Boosting Adolescent and Young Adult Literacy

An Examination of Literacy Teaching and Learning in Philadelphia's Accelerated High Schools

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Executive Summary
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Overview

In 2010-11, the School District of Philadelphia (the District) operated thirteen accelerated high schools that served approximately 2,000 under-credited, over-age students. Each of the accelerated schools was managed by one of seven external providers, each with its own educational approach, and each with a contractual agreement with the District's Office of Multiple Pathways (OMP).

In 2009, the OMP, in conjunction with the dropout prevention and recovery city-wide effort entitled Project U-Turn, strongly encouraged every accelerated school to develop a focus on literacy. Many of the students entering the accelerated schools were low-level readers, and those most closely involved with efforts to reduce student dropout strongly believed that improvement of students' reading, writing and oral communication was critical to perseverance to graduation.

This report examines the development of a focus on literacy in Philadelphia's accelerated high schools. To support the focus on literacy, the OMP, in partnership with Project U-Turn, and Jobs for the Future (JFF), adopted of the *JFF Common Instructional Framework,* which is a set of six instructional strategies that work together as a cross-content approach to improving literacy learning. The Framework was accompanied by professional development and coaching, as well as "rounds" – the practice of teachers visiting each others' classrooms in order to observe, share and form professional communities of practice.

The schools also adopted a range of strategies in addition to the JFF Framework. These included reconnecting disconnected students with school and re-engaging them in learning.

This study provides a theory of action explaining how the tasks of reconnecting disconnected students, re-engaging students in learning, and the JFF Framework were to interact and build literacy skills and academic competence which in turn would remediate

learning gaps and accelerate student learning to prepare students for timely graduation. The report focuses on:

- key factors that affected how the accelerated high schools responded to the introduction of the JFF Framework;
- the range of strategies used by the accelerated high schools to reconnect disconnected youth to school; and
- how the accelerated high schools reengaged disengaged students to literacy and learning.

Research Methods

This study is based on both qualitative and quantitative data and was conducted from January 2010-January 2011.

Qualitative data were collected in two rounds and included:

- Interviews with providers and principals from **ten accelerated high schools in spring/summer 2010**. This sample included all the schools that were actively operating in both 2009-10 and 2010-11 (Round One).[1]
- Interviews with principals, instructional coaches (or lead teachers), and focus groups with teachers at **six case study schools in fall/winter 2010** (Round Two).
- Interviews with selected Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) staff, OMP staff (including one OMP District coach), and JFF staff.

Quantitative data were provided and analyzed by staff from the District's Research Office and the Office of Multiple Pathways, and included student demographics and entering reading levels for students' enrolled for the 2009-10 school year and September to January of the 2010-11 school year.

Future Research for Action (RFA) research will include student performance outcomes, which were not yet available at the time this report was written.

This study contributes to the existing body of research on adolescent and young adult readers, focusing on an over-age, under-credited group of students who are under-represented in the literature on literacy. This group, however, is front and center among many urban district and city policy-makers because of their risk of dropping out of high school. This study also builds on research on reconnecting disconnected youth with learning, which has largely focused on out-of-school settings, with information about attempts to connect these young people to in-school settings.

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[1] This study excluded the two schools that were disbanded at the end of the 2009-10 school year and also excluded any schools that were slated to open in fall 2010.

Findings

Our findings fall into three areas: 1) implementation of the JFF Framework; 2) reconnecting disconnected students; and 3) re-engaging adolescents and young adults in learning.

Implementation

The JFF Framework was a relatively new intervention at the time of this study and the accelerated schools were still at an early stage of adoption. Adoption of the Framework included participation in professional development and implementation of the Framework in classrooms. Participation in JFF professional development varied across schools. All six of our case study schools visited the University Campus Park School (UCPS) at Clark University, the model for implementation, and five sent at least one staff member to the three-day JFF training in Worcester, MA, which included a "residency" component of classroom observations at the UCPS. Here we present findings in three areas related to implementation: adoption, use and sustainability.

