

Wisconsin's 2015-20 Javits Grant – Final Report

Author: Mark Schwingle, Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction

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Overview

Wisconsin's *Expanding Excellence* project sought to mitigate disproportionality in the identification of the Excellence Gap (Plucker, Burroughs, and Song, 2010) in reading and mathematics for high-ability/high-potential primary students who qualified for free/reduced price lunch and/or were English learners. It was a collaborative initiative among the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), three partner school districts (Kenosha Unified School District-KUSD, Milwaukee Public Schools-MPS, and Racine Unified School District-RUSD) which included over 500 students and over 100 staff from 19 demonstration schools, the Wisconsin Response to Intervention (RtI) Center, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, and a variety of educational and community organizations and businesses.

The project had three goals during the grant's performance period:

GOAL 1: Collaboration--Build collaborative, culturally responsive educational systems that include school and district staff, students, and student families, to support the achievement of high-ability/high-potential students from economically diverse backgrounds or who are English learners.

GOAL 2: Assessment--Increase the percentage of high-ability/high-potential economically disadvantaged students and English learners identified for advanced services through the evaluation of existing measures and the implementation of additional culturally responsive measures.

GOAL 3: Instruction--Increase the percentage of high-ability/high-potential economically disadvantaged students and English learners that achieve at advanced levels in reading and mathematics.

Feedback on the Three Goals

Collaboration occurred in a number of different ways throughout the course of this project. There was collaboration among the three school districts (i.e., KUSD, MPS, RUSD)--including district-level and school-level staff--as they learned together about topics ranging from calculating and interrogating excellence gaps to efforts to improve their family engagement approaches. The Wisconsin RtI Center was also instrumental in working with all three districts to explore culturally and linguistically responsive practices for use in teaching their students. In addition, the coursework offered to these staff by the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater was focused on building

upon the skills of these educators to better serve the high-ability/high-potential students in their respective classrooms. Finally, the Strategic Planning team's work helped inform the overall approaches to this project.

Activities undertaken with demonstration school staff and others across the state:

- Analysis of achievement data to calculate the excellence gap for students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, English learners, as well as students of color;
- training on and incorporation of classroom culturally and linguistically responsive practices;
- training on and implementation of an RtI framework;
- training on and implementation of the USTARS~PLUS Teacher's Observation of Potential in Students (i.e., TOPS) tool, along with training on the Dual Capacity-Building Framework and Academic Parent Teacher Teams (APTT);
- during the statewide rollout process, there was specific attention paid to family engagement and strategies for increasing the diversity of students in gifted education across the state.

Lessons Learned:

Planned and sustained professional development for educators was effective. For example, training on the TOPS tool provided a common language and promoted a new "at-potential" mindset, which enabled staff to communicate both internally and with families using a strength-based approach. In addition, the work to increase the level of collaboration between classroom teachers and EL teachers was viewed as a tangible benefit to this work. The work with the RtI Center to complete the School-wide Implementation Review (SIR) allowed staff to see both areas of strength and areas for which they could (and did) improve while using an equitable MLSS in their respective classrooms.

Because each district had variability of screening methods and assessment data as well as locally defined decisions about what levels constitute giftedness in their respective district, it was difficult to compare across districts. In addition, research shows that changes in educator practices may take three to five years to fully implement school-wide before realizing changes in student outcomes (see, e.g., Jackson, Fixsen & Ward, 2018).

The use of a single assessment for advanced academic achievement that was consistent across school districts, grades, and analysis years would typically have been a preferable analysis strategy, though that option was not available in the data for this project.

Challenges:

Because of occasional changes in staff at the demonstration schools or of staff who were part of the strategic planning team, there were sometimes issues with continuity since new additions were at different levels of understanding. This was mitigated with additional support from colleagues in their respective schools, as well as the frequent reiteration of goals and corresponding strategies for all who were involved with this project. Of note, the time needed to truly implement the new identification protocols was longer than anticipated, which, in turn, meant less time was available to fully address programming and family engagement strategies, especially APTT. The additional no-cost time extension to this grant was invaluable in providing additional time to address programming and family engagement topics in more detail.

The districts typically ended up identifying students in the visual/performing arts, leadership, and/or creativity domains. While this is in no way a negative--especially since these three areas are often not routinely identified--more identification here adds to the whole but does not necessarily lead to increases in general intellectual and specific academic areas. In other words, it is righting a “wrong,” but potentially only one type of “wrong.”

It is unknown how quickly students identified for gifted services received such services in each school district, or how effective these services were at accomplishing the goals of specifically improving academic achievement in mathematics or reading. While efforts to track this information occurred, a focus on both identification of and programming for gifted students perhaps should have occurred in a concurrent rather than linear manner so additional focus on programming could have occurred earlier. In addition, future evaluation efforts could focus more deeply on detailed data from each of the three districts individually rather than as a group so there could be a better “apples-to-apples” comparison.

Final thoughts:

My predecessor, Chrystyna Mursky, was the visionary behind this grant. She was instrumental in not only applying for and obtaining this grant, but she was key decision maker during the first three plus years of this grant. Her contributions to this work are immeasurable.

We are indebted to the educators, families, and community members who contributed to this project. We particularly owe a debt of gratitude to the teachers, students and their families in the three partner school districts as their work informed our understanding about strategies to address historically underserved students in this state.

In addition, the work with the Wisconsin RtI Center was critical in helping each demonstration school implement a RtI framework to better serve high-ability/high-potential students. The use of TOPS was also helpful in providing teachers with a new lens to see student strengths, which, in turn, could inform future curricular and pedagogical

practices. The educators who completed coursework through UW-Whitewater significantly improved their knowledge, skills, and dispositions in gifted education so they could better serve their high-ability/high-potential students.

Finally, the lessons learned in our work with the demonstration schools were instructive as we conducted our statewide rollout of this project. This project created a model for statewide rollout in relation to all of the above goals. The work to further improve collaboration, assessment, and instruction is already occurring and will continue as we work to better address the needs of all high-ability/high-potential students across our state.

For more information, please contact Mark Schwingle at mark.schwingle@dpi.wi.gov.