



TRANSCRIPT

Learning to Improve Instruction: One Team's Story

NARRATOR

This video is designed to be used with the Facilitating Improvement Professional Learning Modules, a series of eight modules produced by the Regional Educational Laboratory West, or REL West. The video pulls together key ideas from the modules and provides a case study of continuous improvement of instruction. In this video, you will learn how the inquiry cycle and improvement questions scaffolded one teacher team's journey, what prototyping and collecting data for improvement look like in action, and how inquiry processes and routines can improve instruction. REL West developed the teacher inquiry cycle to introduce a disciplined approach to improving instruction and learning together.

First, school teams identify a focus area for improvement. Then, teacher teams collect data to understand the problems and gaps in their own classrooms and to generate some reasons why these gaps arise. After this initial data gathering, teams begin to generate change ideas to test in their classrooms. They collect simple, practical classroom data to assess the impact. Then, groups gather again to discuss what they learned. They assess whether their change idea worked and determine next steps. They may adopt, adapt, or abandon the idea. The process often includes some tweaking of the change idea and testing it again. The first step in any improvement project is to identify the priority needs. REL West worked with Washoe County School District to examine their literacy data and to identify gaps.

One area the district and principals identified for improvement was K-6 writing instruction. Based on this data review and conversations with their district and principals, the overarching north star aim of the partnership efforts was to improve students as writers. With this focus, we decided to use the Being a Writer curriculum from the Center for the Collaborative Classroom, which had been implemented with successful outcomes at several district schools. We then worked to identify the high-leverage, daily instructional practices in the curriculum and to align the practices with current research. A key resource for this work was the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide on *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*. Several high-leverage instructional practices were identified.

From these practices, four specific student learning opportunities emerged as focal areas for teacher collaboration—supporting students to: feel engaged and motivated to write, collaborate with peers and the teacher about writing craft and process, practice writing independently, and reflect on and improve writing. REL West, including the Center for the Collaborative Classroom, provided institutes to introduce teachers to the curriculum and to launch inquiry cycles at two elementary schools. The engine of these inquiry cycles was learning huddles, or short meetings used to support teachers' improvement of instruction. They focused the group's efforts around common problems and solutions in their practice.

The concept of the huddle was pioneered by the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital to improve safety. These brief but frequent problem-solving meetings were designed to foster teamwork and promote more effective communication about potential or observed dangers for patients. Borrowing from this model, REL West developed the idea of learning huddles for use in educational settings. Learning huddles are routine 30-minute, grade-level meetings focused on a research-based topic or practice. Learning huddle discussions support turn-taking and equitable talk as well as reflection on instruction. Some learning huddles use classroom data to ground these discussions and reflection on practice to support teachers’ improvement of their instruction.

Discussion protocols with clear agendas and steps guide the learning huddles and are designed intentionally. Each section of the protocol fosters sharing and reflection, with both structured and open-ended opportunities for collaboration. At the start of an inquiry cycle, each teaching team chooses a focus area in their learning huddle. The 3rd grade team at Lemon Valley, for example, chose “reflect on and improve writing,” and discussed how challenging it was to confer with all of their students. They agreed that one root cause of this problem was that it was difficult to keep track of who they were supporting and when. After collecting and examining data to understand the problem, the next step in the improvement cycle was to conduct a small test.

The team’s first change idea was to develop a way to track their conferences. They developed a prototype for a conference tracker. Their initial goal was just to increase the number of writing conferences. Their first conference-tracker prototype grouped students by reading level or past writing—low, medium, or high, and teachers tallied the total number of conferences for each student. After this first test, they met to reflect on the data they collected and to refine their tracker for further testing. The team found that the conference tracker did help them to meet with all of their students. They also found that they met more frequently with students who needed more help.

The next step in the improvement process was for teachers to determine if their writing conferences actually led to changes in student writing. As they mapped the beginning, middle, and end of their writing conference process, teachers noted some of the gaps in their process. For example, teachers noticed a gap in how they followed up with students after writing conferences. The team’s final conference tracker prototype addressed this gap by including a column to identify a praise point and something to work on for each student. Teachers also had students write down the work-on point in their writing journals to support them in implementing the feedback. With this new addition to the prototype, teachers were able to follow up to see if their feedback showed up in students’ writing.

Along the way, the team collected practical, classroom-level data to help them measure improvement in their instructional practice. They were able to answer these questions: What is the frequency of conferences? Is conferencing happening at all? How reliably are we getting to conferring? Is conferencing happening on a regular basis? And questions about quality: What is the impact or outcome of the conferencing? Do students apply what they learn to their writing?

The tracker also helped them to monitor student growth in writing, and over time, teachers were able to see their students’ writing improve. The learning huddle process supported these iterative changes in practice. Teachers appreciated the focused time the learning huddles provided to discuss challenges with their team, reflect on practice, make improvements to instruction, and ultimately, observe their students’ writing improve.

To learn more about learning huddles and prototyping, explore the Facilitating Improvement Professional Learning Modules. We would love to hear how you use the modules in the videos. Please contact us at relwest@wested.org. To access this video and related resources, visit the REL West website.