Adoption

1. Adoption of the JFF Framework helped to establish a focus on literacy among all the accelerated high schools. Nonetheless, there was considerable variation in the level of adoption and implementation of the JFF Framework among the 13 accelerated high schools.
2. The alignment of the JFF Framework with each school's educational philosophy and the attitude of school leadership were the primary determinants of the degree to which each school adopted the JFF Framework.
3. Among our six case study schools, two schools were "highly committed" to the JFF Framework while four schools were "partially committed."

Use of the JFF strategies

1. Most schools were not using the full set of six JFF strategies. This occurred for two reasons: schools were encouraged to focus initially on only 2-3 of the strategies and had not progressed beyond them; and/or schools were not fully committed to the JFF Framework.
2. Some school leaders and teachers were unsure of the value of the JFF Framework, believing the JFF strategies mirrored best practices for instruction that they were already using. They did not embrace the idea that the strategies needed to be implemented as a coherent set.

3. The OMP's focus on literacy and use of the JFF Framework in the accelerated high schools helped to focus the schools more on the need for school-wide consistency in literacy practices, regardless of the degree to which they adopted the JFF Framework.

1. Staff in schools that were strongly committed to implementing the JFF Framework had the most positive response to the JFF residency professional development, the combined professional development provided by JFF in Worcester, and the site visit to UPCS.

2. The JFF-led trainings will end for Philadelphia's accelerated high schools at the end of the 2010-11 school year; the JFF trainer believes the schools could continue on their own to use and train their colleagues in the JFF strategies, but are still fragile in their implementation of the JFF Framework.

Reconnecting Disconnected Students

All the accelerated high schools in this study embraced the importance of reconnecting students to school. While reconnection strategies may overlap with JFF strategies, interviewees identified them as distinctly important. The first four strategies were common across all case study schools—although they varied in intensity—while the fifth strategy was utilized at two of our case study schools. These strategies included:

1. building caring, personalized relationships with students to encourage attendance and school connectedness;

2. creating a welcoming and non-traditional school environment for students;

3. preparing students for postsecondary opportunities;

4. devising various methods to improve and sustain strong student attendance; and

5. developing community-building processes and leadership opportunities to enhance students' sense of belonging and motivate students (two case study schools).

Reengaging Students in Learning

Although JFF strategies were also designed to enhance engagement, schools used additional strategies to engage students in literacy learning specifically. These strategies included:

1. developing relevant content;

2. giving students choice in reading and linking reading to enjoyable learning activities;

3. creating lessons for small group work;

4. offering incentives;

5. designating special times for independent reading; and

6. addressing learning gaps.

Next Steps & Recommendations

RFA will continue its research on accelerated schools in 2011-12. Based on our first round of research from January 2010-January 2011, we recommend:

1. **Generate buy-in for sustained investment.** Sustained investment by PYN's Project U-Turn and the OMP in a focus on literacy, and the implementation of the JFF Common Instructional Framework across content areas. This was a relatively new initiative, and too early to fully assess. Some accelerated schools had recently opened, and many were still in the early stages of adoption and need time and support in order to be able to fully implement the JFF strategies.

2. **Establish productive dialogue between the OMP and JFF.** Additional dialogue between the OMP and providers about implementation of the JFF Framework and the compatibility or perceived conflict with their instructional approaches in order to encourage stronger buy-in.

3. **Increase staff participation.** Examination by the OMP of the barriers to school staff participation in JFF practices and processes, including professional development opportunities, and how best to address these barriers.

4. **Identify and/or develop effective teaching and learning materials.** Further exploration by the OMP of the kinds of materials and resources teachers need to meet the needs of struggling readers, and assistance in acquiring these.

5. **Determine which factors lead to improved student attendance.** The District should examine the correlation between approaches to improving student attendance and improvement of attendance.

6. **Open up lines of communication between and among administrators and teachers.** Further opportunities for accelerated high school administrators and teachers are needed to share questions, best practices and challenges across schools.