The Story: RMSEL

**Background:** The Rocky Mountain School of EL Education (RMSEL) is one of the original EL schools. Located in Denver, the school serves 362 k-12 students. RMSEL has a small percentage of kids of color, second language learners or free and reduced lunch. Historically, standardized test scores in reading exceeded state averages. For example, in the spring of 2011, 81% of 3rd -10th grade students were proficient or advanced in reading. In contrast, students had low achievement and low growth in writing year after year. In spring 2011, only 58% of students scored proficient or advanced. The staff was anxious to make changes that would positively impact student achievement in this area.

**The plan:** School leaders crafted a work plan (1) that included the goal, “All students can identify and analyze their growth in writing… according to grade level continua.” In order for students to reach this goal, teachers and leaders realized that there needed to be clear criteria and targets for writing aligned to the Colorado State Standards and the state’s standardized test, the CSAP. They would also need to know where kids are NOW so that they could make effective plans for closing the gap. The Director of Curriculum and Instruction worked with the school leadership and school designers to craft a professional development plan (2) to support this work.

The work began in the fall with a PD session to support each team in creating a grade-level writing rubric (3 a-c), using rubrics from another local EL school as a starting place. The accomplished column of the rubric for each grade level was then pulled to create a draft of a K-12 continuum. The school’s Director of Curriculum and Instruction analyzed the draft and met with teams to make sure the final K-12 writing continuum (4 a-b) was vertically aligned.

Teachers then used models of exemplary writing prompts to craft grade-level writing prompts (5 a-c) that would allow them to measure student progress toward the rubric criteria. The Director of Curriculum and Instruction documented Directions for Teachers- Common Writing Assessments (6). Teachers administered the writing assessment and brought student responses (7) to a professional development session in which ALL staff members and leaders worked in teams to calibrate their expectations of grade level work and assess papers. Teachers celebrated this process as outstanding PD that allowed them to build their understanding of high-quality writing, articulate grade-level expectations, and gain clarity about what kids coming into their grade should be able to do and what their kids would need to do in the next grade level.

Immediately following the scoring of writing assessments, teachers entered the scores into a data table (8) set up by the Director of Curriculum and Instruction. Once data were entered, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction led a professional development session to help teachers address, “What makes data statistically significant?” to build their understanding of the relevance of these data. Grade-level data inquiry teams then met to analyze their data using the ATLAS protocol (9). Based on this analysis, each team (some were content area, others were grade level) crafted an action plan (10) and submitted it to the Director of Curriculum and Instruction. Teachers agreed to collect on-going evidence of progress toward the goals in the action plan and use it to modify their instruction. These action plans are also the focus of formal and informal observations and conversations between teachers and school leaders.
In addition to the action plans, teachers made strategic choices about the skills to focus on in expedition writing products based on their students’ writing data. Expedition rubrics were informed by the school’s grade-level writing rubric.

Finally, the staff came together again to look at the school-wide writing data (11). In evaluating these data, teachers used a written conversation/write around (12) protocol to consider: 1) What are the vertical trends? 2) What are the horizontal trends? And 3) Are these data significant? What makes these data significant? This process surfaced a variety of questions, which will be addressed through on-going PD (particularly through book studies focused on best practice writing instruction and writing strategies in the content areas) throughout the year.

In the spring, students completed the common writing assessment again. The students in the lower grades had strong gains across the board with stand outs in the passage years at 5th and 8th grades. The staff experimented with the process in a few key areas. First, teams advocated for using different writing prompts from grade to grade rather than a common, school-wide prompt. However they found that this made it harder to discuss writing progress across grades. Second, the staff did not recalibrate their scoring in the spring, and quickly wish they had—committing to make this a common part of the practices to ensure consistency and accuracy. In addition, the staff reflected on the schedule, deciding that rather than use the common writing assessment as practice for the state standardized test, they would administer it a little later in the year to support teacher sustainability.

Results on the state standardized test were promising for the first year of implementation:
• Of the 225 students who took the standardized test, only 5 scored “unsatisfactory.” No students score unsatisfactory in grades 4-7.
• Overall 66% of students scored proficient or above, up from 58% the previous year.
• 70% of 6th-8th grade students scored proficient and above—surpassing the achievement of the lower grades for the first time.

After a year of implementation, RMSEL embraced the following practices:
• All students will take the common writing assessment in the fall and the spring.
• All students will respond to a common prompt, with the possibility of slight revisions for primary learners. (e.g. grades 2-12 write about a favorite object, grades k-1 write about a favorite toy.)
• There will be a different expository prompt for each administration.
• Teachers will recalibrate scoring before collectively each assessment.
• The Director of Curriculum and Instruction will enter all data and organize all data charts.
• The Director of Curriculum and Instruction will provide other logistical support to teachers such as copying tests, setting the assessment window, etc.

Reflections and learning from RMSEL’s Director of Curriculum and Instruction:
1. Know the decisions that need to come from the top. Make them and then support buy in through working out the details of “how.”
2. Think through the teacher lens. Be responsive to teacher’s schedules. Take tasks like copying or entering data off the plates of teachers so that they can focus on administering the test and using the data— and nothing else. Leave time and space for thinking.
3. Steal good work and ideas from others. (e.g. rubrics.)