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Closing Achievement Gaps for English Learners & Increasing Teacher Retention

West Goshen Elementary School, Indiana

Spring 2019

An Indiana School Improvement Case Study

Summary

Over the course of four years, West Goshen Elementary School went from a chronically-underperforming school that struggled to meet the academic needs of its increasingly diverse student body to an A-rated school actively closing achievement gaps for its English Learners and students living in poverty.

With support from NIET, West Goshen was able to reach and maintain the A rating. This has been accomplished by implementing instructional supports and developing a culture of continuous improvement—all to enable teachers to lead significant and sustained growth in student achievement.



School Context

West Goshen is a kindergarten through fifth-grade public elementary school located in Goshen, Indiana. The north central Indiana city of 31,000 residents is situated in Elkhart County and is known as the RV capital of the world. Goshen is about three hours east of Chicago and three hours north of Indianapolis.

West Goshen is home to around 350 students and serves a significant number of Hispanic students and English Learners. West Goshen has experienced significant demographic shifts in its student population over the last 20 years.

In 2000, West Goshen Elementary had a white population of 71% and a Hispanic population of 23%, but steady enrollment increases by Hispanic students made West Goshen a majority-minority school by the 2006-2007 school year.

By school year 2017-2018, nearly two-thirds of West Goshen's students identified as Hispanic. Around three quarters of students receive free or reduced-price lunch and 43% of its students are classified as English Learners.

"We all believe that through working with NIET, we've created a culture of growing and learning for all of us. West Goshen teachers don't make excuses; we find strategies. We look at data, we make a plan and we execute the plan."

– Lori Line, Principal

The Challenge

The significant increase of English Learners (ELs) and students living in poverty presented a number of new instructional challenges for the staff at West Goshen. To help support teachers meet their students' academic needs, the school employed a number of professional development strategies that sounded good on paper in the Title I plan, but failed to live up to their promise in the classroom.

For instance, the school provided teachers opportunities for collaboration, but the meeting time was unstructured and centered around general pedagogical concepts rather than strategies tied to data that reflected student need. West Goshen had implemented a common assessment that provided new data, but teachers lacked an understanding of how to actually use the data to improve instruction and student learning.

Teachers also had professional learning opportunities and support provided by in-house literacy coaches, yet even the coaches themselves reported they struggled to effectively support classroom teachers. One of the literacy coaches put it this way:

“Coaching always felt so broad around literacy, like, ‘Here’s how you teach writing or do guided reading activities,’ but it wasn’t centered around, ‘What specific pieces do your kids need and how can I support you?’”

In addition to these general professional learning strategies, West Goshen supported its growing EL population through pullout instruction for EL students. While the EL instructors had some knowledge of general techniques, they lacked an understanding of what EL students needed to make academic growth in key subjects. To make matters worse, classroom teachers began to see EL growth as the responsibility of the supplemental instructors. As a result, many teachers tended to teach around ELs with the expectation that their needs would be met by the EL instructors. This dynamic also contributed to a growing gap between teachers' academic expectations for ELs and those of their English-proficient counterparts.

Overall, professional development at West Goshen was not providing teachers with the ability to support learning growth for all students. Teachers felt overwhelmed by the challenges and unable to adequately meet the needs of their students. Teachers continued to try their best with what they knew, but a lack of progress in the face of mounting challenges wore many teachers down.

As a result, West Goshen experienced high teacher turnover rates and developed a reputation for being an undesirable place to teach among the other elementary schools in the district. When one teacher considered a transfer to West Goshen, her colleague remarked, “Why would you go to West Goshen? Everyone is leaving there.”

Building School Capacity to Support Teacher Growth

West Goshen was committed to supporting every classroom teacher make academic gains for English Learners. With the support of NIET, West Goshen established a school-based structure of teacher leaders to provide job-embedded professional learning for every teacher.

The principal included teacher leaders on the leadership team, and empowered them to provide the kinds of individualized observation, feedback and coaching to help each teacher improve. This structure of support enabled the school to meet high expectations for student learning, further motivating the faculty to continue to improve.

The first step West Goshen took with support from NIET was to upgrade its ineffective teacher professional development to weekly, collaborative meetings led by teacher leaders who made sure instructional strategies were aligned to student needs. In these meetings, teachers looked at student work and assessment data, analyzed root causes for student outcomes, and learned instructional strategies that had been field-tested by teacher leaders with students in the school.

In the words of one teacher, these meetings caused teachers to ask, “What are students doing, why are they doing that, and what teacher move should I make because of what I’m seeing?”

Unlike their past efforts at collaboration, West Goshen’s teachers adopted common tools and protocols to make professional learning groups more effective. These included a common instructional rubric along with meeting protocols and analytic tools to ensure time was spent efficiently and effectively.

In particular, the instructional rubric helped teachers to discuss and understand how to better support student learning through a range of classroom instructional practices, and how these practices support students to meet the high expectations of a college-and-career-ready curriculum. The rubric also gave West Goshen a common language to describe the elements of effective teaching, which enabled teacher leaders to give feedback that was understandable, constructive and actionable.

