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Instructional facilitators fill key role in Wyo schools, but impact is hard to measure

Teachers' teachers

By **JACKIE BORCHARDT** - Star-Tribune staff writer | Posted: Sunday, February 14, 2010 12:00 am

Students won't arrive at Casper's University Park Elementary School for another 20 minutes.

It's just enough time for a group of teachers to discuss every child who is struggling academically or socially in the fifth grade.

"She made a bump here and here," said Schlee Weis, a special education teacher, pointing at two dots on a shaded graph of reading test scores.

"She's flat in retell. She's missing a lot of school," said Diane Weiss, the school's instructional facilitator.

The student hadn't missed enough school to have a letter sent home, but enough to make a difference in her performance, said Principal Sally Huber.

The attendance data came from the teachers in the classroom. The skills test data came from weekly testing done by the school's instructional facilitator, an experienced teacher whose job is to support teacher development with the goal of student growth.

"If we weren't communicating, there's no way these little nuances would be noticed and get fixed," Weiss said.

Instructional facilitators, known as instructional coaches in other states, are experienced teachers who work with teachers to improve teaching methods and strategies. The state Legislature began funding instructional facilitators in 2006, and more than 400 teachers work as instructional facilitators at least part time in Wyoming.

Since the Legislature decided to partially fund instructional facilitators, the program has evolved to a point where schools say they can't do without them. In 2008-09, the Legislature appropriated nearly \$22 million for instructional facilitators.

The grant was designed to help pay for the facilitators during a "transitional period" while the state education funding model was implemented and reviewed, according to the school finance act in 2006. About \$19.7 million was allocated for instructional facilitators the 2009-10 school year. With projections for a significant drop in revenue for schools in coming years, the program could be an easy target for cuts.

Many educators have said the Legislature needs to increase funding to pay for the number of instructional facilitators recommended by the Picus and Odden consulting firm. The state hired the firm in 2005 to build the current funding model, which awards districts a total amount of money in a block grant, calculated with several formulas and based on student population.

The model suggests staffing numbers and amounts to go toward professional development, but districts can spend the money in the block grant however they want. Anything funded outside of the model, such as the instructional facilitator grant, has to be spent solely for the designated purpose. Unspent dollars return to the state.

Instructional facilitators are important enough to continue funding outside the model, said Sen. Hank Coe, R-Cody, co-chairman of the Legislature's Joint Education Committee.

"I feel it's a very worthwhile program," Coe said. "This is a program that has a history and a track record in other places."

Proof?

Research proves instructional facilitators improve teacher performance, said Jim Knight, a leader in the instructional coaching field and professor at the University of Kansas.

"I have never been more hopeful for the future of our schools because it's getting more and more clear what effective teaching looks like and clearer and clearer how to get that into the schools," Knight said.

Instructional coaching has taken off since Knight's book, "Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction," was published in 2007.

The Legislature is wise to fund a statewide program, Knight said.

"You have limited resources and want to invest them on things that make a difference," he said. "Just to do traditional workshops is worse than useless."

Instructional facilitators require buy-in from districts and schools, and performance is difficult to measure. Three Wyoming school districts did not use the state grant for the program, and 15 did not use the full amount available to them in 2008-09. In some cases, money was returned because a school received enough to pay 1.2 staff members but hired one. Just as many chose to spend above the state grant.

The Natrona County School District tried to align itself with the suggested model, making up extra costs with school board funds, said Steve Hopkins, associate superintendent of business. The district spent \$388,940 more than the instructional facilitator grant in 2009-10.

District officials think it's working but hasn't found a way to link instructional facilitators directly to student performance, said Cheryl Gettings, director of the mentoring and instructional facilitator programs in Natrona County. In addition to instructional facilitators, the funding model encouraged smaller class sizes, more tutors and several other changes.

"When six things are implemented at once, you know the basket of goods has made a difference," Gettings said. "We just don't have the data to individually show each one."

About 85 percent of new teachers in Natrona County have stayed in the last five years -- a contrast to national averages of between 50 and 66 percent, Gettings said.

Elementary and secondary teachers differ in their needs for instructional facilitators, according to a statewide survey in 2008-09. Secondary teachers would like to work more on teaching strategies and student data and less with in-class modeling and coaching. Elementary teachers would like to work more with student assessments and modeling instruction strategies. Overall, elementary teachers were more willing to work with instructional facilitators.

In the same survey, 68 percent strongly agreed the instructional facilitator program is money well-spent.

Instructional facilitators have made a big difference in instruction and improved staff development, said Huber, principal at University Park.

"Instead of going to a conference and nothing gets changed when you come back to classrooms, instructional facilitators are in the school to help with that," Huber said.

Accountability

The job description for instructional facilitators has never been too detailed but has evolved, Gettings said.

Duties include modeling lessons, researching possible classroom activities and analyzing data for teachers. Teachers said they could do those tasks, but it would take time away from instruction and not be as well-done.

Instructional facilitators attend four-day training sessions before school and after winter break, a fall coaching conference, meetings with mentors and monthly best practices meetings with other facilitators. An instructional facilitator task force of district and Department of Education administrators coordinates statewide and regional professional development and shares

practices among districts.

"It's more than teachers teaching teachers," Gettings said. "These are highly trained individuals working with teachers."

Classrooms have changed and require more skills to address student needs.

"Instructional facilitators help teachers with skills," Gettings said. "We need to be about collaboration, not about each of us individually."

The Natrona County district created five standards and piloted an evaluation based on those standards this year. In addition to enabling administrators to evaluate instructional facilitators on their specified duties, the rubric clarifies expectations for the job, Gettings said.

Facilitators should be shoulder-to-shoulder with teachers 50 to 70 percent of the time. It's the principals' responsibility to make sure facilitators are using their time effectively.

"We should be held accountable -- we're not afraid of that," Gettings said.

Instructional facilitators want to see the program grow and become stronger across the state. Weiss wishes there was more collaboration and less competition between schools and districts.

"Even if we have different programs and different philosophies, we could still learn from each other," Weiss said.

All the instructional facilitators agreed: It's a process.

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