

Striving for Success: Teacher Perspectives of a Vertical Team Initiative

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ABSTRACT

This study examined a vertical team initiative and the impact the initiative has had on school improvement efforts in one Southeast Missouri public school district. With the focus on the goal of meeting annual yearly progress as required by the No Child Left Behind legislation, the Jackson-R2 school district initiated the vertical team concept at the secondary level. Using an open-ended survey, the perspectives of secondary teachers were collected and analyzed. The themes that emerged relative to the impact of the initiative include: collaborative teaming, professional development/continuous learning, data/results oriented, alignment of curriculum and benchmark assessments, and shared vision and beliefs.

Introduction

In order to address the challenges of the accountability movement and the requirements outlined in the No Child Left Behind legislation, schools across the nation have implemented a variety of initiatives to enhance student success in the classroom. One such school improvement initiative involves the concept of vertical teaming. This article focuses on teacher perspectives of vertical teaming and the ways in which the vertical team approach has impacted the school improvement efforts in one Southeast Missouri school district. To further understand this innovative approach, the researchers discuss the theoretical underpinnings, the research completed in the school district, the major themes that emerged from the study, and the implications, conclusions, and possibilities for future research.

Literature Review

Early in the 1980s, the Danforth Foundation of St. Louis, Missouri initiated the concept of the vertical team (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993). The vertical team concept was one component of the School Administrators Fellowship Program, and it was structured to achieve four specific goals. These goals included collegiality, professional growth, school improvement, and transition. The goals were viewed as tools for building team cohesion and a culture of support within the school.

Further work surrounding the vertical team concept was completed in the late 1990s by the Texas Leadership Center (1998). Researchers at the Center conducted case studies that focused on the culture of coherence within the system of schooling and how this coherence impacted school improvement efforts. Within their work, the researchers developed a definition for this concept, in which the vertical team was viewed as “a small number of people from different levels within an organization who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable” (p. 18). The researchers continued with the definition by stating that the team had a definite structure and tasks and that the members knew what the group aspired to accomplish, what specific outcomes or products were to be produced, and how they were to work together.

Several issues are viewed as important in the implementation of vertical teaming (Texas Leadership Center, 1998). First, the support of the school superintendent is critical to the success of the vertical team at the district level. Second, the support of the school board is critical. The school board members must understand the process and be able to provide financial and human resources needed to fully implement the initiative.

Third, access to information is imperative to the success of the initiative. The sharing of information and the time provided for communication is critical. Finally, vertical team

members must foster a sense of communication with other colleagues that may not be involved with the vertical team initiative.

Based on the theoretical framework, a study was designed to examine teacher perspectives and to understand the impact of the vertical team initiative in one school district located in Southeast Missouri. In order to understand the context of the study, a description of the school district, participants involved in the study, and test information is provided.

School District Description and Participants

Beginning in the 2002-2003 school year, the Jackson R-2 school district in Jackson, Missouri, implemented the vertical team concept as a means to improve student achievement. Vertical team coordinators were selected for each of the core subject areas and during the summer of 2003, vertical team meetings were held in order to address a variety of tasks. The teams researched sound instructional strategies, studied previous test data, and worked together to develop course syllabi and benchmark tests. The course syllabi and the benchmark tests were aligned with the state developed grade level expectations for each subject area.

The school district is located in Jackson, Missouri and has a total school population of approximately 4600 students in kindergarten through grade 12. The demographic data reflects that approximately 97% of the population is white, 2% of the population is Black, and the remaining 1% of the population is Asian, Hispanic, or Indian. Twenty-four percent of the population receives free or reduced lunches.

In Missouri, the state mandated test is the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP). Communication Arts is tested in grades three and seven, with Mathematics tested in grades four and eight. Students are rated in four categories which include advanced, proficient, progressing and Step 1. To determine Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) numbers are reported for the Advanced and Proficient categories. Test data indicate an improvement in student achievement in that more students are attaining the advanced and proficient rating which also reflects that the number of students meeting AYP is increasing (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2004).

The population for this study consisted of 63 teachers. Of these teachers, 26 teachers were assigned to Jackson High School (grades 10-12), 18 teachers were assigned to Jackson Junior High School (grades 8-9), and 19 teachers were assigned to Jackson Middle School (grades 6-7). When divided into vertical teams, 11 teachers were members of the communication arts team, 18 teachers were members of the math team, 19 teachers were members of the science team, and 15 teachers were members of the social studies team. Participants were asked to complete an open-ended survey questionnaire that included ten questions.

Method

This project employed a research design involving survey research. An initial interview was scheduled with the assistant superintendent of personnel and instruction to obtain additional information relative to the vertical team concept implemented in the Jackson R-2 schools.

