

Learning Supports Implementation in Iowa

As part of the American Institutes for Research (AIR) evaluation of the Iowa Department of Education's *Data Quality Grant*, descriptive and formative evaluative data were gathered related to Iowa's first steps in implementing its initiative designed to guide schools in developing a comprehensive system of learning supports.

The following are excerpts from the Executive Summary of AIR's September 28, 2007 report (prepared by Dahlia Shaewitz, Kimberly Kendziora, and David Osher).

Some findings from the report:

"Evaluation of the Learning Supports initiative indicated that having clear guidance and support from the state, a strong local leader, and adequate funding were associated with better implementation of Learning Supports. Teams were working together much more effectively in the second year of the initiative. Districts doing a better job implementing Learning Supports had higher reading and math achievement than districts with poor implementation. We would expect that [in a third year] these gains would have been even greater."

"Data analysis showed that although achievement levels for field test districts were below the state mean, the percent proficient for reading and math at grades 4, 8, and 11 were consistently higher for the medium and high implementation groups than for the low group."

"Eight of the ten pilot sites reported improved student behavior and expected this improvement to serve as groundwork for future academic success."

Community outreach. Most of the teams attempted to connect with the surrounding community and involve them in promoting the goals of the Learning Supports initiative. Community involvement included outreach to local organizations like the YMCA, agencies that provide mental health and substance abuse services, community businesses, churches, neighborhood centers, parks and recreation offices, parent-teacher organizations, and volunteer groups. Iowa City has also used technology to increase their outreach to parents by creating an automated telephone tree that dials out to parents and a real-time student information website. ...

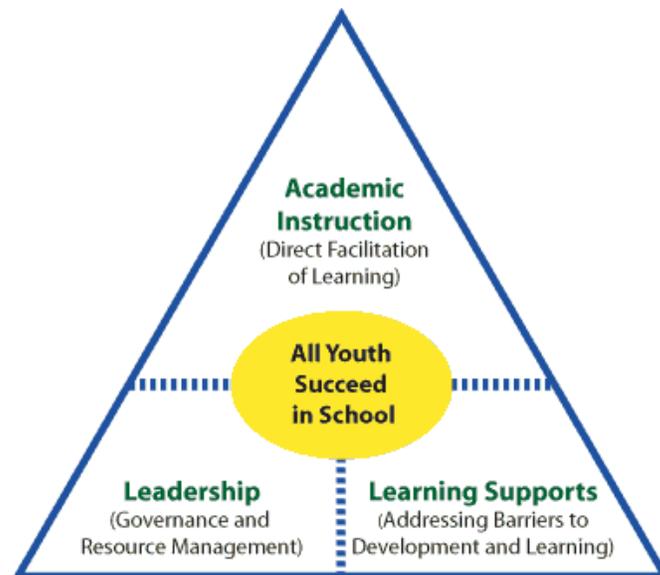
Internal/external champions. Most of the Learning Supports teams considered their team members to be internal champions, and particular members played important roles as volunteer coordinators, at-risk youth coordinators, team leaders, managers of specific initiatives, and liaisons to other community organizations. These members helped to connect the Learning Supports initiative to the community. For those teams that reached out to the community and created partnerships, their external champions ranged from parent-teacher organizations and the school board to local business leaders and service agencies.

Changes in the environment and new opportunities/challenges. Learning Supports team members were also a part of the communities in which they worked, so they were often involved in different organizations from which they could draw information, trends, new ideas, and feedback to support initiatives develop and support their plans. In several field test sites, the AEA staff provided surveys, staff training and resources, and other types of support to collect, analyze and report data. The stronger these ties were among the team and with the community, the greater their ability to respond to opportunities and challenges. In addition, district-based teams that were made up of a wide variety of team members had a broader view of community needs."

