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## Implementing RTI Using Literacy Blocks with Flexible Grouping

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Research journals are full of empirical and anecdotal evidence that education as an institution is resistant to change, which makes starting a district-wide initiative an overwhelming proposition. However, Mahtomedi (MN) Public Schools (MPS) responded to the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA by examining the critical components of response-to intervention (RTI) and decided to phase-in RTI. The multi-year project would begin at the early elementary grades and gradually be introduced through the high school level. Thus, in January 2006, the district's administrative team decided to begin the multi-year implementation process at the K-2 building during the following school year in order to better address the needs of all students.

Mahtomedi Public Schools is a suburban district in Minnesota that serves approximately 3,000 students within two elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, and an Alternative Learning Center. Wildwood Elementary School is the district's early elementary building that serves grades kindergarten through second, while grades three through five are served by the district's other elementary building.

### PLANNING RTI IMPLEMENTATION USING LITERACY BLOCKS

RTI implementation at Wildwood Elementary began with planning during the spring of 2006 by the building principal, the school psychologist, one reading teacher, and the special education director. The team decided to adopt a three-tiered model that incorporated both standard treatment protocol and individual problem analysis. However, it was unclear how to provide scientific, research-based interventions to students who needed additional support but were not identified for

special education services with the limited resources available. Further, general education teachers previously had been trained in differentiation and were working diligently to plan appropriate instruction for all levels of learners, but found the task to be challenging, especially in regards to students who were continually struggling and those that were the highest achieving. There were also concerns with the current pull-out model of special education services, including a disconnect between what was taught in the classroom and what was taught during pull-out sessions. The solution selected by the team was to implement literacy blocks with flexible grouping in order to meet student needs across three tiers.

Flexible grouping is an instructional strategy in which students are grouped homogeneously by skill level for one or two subjects during the day (Bloom, 1984). Student progress is monitored frequently and groups are remixed as their skills progress or they show the need more support (Moody, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1997). All students participate in the flexible groups for skill-based instruction with common themes integrated across groups. They are then brought back into heterogeneous skill groups for common instructional components.

### GETTING STARTED

Wildwood Elementary is fortunate to have a staff comprised of talented, enthusiastic, and well-educated teachers and support staff who consistently place the needs of the students at the forefront of their work. It is their continued pursuit of excellence that allowed the literacy block initiative to become a reality for this school.

During the 2005–2006 school year, the Wildwood faculty created a document to guide its professional development efforts. This document, titled “Wildwood Beliefs About Learning,” contained the following beliefs:

- Learning is developmental and must be meaningful

for all students. Growth is expected for all children. High goals and expectations, personal attention, and active learning strategies will encourage life-long learners.

- We will provide a safe, respectful, positive, and nurturing environment for students and staff.
- Children will be motivated through positive reinforcement, provisions for multiple learning styles, creativity, and the arts.
- Communication and parent support are critical to our students' success.
- As we believe learning is a life-long pursuit, we will challenge ourselves as professionals to encourage our personal and professional growth as educators.

The "Beliefs About Learning" continues to hold our faculty together during times of change. When looking at new initiatives, curriculum or strategies, we refer back to this guide as our road map for change. In addition to the beliefs statement, the staff identified goals in the areas of literacy and social competency. Literacy and social competency were two areas that Wildwood teachers believed were developmentally and academically appropriate for our primary students, based on research and their professional wisdom.

Two important events became catalysts for future work. First, representatives from each grade level and special education from Wildwood visited a school that was already implementing the flexible grouping strategy. The teachers at that school were seeing real results for students and improved conditions for teachers. The second event was a successful grant submitted by the special education director and school psychologist to the Minnesota Department of Education. The grant provided funding to implement RTI. However, implementing the flexible grouping strategy within an RTI initiative required a systems change that was dependent on effective collaboration. Thus, we began by working with our staff and special education director to complete a needs assessment for training in both the areas of literacy and RTI and to identify interventions for the three tiers. Finally, the staff used a guide from Schmoker (1999) to prepare for the change and develop a common understanding of the process.

