

**Kyrene Middle School Evaluation:
Phase 2 (Academic Lab Follow-Up)**

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Introduction

The evaluation of the Kyrene Elementary School District (Kyrene) Middle School model (model) is a three-year, three-phase design that started in spring 2006. The evaluation began with a process evaluation in year one and transitions to an outcome evaluation in year three.

The evaluation is based on a guiding framework, common in program evaluation, that divides the model into three phases: implementation, maturation and outcomes. Phase 1 of the evaluation focused on the extent to which the model has been implemented as intended. Phase 2 of the evaluation includes targeted follow-up on key implementation issues and a shift toward defining program outcomes. In Phase 2, the program is assumed to be in the maturation stage where maturation is marked by the establishment of routine operational procedures to carry out program activities. In the third and final year of the evaluation (Phase 3) the evaluation shifts to a focus on assessing program outcomes.

The purpose of the Phase 1 evaluation was to provide timely feedback to Kyrene District Officials (district officials) and the members of the Kyrene School District Governing Board (governing board) about program implementation so adjustments can occur in a timely manner. The Phase 1 findings were presented to district officials and the governing board in a public meeting on June 13, 2006. The evaluation outcomes were

presented in this manner for two reasons. First, the evaluation schedule was ambitious in order to provide district officials and board members with results in sufficient time to initiate changes in the program for the 2006-2007 school year. Second, the public meeting allowed an opportunity for district officials, the governing board and the research team to discuss the program implementation. Since the public meeting, district officials have initiated a number of program implementation improvements based on the Phase 1 findings.

This report represents the evaluation outcomes for the first part of the Phase 2 evaluation. The purpose of this part of the Phase 2 evaluation is to learn more about the implementation of Academic Lab, the key issue identified in the Phase 1 report.

The Phase 2 evaluation is being conducted by David R. Garcia, Ph. D., Assistant Professor, Arizona State University.

Background

The implementation of Academic Lab (AL) was included in the Phase 1 evaluation because AL is a prominent feature of the model. During the Phase 1 evaluation, all stakeholders, either before or during the evaluation, mentioned the importance of AL to the model's implementation. The opinions of these diverse stakeholders, including teachers, students and principals, all indicated that AL was not being implemented as intended.

Several issues emerged from the Phase 1 evaluation. A total of 42 percent of teacher respondents either strongly disagree or disagree that they received guidance in the 2005-2006. In addition, 57 percent of teacher respondents reported that they were

unprepared to use AL productively. The lack of clear guidance coupled with teacher uncertainty regarding the productive use of AL, are likely explanations for the extreme variability across classrooms in the implementation of AL. For the Phase 1 evaluation, the purpose and objectives of AL were not available in writing. In general, district officials indicated that the purpose of AL was to provide increased student support and allow time for specialized programs. Overall, AL was not being implemented to meet the aforementioned purposes.

In the Phase I evaluation, the research team sought information from students about the implementation of AL. Students were chosen as the optimal information source because they have relevant experiences with AL activities in the classroom. Student opinion was gathered through focus groups with students representing all middle schools and grade levels.

In general, students voiced negative opinions of AL. Most commonly, students felt that Academic Lab was a “waste of time” or that Academic Lab “doesn’t matter,” “doesn’t help,” or “isn’t necessary.” For example, one student remarked, “It’s not like (just) a waste of time, (it’s) like a waste of your brain, like- it’s supposed to help you?” Another student added, “I just don’t think it’s necessary.”

Furthermore, several students questioned the purpose of Academic Lab. For example, most students did not see “the point of it (Academic Lab).” Other students remarked, “In AL (Academic Lab) you get random stuff...sometimes we do stuff and sometimes there’s nothing to do.” “We used to have a schedule, now we don’t; I don’t know what happened.”

When students mentioned AL activities with an academic-orientation, they described these activities overwhelmingly as “study hall.” In some instances these “study hall” or “homework” days were designated by the teacher and limited to these certain days. In other instances these study hall days and/or sustained silent reading were a default. In other words, if no other activity was scheduled students could “do their homework” or “read” if they chose to. Students most often felt this was a “loose” time with little accountability. One student said, “It’s not like a real class; the teachers don’t teach you anything and there’s no grades.”

Few students mentioned activities that could be classified as “enrichment.” Students’ impressions of the few “enrichment” activities they mentioned, however, were positive. For example, club types activities focused on student interests or project-based activities such as publishing a newspaper, or putting on a play were mentioned in a positive light. One student said, “It isn’t all bad. Lots of stuff we do is so, so fun!” Another added, “I like what we do in Academic Lab. We have a lot of planned activities.”

