District
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Group

Realigning Reading:
Mounds View Public Schools (MN)

by Nathan Levenson and Sam Ribnick

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Mounds View
Public Schools

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Mounds View Public Schools (MN) had much to be proud of: the district's test scores were consistently above the state averages, it routinely ranked in the Top 10 metro districts, and *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* regularly placed Mounds View among the top schools in the country based on high school rankings. The reading program was no exception: reading scores were above the state averages and increasing each year, a strong Curriculum and Instruction team had a good relationship with teachers, and much had been done in recent years to foster among teachers and principals a culture of ownership for student growth.

However, with the advent of Minnesota's more rigorous state test in 2014, the percentage of the district's third-grade students categorized as below proficient increased to 31% from 14% in 2012. The numbers were even higher for students in poverty or with disabilities. Confronted with these results, Superintendent Dan Hoverman wanted to take action and improve outcomes for the district's students. Much work had already been done to improve reading instruction, and the superintendent recognized that to improve student outcomes significantly, teacher practice would have to change. But how? In order to know the right shifts in practice to promote, they would first need to gain a detailed understanding of the practices currently in place and examine these vis à vis best practices in reading.
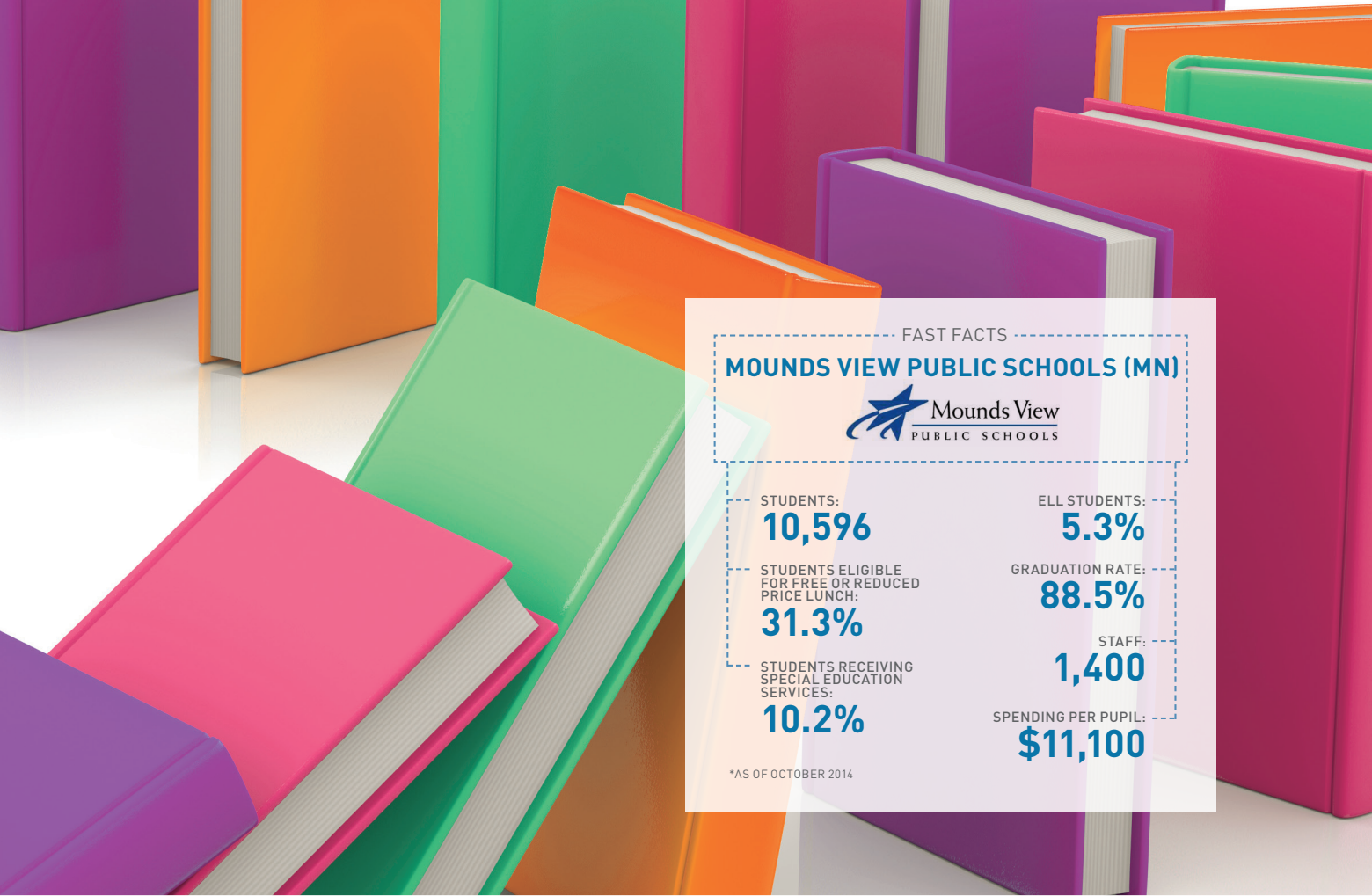
As in most districts, the leaders had a sense of what was happening in the classrooms, but it was just a sense. It was very difficult to know with specificity what teachers were doing in their classrooms and which best practices were consistently happening and which were not. The typical tools for assessing current practice would not be sufficient to gain a detailed understanding of the current reality: learning walks and observations captured only a small set of classrooms on a small number of days; there was no centralized textbook or scope-and-sequence as a basis for practice; assessments and student work could show where outcomes were falling short, but did not reveal which practices were or were not being used.