Transforming School Culture Through Supportive Relationships

While weekly professional learning meetings and coaching by teacher leaders provided a foundation for teacher and student growth, achieving significant and sustained growth required the school’s instructional leaders to build trust with teachers and model the mindsets they wanted to see from the staff.

In its 2008 Title I plan, West Goshen had aspired to become a school “where discussing teaching is not threatening to teachers, but is in fact, the norm,” but only when school leaders created a more supportive structure and resources did this aspiration become a reality.

The New Approach

Giving teacher leaders the responsibility for leading weekly collaborative meetings was particularly important to gaining the trust of their colleagues. Classroom teachers quickly saw that teacher leaders partnered with them to support their individual growth and were committed to helping them support their students, rather than simply pointing out problems or weaknesses.

When teachers weren't comfortable with a new instructional strategy, teacher leaders would model the approach in classrooms, working right alongside the teachers they were supporting. Describing this approach, one teacher leader said, "I am living it right beside them. As they are learning, I am learning." Collaborative meetings also offered an opportunity for the principal to take on a different role, says Principal Lori Line:

"I shift my role when I'm in these weekly meetings. My role is not to lead. My role is to learn with the teachers. I do not throw ideas at them or do a lot of talking, but instead ask questions to support their learning."

While the increase in classroom observations and feedback might have initially made teachers nervous, teachers found it much easier to accept constructive feedback knowing that their principal and teacher leaders were working just as hard as they were to learn and grow.



West Goshen's teacher leaders noted that it took some time for teachers to adjust to these new structures and supports, but within two years teachers across the building were planning and discussing strategies on their own.

Prior to becoming principal, Lori Line—who served as one of the first teacher leaders at West Goshen—noticed a remarkable difference in the beliefs and mindsets of teachers once the systems of support were in place. "Conversations among teachers changed dramatically," she said. "During weekly meetings, observation pre- and post-conferences, and follow-up in classrooms, teachers are able to talk specifically about their teaching and how they can take action to make it more effective for students."

Implementing Schoolwide Strategies to Raise English Learner Achievement

"It's a real gift to have that kind of teacher leadership. I can try strategies in my classroom and reflect on them with the building's teacher leaders."

- Ryan Miller, 3rd Grade Teacher

Given the ineffectiveness of previous strategies, the school leadership team focused on meeting the academic needs of English Learners. They hypothesized that targeted supports that treated EL needs as separate from general student academic needs may have caused ELs to be neglected during general classroom instruction.

The data showed ELs had consistently low speaking and writing scores on the World-Class Instructional Design Assessment (WIDA), which measures English proficiency. At the same time, data from state exams showed that most students needed to improve their communication skills.



As a result, the leadership team chose to make “Building Better Communicators” a major academic goal for the whole school. Across the building, they used weekly meetings to analyze student work and student data.

Weekly meetings also provided the opportunity for teachers to learn and practice strategies that afforded students more time to communicate with one another and their teachers. Within these strategies, they developed activities for building discrete skills such as using academic language or delivering peer-to-peer feedback.

Teacher leaders helped classroom teachers understand how students should be speaking and what teachers should be listening for, and offered support in individual classrooms. By using the greatest academic need to drive schoolwide instructional strategies, West Goshen began to see student growth across the board—and particularly—growth for English Learners and students living in poverty.

"These strategies really allow us to get to the heart of classroom teaching and give applicable and valuable feedback for growth."

- Lauren Moore, Mentor Teacher

Increased Teacher Retention, Schoolwide Improvement, and Shrinking Achievement Gaps

As instructional supports and school culture improved, so too did teacher retention, which had been a significant problem for the school the previous decade. A career ladder through teacher leadership opportunities, coupled with a positive culture of continuous improvement, helped make West Goshen a more attractive school to work.

Mindy Park, a second-grade teacher at the school, noted the change: “When I started at West Goshen, I think the reason I got hired is because no one wanted to be here. A lot of teachers were leaving. In 12 years the culture has changed at West Goshen. Now teachers want to be here and students want to be here.”

The teacher leader roles also formed an internal talent pipeline to ensure that any turnover had minimal effect on school culture and performance. When then-principal Dr. Alan Metcalfe moved into a district administrative role in 2015, Lori Line—who had previously served as a master teacher at West Goshen—was able to step into principal role and maintain West Goshen’s positive trajectory.

As a result of these improvement strategies, West Goshen has seen remarkable growth in student achievement.

After its second year of working with NIET, West Goshen went from a D rating the previous year to a B rating. By year 2015-2016, the school received an A rating. The school has now maintained its A rating for three years.

West Goshen is closing achievement gaps for its English Learners and students living in poverty. In 2018, the passing rate for both English Learners and students receiving free or reduced-priced lunch was higher in West Goshen than the state on both English Language Arts (ELA) and math exams.

Most notably, the passing rate for West Goshen’s ELs was 17.4 percentage points higher in ELA than the state average, while the passing rate for students receiving free-or-reduced lunch was 11.7 percentage points higher in math compared to the state average.

| School Year | State Letter Grade |
|-------------|--------------------|
| 2017-2018 | A |
| 2016-2017 | A |
| 2015-2016* | A |
| 2014-2015 | C |
| 2013-2014 | C |
| 2012-2013 | B |
| 2011-2012 | D |

*New state A-F accountability system started.