Other innovative activities mentioned by students focused on community service. For example, “We’ll be outside cleaning up the track.” “Our AL is trying to get more fun stuff like community service for the hospital, like baking cookies or something.” These types of activities were not mentioned by all students; indicating that students across the entire district are not participating in these activities.

Students expressed neutral opinions or were dissatisfied with how their teachers interacted with them during Academic Lab. Students described teachers who were “busy” during AL time and could not provide assistance them:

- ❖ “The teacher doesn’t exactly teach you during Academic Lab.”
- ❖ “The other classes the teacher actually helps you if you need help.”
- ❖ “Most teachers don’t spend their Academic Lab time doing things that are productive and help people...everyone else is complaining about them.”

Students from every focus group commented on how their Academic Lab teachers used at least some of AL time to “check their e-mail or grade papers.” For example, “A lot of teachers don’t really care. My teacher says to silent read or do your homework. S/he has stuff to do, s/he has to grade papers.”

For implementation purposes, it is important to note that principals consider AL as “teacher or team driven” and did not articulate a clear role for themselves in the implementation of AL. Principals acknowledged that the implementation of AL is the teachers’ responsibility, that AL is flexible and that this flexibility is difficult for teachers to grasp. One administrator specifically pointed out the discrepancy in expectations of teachers as it relates to standards and curriculum for other classes by saying, “It’s a very uncertain thing for teachers in a time when curriculum is so systematically driven.” This administrator went on to say, “We’re all working around what it (AL) really is for, what it’s about, how it’s going to work and how it’s going to work for that specific school, grade and team.”

Principals also described AL as being focused on academics, a perception that is consistent with student perceptions’ of AL as “study hall.” Each Principal described a different model for tutoring type activities at their schools. “Some teams specialize and kids rotate through math, sustained silent reading, study hall ...” One Principal expressed concern over the ability to effectively tutor individuals through Academic Lab. “The

numbers are high, so if I (teacher) am supposed to be helping kids with tutoring, you know you've got thirty kids in a class.”

Principals did not make any mention of the Academic Lab teacher serving as a student advocate in a manner articulated in the program objectives. In fact, one principal felt strongly that Academic Lab time should not be used as an Advisory Period. “Some people thought if you do middle school you need to do an advisory program...that was what middle school was all about. They (district) tried that years ago and it didn't work. This is more directed at academics.”

Research Recommendations from Phase 1

The practical impact of the extreme variability in the implementation of Academic Lab (AL) is that this important aspect of the model has not been implemented as intended and the inconsistency clouds public opinion of the entire model. District officials were encouraged to create consistent expectations for AL and to communicate those expectations effectively.

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

1 - Continue to Investigate the Implementation of Academic Lab

At the June 13, 2006 session before the governing board, the research team recommended that district officials take action to develop explicit expectations for AL and to communicate those expectations to schools to promote consistency in the implementation of AL. District officials accepted the recommendations and began taking steps to improve the implementation of AL. Follow-up focus groups should be conducted

in fall 2006 to assess the impact of district efforts and to re-assess the implementation of AL.

Step 2 - Define Model Outcome Indicators

Phase 2 of the evaluation should include the establishment of measurable outcomes to evaluate the results of the model. This process marks the transition from the implementation evaluation (year 1 and entering year 2) to an outcomes evaluation that will continue through year 3. The process of establishing measurable outcomes involves the following:

- Selection of the 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
- Identification of key comparison groups

Step 3: Establish Baseline Outcome Data

Once the outcome indicators are articulated into measurable variables, the baseline outcome data for the model outcomes can be collected and baseline values for each outcome indicator calculated. The baseline values are used to assess change over time related to the model.

District Response to Improve Academic Lab

District officials have taken several actions intended to improve the implementation of Academic Lab (AL) since the Phase 1 findings were presented to the Governing Board in spring 2006.

Academic Lab Guidelines

The Academic Lab Council designed guidelines for Academic Lab and documented the guidelines in a memo. The memo describes the following aspects of AL:

1. Purpose - The purpose of AL is “to support, enrich and enhance the experiences middle schools have in school.”
2. Support functions of Exploratory Teachers - The support functions of Exploratory teachers include partnering with a core teacher to work with students, providing tutoring and working with established student groups (e.g. drama, band).
3. Suggested uses - The suggested uses of AL include 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.
4. General agreements and understandings - The key understandings identified in the memo include:
 - a. Each team should designate a weekly schedule for how the Academic Lab is used.
 - b. Permanent arrangements that take students out of AL are not encouraged
 - c. Grades for work completed in AL can be given in other content or exploratory classes
 - d. Attendance will be taken each day in AL

Site Plans

Each site has developed a plan for implementing AL. The site plan also covers the implementation of other key school programs/initiatives. The site plans overview the current status of AL at the respective school, document the school goals for AL and update the current situation of that school vis-à-vis the goals. The researcher reviewed the plans for the 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.