The district's commitment to teacher autonomy also increased the complexity of understanding how instruction was occurring. Teacher teams had spent countless hours unpacking standards and designing lessons in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), resulting in each school and grade level having different pacing guides, in different formats, and at differing levels of completion. In particular, Superintendent Hoverman wondered about the implementation of the grade-wide intervention plan. This plan called for students across an entire grade to be grouped by need and ability each day for extra help or enrichment, supported by a wide range of staff including classroom teachers, reading teachers, special education staff, and more. This was a new and important initiative, but was it really being carried out as designed?

Mounds View Public Schools had worked with the District Management Council (DMC) on successful projects in the past, and decided to turn to DMC for help with this challenge. The district decided to engage DMC to assist them in obtaining a more accurate understanding of current practices and developing a plan for bringing current approaches in line with best practices where needed.

Background

Mounds View Public Schools is a mid-sized suburban district in the metropolitan area of Minneapolis, ➔

Minnesota. Though the district had reading scores above the state averages, a number of new pressures were bringing a renewed focus on reading instruction.

The state of Minnesota had recently moved to more rigorous standards and regulations to ensure all districts had a strategy to improve student reading proficiency. In 2012, Mounds View had 86% of students in Grade 3 reaching proficiency on the MCA-II, Minnesota's state test at the time. But in 2014 Mounds View had only 69% of students reaching proficiency in Grade 3 on the MCA-III, the state's new, more rigorous assessment aligned to the Common Core State Standards (Exhibit 1). At the same time, the Minnesota Department of Education had required all districts to submit reading data for kindergarten through grade 3, and to have a publicly posted "Read Well by Third Grade" plan.

Mounds View Public Schools had also experienced a recent change in demographics, part of a larger trend of shifting populations in the greater Minneapolis–St. Paul metro area. New waves of immigration had brought Hmong and Somali students to the area, adding complexity to the district's English Learner program, which already served many Spanish-speaking students. In addition, the challenging economy had led to an increase in the number of students living in poverty.

In recent years, the district had developed and executed a strategy to empower teachers and increase ownership for student growth and achievement. Principals and teachers had been encouraged to take responsibility for the students in their schools and classrooms, and to develop their own plans to help all students reach the standards set by the state. The district had invested a great deal of time training teachers on standards-based instruction, an approach in which teachers work collaboratively to unpack the state standards for reading and then design lessons that will help their students reach those standards.

As part of this shift, the district had moved away from a standardized textbook and scope-and-sequence. Teachers had previously used Houghton-Mifflin as their basal textbook for reading, but now they were encouraged to create or find materials appropriate for their students and use Houghton-Mifflin sparingly. "In some ways the basal textbook had become a crutch and made it harder for teachers to think about the needs of all students. Unpacking the standards forces teachers to know the standards really well, so they can think about what will work for their students," said Angie Peschel, director of Curriculum and Instruction. Within each school, teachers at each grade level worked together to come up with their own pacing guide for the learning targets, and developed lessons to meet the needs of their students. As a result, each school and grade level had different pacing guides, in different formats, at differing levels of completion.

