



CASE STUDY

Grand Rapids Public School District

FROM CURRICULUM REVIEW TO INCREASED ACHIEVEMENT: Success Through ASCD's School Improvement Services

Professional Learning Model: Curriculum Review, Consulting

Focused Area of Need: Integration with State Standards, Backwards Design, Research-Based Instructional Practices, Assessments, Equity, Leadership, and Sustainability

Organization Type: Urban School District

OVERVIEW

In 2014, after working with a school improvement vendor on a general, districtwide review, Grand Rapids Public School District (GRPS) turned to ASCD for a close examination of curriculum. The district was experiencing below-par academic gains, knew that curricular changes were in order, and thought that an outside, third-party evaluation would help to home in on the right strategies and tactics to turn their schools around.

ASCD began its work by establishing relationships with a group of about 40 stakeholders from around the district and the broader community. With full collaboration with the district leadership team, ASCD conducted on-site meetings, school learning walks, phone interviews and conference calls, surveys, and an extensive review of curriculum-related documents to put together a set of recommendations that would lead from the Phase I review to Phase II implementation.

The recommendations covered four interrelated goals:

- Deepening relationships between curriculum specialists and building principals to advance district performance.
- Enriching professional development opportunities to better support district goals.
- Ensuring that the district delivers the quality of curriculum and instruction that it espouses.
- Using data more effectively to drive instruction.

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—Mary Jo Kuhlman,
assistant superintendent,
Grand Rapids Public School District

BACKGROUND

Several years ago, based on the desire to improve academic achievement across the board, Grand Rapids Public School underwent a districtwide review by an outside group that included a cursory examination of the curriculum, as one part of a broader evaluation.

"It didn't go in depth" into curriculum, notes Mary Jo Kuhlman, assistant superintendent for organizational learning. "It was suggested that we take a closer look. It was the sense of the staff that there were some gaps. But we couldn't articulate what those gaps were."

During the next couple of years, through the transformation plan, GRPS addressed such issues as financial gaps and space inefficiencies by closing 10 schools in one year and reallocating money into the remaining classrooms to strengthen existing programs. "We addressed those kinds of challenges, but we didn't begin to see [academic] gains come about, so it was the next logical question to ask about the curriculum," Kuhlman reports.

In addition to teeing up the concept of doing a more in-depth curriculum review, the district's earlier work primed administrators and faculty to work with a third party to evaluate its current status and future needs, Kuhlman believes. "It opened the door to an external partner," she says. "We had that readiness from prior work that turned out well." For the next phase, GRPS turned to ASCD for a close examination of curriculum.

CHALLENGE

In engaging with ASCD to review curriculum, GRPS put together a team led by the superintendent to develop a transformation plan focused on improving academic achievement by overhauling the curriculum.



DISTRICT PROFILE

GRAND RAPIDS SCHOOL DISTRICT

- **16,453** total students
- **52%** male
- **48%** female
- **36%** Hispanic/Latino
- **32%** black/African American
- **23%** white
- **6%** mixed race
- **1%** Asian
- **.4%** American Indian or Alaska Native
- **.1%** native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- **83%** economically disadvantaged
- **52** school buildings

"It starts with the fact that, as with many urban districts, we knew that we weren't getting the [academic] gains we thought we should," remarks Carolyn Evans, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "The first phase was to look at our current status and develop a baseline, with some assumptions that there were gaps. We wondered about the fidelity and quality of the implementation of our curriculum."

Alicia Monroe, ASCD Faculty member, spearheading the work with colleague Ann Cunningham-Morris, identified several systemic challenges that faced GRPS, including the lack of a confluent communication protocol and the limited time curriculum specialists had to, as she says, "model, coach, or impart the instructional strategies for which the principals, teacher leaders, and teachers yearn."

ASCD SOLUTION

The multi-year effort to date has included on-site sessions with ASCD Faculty that included learning walks in several schools and a two-day planning session with the GRPS leadership team. "During the two-day session, the ASCD and GRPS teams worked collaboratively to identify specific indicators for review, and then a one-day follow-up session was held," Kuhlman says. In between those sessions and since then, the teams have communicated through conference calls and conducted interviews, surveys,

and focus groups of administrators and teachers to garner feedback.

“The ASCD and GRPS collaboration began with a conversation about quality indicators,” Evans relates. “We began to unpack where we saw concerns or gaps. We compiled our data, and we used ASCD to help us make sense of the data. I also find that their research base has been invaluable.”

ASCD researched the district and, importantly, provided feedback based on that individualized research and not a generic, off-the-shelf approach, Kuhlman notes. “ASCD’s consultants got to know who we were,” she observes. “You sensed that they were in it with us. It wasn’t, ‘We’ve done this 100 times, and now we’re bringing this to your district.’ They rolled up their sleeves, and they got into the weeds. It wasn’t a standard, canned program at all.”

