LEADERSHIP For Learning

An Initiative of the Surrey School District Leadership Academy

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Linking Research to Practice

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Introduction

The reports featured in this edition of the Leadership for Learning journal focus on teacher collaboration as a powerful means to improve student learning. The Social Studies 11 teachers at LA Matheson sought to improve student results on classroom and provincial exams. The team identified key learning outcomes and worked to collaboratively design unit exams. The teachers noted that ongoing dialogue about assessment practice was a critical factor in the success of the intervention.

The action research team at Northridge Elementary targeted reading achievement of grade 7 males. LST and grade 7 teachers marked RAD 36 assessments together, team taught and co-designed units that embedded foundational principles of *Developing Readers*. They reduced the number of males considered "at-risk" in reading by 50 percent. The project helped to build a culture of shared responsibility for student literacy across the entire grade.

The purpose of this bimonthly publication is to promote curriculum and instructional leadership, encourage innovation in teaching and learning, and showcase action research projects that have recently been undertaken in Surrey schools.

The Leadership for Learning Linking Research to Practice Journal is available in electronic format only. Back issues are also available electronically on the Leadership Academy website.

The Leadership Academy Advisory Board

In This Issue

Standardized Testing in Social Studies 11

LA MATHESON SECONDARY SCHOOL ACTION RESEARCH TEAM: Sean Chambers and Brent Sutter.

CONTEXT:

LA Matheson is a designated inner city school with a diverse student population. Over the last five years, the Social Studies department observed a downward trend in Social Studies 11 exam results. In 2007-2008, the department made a concerted effort to focus on differentiated instruction as a means to reverse this trend. The results of last year's provincial exams, however, did not show the improvement we anticipated. In response, the department engaged in discourse on how best to improve exam results. As part of those discussions, the idea of creating standardized department tests was launched. In the end, all Social Studies department members worked to collaboratively design unit exams in the areas of Government, Geography and History.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

Would the use of collaboratively designed standardized tests improve student achievement, student success rates and ultimately, provincial exam results in Social Studies 11?

ACTION:

In May 2008, five teachers met over several days to design Social Studies 11 unit exams for each of the core areas: Government, Geography and History. All teachers arrived with copies of their individually prepared unit tests. We discussed the purpose of common assessments and the need for assessment for learning tools. Once the staff felt comfortable and we agreed upon our purpose, each member shared their unit exams. All exam questions were analyzed according to how well they were linked to the prescribed learning outcomes (PLOs). Only questions that were well aligned to the curriculum were used to create the standardized tests. All Social Studies 11 teachers agreed to teach the content using their own methods and assess the Government, Geography and History units using the common exams.

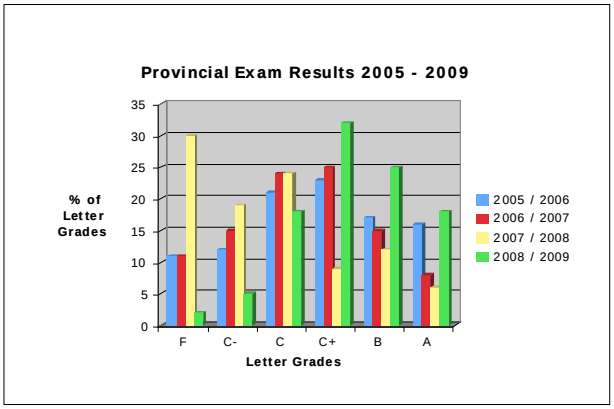
HOW DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Teachers appreciated having the opportunity to work as a team and share assessment tools being used in other classrooms. They reported that assessing the efficacy of the individual exams in relation to the prescribed learning outcomes was one of their most powerful professional development experiences. During the 2008-2009 academic year, teachers expressed that they enjoyed using the common unit exams.