Adding to the complexity, the district also used a flexible grouping model for literacy instruction. During the literacy block, each homeroom from a grade level would be regrouped so that most students stayed with their homeroom teacher, but some broke off to high-performing or lower-level groups to receive more tailored instruction. Schools had been given additional positions to make this work, but the details of implementation varied from school to school. Some schools used the positions for additional grade-level interventionists, while others hired special education teachers or instructional strategy facilitators.

With schools taking such varied approaches, Superintendent Hoverman was eager to obtain a clearer picture of the practices in place and examine which best practices were consistently happening and which were not (Exhibit 2). Only then could the district identify how to implement best

EXHIBIT 1: PASSING RATES ON THE STATE READING ASSESSMENT, GRADE 3
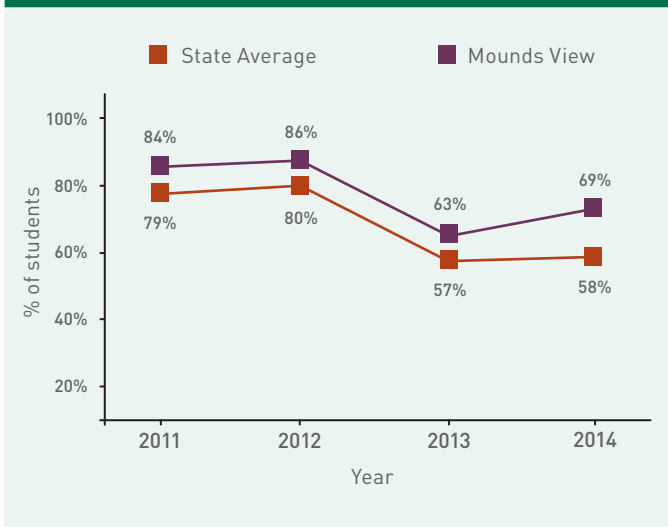
practices more effectively. Committed to the framework of teacher autonomy, Superintendent Hoverman did not want to be overly prescriptive about curriculum, and viewed this as a collaborative project, with teachers and principals involved in this analysis and in whatever realignment of practice was deemed necessary.

"The study began with the idea for them to tell us more specifically what was really happening, and what their thoughts were, and then the rest of the work would unfold based on that," said Superintendent Hoverman. The district had great trust in their teachers and building leaders, and this study was to help provide added information and tools, but not to reduce teacher independence. The work would be done *with* teachers, not *to* them.

Getting Started

The district began by forming a steering committee consisting of the Superintendent, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, the Assistant Director of Assessment and

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Evaluation, and a chief literacy coach. As a group, they were committed to using data to determine ways in which to improve instruction. They had a number of specific questions:

- What practices and resources are teachers actually using?
- How much time are teachers devoting to these practices?
- How consistent is our approach across schools and grade levels?
- How does actual practice compare with established best practices? ➜

EXHIBIT 2: **10 BEST PRACTICES OF EFFECTIVE READING PROGRAMS**

National Reading Panel and What Works Clearinghouse

STANDARDS
1. Clear and rigorous grade-level expectations
2. Identification of struggling readers beginning in kindergarten
3. Frequent measurement of achievement

CORE INSTRUCTION
4. At least 90 minutes / day of balanced core instruction
5. Explicit teaching of phonics and comprehension

INTERVENTION
6. At least 30 minutes / day additional time for struggling readers
7. Tight connection of remediation to core instruction

EFFECTIVE TEACHING
8. Highly skilled and effective teachers of reading

DMC

MANAGEMENT
9. Put one person in charge of reading
10. Use instructional coaching and professional development

Source: National Reading Panel, *What Works Clearinghouse* and the District Management Council

Wanting to engage the whole district in this review of elementary reading practices, the steering committee launched the effort with a kickoff meeting in the fall of 2014. Principals were engaged from the outset, and a task force of highly effective teachers was formed to take ownership of the implementation of any recommendations coming out of the study.