Academic Lab Rubric

Kyrene middle schools have implemented an Academic Lab Rubric to evaluate the implementation of AL. The rubric covers four target areas:

1. Clarity of purpose – teacher teams are expected to have a defined, articulated purpose for AL and the purpose must be articulated for all students and teacher team members; the implementation of the purpose should be evident through observations in practice.
2. Intensity of planned activities – teacher teams are expected to have a highly sophisticated model for planned activities, evidence of longer term goals and short term objectives for AL and the models must be documented in writing.
3. 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.

4. 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 exploratory/curricular programs and the AL program should combine both routine procedures and the capacity for flexibility.

The AL Rubric was discussed with middle school principals on July 20, 2006. The input provided during these discussions was incorporated into later revisions of the AL Rubric. District officials sent the AL Rubric to middle school principals via email on August 23, 2007.

Academic Lab Walk-Thrus

The district initiated Academic Lab walk-thrus to observe the implementation of Academic Lab at the classroom level. According to the master schedule, walk-thrus occurred between the dates September 5 – October 5, 2006. One walk-thru was conducted in each Kyrene middle school and the walk-thru was conducted by either Dr. David Schauer, District Superintendent or a director in the Instructional Services Division. According to district officials' observations during the walk-thrus, most classrooms were focused on a learning activity. Many classrooms were well-planned and well-delivered. District officials' also indicate that middle school principals are aware of the strengths and weakness of AL delivery and where teachers need further support or assistance.

District and School Based Trainings

Teachers were afforded the opportunity to attend district lead or school based trainings on Academic Lab. All middle schools conducted training sessions in August and October 2006. In addition, the district offered two formal classes on AL. Middle school principals continue to support the implementation of AL during meetings and ongoing monitoring.

Methods

The year 2 implementation of Academic Lab (AL) was conducted using teacher focus groups in three Kyrene middle schools. The middle schools were selected at random and each middle school had an equal and independent opportunity to be selected. The focus groups were conducted with teachers from a single grade level per school. For example, 6th grade teachers were interviewed in one school, 7th grade teachers were interviewed in another school, etc. In the end, teachers from all the middle school grades (6-8) were interviewed. The names of the participating schools have been withheld to protect the anonymity of the focus group participants.

The number of participants per focus group ranged from 8-15 teachers. The focus groups sessions were held on January 10th and 16th, 2007. Each focus group session was completed with only teachers and the researcher present. Prior to starting each session, teachers were read a standardized, prepared introduction and given the opportunity to ask any questions. Each interview was conducted using a prepared interview script of questions (see Appendix A for the interview protocol). As needed, the interviewer used

probing questions to allow students to further clarify their responses. Each session lasted 45-55 minutes. All sessions were recorded and transcribed.

After discussions with district officials, the researcher developed the focus groups questions around five topics related to the implementation of AL:

1. Consistency between teacher activities and the purpose of Academic Lab
2. Teachers' ability to use AL to differentiate instruction for individual students
3. Teachers' opportunities to take advantage of the flexibility provided in AL.
4. The integration of Exploratory teachers into AL activities
5. A comparison of AL this academic year compared to last academic year

From the teacher focus groups on these topics, four overarching themes emerged. The detailed findings for each theme are presented in the following section and the report closes with a discussion of the implications of the findings and recommendations.

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the focus group sessions:

1. Academic Lab (AL) is being implemented consistent with the district's policy orientation
2. Teachers must reconcile the tension between structure and flexibility
3. What is working in AL
4. Teacher concerns about AL

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

The district's policy approach to establish more consistency in AL is to recommend, not prescribe. The district AL materials include several guidelines for the

site plans but the district materials do not include specific activities that schools and teams must follow during AL. As a result of this orientation, the implementation of the district's guidance should result in general consistency across schools and teacher teams in the implementation of AL. But within this general structure, day-to-day activities should continue to vary across teacher teams. The district's policy orientation does not anticipate that teacher teams will implement the same activities, the same way at the same time.

The implementation of AL 2006-2007 matches the district's policy orientation. Schools have developed AL site plans that are generally similar across schools. The school site plans consist of a combination of the following:

1. Academic assistance days
2. School wide academic projects (e.g. school-wide silent sustained reading)
3. At least one day designated for Character Counts.

