Instructional Coherence

Why Is This Strategy Useful?

Instructional program coherence is a set of interrelated programs for students and staff. The programs are guided by a common framework for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and learning climate and are pursued over a sustained period. Pertinent to all schools but particularly important for lower performing schools attempting to implement improvement initiatives or reforms, instructional coherence is critical for initiatives to support coherence in the school, as opposed to incremental add-on efforts. In instances of low coherence, staff divide themselves among various initiatives and direct a great deal of time and energy to multiple workshops, meetings, and conferences. Immediate success may not be expected from these efforts, but with time, desired improvements in student achievement fail to materialize and professional fatigue and frustration rise. Many of these improvement programs fade or end, while new programs continue to be adopted. Evidence suggests that schools with strong instructional coherence are able to identify programs or reforms that support the overarching framework and thus show greater gains in student achievement than do low-coherence schools.

Description of Strategy

Instructional program coherence assists student achievement in two ways: by helping teachers to work more effectively on problems of school improvement and by directly increasing student engagement and learning. Tighter coordination of instruction requires more than commitment to a schoolwide framework grounded in a strong technical base. It requires extensive, continuing communication among teachers, mutual assistance, and working together to improve instruction according to the framework. School leaders in the higher scoring schools promote such collaboration by establishing common planning periods for grade levels and across grade-planning groups, by forming "schools within schools" to facilitate more extensive collaborative relationships through smaller clusters of teachers, and by establishing representative teams and committees to deal with school governance issues. Strategies to promote instructional coherence include

- A common instructional framework that guides curriculum, teaching, assessment, and learning climate. The framework combines specific expectations for student learning with specific strategies and materials to guide teaching and assessment.
- Staff working conditions that support implementation of the framework (e.g., including common planning time, accountability for results within the framework, and teacher evaluations).
- School allocation of resources such as funding, materials, time, and staff assignments to advance the school’s common instructional framework and to avoid diffuse, scattered improvement efforts.

Research Evidence

One mixed-methods study on instructional coherence relied on a combination of survey results from approximately 5,400 teachers in 222 Chicago elementary schools, collected in 1994 and subsequently in 1997, as well as a field study (observations and interviews) in 11 of these elementary schools. Evidence suggested a strong positive relationship between instructional
coherence and student achievement. The quantitative analysis using teacher survey responses showed positive connections between strengthening instructional program coherence and improving students’ academic achievement in both reading and mathematics in a large number of schools. Students’ achievement gains in schools that had growing levels of instructional coherence was equated to an additional 2 months a year of schooling (when compared to average schools). Evidence from the field study portion of the research suggests that schools that achieved stronger coherence benefited from principals and other key actors who directed resources toward a clearly articulated instructional program framework. Instructional leadership from the principal or teachers was critical. In addition, principals who were able to leverage resources external to the school to support the instructional framework were most successful at developing instructional coherence.

Sample Studies Supporting This Strategy


We present the concept of instructional program coherence and explain why school improvement frameworks that incorporate instructional program coherence are more likely to advance student achievement than multiple, unrelated efforts. We present evidence that Chicago elementary schools with stronger instructional program coherence make higher gains in student achievement. We also share observations on how, in specific schools, principals and external partners directed key school resources toward the development of instructional program coherence. In closing, we discuss factors within the educational system that discourage instructional program coherence and suggest ways that school leaders, school improvement partners, and policymakers can support greater instructional program coherence.

Additional Resources
