3-8 ELA Module Implementation Case Study #2

Riverbend is a small city school district in New York State. The district has five elementary schools, two middles schools, and one large high school. Many of the teachers are young with less than five years of teaching experience. The elementary principals all have more than 10 years of experience leading their respective buildings. The two middle school principals are quite different from each other – one [“Bob”] is an experienced principal with deep skills in building community amongst the students and creating an impeccable, tightly-run building in which teachers and students feel safe and cared for. The other [“Tia”] is in her third year as a principal, with a deep interest in curriculum, instruction and assessment but less concern for building an intricate master schedule or ensuring that parcels get moved off the loading dock within a couple of hours.

The middle school teachers, staff, and principals all work very hard and all are invested in their students’ success. They are often discouraged by the issues many of their students are grappling with outside of school – poverty, access to substances, and what appears to the kids as a lack of opportunity. Despite the fact that the two schools are so different from each other, their performance on state assessments remains remarkably similar to each other. Although all in the district are committed to helping their students master the Common Core Standards – which everyone agrees are a worthy benchmark – the general consensus is that there is a way to go before they get there.

The Leadership Teams in all buildings studied the modules and recommended that they be implemented in each of the district’s elementary and middle school classrooms. The curriculum was formally adopted by the Board of Education. The superintendent told the principals, “make sure this curriculum is implemented with fidelity so that we can study its impact.” The principals told the teachers “make sure this curriculum is implemented with fidelity so we can study its impact.” In the elementary schools, the teachers and principals discussed what it would mean to implement with fidelity. They learned about tiering and adjusting module tasks and lesson timing to meet students’ needs. Teachers in the elementary schools were provided with a schedule to meet together to review lesson plans, discuss them, and to share resources and insights. When the elementary principals visit classrooms during ELA instruction, they see a consistent set of practices in classrooms – kids productively grappling with complex text, using evidence, acquiring new knowledge and vocabulary, but not in a “cookie cutter” fashion. What’s happening in the classrooms isn’t “scripted” but can easily be traced back to structure the modules provide.

When the middle school principal “Bob” was asked about what it meant to implement the modules with fidelity, he said “really, the directions are there you guys. Read those lesson plans and stick to what it says. Otherwise, how will we know what’s going on? I know you’ll do this because we need to help our kids.”

When the middle school principal, “Tia,” was asked what it meant to implement the modules with fidelity, she said, “I trust you guys and I have been in your classrooms. I know you are smart professionals who will make good decisions for our kids. Use your judgment.”

The instructional practices in the two middle schools quickly diverged. In Bob’s school, what’s happening in classrooms is very similar, but something seems “off.” Bob notices that teachers seemingly aren’t picking up on “teachable moments” and don’t necessarily push kids to deepen their thinking when the opportunities arise. On the other hand, in Tia’s school, so many different things are happening it’s hard to know what teachers and kids are actually working on. And interestingly, in both schools, teachers and kids are tense. There’s a growing sense of discontent and discouragement.

Neither Bob nor Tia were able to create time or structures for ongoing support with the modules and when teachers do manage to meet together, the conversations quickly turn acrimonious, with colleagues insisting that others are “doing it wrong.”

Bob and Tia meet to discuss the implementation of the Common Core Standards, the shifts, and the use of the modules in their schools. Both are concerned about how it’s going.

**Brainstorm:**

* What *are* the cultural and implementation issues that need attention in this school/district?
* How would you build a more positive, change-focused culture in this school/district?