Excerpts from the report's description of learning supports:

“Learning supports are the programs, procedures, services, and strategies that are implemented to create conditions and environments that promote student learning. These supports focus on the creation of caring, engaging learning environments that foster student connectedness and nurture youth development by helping students to build the necessary social, emotional, and other life skills to help them succeed in school and beyond. A learning supports system is created when people coordinate efforts to ensure that barriers to learning are reduced for all students so that they experience success in school.” . . .

The physical, intellectual, social, and emotional aspects of students' lives are woven together like a tapestry, and students' readiness and motivation to learn is deeply connected to how they are functioning in these other areas. Unfortunately, many students are confronted with a wide range of learning, behavioral, physical, and emotional roadblocks that interfere with their abilities to participate fully in school life and benefit from the instruction that their teachers provide. . . . Therefore, becoming "successful in school" requires a three-pronged approach:



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- 1) Supplements to Instruction (academic, leadership, enrichment, and recreational supports and opportunities);
- 2) Family Supports and Involvement;
- 3) Community Partnerships;
- 4) Safe, Healthy, and Caring Environments;
- 5) Transitions; and,
- 6) Child/Youth Engagement.

Interventions in each of these areas serve as pillars of support in preventing problems and intervening as soon as problems arise. Supports in these areas also focus on helping students to develop their own personal motivation for learning, and to reengage students who have lost their way (Adelman & Taylor, 2001). These learning supports can provide the conditions necessary for student learning only when they are well-coordinated, based on data that identifies the specific needs of students, and are organized to meet the full range of these needs.”

“Learning Supports are designed and implemented by Learning Supports teams at the local level. Under this grant, ten districts were invited to pilot this initiative by creating or re-purposing teams to fulfill the Learning Supports functions.”

“The Learning Supports teams were primarily composed of teachers, administrators, and other school staff in the K-12 system; however, most teams also included at least one AEA staff and one or more community representatives including parents and substance abuse/mental health support service staff. ... The majority of Learning Supports teams self-reported that they were cohesive and worked well together. ... Each of the Learning Supports teams was able to clearly identify their mission, which generally aligned with the district mission and vision as reflected in district statements and the comprehensive school improvement plans (CSIPs). ...”

Excerpts from the report’s conclusions

“In this second year of the Learning Supports initiative, the majority of field test sites were able to leverage the data grant's funding and training to achieve positive outcomes. ...

- Team leadership and communication. The success or failure of a team is dependent on clear leadership and a shared vision. Successful teams communicated frequently and met at least monthly to discuss the program's progress. . . .
- Training and support. In the first year, implementation of the Learning Supports initiative was slow in part due to what respondents described as a lack of clear guidance regarding what teams were supposed to actually do at the local level. In the second year, an improved training plan led to greater understanding of the vision for Learning Supports and more effective and enthusiastic implementation. The training events provided tools, materials, and teamwork time that could immediately apply to action back at home. In addition, the ongoing support of DE staff and consultants were critical to continuing the efforts of the pilot sites.
- Peer sharing. In both site visits and on training evaluation forms, team members consistently indicated that sharing information with each other was important both to provide them with new ideas and to support their current efforts. One team specifically suggested a peer mentoring model to help the sites learn from each other.
- Project sustainability. . . . The key to ensuring that the teams' efforts would continue is resources: personnel, funding, and training. In addition, teams with a clear vision of how to implement the initiative in their school or district will likely continue those efforts after the grant funding ends.

AIR's evaluation also uncovered two major challenges in realizing the goals for this (or any) initiative:

- Disconnected state initiatives. A major obstacle to successful Learning Supports implementation was a tendency to see any initiative in Iowa as being associated with a particular constituency (such as special education or high schools) and therefore not applicable to all. Respondents expressed concern about the large number of new, separate

programs that are initiated by the DE without a clear statement of what they replace or how they fit with existing programs or systems. The implication of our data is that the DE could help reduce fragmentation and redundancy in districts by beginning to break through silos that exist at the state level.

