

Kyrene Middle School Model Year 2 Evaluation Academic Lab

Introduction

This report represents the evaluation outcomes for the first part of the Phase 2 evaluation. Purpose is to learn more about the implementation of Academic Lab, the **key issue identified in the Phase I report**.

Background of Academic Lab

After 1st year evaluation, it was determined that AL was not being implemented as intended.

Teachers:

1. Little guidance to teachers.
2. Unprepared to use time productively
3. Purpose and objectives of AL were not available in writing.
 - District indicated purpose of AL was to provide increased student support and
 - allow time for specialized programs. Overall, AL was not being implemented to meet the purposes.

Students:

1. In general, voiced negative opinions of AL.
 - Waste of time, A.L. doesn't matter, doesn't help, or isn't necessary.
 - Questioned the purpose of Academic Lab.
 - As far as academics: students described this as study hall
 - A Few mentioned activities in terms of positive enrichment Club activities or community service; however evident that all students across the entire district are not participating in these activities.
2. Students expressed neutral or dissatisfied opinions with how their teachers interacted with them during A.L.
 - Students described teachers who were busy/could not provide assistance to them

Principals:

1. For implementation, principals consider AL as teacher or team driven & teacher responsible
 - did not articulate a clear role for themselves
 - felt AL is flexible and that this flexibility is difficult for teachers to grasp.
 - One administrator pointed out discrepancy in expectations of teachers as it relates to standards and curriculum for other classes
2. felt A.L. focused on academics, a perception that is consistent with student perceptions' of AL as "study hall"
 - Each principal described different model for tutoring type activities at their schools.
 - No mention that Academic Lab teacher serving as a student advocate in a manner articulated in the program objectives. one principal felt strongly that Academic Lab time should not be used as an Advisory Period.

Research Recommendations from Phase 1

Impact of the extreme variability in the implementation of Academic Lab (AL):

1. the model has not been implemented as intended
2. the inconsistency clouds public opinion of the entire model.
3. District officials were encouraged to create consistent expectations for AL and to communicate
4. those expectations effectively.

Research team's recommendations for Phase 2 of the evaluation include:

1. Continue to Investigate the Implementation of Academic Lab
 - Develop explicit expectations for AL & communicate these expectations to schools to promote consistency in implementation.
 - Follow-up focus groups should be conducted fall 2006 to assess impact of district efforts and to re-assess the implementation of AL.
2. Define Model Outcome Indicators
 - Establish measurable outcomes to evaluate the results of the model.
 - Process marks transition from implementation to outcomes evaluation and consists of:
 - Selection of program outcomes (based on existing expectations found in district materials)
 - Determination of the method to measure the selected outcomes
 - Identify data sources
 - Determine metrics
 - Establishment of baseline year(s) for evaluation
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4. Establish Baseline Outcome Data
 - Collect baseline outcome data for the model and baseline values for each outcome indicator calculated.
 - baseline values are used to assess change over time related to the model.

District Response to Improve Academic Lab

Several actions taken by Kyrene to improve the implementation of Academic Lab (AL)

1. Academic Lab Guidelines
 - Purpose - to support, enrich and enhance the experiences middle schools have in school.
 - Support functions of Exploratory Teachers - include partnering with a core teacher to work with students, providing tutoring and working with established student groups.
 - Suggested uses - additional support in content or exploratory classes, tutoring, conducting programs (e.g. Charter Counts, team building), teach/review study skills and to conduct enrichment activities.
 - General agreements and understandings
 - Each team should designate a weekly schedule for how the Academic Lab is used.
 - Permanent arrangements that take students out of AL are not encouraged
 - Grades for work completed in AL can be given in other content or exploratory classes
 - Attendance will be taken each day in AL
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2. Site Plans for implementing AL. (also covers the implementation of other key school programs)
 - Gives overview of current status of AL at the school
 - Documents the school goals for AL
 - Updates the current situation of that school vis-a-vis the goals.

Researcher reviewed plans for schools selected to participate in the focus groups.

- The site plan is supported by teacher team plans. Teacher teams are expected to develop a plan for the implementation of AL and to submit their specific plan to their respective principals.
3. Academic Lab Rubric (District officials sent the AL Rubric to middle school principals via email on August 23, 2007.) - to evaluate the implementation of AL. Covers four target areas:

- Clarity of purpose - teacher teams are expected to have a defined, articulated purpose for AL & this must be articulated for all students and teacher team members; the implementation of the purpose should be evident through observations in practice.
 - Intensity of planned activities - teacher teams are expected to have a **highly sophisticated model** or planned activities, evidence of longer term goals and short term objectives for AL and the models must be documented in writing.
 - Intensity of student engagement - teacher teams are expected to have a **highly managed program** in which students demonstrate, in different way, that their interactions are meaningful and purposeful, and such interactions should be demonstrated through observations of students in action.
 - Flexibility for Changing Needs and Expectations - teachers are expected to be supportive of the changing needs of AL as evidenced by collaborative work between teacher teams and other programs. AL should combine both routine procedures and the capacity for flexibility.
4. Academic Lab Walk-Thrus to observe the implementation of A.L (occurred between the September & October 2006
- Observations:
- Most classrooms were focused on a learning activity.
 - Many classrooms were well-planned and well-delivered.
 - Principals are aware of the strengths and weakness of AL delivery and where teachers
 - need further support or assistance.
5. District and School Based Trainings
- Teachers were afforded the opportunity to attend district lead or school based trainings on Academic Lab.
 - District offered two formal classes on AL.
 - Middle school principals continue to support the implementation of AL

