Maryland's Largest School District
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Expanding Opportunity and Unleashing Potential

Examining the Role of Additional Administrator Support: A 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 Evaluation

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Prepared by:
Kendra D. Price, Ph.D.

Shared Accountability
Applied Research and Evaluation

Administrator Support

Assistant School Administrators and Fully-Released Teachers

Executive Summary

Evaluation Scope

Prior to the 2021–2022 school year, allocation restrictions for schools with low student enrollment inhibited the placement of a second administrator for eight elementary schools within MCPS. To support these eight schools, beginning in 2021–22, the district used funding from the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) Fund to supply six of the eight schools with an assistant school administrator (ASA) and the remaining two schools with a fully-released teacher. The primary purpose of this evaluation was to examine how the placement of additional administrator support at these schools influenced day-to-day operations, teaching and learning processes, community engagement, and student performance in literacy and mathematics from fall 2021 to fall 2022.

Methods

The evaluation utilized a multiple case study design to examine the role of additional administrator support. Participants from the eight elementary schools included eight principals, six assistant school administrators, two fully-released teachers, and 52 school-based leaders and core team members (e.g., reading specialists, staff development teachers, English Language Development teachers, grade-level lead teachers, and school counselor). Qualitative data collection methods were virtual semi-structured interviews with principals, assistant school administrators, and full-released teachers; and in-person focus groups with school leadership teams at their respective schools. Qualitative data were coded and sorted by themes to identify patterns across cases. School-level achievement data were summarized using descriptive statistics.

Results

The evaluation findings support the **instrumental role of a second administrator in the areas of operations and management, teaching and learning, and community engagement**. For operations and management, two themes emerged from the data: **1) operational continuity** and **2) operational thought partner**. The supporting role of an ASA or fully-released teacher helped to improve systems and structures within the school. With the additional support, operations became smoother and more organized. The additional position also provided the principals and staff leaders with someone to brainstorm and process solutions to operational matters or concerns.

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Results

For **teaching and learning**, three themes emerged from the data: **1) increased capacity as instructional leader, 2) shared instructional leadership,** and **3) instructional thought partner**. The supporting role of an ASA or fully-released teacher released some operational and management burden from the principals which allowed them to operate more as an instructional leader. With the support of an ASA or fully-released teacher, the frequency and quality of instructional support and accountability improved. The additional position provided operational and instructional brainstorming and problem solving. The ASA or fully-released teacher as an instructional thought partner was a benefit for the principals and the leadership staff.

For **community engagement**, one theme emerged from the data: **responsiveness and accessibility**. Having an additional administrator increased administrator visibility in the school and afforded more opportunities to interact with parents, address their needs and concerns in a timely manner, and build relational trust with them.

Overall, the eight elementary schools in the sample had higher percentages of Grades K–5 students meeting Evidence-of-Learning in literacy and mathematics compared to district percentages. The percentage of students meeting Evidence-of-Learning in literacy and mathematics increased from fall 2022 to spring 2023. Mathematics performance was the only achievement trend to demonstrate a steady increase from spring 2023 to fall 2023.

Conclusion

Once ESSER funds are depleted, the district should consider reallocating funding to ensure additional administrator support is retained for the eight schools in this evaluation. Overall, the placement of a second school administrator was instrumental to the development and growth of principals and staff members and to supporting the mission and vision of the schools. Several of the behaviors of effective leaders outlined in the MCPS Administrative and Supervisory Professional Growth System, such as protecting the work of teachers and staff members from disruption; strategically managing staff resources by assigning and scheduling staff roles and responsibilities; promoting instructional practices that address student needs; focusing on improving instructional practices; and using data to monitor student progress and improve instruction were evident improvements since the addition of administrator support. The district should reconsider allocation guidelines and strategize ways to retain administrator support in these schools.

Evaluation Scope

Background

Researchers and policymakers are increasingly recognizing the importance of strong leadership teams, spotlighting the essential role of assistant principals or additional administrator support (Bartanen, Rogers, & Woo, 2021). Due to allocation restrictions for small populated schools within MCPS, eight elementary schools were operating with one administrator. To support these eight elementary schools, the district used funding from the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) Fund to supply six of the eight schools with an assistant school administrator (ASA) and the remaining two schools with a fully-released teacher or lead teacher. The district intended for the eight schools to receive the additional positions for three academic years—2021–2022 through 2023–2024.

