

Promising Practices and Implementation Tools

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3. Levers Addressed: Professional Culture and School Structure

4. Title of Promising Practice: Continuum of High Expectations for All students– Including Advanced Learners

5. District(s) Where Implemented: Fitchburg Public Schools

6. Applicable Grade Levels: All PreK–12

7. How This Practice Reflects District’s Mission & Core Values:

The practice of creating high expectations and addressing the needs of advanced learners directly reflects the districts mission for all stakeholders to work together to "insure the effectiveness of learning experiences that are differentiated to meet a variety of student learning styles, needs and interests." Further articulated among the district's core beliefs is that "All students should be challenged at whatever level of learning they are at in a given time and a given grade."

8. Goals of This Practice:

- 1.) Deliver high expectations that motivate and inspire students.
- 2.) Increase student achievement and decrease the achievement gap.
- 3.) Deliver instruction that teaches higher level thinking skills for all students.
- 4.) Support differentiated instruction in the classroom.
- 5.) Provide direct services to students at advanced academic levels in specific content areas.

9. Description of This Practice and How it Addresses Criteria for This Lever:

While Fitchburg is similar to most districts in terms of providing instruction to meet the needs of advanced learners, students in urban areas are generally not

exposed to the resources and opportunities that students from more affluent communities may experience.

Keeping that in mind, the superintendent began researching programs that were based on the district's core beliefs that all students should be challenged; which meant they weren't looking for a "Gifted and Talented" approach, but a program that was more differentiated and broad based. Approximately two years ago, the district decided upon the Advanced Academic Learning Initiative implemented in Fairfax, VA, because it best matched FPS needs and is based on a coaching and direct services model.

The first step for the district was to begin the program at the elementary level. While there was already a coaching model in place using existing math and ELA specialists, 4 new AALI coaching positions were created; one in each of the elementary schools. The AALI coaches work in collaboration with the classroom teacher to model lessons based on higher order thinking skills and to identify advanced learners in different subject areas using a range of assessment tools. This Advanced Academic Learning Initiative is based on a three -tiered approach:

- Tier I–Promotes differentiated instruction by infusing higher order thinking and strategies such as flexible groupings into the classroom. The coach meets with teacher and specialists to model and plan instruction.
- Tier II–Supports small groups in classroom using strategies such as learning centers and rotation stations that promote peer learning.
- Tier III–Coach provides individual and small group outside of the classroom, and may also bring students together across the district that are advanced in a subject area to engage in activities such as projects, curriculum–based field trips and web–based explorations.

AALI Coaches work at the building level 4 days a week and meet with other coaches and curriculum specialists as a team one day a week so that there is consistency and coordination between teachers, schools and content areas. The collaboration between teachers, literacy and math curriculum specialists and AALI coaches inside the classroom further ensures that all teachers become

efficient in genuine differentiated learning and strategies. AALI coaches also regularly conduct after school programs and parent meetings.

The second step in the process was to address the fact that the initial 4th grade participants were moving on to middle school (grades 5–8) with the expectation that a similar program would be available for them the following year. To that end, the Superintendent visited Worcester Polytechnic Institute last spring to learn more about Project Lead the Way– a national project for advanced learners using the STEM approach. Once agreed that this program would be a good match for FPS, a team of Middle School teachers attended a week long summer training at WPI to build a program that resulted in the Gateway to Technology program– which is more content curriculum driven response to advanced learners.

One coach was then hired at each middle school, who replicates the same strategies of collaborating with teachers, modeling lessons, assessing students etc. as utilized at the elementary level. Middle and elementary school AALI coaches also meet on a regular basis.

More detailed examples of specific content area projects are outlined in the elementary and middle school newsletters attached as implementation tools.

To complete the continuum of high achievement programs offered K through 12, MMSI (Massachusetts Math Science Initiative) was also implemented at Fitchburg High School this year to enhance and hopefully double students taking advanced placement courses.

Plans are also underway to open an Honors Academy at Fitchburg High School in September of 2013. This program will be offered to 30 qualifying students and taught by a subset of 4 core subject teachers. Additional details about this unique program are attached as implementation tools in the form of newspaper articles, PPT presentations and student acceptance letters.

As outlined below, this promising practice epitomizes many of the criteria necessary for effective professional culture and school structure as they relate to levers for positive change.