In collaboration with the steering committee, a team from DMC began the first phase of the project, which was to capture current reading instructional practices in grades K-5 using both qualitative and quantitative data. The DMC team conducted focus groups with teachers and principals as well as interviews with district leaders. Additionally, classroom observations at each school site provided a firsthand look at how instruction was carried out, and how it varied from building to building. Staff and principals were proud of what they were doing and happy to share their thoughts. They spoke candidly about what was working well and had thoughtful suggestions for how to move the program to the next level.

To collect quantitative data about teacher practice, DMC's technology tool dmPlanning® was put into action. The district asked all elementary reading teachers to enter detailed information about their practice over the course of one week: how much time they spent teaching reading, the specific focus area, the class format, and materials used.

The team knew that getting high-quality data from teachers depended on making it easy for all teachers to enter their activities in a consistent manner. Therefore, before the tool was sent to teachers, the menus and options in the tool were customized based on the observations and focus groups; this ensured that the options would match the terminology that teachers in Mounds View used to describe their own work (Exhibit 3). Before entering their data, teachers watched an instructional video providing guidance on how to enter common activities. In addition, teachers could call or email a support team with specific questions about ambiguous situations.

EXHIBIT 3: dmPLANNING® CAPTURES DETAILED INFORMATION

The dmPlanning form allows staff to provide granular detail about the time they spend on different instructional activities. The list of activity options is created by role, and is customized for the district. Information captured includes:

Grouping
- Number of groups
- Number of students per group

Instructional Tier

Primary Instructional Focus

Primary Instructional Material

Time Spent

School

For example, if a teacher taught a 10-minute mini-lesson to the whole class on digraphs (sounds made by pairs of letters) using a SmartBoard, the teacher would enter "Whole Class" as the grouping, "Direct Instruction: Phonics" as the primary instructional focus, "Differentiated/Mixed" for the tier, and "HM Phonics Library" as the instructional material. Or, if the teacher has some students doing independent reading while she works with others who are responding to a text the class had read, the teacher would enter "Small Group Instruction" as the grouping, then list the focus and materials for each of the two groups, specifying the number of students in each group.

Throughout the one-week data collection period, the steering committee closely monitored response rates by school. Thanks to support from the principals, the response rates rose quickly. Ultimately, more than 80% of teachers shared complete weekly literacy instruction schedules, with 96% sharing at least a portion of their schedules.

What Does the Data Reveal?

The interviews and focus groups elicited some unexpected reactions to the district's philosophy of principal and teacher empowerment. While principals said they appreciated the autonomy, many were sometimes uncertain about what the district was expecting of them. One principal said he was not sure whether Mounds View was a balanced literacy district, and many said they simply wanted more guidance so they could better determine whether their school's plan aligned to the district's strategies.

Some similar themes arose in conversations with teachers. Many teachers expressed that they had learned a great deal from building their own standards-based curricula, but wondered if it had really been necessary for each school to do the work separately. Grade-level teams had met at each school for over a year to create their curricula, and now each school had different approaches. Many teachers felt

Interestingly, the data revealed that there was wide variation in the amount of time spent daily on literacy; for example, a quarter of second-grade teachers were spending over 150 minutes per day on literacy—far more than the best practice of 90 minutes.

burnt out from the effort of creating new lessons each day; one veteran teacher of 20 years said she had not worked this hard since her first year. As the district had intended, teachers were engaging thoughtfully in standards-based planning and instruction, identifying struggling students early and assessing them frequently, and reflecting on their own practice based on the growth data from their students. But it was clear that many teachers and principals simply wanted more guidance so they did not need to keep reinventing the wheel.

For the district leadership team, it was enlightening to hear that while teachers and principals wanted some freedom, they also wanted support, guidance, and direction. The district leaders were challenged to rethink the right role for central office. How could they help, but not hamper? The staff and principal feedback was powerful and ➔

led to much reflection on how best to lead and support teachers and schools.

In addition to this qualitative feedback, the analysis of the teachers' schedule data from dmPlanning provided a new level of actionable insight. The detailed picture of current practice provided a level of understanding that the district leaders had never had before. With this new, granular picture, they could compare Mounds View practice to the established best practices from the National Reading Panel.