To understand the supportive role and contributions of an additional administrator, the evaluation examined how the presence of an ASA or fully-released teacher supported the principal and school, and examined school-level academic trends in literacy and mathematics from the fall of 2021–2022 to the fall of 2022–2023.

Purpose of Evaluation

The primary purpose of this evaluation was to examine how the 2021–2022 school-year placement of a second school administrator at 8 elementary schools within the district influenced each school's day-to-day operations, teaching and learning processes, community engagement, and school-level literacy and mathematics outcomes.

The evaluation focused on how the presence of an additional administrator supported principals and schools, and examined school-level data trends from fall 2021 to fall 2022.

Research Questions

1. How did the placement of a second school administrator or fully-released teacher influence the school's day-to-day operations?
2. How did the placement of a second school administrator or fully-released teacher impact teaching and learning?
3. In what ways did the schools' community engagement change since the placement of a second school administrator?
4. What were the school-level academic trends from fall 2021 to fall 2022?

Methods

Overview

The evaluation utilized a multiple case study design to examine the role of additional administrator support in eight elementary schools' day-to-day operations, teaching and learning processes, student outcomes, and community engagement.

Outcome Methods

Data & Measures

- Qualitative data: virtual semi-structured interviews via Zoom with principals, ASAs, and fully-released teachers; and in-person focus groups at each school with school-based leaders.
- Quantitative data: Evidence-of-Learning (EOL) literacy and mathematics data for transition and end-of-year reporting in 2021–2022 and transition reporting in 2022–2023; percent of students who met EOL for the three time periods.

Sample

- Research Questions 1–3: Eight principals, six assistant school administrators, two fully-released teachers, and 52 additional school-based leaders from eight MCPS elementary schools, including reading specialists, special education supervisors, lead teachers, staff development teachers, school counselors, English Language Development teachers, and administrative assistants.
- Research Question 4: Grades K–5 students from eight MCPS elementary schools in fall 2021 (n=2,281), spring 2022 (n=2,292), and fall 2022 (n=2,352).

Analysis

- Qualitative data: Cross-case synthesis with coding and sorting data by themes to identify patterns across cases
- Quantitative data: Descriptive analysis of school-level data

Results: Qualitative

RQ 1: How did the placement of an ASA or fully-released teacher influence the school's day-to-day operations?

"Before last year, the intervention people were getting called to cover classes when someone was out sick... And now to minimize the disruption to our interventions, [administration] will come in and cover the class... That made a big difference, because ***it allowed the non-classroom teachers who are pulling interventions to do their job and do it well for their students... The job of teaching is being done here because administration is making sure it can happen****. And the only way that can happen is with the two of them." - Core Team*

There were a lot of times learning was disrupted. We had to focus all of our attention on the student who was disrupting the class, and we couldn't keep learning going... ***But now [with an ASA] it's more like I call and someone comes....behaviors are addressed almost immediately****." - Core Team*

"In the beginning [prior to receiving an ASA], I feel like things were less organized; structures weren't as in place. ***And now there's more structure around the way we do things. The way data is shared. The way policies are shared.*** *I think it's a little more organized now that we've had two people for two years." - Core Team*

"[when out on leave]...it was our ASA who was able to step up and really **keep the ship floating, and kept it running with the vision and mission of the school** that had already been established.. and we didn't miss a beat...**So that was a huge operational bonus of having someone, within the building, who knew us so well to be able to take the lead**." - Principal

"We had a new student and ***the ASA was able to quickly work with special education to help get paraprofessional schedules changed*** *so that the student could have support as quickly as possible..." - Core Team*

Findings

Theme 1: Operational Continuity

- Additional administrator support led to increased operational continuity, including smoother operations and improved operational structures and competencies, such as the development of staff handbooks and the refinement of emergency and safety protocols. Operational continuity was a consistent theme across all schools.
- The ASA or fully-released teacher, as a person familiar with the vision and mission of his or her respective school, were able to lead the school in the absence of the principal which allowed a continuous and orderly operational flow.
- Prior to receiving additional administrator support, relying on staff to assist in managing the school and addressing disciplinary concerns inhibited their ability to operate in their roles. With increased administrator availability, there were fewer disruptions to the work of teachers and staff members and student learning.
- There was greater continuity in overall building management but also in the management of staff resources through the intentional assigning and scheduling of staff to meet school and student needs.