KEY FINDINGS:

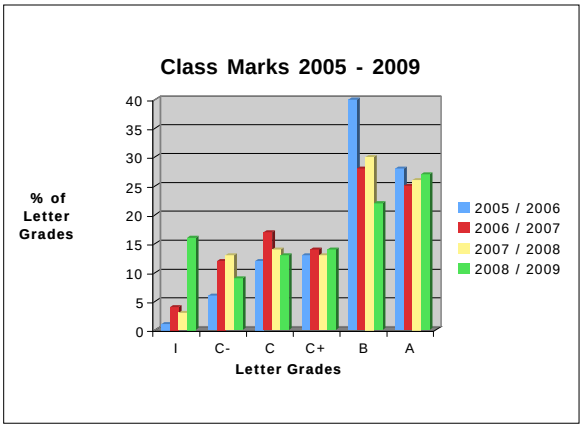
Our 2008-2009 data clearly show a positive effect in both provincial exam results and class marks, as compared to the previous four years. While data was collected from 84 students in semester one only due to the submission deadline, provincial exam results show

substantial improvement. Far fewer students received letter grades of F, C-, or C on their exams, while there was a significant increase in the number of students receiving grades of A or B. In 2007-2008, 30% of students received an F on the provincial exam, while only 18 % of students received either an A or B. When we introduced the standardized unit exams the following year, only 2% of students received an F and the percent of students earning an A or B on the provincial exam increased to 43%. Ministry of Education data revealed that LA Matheson students who wrote the Social Studies 11 exam averaged 73 % that year, while the district and provincial average was 70 %. The correlation between class marks and exam results grew stronger with the use of the common unit tests.



Provincial Exam Data
% of Letter Grade Distribution on Exam

	F	C-	C	C+	B	A
2005 / 2006	11	12	21	23	17	16
2006 / 2007	11	15	24	25	15	8
2007 / 2008	30	19	24	9	12	6
2008 / 2009	2	5	18	32	25	18



Class Mark Data
Percent of Letter Grade Distribution from SS 11 Classes

	I	C-	C	C+	B	A
2005 / 2006	1	6	12	13	40	28
2006 / 2007	4	12	17	14	28	25
2007 / 2008	3	13	14	13	30	26
2008 / 2009	16	9	13	14	22	27

INTERPRETATION:

There was a dramatic increase in student achievement on the Social Studies 11 provincial exam in 2008-2009. The use of locally developed standardized tests had a significant positive impact on provincial exam results. Additionally, classroom marks and government exam results were more closely aligned when teachers used the common unit tests. There was a clear benefit to examining the PLOs and determining which were critical for student success in Social Studies 11. The spike in the number of I's assigned in the classroom may be attributed to a higher level of consistency resulting from the collaboratively designed unit tests.

WHAT WAS LEARNED ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM THIS PROJECT?

Leadership is about building positive relationships. The Social Studies Department Head spearheaded this initiative, and helped to create a safe environment for staff to share and collaborate. Open dialogue about student learning and classroom teaching practices followed. Throughout this action research project, we were challenged to reflect on our assessment practices and explore new ideas to improve student learning.

This project has opened up discussions around authentic assessment practices, including assessment *for, of* and *as* learning. We explored how best to connect instructional strategies and practices with the prescribed learning outcomes. The process of identifying the critical PLOs for Social Studies 11 was invaluable.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DISTRICT? FOR SCHOOLS?

This action research project indicates that locally developed (school-based) standardized exams can enhance student learning and raise school exam marks. The creation of locally developed tests allows teachers to be part of a collaborative process and develop positive working relationships centred on student learning. Department Heads should be encouraged to facilitate dialogue with the goal of identifying and aligning essential PLOs with common unit tests. Schools may wish to consider Professional Learning Communities as a means of investigating and sharing ideas around best practice.

Literacy, RAD, and Collegial Relationships: Improving Student Achievement in Reading through Collaborative Planning and Assessment for Learning

NORTHRIDGE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ACTION RESEARCH TEAM: Judith Harms and Barb Veitch (LST teachers), Mel Caldwell and Dianne Shelling (grade 7 teachers), Hugh McDonald (grade 6/7 teacher), Lisa Jamieson (vice-principal) and Bob Insell (principal).

CONTEXT:

North Ridge Elementary, located in the Newton/Panorama area of Surrey, is a culturally diverse K-7 school. The demographics of the school are changing, however, with the English as a Second Language population climbing to over 50% when students enter kindergarten (Surrey School District Website, 2009).