In some ways, the schedule data confirmed what the district had already believed: that reading instruction in the district was aligned with many key best practices, and that this improvement in effort would be a "good to great" path. For example, nearly every elementary teacher consistently delivered 90 minutes per day of core literacy instruction, a crucial best practice for effective literacy instruction.
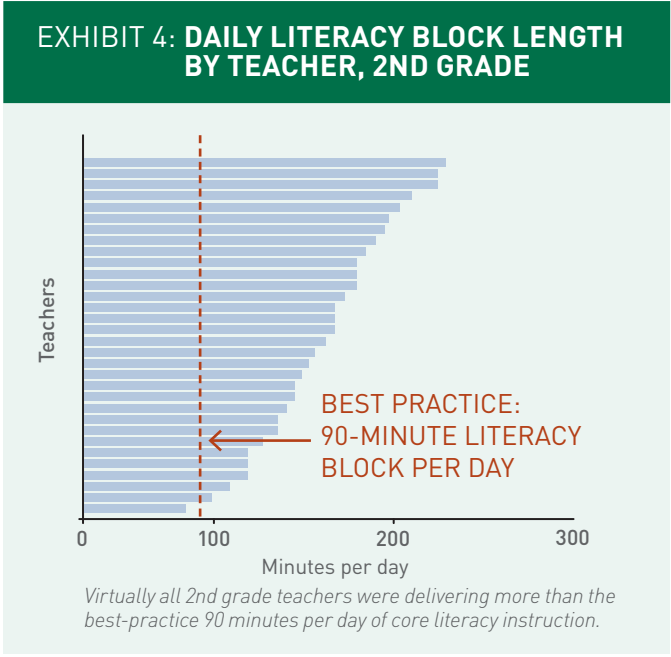
Interestingly, the data revealed that there was wide variation in the amount of time spent daily on literacy; for example, a quarter of second-grade teachers were spending over 150 minutes per day on literacy—far more than the best practice of 90 minutes (Exhibit 4). With this new data, the district leaders recognized they needed to weigh the value of that extra time spent on literacy, since it necessarily comes at the

cost of time spent on other subjects. It would be important to understand whether the teachers spending more time on literacy were making the decision based on evidence suggesting that their students needed the extra time.

Data also revealed wide variation in phonics instruction (Exhibit 5). Research has shown that students benefit from a consistent 20 to 30 minutes per day of explicit instruction on phonics (and phonemic awareness) in early grades until they demonstrate proficiency. District leaders believed in the importance of phonics, so they were surprised to learn that about a quarter of Grade 1 teachers and over half of Grade 2 teachers spent less than 100 minutes per week on phonics instruction. "I suspected there would be inconsistencies, but it was just a little bit more than what I'd bargained for. It did suggest that we were getting honest response from the staff—that people were being pretty candid when reporting their time," Superintendent Hoverman commented.

Furthermore, even in kindergarten where the average was over the target of 100 minutes per week, there was enormous variation between schools and classrooms. The district has two kindergarten centers, one feeding into four of the elementary schools and the other feeding into the remaining two schools. The average time spent on phonics at one center was 140 minutes per week, while at the other center the average time spent was 242 minutes per week (Exhibit 6, p. 36). District leaders and teachers both agreed that considering the differing populations at each center, the amount of time spent on phonics was the reverse of what students at each center needed.

In fact, this type of variation in phonics instruction is common in many districts, and it is often driven by reasons that are more about the teacher than about the students: some teachers learned to read with a phonics-based program, while others did not; some attended a teacher-training school that included phonics, while others did not; some were familiar with the district's phonics materials, while others were not. Perhaps more than any other finding, the findings about phonics instruction raised concern among district leaders at Mounds View. The research is clear that phonics is foundational to learning to read, so why were some students not receiving sufficient instruction?

EXHIBIT 4: **DAILY LITERACY BLOCK LENGTH BY TEACHER, 2ND GRADE**

BEST PRACTICE:
90-MINUTE LITERACY
BLOCK PER DAY

Virtually all 2nd grade teachers were delivering more than the best-practice 90 minutes per day of core literacy instruction.

Further examination of the data revealed that variation existed for other key practices as well. At the two kindergarten centers, there was also wide variation in the time spent on guided and independent reading. The same center that spent greater time on phonics also gave students more time on guided and independent reading. The district realized that if these differences were mostly a result of teacher practice rather than student need, this represented an equity issue for students: why should students get such a different experience in reading based only on where they enroll in kindergarten?

The variation occurred not only in practice but also in systems and structures. One crucial example: each school had reading groups for students in need of intervention and for high-performing students, but the cutoffs to be in these groups varied significantly between schools. At one school with overall high reading levels, nearly half the students should have been in high-performing groups, but only the top two groups received this label and the associated lessons. Even more concerning, the reverse was happening at schools with overall lower reading levels. At some schools, students who were below district targets were placed in "average" groups because there were limited seats in the intervention groups.

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The data also revealed that substantial differences existed between elementary schools in the composition of the literacy block (Exhibit 7, p. 37). Principals had all developed approaches to literacy in their schools that they felt comfortable with, but had no sense of how their approach compared with that of other schools or with the district's expectations. For the first time, the data gave principals the reference point needed to make comparisons. →

EXHIBIT 5: MINUTES OF PHONICS PER WEEK BY TEACHER, 1ST AND 2ND GRADE
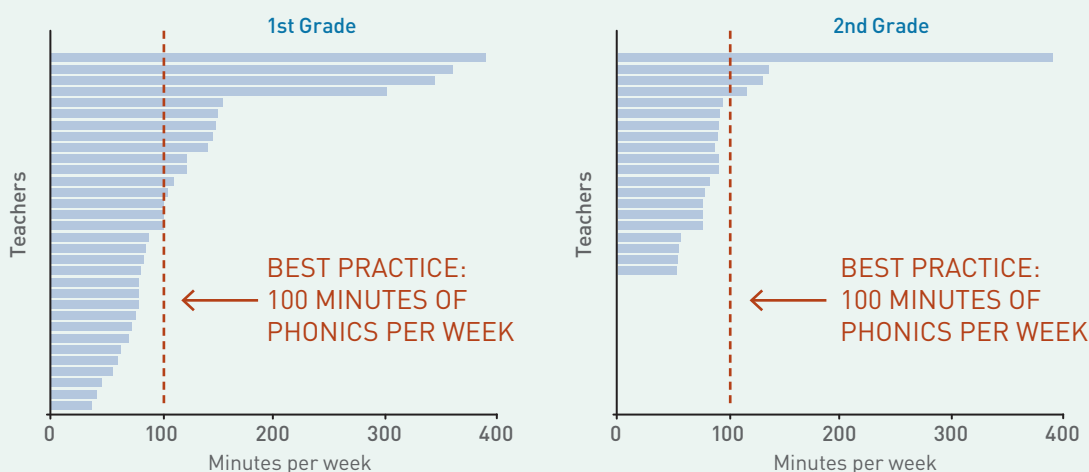
The data shows wide variation in the amount of time spent on phonics instruction, with many teachers delivering less than the best-practice 100 minutes per week.

The facts were now undeniably clear for all to see, and there was a surprising level of buy-in and consensus as a result of the data before them. The district was able to quickly focus on moving forward rather than debating about the present.

As district leaders discussed the data and findings within their team, with principals, and with the teacher task force, a few central themes emerged. First, while teachers and principals appreciated the autonomy provided by the district, both groups stated that more guidance on certain areas would be helpful, rather than limiting. Thanks to the data from dmPlanning, district leaders could see that current practice varied substantially in some areas, further supporting the idea that central guidance would be beneficial. Second, for phonics instruction, some teachers were simply outside the range of best practice, and it would be crucial to provide support to get these teachers back on track. Angie Peschel, director of Curriculum and

Instruction, explained: "What it has caused us to do is ask how teachers define phonics instruction, and make sure that we are providing our own definition of phonics and sharing the research behind why it's so important." Without undermining teacher ownership, the district could still move more teachers toward best practices on phonics, set clearer expectations for use of time during the literacy block, and build a bank of resources and lessons that teachers could have the option of tapping into.

One unanticipated outcome of having such detailed data about current practices was that the district found it much easier to move forward to address its challenges. Gone were the time-consuming and often angst-provoking debates about whether teachers were teaching enough phonics, or how much time was being spent on guided reading. The facts were now undeniably clear for all to see, and there was a surprising level of buy-in and consensus as a result of the data before them. The district was able to quickly focus on moving forward rather than debating about the present. Superintendent Hoverman explains that principals and teachers "saw a need for something to be done for us to better understand the differences between buildings, between grade levels, and how our resources weren't hitting the target. This study gave us the cultural leverage that we needed internally to move things a little more quickly and comprehensively."