Results: Qualitative

RQ 1: How did the placement of an ASA or fully-released teacher influence the school's day-to-day operations?

*"I think [the ASA] has been amazing with helping to set the school up in the beginning of the year, and **allowing [the principal] to have someone to talk through all the challenges a small school has with scheduling and teacher placement, and having all these part-time people to fit into a schedule**. I know it's a really hard piece for [the principal] to do alone, and I think having [the ASA] to go through that whole process has been very, very helpful." - Core Team*

*"So it always helps to have a thought partner. As a single school administrator, you have your staff development teacher, you have your people you trust, and I have my cluster mates, but you do not have someone who has the level of responsibility you do in your building, dealing with your kids and your staff...**To have that thought partner at that level is always good**." - Principal*

*"I believe that we share the weight of class coverage concerns... We are both checking the substitute calling system, seeing where our vacancies are. **I'm able to take on some of that responsibility of thinking through logistics** of where we can shift paraeducators or other non-classroom-based staff to support rooms that do not have a teacher." - ASA/FRT*

"It's great having another administrative thought partner, whether it's on a staff issue, student issue or just having someone to bounce ideas off of...we were working in isolation so much more [prior to receiving an ASA]." - Principal

Findings

Theme 2: Operational Thought Partner

- An additional administrator provided principals an operational thought partner at the administrative level to serve as a second mind and perspective to think through operational concerns and allow collaborative problem solving. This theme was evident for seven of the eight schools.
- Other principals within the district are a resource for brainstorming and problem solving, but the presence of a second administrator in the building who is familiar with the staff and the students is more beneficial. A second administrator also lessened the need to rely on staff for logistical problem solving.
- There are many logistical components to the day-to-day management of a school building. The support of a thought partner facilitated in-the-moment decision making and diminished the sense of isolation for the principals.

Results: Qualitative

RQ 2: How did the placement of an ASA or fully-released teacher impact teaching and learning?

*"[Having an ASA] has allowed me to shift my focus from someone who runs the building or from being a manager, **to implementing a vision strong in teaching and learning and student performance**." - Principal*

*"Well, I think [the ASA] helped take the management pieces off of my plate, which has **allowed me to be a greater instructional leader**." - Principal*

*"During IEP meetings, [the principal and ASA] are really able to be present in the meeting. In every meeting, I've had an administrator who's actually a part of the conversation and adding their perspective, which is super valuable. **I feel like now they're able to pay more attention, give their input, and have a better discussion when they're not so focused on listening to the walkie**." - Core Team*

*"For the administrative standards, 3 was operations and management and 1 and 2 were vision and instruction. **I spend a lot less time now in 3 and a lot more time in 1 and 2, which I feel is my real role as a principal**." - Principal*

*"**And now, we can get in [the teacher planning meetings] and be a part of those conversations**, and if one of us is caught up with something operational, then the other one can continue to be present.. **I feel I'm more in tuned with what our teachers need, how they're growing, and how our kids are progressing because I'm able to be more actively a part of those discussions than I was before**." – Principal*

Findings

Theme 1: Increased Capacity as Instructional Leader

- Additional administrator support enhanced the ability of principals to operate as an instructional leader and to do so with excellence. Increased capacity as an instructional leader was a consistent theme across all schools.
- The ability of the ASA or FRT to relieve principals of operational strain increased the principals' capacity to focus on developing and implementing vision and fully supporting teaching and learning in the school. Principals were better able to serve as instructional leaders.
- More frequent classroom visits and attendance in team planning or IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) meetings enabled principals to gain a greater awareness of their school's instructional needs. They exhibited an increased presence in meetings physically and mentally. Staff also expressed appreciation of administration's increased presence and contribution in meetings.

Results: Qualitative

RQ 2: How did the placement of an ASA or fully-released teacher impact teaching and learning?