Last year, no written documentation was available at the district or school level on the purpose of AL and written schedules of AL activities were not presented to the research team. And, as noted in the Background section of the report, the lack of documentation was evident in the AL implementation. One teacher, when asked to compare the implementation of AL last year to this year, captures well the uncertainty teachers' faced in the first year of the model:

- ❖ "I know last year there was a lot of like, well, a lot of schools didn't know what they were doing so for the first nine weeks they basically did whatever and didn't have a set schedule. . . I know there was a lot of inconsistency, not everybody was told what was expected of academic lab. And I think it kind of "oh yeah, we have this extra 38 minute class, here it is" and then it fell through the cracks like not everybody did what they always should have been doing."

In 2006-2007, site plans for all campuses were made available through the district office. More importantly, there is evidence that the AL plans have been implemented at the school level. At two schools, a handout was available that described the purpose of AL and the AL schedule was documented in writing.

Also, teachers articulated collective agreement about the AL schedule for their school and their individual team. When asked to describe the activities for a typical week in AL, teachers had no difficulty communicating the AL weekly schedule of activities. The uniformity across teachers in the same team and across teacher teams indicates that teachers have developed a common understanding of which AL activities occur on which days of the week, for example:

- ❖ “Every single day has a different focus, so Monday is vocabulary, Tuesday is Character Counts, and then Thursday is either silent sustained reading or like extra help with homework and then Friday is, either homework or SSR.”
- ❖ “We have it scheduled so that every Monday is SSR reading. Tuesdays is academic assistance or homework day. And then on Thursdays, our team does math activities. Friday is set up for Character Counts.”
- ❖ “Mondays is silent sustained reading . . . then Tuesdays and Thursdays are academic assistance and exploratory teachers can pull out their kids, and then Fridays maybe, maybe a homework help or a teaming building, character counseling kind of activity.”

Within the weekly schedule, considerable variation still exists across teacher teams on the day-to-day implementation of AL. Teachers are implementing the specifics of AL differently. While teachers expressed consistency in the weekly schedule, teachers noted that differences existed across teams and that their AL experiences were team-specific. Commonly, teachers used phrases such as, “Our team is set up a little differently than theirs (another team).” to indicate that their experiences did not generalize across all teacher teams. Another teacher, in assessing the overall structure of

AL, qualified their assessment as follows, “I think the structure is working, at least for my team.”

Because teacher teams implement the AL schedule differently, it could give the impression of disorganization on the level or in the same manner as last year. There is a notable trend this year, however. Teachers have identified academic activities of value, they have sectioned off time in the AL schedule for these activities and teachers are guarding this time from interruptions. For example, teachers commented:

- ❖ “Well, once a week we do silent reading. I don’t know if all teams do that. Kids are reading, it’s strictly enforced. They’re not running to the bathroom, they’re not going to sharpen a pencil, they are reading quietly”
- ❖ “We have it scheduled so that every Monday is SSR reading, which we highly value. “
- ❖ Our team does a (math) lab and each one of the teachers . . . we do drills, math activities that are set up, but we set that up totally for math, and nobody gets pulled on that day at all. That’s how highly valued it is.”
- ❖ “Yeah . . . as long as we can protect SSR and math, those were our two commitments as a team to promote reading . . . as long as nobody messes with those, that allows us to keep our commitment to the kids to the academic stuff here.”
- ❖ “Monday is vocabulary. . . The students find words that have to do with each quarter. . . This is what our school does. . . We pick the top 25 words that most kids missed on our team and those are the 25 words we focus on. And it’s a school-wide project.”

Teachers must reconcile the tension between structure and flexibility.

There is an inherent tension between structure and flexibility in the implementation of AL and reconciling structure and flexibility presents a formidable challenge to teachers. The district guidance anticipates this tension as it calls for both a school-wide AL plan and a flexible schedule to implement the plan. Furthermore, 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.

Nearly all teacher teams, with the exception of one, allowed Exploratory teachers to “pull out” students during AL. The teachers described their genuine efforts to accommodate Exploratory “pull-outs” but recognize the scheduling challenges that the “pull-outs” present. For example, two teachers indicated:

- ❖ “Yeah, it does make it nice and I know that it’s very valuable for especially the fine arts teachers to have the students being able to go to band or whatever it does definitely take a toll on the program, but, you know, I’m always happy to, you know, give those children the help that they need since that time was taken away, but yeah, it sounded like it was good but we’re still saying it wasn’t working. We’re just doing the best with what we have.”
- ❖ “The mistake I think we made with academic lab is trying to put structure activities in to it. I think it needs to be, I hate the use of the word ‘study hall’ because it upsets people, but I think that it’s better used that way. Let the kids have some time to complete their work that they have issues with, if they want to pull them out, pull them out, I don’t care.”

