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Focus on Essential Learning Outcomes



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Focus on Essential Learning Outcomes

Robert Sornson and Debbie Davis

RESEARCH BEST PRACTICE

Simpson Central School is a rural school in Pinola, MS that serves Kindergarten through 8th grade students in the Simpson County School District, which is approximately 50 miles south of Jackson, MS. The school has approximately 500 students from 20 small surrounding communities. Simpson Central is a Title I school, with 77% of the students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The student population is 52% Caucasian and 48% African American.

In 2008, two Simpson Central staff members and two district administrators began training on the Early Learning Success (ELS) model (Sornson, 2012). Until this point the district had placed a strong emphasis on remediation for grades three through eight, and the state assessment scores were used to identify students who were struggling academically. District and school data historically reported that over 60% of students were performing academically below their grade level proficiency in reading. As a result, by the end of grade three, many of these students were recommended to receive special education services, which caused the school's special education rates to go well above the state and national averages.

Simpson Central School began a gradual implementation of Early Learning Success strategies and procedures to close the gap among its students. The purpose was to identify the learning needs of students as early as possible and to respond to those needs quickly and systematically. Kindergarten was the grade level of focus for the first year of ELS implementation; however, efforts to improve instruction in grades one through three were also initiated to include:

1. Redesigned daily schedules to include a greater emphasis on literacy instruction for children on their level of instructional readiness. Additional time was allocated for language and literacy instruction, including 60 minutes of daily practice reading blocks with small groups. All staff participated in the designated practice reading time.
2. Implemented a K-1 motor skills development program using AmeriCorps workers, based on *Motor Skills for Academic Success* (Sornson, 2010). Several groups of students were selected to receive supplemental assistance two to three times weekly. The sessions focused on the

development of balance, core strength, body awareness, bilateral motor coordination, and hand-eye skills.

Every K-1 student was assessed using the *Preschool to Grade 3 Essential Math Skills Inventory* (Sornson, 2012). Students with the greatest need worked one-on-one with a volunteer for 10-15 minutes a day. The program included kinesthetic and manipulative activities that supported the development of basic numeracy skills. During the second year of ELS, report cards for kindergarten and grades one and two were aligned with the *Essential Skill Inventories* (Sornson, 2012) along with:

1. A three and one-half hour daily language and literacy block was scheduled for kindergarten and grade one, including the daily 60 minutes small reading groups. In addition, kindergarten and grade one students received an hour of language lessons weekly, which were conducted by the speech teacher or the academic coach.
2. Grades two and three also scheduled a three and one-half daily language and literacy block. Students in grade two received instruction at their correct level of challenge for 60 minutes daily and grade three students received instruction in small groups daily for 45 minutes.
3. Simpson Central School began its development of an Instructional Support Team. The assistant principal, lead teacher, academic coach, and counselor served as case managers. Teachers requesting support were assigned case managers who developed skills in formative assessment and

provided on-going progress monitoring.

During the 2010-2011 academic year, teachers refined their skills in the use of systematic measurement for progress and planned instruction based on their analysis of students' learning outcomes. It became clear that adherence to rigid pacing guides and attempts to cover overwhelming content that expectations were not producing acceptable outcomes. Staff was given training in systematically identifying students' levels of instructional readiness and the delivery of instruction responsive to students' learning needs. As a result, (a) kindergarten and grade one began to use the *Essential Skill Inventories* to maintain classroom data maps which include essential language, literacy, numeracy, motor, and behavioral skills, (b) the Instructional Support Team (IST) refined processes and procedures and worked to create a collaborative problem-solving process, and (c) the kindergarten through grade two staff developed additional skills to deliver math instruction based on an understanding of students' skill levels and readiness.

In 2011-2012, the staff continued to refine their ability to teach a rich and interesting curriculum while recognizing that some skills were crucial and needed more coverage. Kindergarten and grade one teachers after a year of training on the *Essential Skill Inventories*, were able to use the assessment tool with confidence and maintained a schedule of weekly data updates. Grade two teachers began to use the *Essential Skill Inventory* and learned to imbed formative assessment into their instructional plans. A monthly data review meeting was used by administrators in grade level

meetings to track and improve teaching and learning.

After each data meeting, the grade-level teams reevaluated their lesson planning strategies. While making sure to cover Common Core State Standards, they focused on allowing students who had not yet mastered the grade level essential skills to have more instruction and practice time. Students who had already mastered a skill were advanced to higher levels of learning.

Measuring ELS's Effectiveness

The following research questions guided Early Learning Success (ELS) initiative in Simpson County: Research Question #1: What are the Language Arts and Math outcomes on the Mississippi Curriculum Test-2 (MCT-2) for students who participated in the Early Learning Success initiative from 2008-2009 to 2011-2012? The researcher followed the progress of a cohort of students who were involved in the ELS from kindergarten through grade three. In May of 2012, the first class of students who were involved or who participated in the Early Learning Success Initiative at Simpson Central School since Kindergarten took the MCT-2 at the end of their third grade year. Students are required to take the MCT in grade three. Based on previous test results, students who received the ELS in kindergarten through grade three made significant improvement in their language arts test scores and mathematics.