"We meet monthly with the grade-level teams around different data points and data questions, and sometimes those meetings were interrupted because I was pulled for something. But now, if I'm out or [the ASA] is pulled, the other one can jump into those data discussions and still keep that conversation going in more real time." - Principal

*"And so that means every teacher is being seen by an administrator once a week, and **that allows us to provide real time feedback. It allows us to celebrate successes as well as to coach in real time**..." - Principal*

*"We dug deep into the DIBELS data and from that we developed a plan for that particular student. It's really breaking [the data] down, student by student, and **I have the time and the ability to do that and hold the teachers accountable**. They know that in 8 weeks I am gonna meet with them and talk about how that plan is going." - ASA/FRT*

"With an additional person on core team, one of the things we definitely increased in the last two years is our ability to differentiate professional development. At staff learning, we can break into four different learning groups." - Core Team

*"[The ASA] has a lot of knowledge about the math curriculum, and **gives helpful feedback and suggestions to teachers when observing or planning with them**. **And also with reading. That really supports me [in current role]**." - Core Team*

Findings

Theme 2: Shared Instructional Leadership

- An additional administrator allowed principals to divvy up the roles of an instructional leader amongst two individuals, which increased the frequency and quality of instructional support for teachers and staff and improved accountability structures.
- Five of the eight schools specifically discussed the increased frequency of data conversations. The ASAs or FRTs were instrumental in ensuring those conversations were occurring, for extracting and organizing the data into digestible formats for staff, and for promoting follow-through in the execution of instructional plans.
- Having two administrators led to more timely feedback and real-time coaching for teachers. Additionally, whether it was an additional person to enable more breakout learning groups for professional development (PD) or the work to create space in the master schedule to offer PD during the school day, staff PD opportunities also improved.
- The professional expertise of the ASAs and FRTs was highlighted as supporting their roles as instructional leaders.

Results: Qualitative

RQ 2: How did the placement of an ASA or fully-released teacher impact teaching and learning?

"It's wonderful to have two administrators in the building for that additional thought partner and a working-through-problems partner. ***Having two viewpoints when looking at instruction, for how instruction is happening, and where instruction needs to be improved or tweaked gives you an added lens towards what's going on instructionally in the building****. And now that we have a second person, we can do that whereas before we couldn't." - Core Team*

"I'm so thankful for [the ASA] this year. I'm new to this role and it's nice to have a planning partner, an in-house person to talk through how I can coach a teacher. So if you have somebody else to help you think through things or help you brainstorm, they give you a better sense of what you're doing and how to know if you are effective in your role." - Core Team

"For the students who aren't receiving special education but need extra interventions, ***[the ASA] helps us identify who those students are, helps us decide what interventions to use, and help us assess the students****. We look at the interventions, whether they're math, reading, or behavioral, and [the ASA] helps us coordinate a plan." - Core Team*

"[While] here by myself, I would walk out of a classroom and want to talk with someone. I would often have my staff development teacher and my reading specialist, but it's just not the same. And so now, before I have a post observation conference, I am able to run through things with [the ASA] as a thought partner but also I believe that as a leader we build our capacity when we're able to have a conversation with someone and when you're working in isolation, you're not having a conversation with anyone." - Principal

Findings

Theme 3: Instructional Thought Partner

- An additional administrator added a second mind and perspective to think through and process instructional matters and allow the principal and staff to be reflective in their instructional leadership. Instructional thought partner was a theme for seven of the eight schools.
- The ASAs or FRTs provided additional support to the principals for instructional problem solving and identifying ways to improve the schools' instructional program. With the support of a instructional thought partner, principals did not feel as if they were working in isolation.
- An instructional thought partner also benefited the other school-based leaders. The ASAs or FRTs assisted with student diagnostics and intervention planning, as well as supported professional growth and development.

Results: Qualitative

RQ 3: In what ways did the schools' community engagement change since the placement of an ASA or fully-released teacher?

"One day, when [the principal] was walking the building, a parent happened to walk in. It was clear he was upset about something his [child] had done the day before. He said he wanted to find a time to talk, and I was able to say, come on and let's talk now. ***That's because there's the two of us, and one person can be attending to the immediate things in the building, allowing me to address the parent right away... It enabled us to connect with the parent right away and leave him feeling validated and connected to the school****." - ASA/FRT*

"It's relationship building. In the car rider line for drop-off, [the ASA] is able to talk to parents. [The ASA] does the car rider and I do the bus, and sometimes we change. It sounds silly, but it's those informal contacts. Then there are IEP or EMT meetings and sitting in on parent teacher conferences. ***I think it's building those relationships so that [parents] feel more comfortable****." - Principal*

"Often time we are both at [after-school events], so [parents] also see a commitment of the administrative team to their kids and their program, which inherently ***builds greater relational trust****." - Principal*

"I have this rule that I touch base with families anytime I interact with their child... It's always my goal to call families, and I really like for those phone calls to happen before students go home. Just so that when their mom and dad get them off the bus, they can be the one who brings it up, and the kid isn't the one that informs the family of it first. So as a result of having two of us, that goal is easier to attain." - Principal