For Professional Culture:

- The superintendent at the district level and the principal at the school level ensure there is an articulated set of core values that drive behavior and decisions as well as an organizational culture that supports open and honest communication, continuous professional improvement, data-based decision-making, and joint responsibility for student learning and achievement.
- District and schools are characterized by a climate of shared responsibility for continuous improvement.
- Teachers regularly engage in instructional conversations, peer observations, collaborative planning and ongoing collegial support.
- District and school culture is characterized by trust and willingness to discuss “undiscussable” issues.
- Data are continuously examined and analyzed to guide instructional decision-making

And for School Structure:

- The superintendent at the district level and the principals at the school level ensure that organizational structures are in place to support teaching and learning elements such as common formative assessment practices; well articulated and aligned curricula; standards; adequate resources; adequate time to meet; collaborate and communicate; learner centered schedules and communication protocols.
- District uses data in meaningful ways to help educators improve instruction.
- Educators have access to clear, consistent standards-based curriculum,

pacing guides,
 assessments and materials.

- District has multiple vehicles to support ongoing communication with families with diverse cultures, linguistic backgrounds and needs.

10. How This Practice Was Implemented So It Was More Successful Than Others:

The fact that Fitchburg adapted an established program that has been in place for years in Fairfax County, VA contributed to the success of the AALI program implementation at the elementary and middle school levels. In addition, the strong partnership the district established with WPI and Fitchburg State are both STEM focused.

Another factor that came into play is that 4 of the 7 elementary and middle school teachers hired as coaches came from within the district. This not only provided the opportunity for these educators to expand their skills and grow professionally, it went a long way in establishing credibility and buy in needed for optimum collaboration with classroom teachers.

Lastly, envisioning and then implementing this initiative as a K-12 continuum of services to raise the bar for all learners has also made this a more successful endeavor than prior efforts within the district.

11. How This Practice Changed The District or School:

The superintendent believes this K-12 initiative did what all hoped it would:

- Raised the level of expectations across district.
- Raised level of awareness and professional growth in differentiated instruction for teachers.
- Heightened collaboration between AALI coaches, GTT and MMSI, Math and ELA Curriculum coaches who meet once a month.
- Raised level of awareness of parents, so they are cognizant of the level of academic rigor that is provided in this urban community. In essence, the district has "delivered the goods" to parents who had hoped their student's needs would be met. Parents can also talk to the AALI coach at any time; learn about the additional opportunities

available to advanced learners in math and science at elementary, middle and high school, so there is an understanding of the continuum of available programs as their child travels through the system. Parents can also access the website, receive newsletters, and attend parent nights.

- Planned for opening of an Honors Academy at high school in Sept. to keep kids who qualify in the district and attract students to FPS who may attend private schools.
- Strengthened partnerships with WPI and Fitchburg State University. Current agreement with FSU is automatic acceptance into the FSU Honors Program and scholarship offers to qualified students.
- Overall, the district is better equipped to meet needs of advanced learners.

12. Resources (time, money, materials etc.) Required For Successful Implementation:

- Funded 7 coaches and access 4 existing high school teachers for the Honors Academy.
- Funded additional AP courses and stipended teachers through MMSI Grant monies.
- Researched coaching models in Math & Literacy and travel to Fairfax, VA.
- Purchased computers and materials necessary to implement Middle School Gateway to Technology; Energy & the Environment and Design & Modeling modules.
- Time for coaches to collaborate with PreK-8 teachers and curriculum specialists
- Partnership with Worcester Polytechnic Institute.
- Community Partners with Fitchburg State University Technology Education Dept.

13. Tools Used To Implement or Advance This Practice:

See Separate Attachments:

- 1.) Advanced Academic Learning Initiative- District Brochure
- 2.) AALI Spring Newsletter- South St. Elementary
- 3.) AALI- Winter Newsletter- Middle School
- 4.) AALI- Parent Night- Crocker Elementary

- 5.) Fitchburg Honors Academy– Newspaper Article
- 6.) FHS– Red Raiders Newsletter
- 7.) MMSI Update– Honors program– PPT presentation
- 8.) Fitchburg Honors Academy –PPT
- 9.) FHA– Freshman Acceptance Letter