This action research project focused on how to improve reading achievement among grade 7 males. A rationale for the intervention was based on four factors: 1) Grade 7 male students had statistically weaker achievement results on the initial RAD 36 assessment than their female counterparts. 2) A higher proportion of boys required assistance from the Learner Support Teacher. 3) The staff noted a lack of engagement among males during reading tasks. 4) The intervention supported a school goal to improve reading comprehension across all grade levels.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

Will collaborative planning with RAD results between LST and classroom teachers improve non-fiction reading comprehension in grade 7 males?

ACTION:

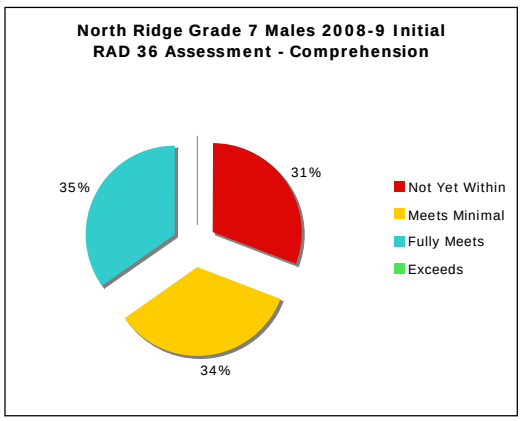
1. The RAD 36 assessment was used to establish a student baseline in reading comprehension. We focused our teacher collaborative planning time on the *Developing Readers* Framework.
2. We coordinated the school timetables so that *Developing Readers (DR)* became a school priority. One hour each week was allocated to a science lesson jointly taught by a grade 7 teacher and the LST teacher. The other weekly science lesson was taught by the classroom teacher.
3. Grade 7 teachers and the LST collaboratively marked each of the sections of the RAD 36 initial assessment.
4. Three grade 7 teachers and our LST teacher used collaborative planning time to design a science 7 unit on the Earth's Crust. We integrated *Developing Readers* strategies for reading comprehension into the unit using the BC science 7 textbook and grade 7 science and language arts learning outcomes.
5. From October to mid January, we had ongoing collegial conversations regarding the effectiveness of our intervention strategies.
6. We worked as a team to create another science 7 unit on Ecology that integrated *Developing Readers* strategies.
7. Our LST teacher, in consultation with grade 7 teachers, created a mid-year RAD 36 assessment to determine if student reading comprehension was improving with our intervention.
8. The team met in March to mark the mid-year assessments and discuss student progress.
9. Students wrote their final RAD 36 assessment at the end of May. Initial and final data were entered into the district Edudata database to compile and compare results.

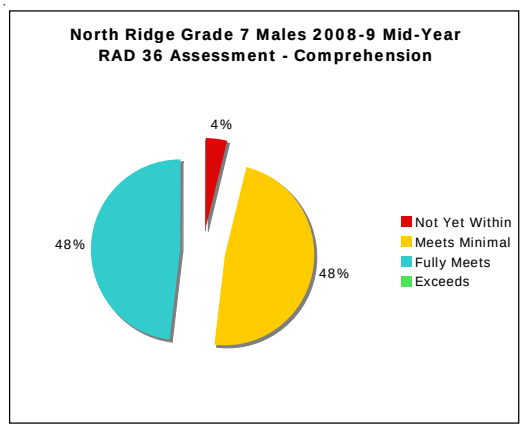
HOW DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

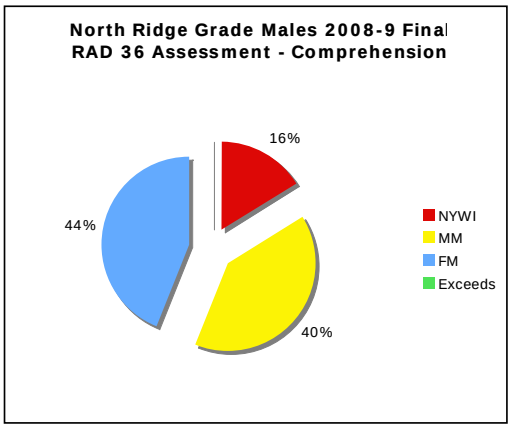
1. We developed a shared responsibility towards collaboration, literacy instruction, and assessment for learning. Shared marking and planning between LST and classroom teachers reduced the stress for classroom teachers. This resulted in teachers being more supportive toward changing the way reading was being taught across the curriculum.
2. As student awareness of the language and process of metacognition increased, they grew more comfortable with writing RAD 36 and other classroom assessments.
3. Struggling male readers benefitted from the visual appeal of non-fiction texts. They enjoyed showing their thinking using the *Developing Readers* comprehension organizers.
4. Integrating the *Developing Readers* framework into the teaching of science fuelled assessment for learning conversations between colleagues and students. Until recently, the teaching of reading in grade 7 was individually driven, with teachers often working in isolation.
5. To best support the *Developing Readers* initiative, the LST model was expanded to include more team teaching across all grade levels. Subsequently, staff became involved in dialogue and shared responsibility for reading among classroom teachers and LST teachers.
6. Collaboratively planned units were informed by our initial RAD 36 assessment. This increased the amount of differentiated instruction as students were flexibly grouped to provide appropriate individual challenge.