Findings

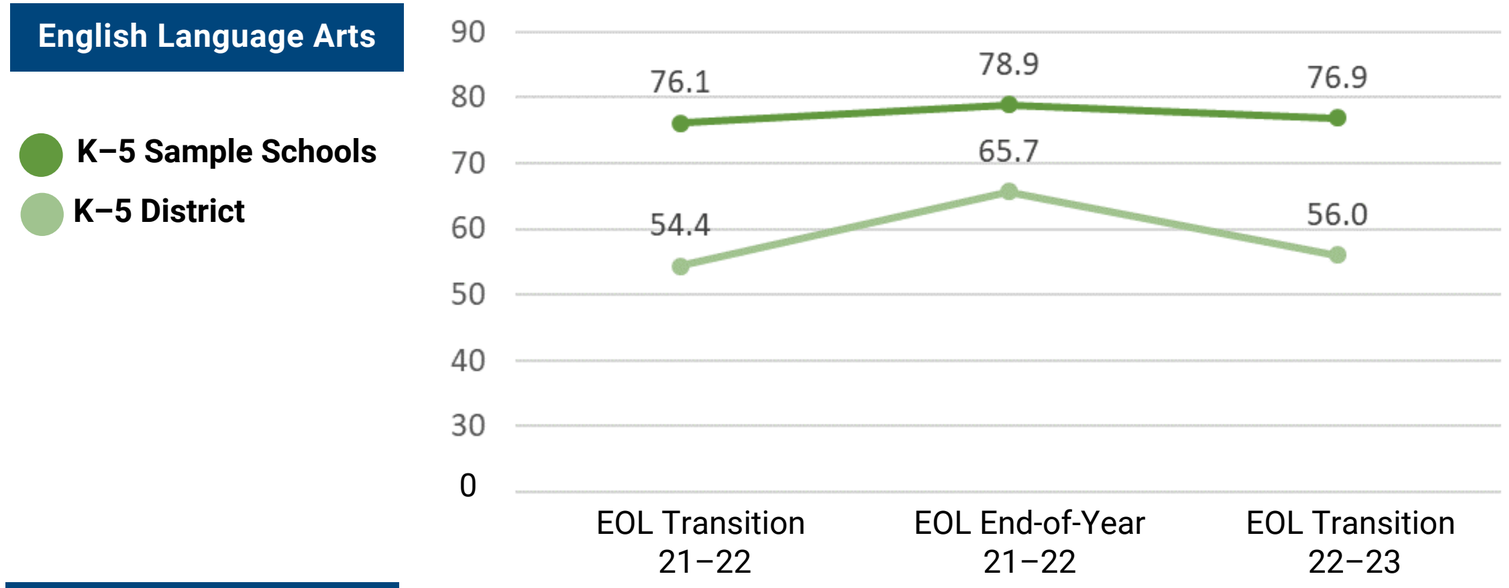
Theme 1: Responsiveness and Accessibility

- Having an additional administrator increased administrator visibility in the school and provided greater opportunities for parent engagement and timely responses to their needs and concerns. Responsiveness and accessibility was a theme evident across all schools.
- In relieving principals of some operational duties, there was more time for them to interact with parents during student arrival and dismissal or during after-school events. With a second administrator, there were more opportunities to build relational trust with parents and to demonstrate the school's commitment to their children.

