
Data Related to Iowa's Work on Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

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).

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/wheresithappening/AIRFinalreport-IowaDataGrant.pdf>

"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."

"This system has interrelated components that together produce effects impossible for any one of them to produce alone. In practical terms, all parts of the system are important and work together effectively toward a common result: success in school for all students. This system of supports includes six areas:

- 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. ...

o 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. . . .

o 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.

o 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.

o 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:

o 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.

o 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."

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