## IMPLEMENTATION

**Data-driven decision making.** Preliminary implementation of RTI and literacy blocks began in the

spring of 2006. Reading specialists, special education staff, and a handful of paraprofessionals were trained to administer school wide curriculum-based measurement (CBM) benchmark assessments. Next, baseline data were collected for all students in May. Kindergarteners were assessed with Letter Name Fluency (LNF), Letter Sound Fluency (LSF), and Oral Reading Fluency (ORF). First and second graders were administered an ORF measure.

Based on our preliminary data, we were able to create mock schedules and literacy block classes to help start putting things into perspective. We were able to visualize the resources that we would need to utilize in the upcoming school year. We determined from our preliminary work that we would need to assess the first grade students on LNF and LSF as well as ORF, so these measures were added to the plans for fall CBM testing.

Full implementation began in the fall of 2006, during the first week of school. Kindergarteners were given LNF and LSF tests as part of their "Kindergarten Interview." The first 2 days of school are set aside for kindergarten teachers to meet individually with their students to assess incoming skill levels. Kindergarteners were asked to see the reading specialists before or after meeting with their classroom teacher to assess LNF and LSF. The first and second graders completed CBMs the first week of school and also took the Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test during the first 2 weeks. The MAP is a computer-adaptive, norm-referenced test of overall reading achievement (NWEA, 2005).

Students remained with their homerooms for literacy instruction while literacy assessments were occurring during the first three weeks of the school year. Literacy instruction during this time focused on review and classroom teachers collected data such as text reading levels and number of known sight words.

**Student groups.** As the data were collected, the Title I reading teachers compiled the information using Microsoft Excel and AIMSWEB. They proposed literacy groups based on the CBM, MAP, and classroom teacher data. The group lists were then presented at a staff meeting during the fourth week of school. It was at this meeting that teachers were able to add their professional judgment and make changes as they saw fit.

Surprisingly, classroom teachers were satisfied with the proposed grouping based solely on the data. Thus, students on the proposed list were grouped similarly to how the teachers viewed their performance in the first few weeks of school and very few changes were made to the proposed group lists.

Students with the lowest skill levels (approximately the lowest 5 percent) were placed in Tier III literacy groups, which had the fewest number of students and the most adult support. These groups were comprised of four or five students who were taught by a special education teacher with one paraprofessional for support. The students with the next level of skill (between the 6th and 19th percentile) were assigned to the Tier II literacy groups. These groups were comprised of 12 students who were taught by two licensed reading teachers with one paraprofessional for support. The rest of the students (approximately 80%) were assigned to Tier I groups with one teacher and approximately 18–20 students.

**Scheduling.** All students in one grade level had literacy at the same time to allow for flexible grouping. The original schedule included literacy blocks four days each week. This schedule allowed for scheduling specialist classes and to give the homeroom teachers a chance to catch up on other curriculum areas that were lacking, but teachers were still expected to teach literacy to their homeroom groups on the days without flexible grouping.

Literacy grouping started at the end of September, but by November some concerns were voiced by classroom teachers that four days of literacy grouping each week was not sufficient to cover everything that the students needed. Those concerns were taken into consideration and a fifth day of literacy blocks was added to the weekly schedule. The change to five days per week occurred immediately after Thanksgiving.

**Progress monitoring.** Teachers working with students in Tiers II and III progress monitor their students using CBM measures. Although some modifications to progress monitoring schedules were needed, and no perfect system has been found yet, the data that are collected were perceived as useful and were used to guide instruction. The immediate feedback about

student progress has been positive, and the information was used to move students among groups as needed. Teachers meet in their professional learning communities once per week and data from student progress monitoring is reviewed during these meetings at least once per month. Student movement between groups has generally occurred at the end of the quarter, around parent-teacher conference time, and around the three school wide testing times.

## LITERACY GROUPING INSTRUCTION

**Kindergarten.** Literacy Groups in kindergarten occur for 45 minutes, five days per week. The core literacy themes are delivered to students in heterogeneous homeroom groups. During the literacy block time, instruction is focused on the needs of each ability group. For example, the highest group of students is learning comprehension strategies and how to read contractions, but the two lowest groups are focused on letter names, letter sounds, and concepts of print, along with other basic phonemic awareness skills necessary to become successful readers.

