

Evaluation of the Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project

Data Brief March 8, 2007

The PRAIRIE Group of the UIC College of Education in collaboration with the CPS Office of Math and Science and the CPS Office of Research, Evaluation and Assessment serves as an external evaluator for the “CPS Middle Grades Project” and the “CPS Middle Grades Leadership Project.” This is a data brief reflecting findings to date around the progress of these projects. The brief addresses three of the ten key evaluation questions shaping the 2006-07 external evaluation of the project. These three questions are around structural configuration of schools and the leadership workshops for principals and Area teams.

Structural configuration of schools

1. To what extent do these schools move to the “middle school” approach/what percent of middle school grades are self-contained? ***

Leadership workshops for principals and Area teams

2. Do Area and school leaders gain understandings of math, science, and literacy content areas? If so, how? What is the nature of that understanding? Does this content provide them with insights they find useful? In what ways are they putting this new knowledge into use in their schools and Areas?
3. How do Area and school leaders gain deeper understanding of effective leadership? Does this content provide them with insights they find useful? In what ways are they putting this new knowledge into use in their schools and Areas? What are the roles of these Area and school leaders in terms of working with teachers and others around math, science and literacy instruction? How do the sessions address these roles? Do leaders change in terms of working in these roles after their experiences in this leadership training? If so how?

Structural configuration of schools

One goal of the external evaluation is to assist C4MGP leadership in understanding the configuration of schools related to the “middle school” approach. UIC PRAIRIE is looking at these 24 schools in terms of the status of these schools’ efforts to

- Specialize teaching in math and science
- Offer Algebra to qualified grade 8 students
- Support the needs of adolescent students?

In doing this, PRAIRIE aims to help the district understand how and why school change in these efforts and what supports schools need to facilitate these improvements.

To date, PRAIRIE has conducted interviews about the configuration of the 24 schools with five Area instructional officers and coaches from all three Cluster 4 Areas and with five university coaches involved in the C4MGP. We currently characterize the C4MGP schools according to their specialization efforts based on these data.

Based on information from coaches, almost all of the 24 schools are attempting some type of specialization of teaching math and science. In the majority of schools, grade 6 was organized differently than grades 7 and 8. When specialization was occurring about half of the time it was through within grade specialization and the other half through across grade specialization. Large schools (72%), compared to small (50%) or medium (27%) schools, were more likely to keep their grade 6 classes self contained rather than have specialized teachers. In most of the above cases, students switch classrooms during departmentalized classes. Not all of the departmentalized math courses are getting 60 minutes a day of instruction.

**2006-07 C4MGP School Configuration:
Specialization in Teaching of Math and Science to Grades 6, 7, 8**

Configuration Type *	Number of Schools (Percent of Column)			
	Schools in C4MGP Project	Small Schools: Less than 350 students	Medium Schools: 351-700 students	Large Schools: More than 700 students
A. Self Contained – All Grades	1 (4%)	1 (17%)	0	0
B. Grade 6 Self Contained – Grades 7 & 8 Departmentalized	11 (46%)			
i. Within Grades (<i>like C</i>)	i. 4 (17%)	i. 1 (17%)	i. 1 (9%)	i. 2 (29%)
ii. Across Grades (<i>like E</i>)	ii. 7 (29%)	ii. 2 (33%)	ii. 2 (18%)	ii. 3 (43%)
C. Within Grade Departmentalized – All Grades Have Math Teacher(s) and Science Teacher(s) within each grade level.	5 (21%)	0	3 (27%)	2 (29%)
D. Grade 6 Within Grade Departmentalized – Grades 7 & 8 Across Grade Departmentalized	2 (8%)	0	2 (18%)	0
E. Across Grade Departmentalized – All Grades Have Math Teacher(s) and Science Teacher(s) who teach students across all grade levels.	5 (21%)	2 (33%)	3 (27%)	0
Total	24	6	11	7

* Based on interviews with Area and university coaches and focus groups with teachers. Further refinement forthcoming after additional school visits and focus groups.

Leadership workshops for principal and Area Teams

To date, the CPS Department of Program Evaluation (DOPE) has reported findings on surveyed attendees at project leadership workshops. Across the five day-long workshops held between August and December 2006, an average of 44% of attendees responded to the online surveys addressing their experiences in the math, literacy and leadership sessions they attended. Findings from the CPS DOPE surveys were shared with the project's evaluation team at its first quarterly meeting January 30th, 2007. Here we add to what we know using the latest PRAIRIE findings.

PRAIRIE evaluators observed seven sessions within two of the five leadership workshops. Math, literacy and leadership were observed during August and February workshops. PRAIRIE also conducted focus groups, interviews and shadowing with members of six Area teams December 2006 to March 2007. Four of these Areas are outside of Cluster 4. Included in these conversations have been four AIOs, six math/science coaches, three reading coaches, and one principal.

Originally, PRAIRIE drew a random sample of Areas -- selecting one area within Cluster 4 and four from the additional 13 areas. We experienced difficulty in getting these Area Teams to talk with us in the planned focus groups and then shadowing observations of their work related to the leadership workshop. New Areas were then selected based on their availability to speak with us at two AIO-Principal leadership workshops. In two cases we were able to have conversations with multiple Area team representation. So far we have only been able to shadow one Area team member.

Active engagement

Observations of workshop sessions indicate that participants were actively engaged in different ways that varied by date and session. During August sessions, participants discussed in an active manner with presenters around a few themes that were likely relevant to their work with teachers and schools. Participants talked about how they learned math and literacy as children and how these workshop sessions looked at instruction that differed and improved upon the ways they were taught. Participants made some comments about pedagogical issues that they saw as relevant to both literacy and math. For example, they noted language acquisition is about patterning and that problem solving is critical in both math and literacy. Participants also spoke together about challenges their teachers had in using mandated curricula and discussed strategies for how to work with frustrated teachers. During February sessions, participants continued to have some discussion with each other and presenters about similar issues.

One promising way that active participation was encouraged was through the assignment of "homework." A ten page case study of schools was assigned in the leadership session. An observation of a math session including pre- and post-observation dialogue was assigned in the math session. In the literacy session in February there was not discussion of any homework. The value of these homework assignments is uncertain at this point. The math assignment was due in February yet, in the session observed, none of the

participants completed the assignment. The leadership assignment will be completed in the future.

Participants shared mixed views of the structure of these workshops and how actively they could engage with each other. Some participants from the Area offices explained that during the sessions they sat with principals from their Area. They tried to connect what was said in the session with how they could apply it in their schools. Some noted they wanted to be sure that a unified message about good instruction was being promoted within the district. However other participants felt there was no time within the structure of the workshops to have these conversations.

Some Area staff felt there was little connection between sessions or within sessions from one workshop to the next. This lack of open conversation of the connection between these strands or within the strands along with a lack of clarity and connection to what was going on in Cluster 4 about middle grades was uncomfortable for some participants. Some wished for a clear sense of how this program (AIO-Principal leadership program) fit with other CMSI grants, departments, academic enhancement, etc. None of the participants in this focus group were able to articulate a clear connection between these programs with a clear vision of what the end product would be. However, one participant was invited to join in a conversation to help with this articulation, but found it impossible to add this to their workload. Participants wished they knew what the end product was that the district was trying to achieve so that they could consciously be working towards it in their Areas.

Learning and using new content

Area team members shared that they gained new content knowledge in math, literacy, and leadership. For example, some literacy coaches or AIOs spoke of learning new content from the math sessions while some math coaches spoke of gaining new insights from the literacy sessions. While many participants spoke of having already learned much about literacy or leadership and noted how these sessions were often repeated what they already knew, they also expressed a feeling of validation that what they knew was important.

Workshop participants shared a number of key stories about using information from the workshops. Two AIOs spoke about how they were specifically instructed not to use information from the workshops in their Areas this year. They heard rumors that this was due to the fact that they were going to be asked to roll out a similar program within their Areas in the 2007-08 school year. They wondered how they would be able to present information to schools from their areas during 2007-08 when they usually had just two hours a month in meetings and after they were finished with their own participation in the workshops. One of these AIOs noted use of some of the Spillane's work on leadership routines at Area principal meeting and shared the feeling of having done the wrong thing by having done this.

Another AIO told the story of how involvement in the math strand provided him/her an ability to recognize good math instruction which he/she passed on to principals via the

AIO principal meetings or during walkthroughs. Similarly, a number of math coaches spoke of how the math sessions directly applied to their work in the Area at meetings with principals, assistant principals, specialists, and teachers. The conversations about what good math/science instruction looks like and how to model this with teachers along with the use of the Classroom Observation Guide were refreshers for them as well as gentle reminders of what to keep pushing for within their Areas.

Other participants told how these workshops did not provide them with enough help or sense of how to implement this content knowledge within their Areas or within the middle grades. One particular Area team was concerned that principals were not being engaged in these sessions and that information participants were receiving was not going to be shared at their schools. Others wondered what these sessions had to do with the middle grades project as they had not heard an overt message about what the district or OMS was trying to do with middle grades nor did they see any connections being made in these workshops to make connections with a middle school approach. Another participant wondered why science was left out of these workshops.

Moving towards middle school concepts

A number of participants wished for a clear message of what the vision for middle schools was and many expressed worries about this. Some were clear that this would be a difficult move to make for schools especially where teachers lacked appropriate certification. Others wished for an open conversation of how Areas would move schools to this approach. Others wanted to be sure that students would get what they needed in terms of differential instruction in a set up of schedules that allowed only 40-50 minutes with a given teacher. Others worried how teachers would have time for vertical and horizontal meetings and if teachers would become more isolated especially in small schools where potentially only one person taught each subject. Others wondered about teachers being fit into the “right” subject areas and whether the teacher who is best for Algebra is also the best for 6th grade math. And still others worried that all would be forced to use a “one size fits all” model.

What are the roles of these Area and school leaders in terms of working with teachers and others around math, science, and literacy instruction?

Area teams articulated roles not dissimilar to roles we have found them doing in the past years of the CMSI. Area teams continue to conduct principal, assistant principal, specialist, and teacher meetings within their area. Area Teams continue to make school visits as walkthroughs of visits as needed regarding specific issues raised by the Area team or the principal. Area teams are also engaged with trying to get teachers endorsed in content areas. In our shadowing experience this year, our researcher was able to observe an area coach conduct a meeting with key school leadership regarding the schools participation in the Cluster 4 Middle Grades Project and with all grade level teams within this school regarding their participation in CMSI professional development and university courses regarding content certification.

A number of our original sample of Area Teams objected to giving us time to talk with them or shadow them as they felt that the connection between their work and the

workshops was too slight for us to notice any differences in the way they approach their work. Even those areas that agreed to our conversation with them doubted that we would see any direct connection between these strands and their work except on the rare occasions when they directly took something from a session and presented it at one of their meetings. A few participants were able to point to specific moments where they used this information: One AIO spoke of how the math workshops helped her look more deeply at instruction while doing walkthroughs. Two math coaches spoke of how the review of the COG was timely to their own work with specialists and teachers.