The “pull-outs” create considerable disruption to structured activities during AL, particularly because teachers claim that on any given day different groups of students are pulled for different activities. Thus, teachers find it difficult to conduct a structured activity on “pull-out” days because the composition of the students remaining in their classrooms after the “pull-outs” differs each day.

- ❖ “I think that you said too, you added two pieces there – the pull out and the structured activity. Now they’re conflicting. Because, yes it’s chaotic, but if you have a structured activity, most likely the child was pulled out because they were requiring help somewhere, most of those children are low everywhere. So if you pull a child out to receive help somewhere and then they also miss the structured activity. Then they’re behind again. So it’s not helpful for there to be a structured activity that anyone would miss. Because what’s happening is then you would only have an advanced child who probably doesn’t need that enrichment, sitting there getting this structured activity and the kid who needs it is pulled out to try and catch up on the other things he’s missing.”

- ❖ “Then we get the list from band, we get the list from choir, or we the list from orchestra, and they email us a list of the kids that are going. And then we’ll have others that’ll have a pass, and even on team when we want us together, kids were starting to do the pass thing, because it is so chaotic those first few minutes, it’s like, by the time it gets settled down, who do I have left that I can work with. “
- ❖ “I think it’s (...) that you don’t know who they will be so you can’t plan ahead and say well I need this, this and this kid to see this video because they didn’t last week, well guess what, this, this and this kid again going to be gone so I don’t even know that, because they or may not be there, because it might change.”
- ❖ “Well last year we really tried pulling kids, well okay I would say these kids, I need these kids, I would give my team a list of kids that need extra writing help, so we had to restructure our academic lab, this is fun, and where our kids are going to go, but not this room, so we went through all that planning, by the time we took attendance, got the stuff we needed to do, they got in my room, I had fifteen minutes – that was not enough time for them, by the time they pulled out their stuff and got settled there was no tutoring happening, so I thought, okay that didn’t work. So let’s try. So we tried different things last year, we really tried to coexist, and we found again that less is more. And that’s how it’s different. We really tried; there was a lot of frustration.”
- ❖ “You’re spending all your time planning for this ungraded period of time that half the kids weren’t present for. So after a year of killing yourself over it, we decided next year okay these are what you’re doing on these days, take whoever you want.”

To accommodate the “pull-outs,” teacher teams have developed, as one teacher described, “structured environments where they (students) can miss.” Teachers have designated “pull-out” days where Exploratory teachers can remove students from AL. This 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.” Teachers describe the structure of “pull-out” days as follows:

- ❖ “We have structured our days so that if they are doing a structured activity, it is on a day where no one is getting pulled. “
- ❖ “Mondays and Thursdays are academic assistance days, those are the days that the Exploratories (teachers) can pull kids out. We never plan a structured activity on Mondays and Thursdays. Mondays and Thursdays for the kids that

stay in the room and aren't pulled out that's their academic assistance time, where they can go to another teacher and get academic assistance on the team, they can work within the classroom, they can work on homework, they can get tutoring, the kids that stay in the room, they are working on academic work at that time. "

- ❖ "All of our kids are pulled out on Mondays and Thursdays; we have never had kids pulled out on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and on Friday we have SSR, so if the kid misses SSR because they're in an academic success group, you know that's okay."

In many cases, the students who are not "pulled" on the "pull-out" days and remain in the classroom engage in an unstructured, often not pre-planned activity – most often, academic assistance. 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:

- ❖ "I value the time very highly, but I wish we had a bit more because it seems to be that every time we get children settled they're ready to get up and leave or they get a minimal amount of work done. Additionally, with all the kids that come rushing in wanting to leave and go here and go there, by the time I get attendance taken and by the time I get kids settled down and get them sent where they need to go, I have very little time to do a review or one on one."
- ❖ "I'm not gonna stand to do a dog and pony show for the fifteen kids that are left or the assortment of children that are there."

Teachers did identify occasions when the reduced class size that remained after the "pull-outs" presented unique instructional opportunities that were unavailable during other times of the day. For example:

- ❖ "I looked around the other day. I looked around like on Friday before winter break and my ac lab's pretty big – it's 32 or something like that, whatever – and I looked around, I had 15 kids in there because the other plus had been pulled. And it was, yeah, they were doing chorus and band and orchestra and that's a huge amount, and I had a couple go to ___ and a couple go to art and a

couple go to Spanish, I mean you know, I'm looking around going "wow, this is really cool." It was a small amount . . . That can happen, it happens to all of us."