**First grade.** First grade teachers teach the overall curriculum themes in their homerooms for 30 minutes each day, which includes reading the anthology stories and the big books. Then, when literacy blocks convene for the daily 65 minutes, the focus is targeted phonics instruction, guided reading groups, and literacy skills from the core curriculum. Each literacy group has its own unique spelling list that focuses on the ability level of its students.

**Second grade.** Second grade literacy groups meet for 75 minutes, five days per week. The majority of literacy instruction occurs during the literacy block time. Each literacy teacher is responsible for daily oral language, spelling, guided reading, anthology readings, and core curriculum skills, although each literacy teacher needs to adapt the curriculum to the students' skill levels.

**Multi-age.** Wildwood Elementary has four classrooms that are comprised of both first and second grade students. These classrooms have literacy groups for 60 minutes, five days per week. The curriculum looks similar to the single-grade classrooms, but the literacy groups are mixed with first and second grade students.

## PRELIMINARY RESULTS

In January 2007, the data management team at Wildwood Elementary examined the student CBM and MAP data and was amazed at the progress in just a few short months. On the Letter Naming Fluency measure our kindergarten students have increased from only 61% at or above target to 80% at or above target. On the Letter Sound Fluency measure our kindergarten students increased from 37% at or above target to 72% at or above target. The results are similar for first grade. In the fall, 40% of our first graders tested at or above target on Letter Sound Fluency. In the winter, 72% of them were at or above target. Similarly, on the Oral Reading Fluency measure, 68% of our first grade students were at or above target in the fall and 83% were at or above target in the winter. Finally, our second grade students have had positive results as well. In the fall, 66% of our second graders were meeting or exceeding the ORF target. In the winter, we now have 70% of our students at or above the ORF target.

In addition to examining the entire grade level as a whole, we looked at average student performance across literacy groups. We found that on each measure, at each grade level, and for each literacy group, the average scores increased, without exception. From the lowest skilled to the highest skilled, all of our groups are making progress in reading skills.

These Fall to Winter results are only preliminary. At the end of this school year, we will collect CBM screening data again on all of our students. We will compare student performance in May 2007 with CBM data collected schoolwide in May 2006. We believe the positive results we have seen in our preliminary data collection will be confirmed in our year-to-year comparison. Implementing Literacy Blocks with flexible grouping has provided a framework for all students to receive instruction that is matched to their skill level, and has made it possible to provide more intensive instruction to our most needy students without adding additional resources. We are also planning to continue CBM and MAP test data collection three times a year, for future evaluation.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As we have shared this information with various

districts, we often hear the message, “yes, this looks good but it isn’t possible in our district.” We argue that it is possible, especially if your staff is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve their goals. Initially there was a concern with the level of professional commitment that would be necessary for Wildwood to make the changes that would have the largest effect on student achievement. However, this concern never materialized because student needs were placed at the forefront. The staff began to study changes in student expectations, methods of collaboration, using data to make decisions, new teaching assignments, case loads, actual duty days, advanced literacy training, and scheduling. This work has been largely accomplished through professional learning communities and at faculty work sessions.

As we plan for next year, we are continuing to revise and improve our flexible literacy grouping system. One thing learned from this year is that communication is very important. When using a schedule that includes flexible literacy groups, everyone is affected when there is a field trip or a special event in a grade level. Also there should be at least bi-weekly meetings set up where everyone involved in teaching the grade level literacy curriculum can meet and plan together. Communication with parents is also important; when students move between groups, parents must be notified and it is up to your team to decide who contacts the parents. Will it be the homeroom teacher or the previous literacy teacher? Also, clarity is needed on how data will be reported to teachers and parents. Moreover, teacher training on data interpretation and instructional implications is critical because if the teachers do not understand the data, they will not use it.

For our staff and students, the combination of the literacy block initiative and RTI has made a tremendous difference. The data support the efforts and provide reason for energy and enthusiasm to continue to provide the best services possible for our students. With all the success this year in reading, we are planning on expanding the process to math instruction, and to the intermediate elementary school as well. Thus, our efforts have evolved from initial implementation and planning to expanding so that the notable success our students have experienced this year will continue in years to come.

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