From information obtained during the interview, a 10 question open-ended survey was developed (Neuman, 2000; Creswell, 2002). Areas addressed included training, curriculum alignment, instructional strategies, assessment models, evaluation of the initiative, and lessons learned from the implementation. Using within-subject analysis, categories were developed to document the teachers' perspectives. Cross-grade analysis was then used to determine emergent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results and Emergent Themes

In analyzing the data, five themes emerged relative to the impact of the vertical team initiative. These included: professional development; collaborative teaming; data/results oriented; alignment of the curriculum that is written, curriculum that is taught, and curriculum that is tested; and a sense of a shared vision and belief system.

Professional Development

As a school improvement practice, the teachers in the Jackson public schools were committed to continuous learning as a means toward achieving student success and building teacher capacity. Kushman and Chenowith (1996) supported this idea as they suggested that building teacher capacity was the key to accelerating the learning for all students. The vertical team initiative has been implemented in the Jackson public schools over an extended period of time with professional development activities occurring on a year round basis. Teachers have attended sessions during the school year on days set aside for professional development and during the summer months. Outside consultants have been utilized to provide training in the process of vertically aligning curricular objectives. The majority of teachers perceived the idea of professional development as a means of continuous learning as they worked toward accomplishing their goals.

The goals set by the Jackson school district continue to be addressed with teachers meeting in vertical teams to study the alignment of subject curricular objectives with the Missouri state grade level expectations, to discuss the results of the benchmark assessments and how this data aligns with the current MAP scores, and to develop course syllabi.

Collaborative Teaming

Collaborative teaming, viewed as a school improvement practice to help meet the challenges of the federal and state accountability measures, was a focus of the teachers in the Jackson public schools. Secondary teachers in the Jackson R-2 schools viewed the vertical team initiative as a collaborative effort to improve student achievement. Overwhelmingly, the teachers reported that collegiality had improved due to the focused effort regarding the concept of teaming. As reported by a high school math teacher, “Collegiality has increased dramatically; communication has improved and we have identified weak areas in our curriculum.”

By meeting both in horizontal and vertical teams, the teachers stated that they were able to build on each other’s strengths as they shared ideas and strategies they were using in the classroom. In the collaborative team meetings, teachers reported that they were able to discuss a more uniform manner of instruction that led to more uniform assessments of student achievement.

Striving to meet a common goal was a thread that was interwoven through a majority of the responses. As one-sixth grade science teacher reported, “We sixth grade science teachers are more helpful and have a common goal. In grades 6-12, we are closer and also have a common goal. It is the best thing that’s happened!”

Data/Results Oriented

The school communities of all three secondary buildings in the Jackson district centered on student achievement as the driving force in their school improvement efforts regarding the vertical team initiative. The majority of teachers reported that the idea of collecting and analyzing data was a major focus. Data was collected from a variety of sources including previously administered MAP tests and districtwide benchmark tests that had been developed by the vertical teams.

All in all, the theme that emerged regarding the data/results oriented concept is very much a forefront of the vertical team initiative. With the state and federal mandates relating to student achievement and accountability, ongoing test data and formative assessments are utilized in the Jackson schools as a means toward increasing student achievement and meeting the goals toward Adequate Yearly Progress. Concurring with the idea of ongoing assessment, the research conducted by the National Education Association study found that student achievement was higher in schools that understood and used the assessment results of students on a regular basis (Rollie, 2002). As the vertical teaming initiative becomes more refined and further integrated into the school communities, ongoing assessment relating to tangible results will likely become more evident.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Alignment

Supported by the work of the Northwestern Regional Education Lab (1990), effective schools exhibit a clear relationship between learning goals, instructional activities, and student assessment. This relationship appears to be emerging in the Jackson public schools as the vertical team initiative is being implemented.

As reported by the teachers surveyed, a major goal of the Jackson district vertical team initiative was to address the alignment of the curriculum that is written, the curriculum that is taught, and the curriculum that is tested. To address this alignment, a variety of activities has been initiated.

First, in reviewing the curriculum that is written, the teachers in grades 6-12 worked together as horizontal teams to address skills and objectives for each grade level. Outside consultants, who were hired by the district to provide professional development, guided teachers through the process of revising the grade level and subject area written curriculum. This process aided the teachers in generating common syllabi for courses taught at the secondary level.

In addressing the curriculum that is taught, teachers reported that an assortment of strategies have been shared throughout the district. Within the vertical and horizontal team meetings, teachers have communicated their thoughts on successful teaching strategies that have aided in their teaching.

Finally, in addressing the curriculum that is tested, teachers in the Jackson secondary schools have embraced a districtwide assessment model. Even though several teachers reported that the assessment model was in a transitional stage, benchmark exams had been developed to align with the written and taught curriculum.

Shared Vision and Beliefs

Emerging as a final theme of the study, the school improvement practice of creating a shared vision from a common set of beliefs was evident in the responses collected from the Jackson teachers involved in the vertical team initiative. The creation of a shared vision stemmed from the collective understanding of both the purpose of the vertical team initiative and the benefits the practice has had on school improvement efforts. Aligning with the work of numerous researchers (Deal & Peterson, 1999; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Newman & Associates, 1996), the vision and belief that high expectations of students led to increased student achievement was very evident in the responses of the teachers participating in the study. The teachers also voiced some initial lessons they had learned that further led to their construction of a shared vision.