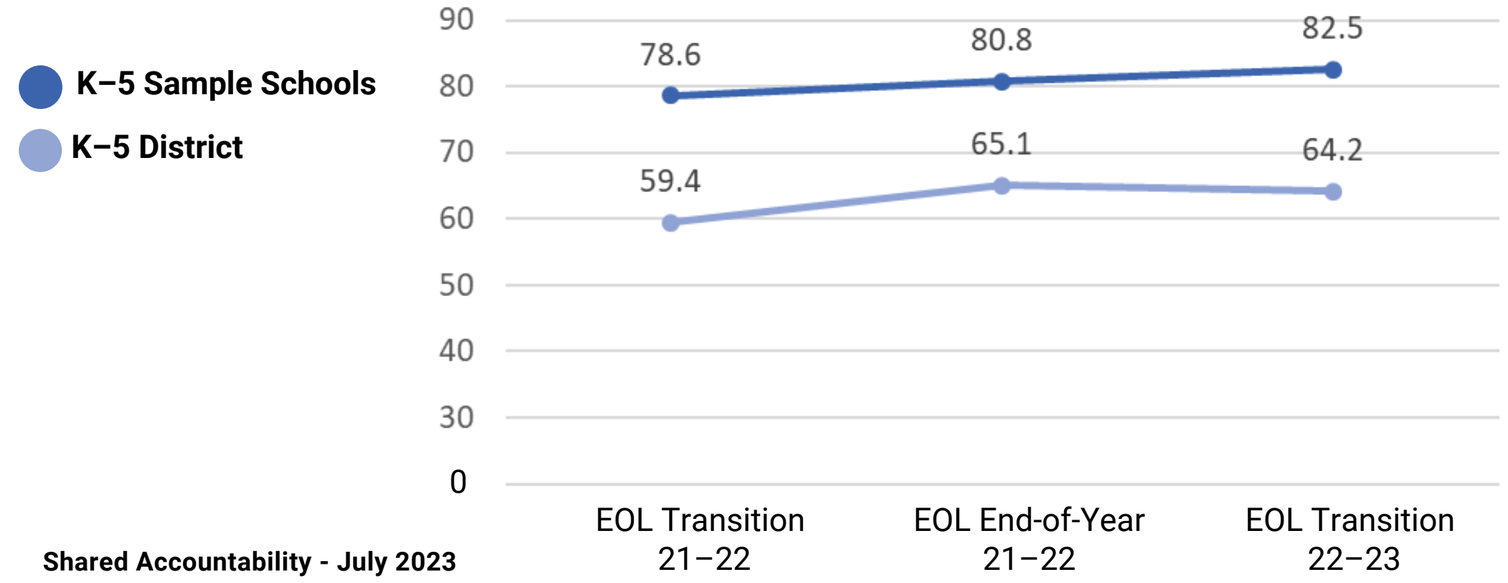
Results

RQ4: What were the school-level academic trends from fall 2021 to fall 2022?

English Language Arts



Mathematics



Findings

- Overall, the eight elementary schools in the sample had higher percentages of Grades K–5 students meeting Evidence-of-Learning (EOL) attainment in literacy and mathematics compared to district percentages.
- The percentage of students in the eight schools meeting Evidence-of-Learning attainment in literacy stayed relatively steady over time, whereas in mathematics, steady increases were evident.
- For comparison, district-wide, the percentage of students demonstrating evidence of learning in ELA and mathematics increased from EOL Transition 2021–2022 to EOL End-of-Year 2021–2022 before decreasing in EOL Transition 2022–2023.

Conclusions

Summary of Key Findings

Operations and Management

For operations and management, two themes emerged from the data: **1) operational continuity and 2) operational thought partner**. The supporting role of an ASA or fully-released teacher helped to improve systems and structures within the school. With the additional support, operations became smoother and more organized. The additional position also provided the principals and staff leaders with someone with whom they could brainstorm and process solutions to operational matters or concerns.

Teaching and Learning

For teaching and learning, three themes emerged from the data: **1) increased capacity as instructional leader, 2) shared instructional leadership, and 3) instructional thought partner**. The supporting role of an ASA or fully-released teacher released some operational and management burden from the principals which allowed them to operate more as an instructional leader. The principals were able to spend more time in the classrooms to observe and obtained more time to provide thoughtful and timely feedback to teachers for the purposes of instructional improvements. With more time to be an instructional leader, the principals also joined planning meetings more often and were fully present—not only physically but also mentally. With the support of an ASA or fully-released teacher, instructional support and accountability improved. Improvements included more frequent data conversations, greater focus on follow-through of instructional plans, and enhanced coaching techniques. In addition to brainstorming operationally, the additional position provided instructional brainstorming and problem solving. The ASA or fully-released teacher as an instructional thought partner was a benefit for the principals and the leadership staff.

Community Engagement

For community engagement, one theme emerged from the data: **responsiveness and accessibility**. In freeing up the principal, there was more time for parent engagement and responding to the needs of the community. The additional administrator provided another person to take parent calls or address in-the-moment needs. There was also greater visibility of administration for students' arrival and dismissal which allowed more parent interactions.