Housekeeping/homeroom activities also take up some of the limited minutes allotted for AL and compete with the time to conduct other activities. When asked to estimate how much time is available on a typical day for either academic assistance or a structured activity, teachers most commonly estimated 15-20 minutes on "pull-out" days and up to 25 minutes on non-pull days. For example, teachers described the class atmosphere during the beginning of AL as:

- ❖ "The first ten minutes are nuts, ... Actually, once you have finally have a stable atmosphere, then you have the kids that have to go to the library, or have to go to the nurse, or have to go to the bathroom, so it's pretty much a blow."
- ❖ "Then you've also got kids running to other classes, 'well I need the math book,' 'oh, I need the social studies book,' or whatever – so that just takes up time, cause you've got kids running to go get stuff they need to work on that day."
- ❖ "I think it's helpful (AL), but you have to realize that it's craziness. Researcher: Craziness the entire time or part of the time? "The majority."

The time diverted to housekeeping/homeroom activities and general logistics is important to take into consideration when assessing the potential for teachers to accomplish the AL objectives.

- ❖ "A lot of the times our time is taken up because we have things to pass out to them, we have to read a newsletter to them, and so a lot of our time sometimes is taken by that...It is a good time to do it, but it makes, you know, cuts into that other time that we're trying to get something done."

Teachers created a distinction between pull-outs, academic assistance and what they perceive as structured programs. These "structured" programs include activities such as Character Counts and Second Step. Teachers find it extremely difficult to

conduct a structured program on designated “pull-out” days. One teacher summarized the challenge as follows:

- ❖ “And in addition to all that stuff, we’re supposed to be doing character counts, we’re supposed to be doing second step stuff, (...), so the kid knows what we’re doing, and we’re supposed to do all of this additional stuff too, when we don’t have any idea who we’re going to have that day.”

In most cases, schools have designated one day for structured programs such as Character Counts. Although one day of structured programs may seem minimal – 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; teachers also expressed an overall objection to Character Counts.

- ❖ “I’m going to stick my neck out here and say no, you develop character every day, every time I address this child and he addresses me, every time we work in class and how I handle my class and my classmates, classroom management, and that kind of thing, those are Character Counts. Every day I’m doing Character Counts, I don’t need a Friday to build Character Counts. I need a Friday to work on math or I need a Friday to help the kids read, some of these kids can’t even read. They can’t do the work problems because they can’t read them. So I’m building character every time I deal with a kid, and how he responds to me, so I don’t need a Friday, I don’t think Character Counts is a separate class. I think it is built in every day of every minute I’m here.”
- ❖ “I agree. It’s definitely a part of planning appropriately. You can include those lessons that you would learn in a Character Counts activity with a math lesson that, you know, working cooperatively in groups and working on this thing you can always incorporate, you know, whatever subject matter you’re doing. So yeah, I agree that you don’t need separate times for everything.”
- ❖ “What I was going to say is, see I don’t mind all of these other things. You pull out whoever you want, get rid of the second step, get rid of all of the structure stuff you’re trying to put into this kind of unstable matrix, and if you want to pull kids out, do it. Just, get rid of the second step, don’t make us do health and character development and all kinds of other stuff, and what is a becoming a catch-all. That’s the catch-all part that I don’t like.”
- ❖ “And it’s a difficult one because even if they do go through a written process in the classroom during academic lab for Character Counts, it doesn’t mean it’s going to generalize outside the classroom when they walk into the

lunchroom. I mean, it's very hard to teach those concepts in a kind of verbal format and then hope they don't punch their buddy on the way to the lunchroom."

- ❖ "You have to get them (students) to buy into it. They don't want to do Character Counts very often."
- ❖ "There's not time to do second step the way that it's suppose to be done, because of the amount of time you have, it's direct instruction of giving them information and then they move on. If such and such is supposed to be activities of working together, lots of discussion, videos, you do not have time for that, unless you want to use up two days, which you know at that point it's kind of overkill."

In summary, 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.

- ❖ "I think it's (...) that you don't know who they will be so you can't plan ahead and say well I need this, this and this kid to see this video because they didn't last week, well guess what, this, this and this kid again are going to be gone so I don't even know that, because they or may not be there, because it might change."
- ❖ "You need to shuffle through all those (activities) in between prepping for you know all your different kids and all your different levels and whatever. But, you have to dig out an activity and then constantly create things and then present this little activity to these kids, it's like, I'm sorry I don't have time for that."

One teacher articulated that the time devoted to planning AL activities competed with other academic priorities:

- ❖ "The problem is, is where should teacher time be focused. Yes, this is a beautiful time period where we could tutor kids, we could break them into an extension activity, we could have them all hold hands in the pot, whatever it is, but that requires planning, that requires planning on our part, planning that we should be using on our curriculum. "

What is working in AL

Teachers cited several examples of activities that are working well in Academic Lab (AL). Pre-planned activities were more likely to be executed in AL and many teachers commented favorably that the academic assistance time in AL is valuable for providing individualized attention to students.