KEY FINDINGS:

The following charts represent grade 7 male student achievement on the RAD 36 assessment focusing on reading comprehension. Initial assessment occurred in September, mid-year was in March, and our final assessment occurred in late May.







INTERPRETATION:

Our data looks promising, as the number of male students not meeting expectations on the initial RAD 36 assessment decreased from 31% to 4% on our mid-year assessment. This was a significant improvement among our most "at-risk" students. Our goal is to continue working collaboratively to improve reading achievement, with particular attention on the needs of male students. The final RAD 36 assessment demonstrated that we had reduced the number of male students considered "at-risk" in reading comprehension by almost one half. This suggests that team teaching between LST and classroom teachers more effectively addresses the needs of "at-risk" students, many of whom are males, than our previous pull-out model for LST.

WHAT WAS LEARNED ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM THIS PROJECT?

RAD 36 assessment data helped us to plan science units that embedded reading comprehension strategies. Our aim was to keep male students engaged in reading tasks by improving their metacognitive skills. The focus of our instruction shifted from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning.

Collaborative dialogue to improve instructional effectiveness was a key aspect of this project. As a result, teacher engagement increased and student achievement improved. Additionally, we reduced isolation as teachers worked together to engage students in powerful learning across the entire grade.

The success of our initiative was due in part to having in-school opportunities to meet in our grade group with the LST teacher to collaboratively plan and discuss how best to support our students. Respect, trust, and belief in the purpose of the intervention are crucial to the success of any school initiative.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DISTRICT? FOR SCHOOLS?

1. Communication between the district, school administrators, and teachers regarding the importance of collaboration in improving student achievement in reading is essential. Continue district support and improve provincial support by funding collaboration time for similar initiatives.
2. Continue the dialogue and action at the school level on the positive benefits of using RAD 36 as an assessment tool to address the reading needs of male students. Consult with district helping teachers to encourage inclusion of texts and resource materials that use *Developing Readers* strategies as part of the recommended learning resources for science, social studies, and language arts.
3. Celebrate successes at staff meetings to inspire sustainability of *Developing Readers* initiatives at the school level.

Websites

Submitted by Amy Newman, Research and Evaluation Helping Teacher

Brainology

http://www.brainology.us/webnav/whatismindset.aspx

Dr. Carol Dweck is a psychology professor at Stanford University and a leading researcher in the field of motivation. Over twenty years of research focusing on motivation, achievement and success has led her to discover two distinct mindsets that have a profound effect on motivation and success. Individuals who inhabit a "fixed" mindset believe that intelligence is static, may avoid challenges and tend to view effort as fruitless. A "growth" mindset, on the other hand, is "the core belief that abilities are malleable and not fixed." This leads to a desire to learn, embrace challenges and a view of effort as a path to mastery. Dweck's research suggests that developing a growth mindset is "critical to adopting learning-oriented behavior." Click on the slideshow for a summary presentation of her growth mindset research. Dweck's recent book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* delves deeper into her studies. She discusses practical implications for parents and educators who hope to foster a love of learning and greater resilience in our children.

Waterlife Interactive

Waterlife.NFB.ca

Waterlife.nfb.ca is an interactive website that tells the story of the Great Lakes - the last great supply of fresh drinking water on earth. Packed with compelling facts, narratives and history, the website's striking imagery is offset by important messages to protect this vulnerable resource. The website was inspired by the National Film Board documentary Waterlife by Kevin McMahon.