School-level Achievement

Overall, the eight elementary schools in the sample had higher percentages of Grades K–5 students meeting Evidence-of-Learning in literacy and mathematics compared to district percentages. The percentage of students meeting Evidence-of-Learning in literacy and mathematics increased from fall 2022 to spring 2023. Mathematics, however, was the only subject to demonstrate a steady increase from spring 2023 to fall 2023. The percentage of students meeting literacy EOL decreased from the end of the 2023 school year to fall 2023 but not as steeply as it did at the district level.

Conclusions

Limitations

Although it is beneficial to observe achievement trends of schools supported by new personnel allocations, findings must be interpreted with caution. The evaluation design limits the ability to determine a cause-and-effect relationship between the placement of a second school administrator and student performance. With the inability to determine causation, school-level Evidence-of-Learning outcomes in literacy and mathematics cannot be attributed to the placement of an assistant school administrator or fully-released teacher.

Implications

Implications for the district's strategic plan are evident from the findings. Increased academic achievement, or academic excellence, is an anticipated by-product of an increased ability for administrators to operate as instructional leaders, be more intentional and proactive in supporting student learning, promote accountability, and monitor student outcomes. In addition to academic excellence, the district's goal to support the emotional and mental well-being of staff was also aided by the assistant school administrator's or fully-released teacher's ability to lessen the operational strain placed on principals and school-based staff and to minimize their workloads.

There are also implications for the MCPS Administrative and Supervisory Professional Growth System. It is inequitable to evaluate a principal’s quality of performance without ensuring adequate supports are in place to ensure their success. Prior to receiving a second administrator, the principals in the evaluation were burdened by the overwhelming management of day-to-day operations. If 90% of a principal’s day is spent addressing operational and disciplinary concerns, quality performance in other areas of leadership outlined in the professional growth system handbook may be a challenge to attain.

Recommendations

1. Continue to fund additional administrator support for the eight schools in the study.

With evidence of the invaluable support provided to the schools in the evaluation, it should be the district's mission to ensure these schools retain the assistant school administrator or fully-released teacher positions. In addition to supporting principals to meet a high standard of performance as outlined in the MCPS Administrative and Supervisory Professional Growth System, the areas of support evident in the findings align with research highlighting the skills and behaviors associated with principal effectiveness and success such as engaging with teachers to improve instructional practices, cultivating a data-driven instructional program, and practices that promote organizational learning (e.g., Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021). The district should also consider what entails adequate support. Per the findings, adequate support is a second administrator who is fully immersed into the school's culture with a familiarity and understanding of the students, staff, and the overall mission and vision of the school.

2. Reconsider the adopted assistant school administrator model.

The district may wish to consider revamping the assistant school administrator model. Assistant school administrators are 10-month employees, assigned to a school for three years. A 10-month schedule minimizes the amount of time individuals in these positions have to assist with summer planning for the upcoming school-year and for addressing school improvement needs. The district may also consider allowing assistant school administrators to be promoted to an assistant principalship within the same school. This will foster greater continuity and stability for the staff and the community and provide another level of administrator support to principals. The intentional training and development of assistant school administrators into assistant principals may also benefit the district in ensuring a high-quality pool of candidates for the principalship.

3. Reconsider allocation determinants for additional administrator support.

If supplying additional administrators to schools with low student enrollment requires further decision-making, the district should reconsider guidelines for administrator allocations. Enrollment based decisions may not be the best approach for determining the level of need in all schools. Low-enrollment schools are small in numbers but may not be small in need. Some schools house special education programming such as the Comprehensive Autism Preschool Program (CAPP) or the Preschool Education Program (PEP). Furthermore, challenges such as developing and managing IEPs and paraeducator schedules may be comparable across smaller and larger schools.

Evaluation Framework

CONTINUE IMPLEMENTATION

Results from this evaluation support the continued allocation of funding for assistant school administrators or fully-released teachers in the eight schools presented in this report. Overall, the placement of additional administrator support was instrumental to the development and growth of principals and staff members and to supporting the mission and vision of the schools. Several of the behaviors of effective leaders outlined in the MCPS Administrative and Supervisory Professional Growth System, such as protecting the work of teachers and staff members from disruption and using data to monitor student progress and improve instruction were evident improvements since the addition of administrator support. For the eight schools in this evaluation, the placement of a second school administrator or fully-released teacher benefited each school in ways that aligned to all three priority areas of the MCPS Strategic Plan—academic excellence, well-being and family engagement, and professional and operational excellence.

References

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Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research. New York: The Wallace Foundation. Available at http://www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsynthesis.