



School Learning Laboratory

Kingfield Elementary School MSAD #58

Kingfield Elementary School in Kingfield, Maine serves just over 200 students in grades K-8. There are 20+ professional staff members and the building is divided into elementary and middle level wings. The school was the first to become part of the SuperEd/School Learning Laboratory (SLL) project in the fall of 2003.

The Need

In January of 2004, the Kingfield SLL Team and SuperEd reviewers identified the need to build and support a whole school (K-8) climate and culture of teamwork. The physical separation of elementary (K-5) and middle (6-8) grades, the high teacher turnover, the lack of structured communication time to focus on student work and simply collaborate, and the everyday differences in personalities and styles were contributing to a school climate that was less than ideal. Principal and staff agreed that there was a need to purposefully address teamwork. They hoped that whatever the staff could learn from the SLL intervention could be brought to bear during staff meetings and to implement improvements in teaching practices for literacy.

The Intervention

The Kingfield initiative used a coordinated, three-pronged approach to create a sense of ownership, collaboration, collegiality, and trust among K-8 staff, and to increase staff capacity to collaborate and plan actions to improve literacy instruction.

After identifying its need and meeting with SuperEd representatives in February 2004, the Kingfield SLL Team elected to work with Kieve Affective Education/Leadership Decisions Institute (LDI), a SuperEd member organization that specializes in experiential education. Kieve/LDI consultants are eager to show that “experiential education is not just ropes courses and the environment” but a flexible approach that can be used within many content areas. Kieve/LDI consultants present workshop participants with concepts, vocabulary, issues, and problems, and then structure experiences where they interact with each other in activities that address the particular issue at hand. Kieve/LDI’s work in Kingfield included:

1. A one-day workshop conducted immediately prior to the start of school in the fall of 2004. This session created awareness of personal and small group styles/differences and demonstrated, using a discussion regarding standards data, how to apply better team working skills.
2. The second event was a half-day workshop conducted in December of 2004 which used exercises and de-brief/application discussions to coach in individual and collective responsibilities in a group setting – responsibilities for understanding goals, getting clarification, creatively looking for common ground, etc.
3. The final session was intended to reinforce the prior two workshops and used a series of tasks and challenges to test the staff on what they could remember and how to apply that learning in a team setting. Second, in parallel with these workshops, staff members attended a writer’s workshop, reading Six Traits of Writing and were encouraged to bring examples of student’s writing to staff meeting in an effort to incorporate the use of the Six Traits Writing Model within Kingfield classrooms.

The third change included structural modifications in staff meetings. The Principal changed the time and the format of staff meetings to create a common dialogue throughout the building regarding literacy and language arts. She also created opportunities for elementary and middle level teachers to work in teams and small groups during meetings. In addition, a literacy consultant visited classrooms during this period and interviewed teachers to gather information regarding literacy practices, instructional methods and assessment tools in use to develop a baseline profile of classroom practices.



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Kingfield Elementary School MSAD #58 (continued)

Noticeable Results

In the spring of 2005 SLL surveyed 21 Kingfield staff members, interviewed the Principal and the primary Kieve consultant to assess the impact of the intervention.

1. There is general agreement that the staff experienced increased trust and communication during the year. Responses also indicated that there was an increased awareness of and appreciation for differences as a result of the year's efforts. One teacher described the culture/climate prior to the intervention as "a foster home – being under one roof but all from different backgrounds and experiences in foster care!" At the end of the school year another teacher described it as "a ball team – having the same goals to be successful!" The Principal observes that the "tone of conversation has become more relaxed."
2. The majority of respondents also reported that the work has impacted teachers in the school, for example:
 - (It shed) "New light on how we function as a group, strengths and challenges we have as a group."
 - (This experience) "Built trust, developed risk taking, enhanced communication, awareness of others strengths and weaknesses, awareness of differences and we had fun doing it!"
 - "We recognize the value of talking together and getting on the same page but we still need to make time to talk about what goes on in our classrooms – we see the importance now."
3. It also appears that changes in the structure and processes of staff meetings yielded benefits. "Teachers have been more open and have taken a role in staff meetings" and "have stepped up to the plate and worked together to teach a writing topic."
4. While more difficult to measure, about half of the respondents said that the year's experiences had impacted instruction in their classrooms in that it raised their awareness about individual student differences, the importance of clear instructions and objectives, and the need for a cooperative climate in the classroom.

Learnings

The school Principal reports that she learned about the importance of "laying the groundwork" to get people comfortable with each other as they work in teams. "It raises lots of questions about levels of teams – in classrooms, cross-grade, cross district, etc."

KES was SLL's first school "case" to manage, and it yielded many lessons for project staff. The SLL Toolkit was designed, created and revised based on the work done with this school.