- Inadequate resources. One especially painful realization for Learning Supports teams was that using data well can at times create knowledge of student needs that schools or districts lack the resources to address. One salve for this wound may be direct support by the DE or the AEAs (such as by providing training and materials for evidence-based social emotional programs). An alternative or supplementary way of helping might be to increase the level of discretion that school leaders have at the building or district level to allocate resources in line with local priorities.”

Excerpts from the AIR site visit report on Iowa City Community School District

“Contextual Background. The Iowa City Community School District (CSD) is located in eastern Iowa. The site represents a large school district with 10,894 students and is supported by AEA 10. Based on the 2000 Census the district is designated as mid-size with a population of 89,949 persons. In the district Whites are the majority with a Hispanic population (2.8%) equal to the state average and Black/African American (3.4%), Asian/Pacific Islander (5.0%), and Other race or multiple races (2.8%) populations above the state average. The median household income according to the 2000 Census in Iowa City was \$37,295 compared to the statewide median income of \$42,865 (2004 Census). Twenty-one percent of students are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals compared to 30% statewide. High school graduation rates during the 2002-03 school year were 92.8%, which is higher than the state average of 90.8%. Enrollment in the district is projected to increase in the next few years.”

“About the Team. The Iowa City Community School District created two levels of resource management teams (Learning Supports teams) for the Learning Supports initiative. The first layer involves Learning Supports teams at five of the six secondary schools. (The remaining school is quite small with only 100 students and a few staff and serves as an alternative high school.) At each school the Learning Supports team consists of key staff who work with at-risk youth, juvenile court liaison, substance abuse counselor, school principal or associate principal, and United for Action youth counselor. The district-wide Learning Supports team consists of approximately two members from each building team, including the principal/associate principal and one or two other team members. In addition, the associate superintendent is a member of the district Learning Supports team.

The key agency and teaching staff were selected to be members of the team because they know the kids who have the greatest need and interact with them on a daily basis. The administrators add authority to the teams. . . .

The team represents the entire district. The learning supports teams were initially established in the secondary schools due to the challenges posed by the size of these schools, there has been some work going on in the elementary schools as well.

Building Learning Supports teams meet at a minimum of once per trimester, although some teams meet more frequently. At the end of each trimester, the building teams gather data and analyze their needs and resources.

The district Learning Supports team meets twice a year and this year they are considering a third meeting during the summer

The Learning Supports teams are trying to make the review of resources more formal and systematic. In one example, a secondary school looked at how they were using their resources and made changes that were relevant. They had hired an alternative education teacher for each of the 7th and 8th grades, but found through analyzing their data that the staff were "catching kids too late." They decided to blend the two positions so that each teacher interacts with both 7th and 8th graders, which provided more continuity. In addition, they began to 'graduate' kids out of the program after two years which freed up this resource for other students.

The district and Learning Supports team vision are aligned. There is a movement to make data driven decisions. This becomes more challenging at the building level because some staff are resistant to change. However, the school board and the associate superintendent remain very supportive of this vision.

The team is knowledgeable of the needs and challenges of their students. Members of the building-based Learning Supports teams include staff who work directly with at-risk students, including teachers, counselors, and administrators. The team staff have many years of experience in the school system. Also, these teams meet frequently on an informal basis to share information and discuss individual student cases.

Different school-based Learning Supports teams have different approaches. In one school, the Learning Supports team meets every 6 weeks at the end of the grading period to review grades and the promotional status of students. In addition, they have weekly triage meeting at which the teachers, counselors, and administrators discuss students that require intervention. Another Learning Supports team meets infrequently, but smaller teams of teachers and counselors meet weekly to discuss the needs of kids and then share that information with the larger faculty. The faculty meeting at this school involves reviewing and discussing data, such as grades and failures and the need for direct interaction with families.

Some building teams are more connected to families than others. For the schools that are less connected, the teams would like to increase their contacts with families to better understand the needs of their students.