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—Carolyn Evans, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, Grand Rapids Public School District

“They had to understand where we were coming from because, for us, there was and continues to be a sense of urgency,” Evans adds. “We didn’t want a superficial, on-the-surface type of relationship. We wanted to find out where our issues were.”

ASCD identified GRPS’s systemic and curriculum-related processes as “lacking connection,” Monroe explains. “The ASCD team findings surfaced needs in the areas of communication, the understanding of roles and responsibilities throughout the district, using professional learning opportunities to teach and embed research-based instructional practices, using assessment data to consistently drive instruction, and the development and implementation of rigorous standards-based lessons as well as formative and summative assessments.”

She adds, “We examined the educational system first. As a team, we were very conscientious and had a great

deal of discussion about the system because we felt the recommendations would fit better in a system that was seamlessly well-connected.”

The follow-up sessions between ASCD and GRPS included the president of the local corporate foundation and a group of 40 administrators and teachers that they used as a sounding board for ideas, Evan says. “That has been a benefit to us, so that we are not pulled in multiple directions, and we’re cross-pollinating knowledge.”

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—Alicia Monroe, ASCD Faculty member

“We have some of the leading thinkers in the country, if not the world, and we’re speaking to them directly and being directed to their literature and their research,” Evans adds. “The core of work that has been identified holds the potential for leveraging major change.”

RESULTS

Upon completing its review, ASCD released a set of recommendations for the district, entitled “Transforming Teaching and Learning: The GRPS Way.” The review, which the district will draw from to implement Phase II, analyzed and triangulated the data and observations from Phase I to target six areas: integration and alignment, backwards design and research-based instructional practices, formative and summative assessments, equity and access in learning conditions for all students, leadership, and sustainability.

The ASCD review, which broadly addressed all subject areas and grade levels with a focus on English, language arts, and math, recommended how the district could move forward. The audit specifically pointed to:

- Improving the quality of professional relationships to advance district performance.
- Enriching professional development opportunities to better support district goals.

- Bridging the disconnect between what the district espouses regarding curriculum and instruction, and what it actually provides.
- Making better use of data to drive instruction.

District administrators say they're taking these recommendations to heart and have begun to move forward. "We began discussing, 'These are the findings, so what are the logical next steps?' " Evans explains. "The insights have been quite valuable."

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—Carolyn Evans

The disconnect between curriculum specialists and building principals reflects problems with the district's system operations. Staff want to communicate with each other, Kuhlman acknowledges. "There's just not been a vehicle or a venue for specialists to be in schools, directly," she notes. "That is changing." In Phase 2, each priority school has been assigned a curriculum specialist, district administrator, and an ASCD Faculty member. This team provides teachers professional learning and coaching that is driven by the district's three priority areas: unpacking the standards, backwards planning, and formative and summative assessment. As the school leader, the principal is also actively engaged in the implementation.

In terms of professional development, GRPS and ASCD are working together to create permanent structures for continuous learning that could spread throughout the system and break administrators and faculty out of their silos, Evans reports. Identifying how that compartmentalization hampered communication "was probably the greatest insight that they offered us," she recognizes.

Professional development had been intermittent and structured in a "sit-and-get" lecture fashion. ASCD helped GRPS develop a continuous learning

approach that encouraged active engagement and collaborative participation among teachers, Kuhlman acknowledges. "You can take that back into your job and your environment, and continue your learning on the ground, in your own classroom," she says.

Data presented "a huge challenge" and is vital to the enterprise of ramping up curriculum, Evans reports. For example, it's hard to engage in backwards design effectively "without a rich flow of data," she says. "We're beginning to tease that out. We've done training around formative assessment, and we're very aware that is an area of needed growth."

Monroe notes the results indicate that teachers need modeling and coaching to adopt instructional practices that will engage all students in a rigorous classroom experience as well as more time for GRPS educators of all levels to talk and collaborate with each other. But she sees communication as the most pressing issue. "Even with what we saw in the classroom, the disparity in methods that I saw in one classroom [vs. another], the teachers were buried in their own teaching approaches," she observes. "We talked about this extensively with the GRPS team, and they are committed to providing high-quality education for all students. They're passionate, they're invested, and they want to meet the learning needs of each and every student."

GRPS is very much looking forward to Phase II, Evans notes. "We are not only working with [ASCD], but we are making sure that our partners are working with them, too," she explains. "We're all planning so that we have strategies that go deeply into the organization and are not in conflict with each other."

"We have learned so much from Phase I, and the process is on a fast track," Kuhlman says. "We are already beginning to implement some of the new structures we have talked about to help us address those gaps identified in Phase I, such as professional learning. We plan to embed professional development in the building in a more formalized, structured way."

Perhaps most centrally, she adds, the work with ASCD has redefined the role and work of curriculum specialists. "I see a new level of excitement from curriculum specialists. We always had their depth of knowledge, but I'm not sure we provided ways for that to show up as much as it does now. It's pretty exciting to have a more powerful use of their knowledge and skills, and very promising."