When teachers noted a successfully-executed activity, most often the activity was pre-prepared for teachers in advance. For example,

- ❖ “Then, one day a week each teacher takes one of Sarah’s math classes and we do drills, math activities that she set up.”
- ❖ “If there’s not quality materials available or someone hasn’t planned something for us, it’s kind of, we’re on our own. And some months, there’s been a couple, there was one month, at least, where we had activities for every Tuesday. That was good. They were provided and those were pretty good, but we haven’t gotten those every month.”

In fact, the only mention of a successful Character Counts implementation involved a pre-planned activity:

- “There is no district curriculum for character counts because they say we know what the pillars are, but we all come up with our own activities whether it’s showing a character counts video, whether it’s doing an activity out of the fun book that one of our wonderful teachers put together this huge fun book that has all kinds of activities and we take activities out of there, we use activities from there.”

Teachers indicated that pre-planned activities that are designed to be accomplished in the time allotted for AL and provided to them in advance are the most likely to be executed well. Teachers recommended that more activities should be prepared in advance. For example:

- ❖ “If the district wants to turn around and say, here are the character counts lessons we have prepared for you all you have to do them, here do this on Tuesdays, I think that would be great because that’s less that we have to worry about and less that we have to plan for. I would much rather have something

handed to me and told we would like to do this one day during academic lab each week of the eight weeks or what it takes to get done. “

- ❖ “I would rather have the district develop something and saying here you can do this in 20 minutes or you can do this in 30 minutes, and then I don’t have to worry about planning I don’t have to take time away from planning my core classes to plan this activity for academic lab. If some body hands it to me, I could deliver it.”

Academic assistance was highlighted as a productive use of AL time. Teachers stated that academic assistance during AL supplemented classroom instruction because they were more able to work one-on-one with students, which is difficult during class because teachers must also deliver content. In addition, teachers claim that students receive academic support during AL that may not be available at home.

- ❖ “We’re saying that those academic assistance days are working, they’re fine, don’t touch those. “
- ❖ “You asked about the difference between last year and this year, there’s not a whole lot of difference between last year and this year but the difference to 2 years ago when we had 2 planning periods, that left us with one period where we could pull kids for course assistance and we had lots of ... and so Academic Lab time is the only time during the school day without us going before or after school that we can have that individual one on one time with the kids if we need it and cause and we lost that. When we lost that 2nd play period we had 2 years ago.”
- ❖ “One on one time with the kids, if they need it. We can review more than, you know, review more one on one. I know for me, personally, it’s mostly I use academic lab for make-up work, like to make up a test or something, which now I don’t have to ... instead of pulling the kids during the class period and saying, okay, “make up this test,” and then they miss all the instruction while they’re taking that test, then I can say okay, “make up the test,” and they’re not missing any instruction time.”
- ❖ “So when they get a road block they can waste twenty minutes to an hour at home staring at this road block and not doing their homework, where they could just go hey (teacher) how do I do this, and then they’re done and it’s only a minute lost instead of an hour.
- ❖ “I teach science, and I have kids that come up to me and say can you help me with this math problem, can help me explain the analogy between these two vocabulary words and I can help them, most of the time.”

- ❖ “More often than not (during Academic Lab) they (students) have a teacher they can turn to even those it’s not the same teacher in the subject area. They can get some support and assistance there, where as at home if they turn to a parent, say mom dad can you help me with this, a lot of times either mom and dad don’t know the info or mom and dad don’t have the time.”

Teacher concerns about AL.

Teachers expressed varied concerns about Academic Lab (AL) that are worth mention. Teachers expressed concerns that AL could become an excuse for students not to complete homework, teachers mentioned the continued struggle with student perceptions’ of AL as detached from the rest of the curriculum and the teacher teams at one school advocated specifically for more PE.

Although a number of teachers praised the ability to provide individualized academic assistance during AL, some teachers expressed 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.

- ❖ “If they (students) don’t do their homework then, “well, I’m gonna have time in academic lab” and that’s not really the purpose of academic lab. And then all this pulling in exploratory is like, you know, because they have less time so it’s kind of like “oh, we’ll make up a new class for them to have a little bit more time to do work. I don’t know, it’s just frustrating.”
- ❖ “Personally I feel like this year academic lab has become an excuse for kids not to do their homework.”
- ❖ “Like they said at the beginning, I think it (AL) is an excuse for kids to sit there and not do their homework at home and use academic lab time when they could have been getting the teacher to help them edit their essay, or talking to the teacher about what their project should look like. And so I think there’s a loss of accountability, especially for the kids.”