Moving Forward

With this new, detailed understanding of current practice, the Superintendent and district leadership have been able to hone in on specific improvements to the district's reading program. Committed to improving practice while still respecting teachers' autonomy, the implementation plan has the following focus areas:

- The district will continue to provide traditional professional development, including a summer literacy institute, to build teacher capacity and reinforce best practice.

EXHIBIT 6: PHONICS INSTRUCTION AT THE TWO KINDERGARTEN CENTERS

Center A: 140
Center B: 242

BEST PRACTICE: 100 MINUTES PER WEEK

Minutes per week
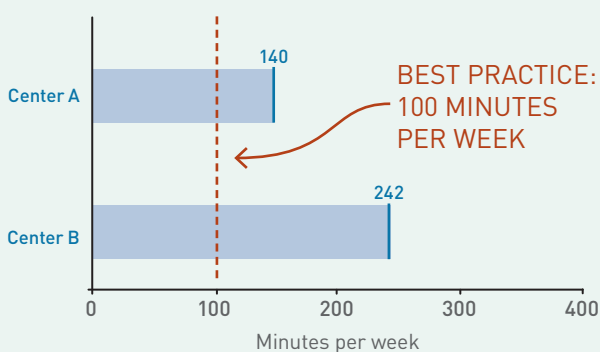
This calculation includes both direct instruction and student work in the areas of phonics and phonemic awareness.

- While workshops and seminars can be effective in teaching and reinforcing strategies, they are generally less effective in helping teachers change and adapt their own practice in the classroom. For this reason, the district is shifting resources to create school-based coaching positions. These coaches can work with teachers in a customized way to support their individual practice, rather than enforcing a certain set of uniform practices for all. For Superintendent Hoverman, individualized coaching is a key to improving teachers' instruction while still respecting their autonomy in the classroom. ➜

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>
> –SUPERINTENDENT DAN HOVERMAN

EXHIBIT 7: LITERACY BLOCK COMPOSITION

BEST PRACTICE: 450 MINUTES PER WEEK

Legend:
- Writing
- Other**
- Independent Read
- Guided Reading
- Vocab / Spelling
- Fluency
- Comprehension
- Phonics*

X-axis: Minutes per week (0, 200, 400, 600, 800)
Y-axis: Schools, Grades 3-5 (School A, School B, School C, School D, School E, School F)

Includes both direct instruction and student work in the areas of phonics and phonemic awareness

**Other includes Read Aloud, Book Structure, Daily 5, Grammar/ Mechanics, Assessment, and Other*

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- The district's teacher task force for implementation will be charged with creating a set of model lessons and intervention plans that will be available to all teachers as optional resources. In line with its philosophy of teacher empowerment, the district will not expect teachers to use these resources exclusively as a curriculum; instead, the resources are intended to relieve some of the pressure that teachers feel to create lessons from scratch each day.

The district is now finding a new balance between central guidance and teacher autonomy. They are still empowering teachers to make instructional decisions, but now understand that a little central guidance can lead to more informed staff and better practice. As Hoverman notes, "This really focuses the attention on the teachers finding some of these answers themselves, and working collaboratively to make that happen."

The teacher task force, the principals, and the board have been supportive. Many teachers said that they were encouraged to see the district providing more guidance and addressing some of the variation in instruction. At a meeting with the school board, one board member who is also a parent of students in the district was particularly excited about the district's effort to improve reading instruction and reduce variation that is not tied to student need. She described to the board how her own children had experienced some of this variation when they were in elementary school, and how frustrated she had been that students in two different schools or classrooms could have such different experiences.

At the board meeting, Superintendent Hoverman assured board members that the district would be working to solve the problems identified in the study. At the same time, he reminded his team and the board that, while the change effort would begin immediately, it would take time to see the changes through. Adding literacy coaches would only help if the district took the time to find the right individuals for the job, the Superintendent pointed out. And organizational culture always takes time to adjust, even with a strong leadership team and clear direction.

Without the detailed view of current practice, it would have been difficult for leaders to know what guidance to provide. Teachers are pleased by the changes, the parents seem pleased at the prospect of more uniformity across schools, and the students should benefit in their outcomes. Measurement brought meaning and positive change, and is allowing the district to maintain teacher autonomy, but in a way that renders it more productive for teachers and students alike. ◆