Using Professional Learning to Improve Independent Reading

Continuous school improvement depends on high-quality professional learning that focuses on research-based strategies. Professional learning is the primary means to strengthen teachers’ development and performance to improve student learning and achievement.

Plans for the First Year

In Module 4, the leadership team at Madison Elementary School identified four areas of need after reviewing their data from surveys and classroom visits. The areas of focus included

1. enhancements to their teachers’ understanding of effective independent reading practices through professional learning activities;
2. improving classroom libraries;
3. closing the achievement gap through summer reading; and
4. ways to increase family involvement by using effective reading habits at home.

Professional Learning

The school leadership team and teachers in this school shared collective responsibility for student learning; therefore, they worked and learned together to increase independent reading practice. Teachers enhanced their knowledge and understanding of strong independent reading practices by reading books: Creating Lifelong Readers through Independent Reading (Moss & Young, 2015), No More Reading Without Support (Miller & Moss, 2013), Reading Without Limits: Teaching Strategies to Build Independent Reading for Life (Witter, 2013), or Reading in the Wild (Miller & Kelley, 2013). Each professional learning community chose one text, shared ideas, addressed challenges, and highlighted their learning to build a strong culture of collective responsibility for teaching quality and student achievement.

Most importantly, the collective learning they did focused on the application of learning about independent reading for these educators. For example, rather than reading the whole book and having a conversation about the teachers’ perceptions about their reading, chapters were read...
and prompts created that required action within classrooms. Professional learning teams in the school were given choices of activities to dig deeper into the content of the text, try strategies that were shared in the text with their students, and report back to the whole group. Below are examples of two different PLC activities teachers did after reading Chapter 4 of Creating Lifelong Readers through Independent Reading (Moss & Young, 2015).

**Professional Learning Community Activity A**

On pages 92–96 of Creating Lifelong Readers through Independent Reading, the authors provide a way for teachers to “scaffold” instruction, which gives high support for students practicing new strategies and then slowly decreasing that support to increase students’ independence. After critically reading this selection, have each member of your PLC select one of the structures that will provide students with opportunities to grow as independent readers.

**Read Alouds**

Select three read-aloud books for your class. Be prepared to tell your PLC group

1. why each book was selected;
2. how the read-aloud book was used or will be used with students; and
3. how the book fits with the curriculum.

**Shared Reading**

Try out a shared reading when teaching a new reading strategy (e.g., building background knowledge/making connections, constructing mental images, inferring, determining importance, predicting, summarizing and synthesizing, or monitoring and evaluating with your students). Be prepared to share with your PLC group

1. the text you selected and why;
2. the reading strategy you taught through the shared reading;
3. how you involved students; and
4. the support you provided as students applied the strategy.
Guided Reading

Plan and deliver a guided reading lesson you will do with a small group of students. Be prepared to share with your PLC group:

1. the purpose and the data you used to support this need;
2. the text you selected for the guided reading lesson and why;
3. the reading strategy you taught through the guided reading and why it was selected;
4. how you taught the lesson;
5. how the lesson met its goals and purpose;
6. the effect of students’ engagement and strategy use.

Independent Reading

Through the use of a short focus lesson, teach students a strategy to apply during independent reading; for example, “fix up” comprehension strategies (reread a selection if it doesn’t make sense); use context clues (words around a word they don’t know); use pictures or illustrations to help with meaning making. After you have taught at least two to three strategies on separate days, ask students to share which strategy they attempted during their independent reading time. Then have them share how they applied the strategy using the three criteria on page 96. Be prepared to share with your PLC group:

1. the strategies you taught and why you selected them;
2. the strategies students used and whether they applied them accurately; and
3. whether the strategy instruction helped students enhance their comprehension and how you know.

Professional Learning Community Activity B

On pages 107–116 of Creating Lifelong Readers through Independent Reading, the authors tell us about the purposes for student response to reading and provide a number of different approaches students can elect to use when they respond to text. Have each member of your PLC select one way to respond to reading from this list:
1. Responding with art (illustrator study, collage, or puppetry)
2. Responding with drama (choral reading, hot seat, or readers theatre)
3. Responding with writing (book reviews, poetry, or response log)
4. Responding with technology (book advertisements, wikis, or message boards)

In your PLC group, be prepared to discuss

1. which response to reading you selected for students and why;
2. how the technique helped you learn about the literature experience of your students;
3. whether parents were involved in the response-based process and how you involved them;
4. what you learned about this technique and whether you plan to use it again;
5. what students said about this technique and how well they did with it.

Professional learning is more than just attending periodic workshops or conferences. It requires an investment in time, careful planning, monitoring its implementation, and engaging in data conversations to ensure it is changing practice and affecting student growth (Gulamhussein, 2013). In Module 3, we described common patterns that emerged from the initial series of Independent Reading—Literacy Classroom Visits. To address the gap between knowing about the best practices and actually using them with fidelity in classrooms, we first need to provide professional learning. The examples of PLC work described in this module will help teachers learn more about independent reading, test strategies out with their students, and discuss what worked and what didn’t work with their colleagues.

However, the area of greatest struggle is not in learning a new skill but in implementing it, something referred to as the “implementation dip” (Fullan, 2001). This is true with any new skill—learning about knitting isn’t as difficult as actually knitting, learning about hockey isn’t as difficult as actually playing hockey, and learning about an instructional strategy isn’t as difficult as actually applying it. Numerous studies speak to the challenges teachers face when they try to implement new skills in their classrooms. Therefore, conduct classroom visits multiple times a year to determine whether professional learning is making a difference.

Make adjustments to the classroom visit instrument to focus on just the areas being addressed through professional learning. For example, Madison School is planning to focus on rituals and
routines of independent reading during this first year of a three-year plan for improvement. Consequently, the look-for indicators can focus on these areas:

- Are students reading self-selected texts?
- Are students searching for books in the classroom library, and do they appear to know how to select books of interest or reading level?
- Are students listening to or providing book talks?
- Do students have a variety of books to choose from on their desk, in a bag, or in a bin, and have the books been changed out within the week?
- How many students are reading *self-selected* fiction books? How many are reading *self-selected* informational texts?
- Are students reading independently with deep engagement?

An example of the enhanced classroom visit form is shown in the table below.

### Enhanced Independent Reading Literacy Classroom Visit Instrument

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When professional learning is ongoing, sustained, focused on important content, embedded in the work of professional learning communities, and monitored throughout the implementation, it can have a powerful effect on teachers’ knowledge and skills as well as on student learning. “By embedding the Independent Reading–Literacy Classroom Visits in a school or district’s professional learning plan, leaders will have data that helps teachers hone their skills as they address the lasting changes needed to improve the literacy culture within their schools” (Houck & Novak, in press).

References