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

which creates the perception among students that AL activities do not “count.” For

example:

- ❖ “Well, it depends, if you’re talking about a character counts activity or a second step activity, or a team building activity, they are very aware of the fact that they don’t have to do it because they’re not getting a grade in it, so they’re not going to put as much effort into it. If it is something that they get counted for as a grade, then they take it more seriously.”
- ❖ “You know, it’s not for a grade . . . it’s not for a grade and so they know they don’t really have to do it. They don’t view it as a class.”
- ❖ “They don’t value that time, if they even looked at it as regular class time, like if the rest of your schedule is full of regular classes, science and English . . . they don’t get a grade for it so I don’t know if they value that class.”

The teacher teams from one school in particular indicated that additional seat time required of AL could be better used by keeping students active, such as PE. The teachers suggested;

- ❖ “My biggest thing is that I feel like they could better use that time giving the kids PE every day.”
- ❖ “I do notice a difference with kids when they do have PE and they don’t have PE, they are...when they have PE they are able to focus and they’re not as squirrely as they usually are and when they do have PE they’re focused and I don’t have as many discipline issues.”
- ❖ “The second thing is that, again, these are middle school children who need to be up and moving. Most of them need to have hands-on and are kinesthetic learners to some extent. And now what we’re doing is we’re putting them in a chair and we’re saying “okay, now sit here for an additional half hour.” And the PE program has been taken. If that 30 minutes could be used for those kids to be outside moving they would be more focused on their lesson and really, I would say at least half of them spend their time sitting there daydreaming.”
- ❖ “I can’t tell you how many children have said “why can’t we have PE? Why can’t we be outside? Why can’t we play tag?”
- ❖ “One of our best Character Counts we had was when we had to clean up the trash. That one, everybody goes out . . .they can run around and they talk to you and they come up and you just talk to them and get to know them a little bit.”

Conclusion

The district has made considerable effort to prescribe the guidelines for Academic Lab (AL). These efforts have resulted in greater consistency across schools in the execution of AL. The parameters set forth by the district are evident in the site plans. The execution of the site plans is observable through greater consistency across teacher teams in their understanding and implementation of the weekly schedule of activities.

Within the general parameters, teachers claim to have “made it (AL) work.” This involves creating more stability through designated “pull-out” days which allow for teachers to utilize the other days for academic assistance and structured programs.

In determining the overall assessment of the AL implementation, it would largely depend on the day and whether the student has been “pulled-out” from class. Teachers described sharp contrasts between “pull-out” days, academic assistance days and structured program days.

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.

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. According to teachers, few planned activities occur in the time remaining on “pull-out” days. A negative consequence of these unplanned activities is that student reports of these activities may not be positive, continuing to cloud opinions of the model.

The inclusion of structured activities into AL, namely Character Counts, was largely criticized by many teachers. Although some teachers expressed dissatisfaction

with the programs independent of AL, most teachers indicated that there was either insufficient time to plan for and carry out a proper structured activity within the time limits of AL.

Finally, 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. Pre-planned 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.

Appendix A

Kyrene Middle School Schedule Implementation

Academic Lab Follow-up Questions

January 2007

Introduction

Hello. Thank you for meeting with me today. I know how busy things are at the building, and how hard it is to get away some times.

I'm David Garcia and I am an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at ASU. As you may know, I am conducting an evaluation of the middle school model here in Kyrene. As part of that evaluation I am here to talk with you about Academic Lab.

Before we get started, let me explain a few things. I am interested in your personal opinions. There are no right or wrong answers. Your comments are confidential and no personal names or schools will be identified in the report. I am taping the session because I don't want to miss anything...and I can't write that fast! Only a graduate student who is assisting me with the evaluation and I will have access to the tape recordings. Let's begin by going around the room and telling me your name.

Topic 1: Current Academic Lab activities:

- Think back to last month, earlier in the month, prior to the holiday break. Please describe for me the activities you conducted in Academic Lab during that time period.
- How is Academic Lab time different than other classroom time? What can you do in Academic Lab that you can't do in other classroom time?
 - How were Exploratory Program teachers involved in Academic Lab activities during this time period?
 - If not involved during time period, expand to ask how Exploratory Program teachers involved over the semester. How often did Exploratory Program teachers conduct these activities?

Topic 2: Academic Lab activities compared to last year:

- Think back to your typical Academic Lab activities last year. What would your students say about Academic Lab this year compared to last year?

Topic 3: District guidance:

- What guidance have you received this year about the purpose of Academic Lab?
 - Ask for specifics about source and type of communication
- How has this guidance influenced your daily Academic Lab activities?

Concluding Question:

- Any other comments you would like to make about Academic Lab that you think are important?
- Ask for a show of hands to count number of teachers by grade level(s).