case study

Tackling Student Achievement:
Aligning Cause, Solutions, & Support

Recap/Key Points

- Problem Analysis helped district structure data to identify four root causes of student achievement problems.

- District found increased ownership of student achievement at all levels.

- PA helped align school and district initiatives, PD and spending to address four key causes.

District Information

Colorado's D11 (Colorado Springs) school district serves over 27,000 students in its 53 schools.

Problem/Challenge

After multiple years of using several standard root cause analysis tools (5 Whys and Fishbone), District 11 decided they were not getting deep enough in their analysis to address the true root cause for lack of student achievement growth. School improvement efforts abounded yet few had sustainable embedded changes that resulted in higher student performance. They resolved to try a different, more systematic approach to dig deep enough to determine true cause to guide school improvement efforts and use resources more effectively.

Solution

TregoED provided an interdepartmental team with in-depth training in Problem Analysis (PA), a root cause-finding tool. The team facilitated one-day PA sessions with each school improvement team, focusing on using and analyzing student achievement data to identify root cause. School teams accessed, disaggregated, and analyzed existing student achievement data. Digging into and organizing data into the IS/IS NOT format helped teams make sense of information and identify interesting contrasts and anomalies.

School teams identified possible root causes as well as things to look for in their buildings to validate or disprove the causes. District team members completed Validation Walks and confirmed the most viable cause. School improvement plans and "problems of practice" were developed around validated causes and included observable indicators of success.

A district-level team also independently used PA on district-level data and identified four primary causes or drivers of student achievement. The four areas were: data-driven decision making (including data collection, analysis and usage), standards implementation (including knowing what they mean and how to achieve mastery), curriculum (including alignment to state standards and pacing guides), and quality of instructional practices (including rigor, expectations, and formative assessments). Interestingly, no school identified a root cause that did not align with one of the four identified at the district level. By working together and providing feedback to each other, each department specified what it needed to do in order to better support schools in these four areas.

Results

Focusing on their four key drivers of student achievement helped D11 align efforts and resources at all levels in order to better support teachers and schools. Some of the changes and outcomes include:

- Improved understanding and alignment to state academic standards—analysis showed a lack of clarity on what the standards meant and how to recognize and achieve mastery of them in the classroom. The district updated its curriculum and aligned pacing guides. Early efforts in working with schools quickly convinced the district of the value of working with each individual school to help teachers unwrap and prioritize standards, as well as determine ways to help students master them.

- Classroom observations (Instructional Rounds and Success Walk) have focused on providing timely and targeted feedback and have noted a positive upswing in high-value practices

- District culture has changed moving "servant leadership" from intent to practice. Using a common language and shared vision they have created an environment of trust and improved relationships where it is safe to own the problem.

Teachers feel empowered with their increased capacity and focused work in Professional Learning Communities.

- Greater focus and alignment of district and school resources—all initiatives, professional development, spending and planning have been aligned to address identified root causes related to student achievement.

- In year three, knowledge and gains from previous years have become even more definitive allowing the district to be more strategic in their delivery of support and resources where needed. Testing outcomes show that nine District ACT schools (16 schools focused on Academic Systems-Culture of Performance-Talent) have moved up the Colorado School

Performance Framework categories with five schools moving from Improvement to Performance, three schools moving up from Priority Improvement to Improvement and one school moving up two categories from Priority Improvement to Performance. Other schools in this group also demonstrated improvement just narrowly missing the cut off for the next highest category.

- More ownership and enthusiasm for tackling student achievement at all levels. Student achievement problems are proactively identified and addressed. Rather than dismissing problems for reasons perceived to be outside a teacher's or school's control, people are working together on things that **can** be done to address root cause.

"The work has created an infusion of excitement because the path is clear, the work is more defined and work is being supported."

Patti Pierce, System Improvement Specialist