Remarkable improvement is noted over historic patterns of proficiency. In language arts, this pattern is particularly significant since many Simpson County students have historically had weak language, motor, and social/behavior skills upon entering kindergarten. In mathematics, a significant improvement in outcomes was

noted after summer training in formative assessment and responsive instruction for essential math outcomes.

Research Question #2: What are the Developmental Reading Assessment outcomes for students who participated in the Early Learning Success initiative from 2008-2009 to 2011-2012? The importance of helping young children achieve proficiency in reading skills by the end of third grade is well documented (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; Foundation for Child Development, 2012; Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998; Torgeson, 1998, 2002). Developmental Reading Assessment scores were tracked throughout each school year to help ensure proper attention was given to students' reading practice time at the correct instructional level. The end-of-year data were analyzed and changes were shown in proficiency since 2007-2008, which was the year before the Early Learning Success Initiative began at Simpson Central School.

Developmental Reading Assessment scores improved significantly from 2007-2008 to 2011-2012 at every grade level. Increasing the time spent on literacy instruction and allowing students more time for practicing reading using grade-level material improved their Developmental Reading Assessment scores. Some year-to-year variations may have been related to changes in teaching staff, challenges in the personal lives of staff, and the different needs of individual classes. Of special note are the 2011-2012 kindergarten Developmental Reading Assessment scores. In the first year of implementation of the *Essential Skill Inventory* protocol for ongoing data updates and reviews, the majority of kindergarten students were at or above grade level. Quality ongoing formative assessment of the whole child, in

combination with responsive instruction in reading and oral language skills, may have accounted for this outcome.

Research Question #3: Has Simpson Central School achieved its goal of more than 90% proficiency or better on the MCT2 Language Arts and Math? At Simpson Central School, grade three MCT2 Language Arts scores improved from less than 30% proficient in 2008-2009 to 82% in 2011-2012. During the same timeframe Math scores increased from 57% to 87% proficient and above. The school has not yet achieved 90% proficiency. The scores showed that the rates of proficiency on the MCT2 increased by 222% in language arts and 147% in math.

The *Essential Skill Inventories* identify 30 to 33 skills for each of the early grades which are crucial to long-term learning success. These K-3 skills include language, literacy, numeracy, motor, and social/behavioral skills. These essential skills are not intended to be the focus for instructional design, which is better served by the Common Core State Standards or some other instructional framework for a viable curriculum. Rather, the Essential Skills become the framework for assessment. These are the *Core of the Core* during the crucial early grades, identifying outcomes which cannot just be “covered”, but rather must be learned to a level of deep understanding and application.

As a framework for on-going formative assessment and progress monitoring, the inventories alert teachers of those students who are not yet proficient in a skill and who need additional teaching or practice, and further notify teachers of those students who are ready to advance to higher levels of challenges. During the initial staff training phase for use of the *Essential Skill Inventories*, Simpson Central

teachers set a goal of 75% of all Kindergarten students achieving proficiency in every grade-level essential skill.

The transformation from covering lessons, to systematically using formative assessment, to monitoring progress, and adjusting instruction did not come without dedication to change. Kindergarten teachers followed the protocol for data collection with fidelity during the 2011-2012 school year. This allowed teachers to understand exactly which students had achieved proficiency in any specific skill at any given point during the school year, and also which students still needed encouragement, instruction, practice, or home support. While staff exceeded the 75% goal during the 2011-12 school year, they recognized that the learning needs of students upon entering school, in some cases, are too great to be solved in one school year. In some cases it may take more than one year to properly develop the foundational language, movement and social skills that support learning success.

Reaching the long-term goal of more than 90% of students proficient in every essential skill will require (a) teachers to be skilled in systematic formative assessment and responsive instruction, (b) grade-level teacher collaboration, (c) a support team process to consider complex learning or behavior needs and interventions, (d) on-going professional learning, and (e) development of a powerful school to home connections with learning options for parents.

Recommendations for Further Progress

1. Continue developing skills for using formative assessment to drive responsive instruction in

- every crucial aspect of early learning.
2. Achieve confidence of the protocol for data collection using the *Essential Skill Inventories* in grades one and two.
 3. Refine the Instructional Support Team process so that it is quickly responsive to teachers' requests and to effectively measure students' response to instruction.
 4. Use monthly data review meetings (principal and grade level teachers) to support collaboration, professional learning, and discussions to lead toward effective practices for formative assessment and responsive instruction.
 5. Use experiences at Simpson Central to develop an accelerated learning curve for the use of formative assessment and responsive instruction at other Simpson County elementary schools.
 6. Prepare grade three staff for their participation in the early learning success initiative.
 7. Consider how to apply what we have learned about instructional match, formative assessment, and responsive instruction at the upper grade levels.
 8. Continue to support the development of a respectful culture in which adults collaborate, learn, constantly look for ways to improve, and are

dedicated to serving students and their families.

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