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Alaska School SPOTLIGHT

Nenana City School District Literacy Initiative

October 2022

With a note from Dr. Pam Kastner

In the winter of 2019 Nenana City School District joined the State of Alaska and other districts around the State in the Comprehensive Literacy State Development award. For those of you who may not know, Nenana is a small village on the road system roughly 50 miles south of Fairbanks, and like many villages struggles with persistent poverty. Nenana is also home to a boarding facility that accepts students from across the State. The CLSD award has helped Nenana focus on growth of student literacy rates in many ways. Perhaps the best way to think about our efforts are through initiatives we've adopted both inside and outside of the classroom.

Outside of the classroom, we have implemented two initiatives to support student literacy rates. The first of these are our "Literacy Cafes." Literacy Cafes are designed to support students and their families and promote reading at home through sharing basic concepts from the science of reading and some helpful reading strategies. Our Literacy Cafes are thematic, and families are able to bring a book home to practice these strategies and concepts. For example, our last Literacy Cafe's theme was camping. Families were taught about the simple view of reading and students received books like *Chirp*, *The Camping Trip*, and *A Camping Spree with Mr. McGee*.

Another initiative NCS is pursuing is a quarterly book distribution. This program provides all students attending Nenana City School with a book of their choice once per quarter, for a total of no less than four books over the course of a school year. The goal of this program is to increase student leisure reading rates. Teachers work with students to help them with their choices based on student interest. Initial self-reported reading rates from secondary students suggests that the program has had a positive impact on student leisure reading, with an increase in students reporting that they've read books they chose during the 1st quarter of the year over the course of the program. With time NCS has improved our program, with this year's elementary students encouraged to share their books through an after-school book club.

Inside the classroom much of our focus has been on Tier 1 classroom literacy interventions. One of the primary components has been a focus on finding and implementing effective curriculum that supports literacy K-12. For Kindergarten through 8th grade NCS decided on Amplify's CKLA and ELA curriculum, which has so far proven to be extreme-



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ly helpful in developing literacy skills, particularly at the K-3 level. NCS has also focused on finding curricula in Science, Social Studies, and Health that will support our literacy initiative. NCS has found a K-6 Science curriculum through HMH that supports our literacy initiative, and a 9-12 Social Studies curriculum that also lends itself to Tier 1 literacy interventions through HMH. Moving forward, NCS's goal is to have K-12 curricula in place for English/Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, and Health that all directly support our identified ELA critical standards.

Universal Tier 1 interventions have also been promoted through consistent professional development. NCS staff have welcomed Lexi and Shelby as part of our in-service schedule at the beginning of the award, and have most recently welcomed Dr. Pam Kastner. All three of these professionals have done wonderful work with our staff, helping to develop a common language and universal acceptance of the science of reading amongst staff. Moreover, all three have shared quality instructional strategies that can be used at various grade levels that promote literacy rates.

Staff have also consistently attended the Alaska RtI/MTSS conference over the last 3 years. Finally, 5 staff members have earned or are currently earning their Master's of Education in Literacy through the American College of Education, which has helped facilitate a level of common expertise regarding literacy development that has directly translated to quality classroom instruction.

Nenana City School has not stopped at universal literacy interventions. NCS has also placed a significant focus on retooling Response to Intervention to better serve students. Staff are provided regular collaborative time at the K-6 level to discuss students of concern, including academic concerns, as well as time during quarterly in-services. Staff use this time to create Student Intervention Documents that lay out the specific skills a student needs intervention in, curriculum to be used, and staff who will carry out the intervention. These documents are shared with parents, and serve as a "landing pad" for data that can be used for possible referral for Special Education if necessary. While many of these interventions take place during the school day, many families have consented to after-school interventions for their students as well. Thus far, the system has seen quite a bit of success, particularly at this elementary level. Last year over 75% of students enrolled in interventions increased benchmark scores in the areas they were receiving interventions.

At the secondary level, NCS is still attempting to craft the most effective system for Response to Intervention while staying sensitive to the needs of our students from our boarding facility. This dynamic adds a layer of complexity to truly craft an excellent system that best serves all students. At this time, NCS has implemented a process to identify students in need of Tier 3 interventions and place them in courses specifically designed to support their skill development in addition to typical math and English courses. This is done through partnerships with secondary staff co-teaching some classes, implementation of intervention curriculum, and regular discussion of formative assessment data as students move through the process. Overall, staff and administration are attempting to truly let student data drive decisions.

All of these efforts seem to have had a positive impact on student literacy rates. For the first time in at least 6 years, Nenana City School students have all met the 3rd grade reading level challenge. The growth gap, that is the gap between the growth rate seen in students attending Nenana City School and the national norm, has shrunk for many grade levels. In short, student growth rates in literacy skills have improved. This is all the more impressive considering the negative impact COVID mitigation efforts had on student learning over the previous two years, particularly at the elementary level.

It is so important to note that none of these gains could have happened without the considerable, tireless efforts of the teaching staff at Nenana City School. The teachers at NCS "bought in" to the max when it came to the idea that all teachers are literacy teachers. There is a consistent, concerted effort from the staff to incorporate best practices into their classrooms with intentionality in order to increase student literacy rates and growth. They put in the work to make connections with students and families to support reading both inside and outside of the classroom. Without them, this improvement would not be possible. Thank you to the teachers and support staff serving the students of Nenana City School. Thank you to the students who are stepping up to the challenge.

Thank you to the families and community for placing an emphasis on education. And thank you for taking your time to read about our efforts. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at your convenience.

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Sometimes life gives us a gift of an experience we will never forget. My time in Nenana City School District was one such gift. In our time learning together we took a deep dive into the underpinnings of the science of reading, and the essential understandings of the interdependency of language, literacy, and practice.

In every encounter, Nenana educators and leaders personified what it means to be a community of practice. At the heart of it all they are pursuing continuous learning in service of their students and their community. Their commitment to their students and one another is unmistakable. This isn't just talking the talk; it's walking the walk and doing it together. Being a small part of their journey was an honor I will always be grateful for.

Dr. Pam Kastner