At the district level, the Learning Supports team has not coalesced yet; however, they plan to tie funding to the decisions made at the district level meetings. After this change occurs, the district level Learning Supports team will have more influence on the process. Overall, the goals of the district and building level teams is to determine which students are at risk of failure or failing grades and provide them with the support they need in order to increase achievement.

At the building level, Learning Supports teams vary in their cohesiveness. At one school, the team began by reviewing the many possible approaches but they have been caught up in addressing many of the needs of new students due to a large influx in students from another district. In another school, a longstanding team has become the Learning Supports team and continues to work toward school success. This team works well together.

In another case, the teachers are counselors and in this dual role they directly address the needs of at-risk students. They share the same goal as the administrators and teams exist at each grade level to meet and discuss students. These teams meet weekly and provide information to the Learning Supports team, which meets on Wednesdays to discuss the best options for intervention with specific students.

Team Activities. Team activities for the Iowa City Learning Supports team take place at the building level and the student needs are analyzed and addressed somewhat differently at each building. All of the schools look at grades and attendance, and they focus on the individual student in their reviews. Some of the data they review include ITBS, attendance, discipline referrals, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, credits earned towards promotion/graduation, D/F grades, IYS, and direct referrals from staff. ...

The district team considers the data they review to be valid because it matches anecdotal

evidence and what they observe directly with the students. The data helps them to understand the larger picture of what is going on to help them diagnose problems and determine how best to intervene. The challenge is not the validity of the data but how to review the data to help intervene with students that might otherwise be missed. Assuming that the data is valid, the building teams focus on the cause to help them diagnose student problems and intervene effectively. The team also notes that reviewing data across grade levels as kids transition up through the school system may not be helpful, because student behavior changes as they move from elementary to junior and senior high school.

The Learning Supports team has focused on school failure and connectedness. They first identify students who "are not making it" and receiving poor grades. Then, they determine whether the problem is poor studying skills or behavior related to school safety and connectedness. The IYS data has been useful in this analysis.

The team would like to develop key data points that are looked at consistently across the district. Some people have commented that the Learning Supports team has "patches of brilliance." The team would like to be more systematic and ultimately see higher attendance rates, improved grades, and less substance abuse. By building the infrastructure to support these goals, the team hopes to improve outcomes for students.

Each building creates its own school improvement plan and then the district associate superintendent puts these building plans together into the full CSIP that is submitted to the Iowa Department of Education. The associate superintendent uses this opportunity to visit with each school principal as well.

Although the CSIP may be used as a guide, it is not a 'living' document. Nonetheless, there is overlap among the CSIP development teams and building Learning Supports teams, which supports the CSIP and Learning Supports team goal of connectedness. The use of the CSIP goals during Learning Supports team planning and its alignment could be further strengthened. ..."

"The district has repeatedly used the phrase 'removing barriers to learning' in its many communications. This has become a commonly understood phrase in the community and has become a part of the philosophy and mind-set of the district. While schools are academically oriented, the district recognizes that there are barriers to learning for everyone. In the case of those at-risk students, what can be done? Now, the district has the language that is 'safe' to use in addressing barriers that were not talked about in the past. This allows the district to welcome agencies that provide mental health, substance abuse, and other non-academic services into the schools without being labeled as 'bad' simply because they need more help.

In return, other agencies in the district have come forward to offer help, such as the University of Iowa health group that offers weekly school-based health clinics. In addition, the district formed a partnership to provide mental health services onsite at school buildings. In just 2 months, the caseload increased to 25 people. The learning supports initiative has changed the way the schools view the child-rather than seeing a discipline problem, the schools see that there is a behavior issue and attempt to determine why it exists. They have the tools to address student problems in a different way. Also, families now see the schools not as just an academic center but as a system that is serving the whole child, and the whole family. As schools become more community oriented they are also becoming the center of that community support."