Methods

1. Used teacher focus groups in three Kyrene middle schools.
 - conducted with teachers from a single grade level per school, thus there was representation from
 - all the middle school grades
 - number of participants per focus group ranged from 8-15 teachers.
 - Held in January 2007 Each session lasted 45-55 minutes.
2. After discussions with district officials, the researcher developed the focus groups questions around five topics related to the implementation of AL:
 - Consistency between teacher activities and the purpose of A. L.
 - Teachers' ability to differentiate instruction for individual students
 - Teachers' opportunities to take advantage of the flexibility provided in AL.
 - The integration of Exploratory teachers into AL activities
 - A comparison of AL this year compared to last

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the focus group sessions:

1. Academic Lab is being implemented consistent with the district's policy orientation.

- To recommend, not prescribe - District AL materials include several guidelines, but not specifics; thus implementation should result in general consistency But there should be **variation in day-to-day activities**
- The implementation of AL 2006-2007 matches the district's policy orientation. Schools have developed AL site plans that are generally similar across schools that consist of :
 - Academic assistance days
 - School wide academic projects (silent sustained reading)
 - At least one day designated for Character Counts.
- Ste plans for all campuses were made available through the D.O. and there is evidence that the AL

plans have been implemented at the school level and individual team & have common understanding of activities

- While teachers expressed consistency in the weekly schedule, teachers noted that differences existed across teams and that their AL experiences were team specific.
- Because teacher teams implement the AL schedule differently, it could give the impression of disorganization on the same level as last year.
- There is a **notable trend this year**, however. **Teachers have identified academic activities of value and are guarding this time.**

2. Teachers must reconcile the tension between structure and flexibility.

District guidance encourages Exploratory teachers to work with students during AL and for teachers to create an effective plan to make the best use of AL time.

Many teachers find it difficult to plan ahead for AL each day because they do not know which students will be in class or pulled-out and there is a minimal amount of potentially-productive time available in AL. Many teachers indicated that they were told that no planning was required for AL but that they were still required to plan. In addition, many teachers questioned whether planning for AL was worth the effort

- Most teams allowed Exploratory teachers to "pull out" students during AL but recognize the scheduling challenges the "pull-outs" present.
 - Teachers find it difficult to conduct a structured activity on "pull-out" days because the composition of the students remaining in their classrooms. (Differs each day creates disruption to structured activities
 - To accommodate the "pull-outs," teacher teams have developed structured environments where they (students) can miss."
Flexibility is the result of teachers coming to the common realization that, "you really can't have a structured activity and a pull out system."
 - Based on teacher accounts, the quality of these unstructured, non pre-planned, academic assistance sessions varies widely.
 - Most often teachers indicated that constructive activities are difficult to accomplish with the time remaining in the "pull-out" days and the ever-changing composition of students remaining in the classroom
- Housekeeping homeroom activities also take up some of the limited minutes allotted for AL and compete with the time to conduct other activities.
 - Estimate of time available for either academic assistance or a structured activity
 - 15-20 minutes on "pull-out" days & up to 25 minutes on non-pull days.
- Structured" programs include activities such as Character Counts and Second Step.
 - Most schools have designated 1 day for structured programs. Many teachers objected to the inclusion of structured programs into AL, Character Counts in particular. Likely, however, the objections to Character Counts are not specific to AL;

3. What is working in AL

- Teachers cited several examples of activities that are working well
 - **Pre-planned activities** were more likely to be executed, where academic assistance time with individual students was seen as valuable
 - **Academic Assistance** was highlighted as a productive use of time
 - supplemented classroom instruction
 - received help that may be unavailable at home
 - When teachers indicated a successful activity, most often it was pre-prepared for them And those activities that were designed for the time allowed were the ones most likely used
- **Teachers felt there should be more of these pre-prepared lessons**

4. Teacher concerns about Academic Lab.

- A.L. could become an excuse for students not to complete homework and there was concern that allowing students to finish homework during AL results in less accountability for students to

complete their work in other classes or at home .

- Continued struggle with student perceptions' of AL as detached from the rest of the curriculum
- The teacher teams at 1 school advocated specifically for more PE.
- Consistent with both teacher and student perceptions from the Phase 1 evaluation, students recognize that AL activities are not graded. As a result, teachers are challenged with keeping students engaged because students do not consider AL as a "regular" class

Conclusion

1. The district has made considerable effort to prescribe the guidelines for Academic Lab
 - Resulted in greater consistency across schools in the execution of AL in the form of site plans and team teach plans. Teachers claim to have made A.L. work
2. Pull-out days are designated, to allow for academic assistance and structured programs on the other days.
 - Teachers describe sharp contrasts between pull-out days, academic assistance days and structured program days
3. The evaluation did not assess student activities with Exploratory teachers during AL. The districts' dedication to incorporating Exploratory teachers into the AL schedule is an indication that this time is considered valuable.
4. The students who remain in the classroom on the "pull-out" days may not be involved in an activity consistent with the intent and spirit of AL.
 - Few planned activities occur in the time remaining on "pull-out" days. A negative consequence is that student reports of these activities may not be positive, continuing to cloud opinions of the model.
5. The inclusion of structured activities into AL, namely Character Counts, was largely criticized by many teachers because of insufficient time to plan for and carry out this program.
6. Teachers considered that the dedicated academic assistance days are positive and pre-planned activities are more likely to be implemented well.

Recommendations

The following are recommended in light of the aforementioned findings:

1. Continue the dialogue about AL at all levels. The concerted focus of district and school administrators is evident in teachers' comments.
2. Invest in pre-planned activities that can be provided to teachers in advance. Preplanned activities have a greater likelihood of being implemented as intended.
3. Recognize that teacher and teacher team latitude is still permitted under the district's present policies. Thus, one should continue to expect variability across teacher teams in the implementation as each team uses professional discretion to implement AL.