To further enhance the shared vision and beliefs of the teachers, several faculty members reported that even though the vertical team initiative was in the initial stage of implementation, there had been some lessons learned that helped them to construct further knowledge regarding the school improvement efforts in the Jackson R-2 School

district. First, several teachers reported on the selection of the group to be involved in the initiative. Initially, the vertical team initiative was implemented in grades K-12. This large endeavor was viewed as too overwhelming and the decision was made to begin at the high school level, working down from the junior high, and then to the middle school level. With this in mind, grades 6-12 were the final grades that were included in the improvement efforts.

Second, the site of the meetings was discussed in that a suggestion was made to have neutral sites for meetings or to schedule the meetings on a rotational basis between the three buildings housing the teachers involved. Another lesson learned centered on the idea of team building. Team building was viewed as the key to success. The suggestion was made to ensure that all teachers in the core subject area were involved and that ground rules were set for each meeting, which would cut down on any personal attacks or development of a gripe session. Another suggestion involved having clear goals and objectives in place from the start of the initiative. Having a clear blueprint was viewed as a means to accomplish the goals of the district. Several teachers reported a sense of feeling frustrated when the process was unclear or when they were unsure of what was expected. Setting goals, building in an accountability system for implementation, and evaluating those goals were viewed as a means for improvement.

Finally, a lesson learned was that change takes place slowly and time is needed to implement the change. Teachers reported that time was a factor in that they needed to meet not only after school and during the summer, but they needed time during the school day to collaborate. Suggestions such as release time or common planning periods were viewed as a means to capture more time to communicate.

All in all, the teachers in the Jackson R-2 school district viewed the vertical team initiative as a shared vision and a key to their school improvement efforts. Students and teachers alike were perceived to have benefited from the initiative.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Conclusions

The Jackson R-2 school district is in the midst of implementing the vertical teaming concept as a means of increasing student achievement. The initiative is relatively new and is viewed as being in a transitional stage. Test scores on the state assessment indicate that students in most grades and subject areas are progressing in their acquisition of knowledge and skills; however, more time is needed to fully implement the initiative and to determine how the vertical team concept is impacting scores on the state assessment test.

In reviewing the survey responses, a majority of teachers viewed the initiative as worthwhile. The teachers reported that they supported the opportunity to collaborate and communicate with colleagues both in a horizontal manner as well as a vertical team. Most teachers reported that instruction and the alignment of the curriculum had improved

and that the benchmark tests were a means to gather formative data throughout the school year. Professional development was viewed as a key to success. Overwhelmingly, the faculty in the Jackson secondary schools is committed to making difference in the lives of the students they teach.

Implications

This study contributes to the understanding regarding the collaborative vertical team initiative and the impact it has had on school improvement efforts. The findings of this study are consistent with the literature regarding how schools can react to the challenges of improving student achievement and meeting their Adequate Yearly Progress goals. School improvement efforts require a collaborative effort. With this in mind, the following implications are presented.

District Level. As districts develop their plans for improvement, areas involving curriculum, instruction, and assessment must be addressed. District support of the vertical team initiative was evident in the study of the Jackson R-2 school system. Support was evident in professional development activities offered to teachers. Teachers were involved in training and team building activities that enhanced their understanding of the improvement process. Curriculum is being aligned both horizontally and vertically and a districtwide assessment model is being implemented in grades 6-12.

Preservice Level. Preservice programs for teachers must strive to teach future teachers best practices involving school improvement efforts. In the era of state assessments and accountability, new teachers to the field must be able to collect data, disaggregate data, and analyze data. Preservice teachers need to be aware and understand what it takes to collaborate and to make decisions as a team. They must also be able to align their instructional practices to state standards and to formatively assess students as means of improving student achievement throughout the school year. Finally, preservice teachers must understand that continuous learning is a process that will enhance their teaching and that professional development is needed on an ongoing basis throughout their career.

Recommendations for Further Studies

From the findings of this study relative to the impact the vertical team initiative currently being implemented in the Jackson R-2 school district, further questions have emerged. First, the reporting of other voices would help to validate this study. Questions pertaining to the perceptions of administrators (both building and district level), parents, and students have come to mind. The perception of these people could provide additional details regarding the vertical team initiative and the school improvement process.

Another recommendation involves the Missouri Assessment Program. The state assessment model has not previously included a test of the language arts and math areas every school year. However, beginning in the spring of 2006, Missouri will implement a new testing model to reflect the changes mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act. This new model will include the assessment of both the language arts and math areas in grades three through eight. It will be of interest to educators to determine how this new assessment program will impact district improvement practices.

Finally, since the vertical team initiative is in the beginning stages of implementation in the Jackson schools, a follow-up study would provide information on a longitudinal basis. Adequate Yearly Progress goals could then be evaluated with more in-depth information regarding the vertical team approach to increasing student achievement.

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