

Preparing Students for College and Careers: Early Findings from the Implementation of Ready Now Yuma







OVERVIEW

Helios Education Foundation is dedicated to creating opportunities for individuals in Arizona and Florida to succeed in postsecondary education. The Foundation invests its knowledge, expertise, and resources across the education continuum to advance student academic preparedness and foster college-going cultures within communities throughout Arizona and Florida. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that every student graduates from high school ready for college and career, and goes on to complete a high-quality postsecondary certificate or degree.

With increasing demands on the 21st-century workforce, all students should graduate from high school prepared to enter college or start a career. Improving the skills required to succeed in college and a career is a major challenge in the United States. According to the nonprofit organization Achieve (2012), about 11 percent of freshmen entering two- and four-year postsecondary institutions require remediation in reading, 14 percent in writing, and 22 percent in math. Similarly, a recent national readiness report by American College Testing (ACT; 2013) showed that 28 percent of students who took the ACT college entrance examination failed to meet any of ACT's four college readiness benchmarks while only 25 percent of graduates met all four of the benchmarks. These numbers are alarming when connected with 21st-century workforce reports that show technological changes and increased competition require a workforce with strong cognitive skills and problem-solving abilities (Karozy, 2007).

To address these challenges, Helios Education Foundation began to take steps to identify a new comprehensive, high-school reform initiative focused on preparing students for college and careers. Beginning in 2010, Helios Education Foundation awarded the Center for the Future of Arizona a \$450,000 grant to: (a) identify a district to demonstrate a whole-school reform model; and (b) collaborate with that district and Helios Education Foundation to develop an innovative, comprehensive, and sustainable initiative to

prepare all students, especially those from low-income and minority backgrounds, for college and careers by the end of high school. This brief provides a short history of the development of policies and practices around college and career readiness, outlines the research and theory of action behind the Ready Now Yuma initiative, and highlights key findings around implementation roughly halfway through the five-year project.

Over the past several years, education reformers, policy makers, and school leaders have increasingly invested a significant amount of time and energy into preparing all students to be ready for college and career by the end of high school. President Barack Obama appealed to the "nation's governors and school boards, principals and teachers, businesses and non-profits, and parents and students, to set and enforce rigorous and challenging standards and assessments" (Office of the Press Secretary, 2009). The following year, the U.S. Department of Education heeded this call by releasing A Blueprint for Reform, a document that described the Department's approach to reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Arguing that the current academic standards in the United States did not adequately prepare students for success after high school, the Department called for more rigorous academic standards in English

Language Arts and mathematics, the development of assessments aligned with college and career readiness standards, efforts to promote more rigorous classroom instruction through the adoption of evidence-based instructional models, and improved professional development (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Responding to both the Department's call and educational leaders around the country, most states have adopted college and career readiness standards and are developing assessments aligned to these standards. As of 2015, 43 states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English Language Arts and mathematics for kindergarten through 12th grade ("Common Core State Standards Initiative", 2013). Along with the standards, a majority of states administered assessments aligned to college and career readiness standards in the 2014–2015 school year (Education Commission of the States, 2014). Beyond the adoption of these more rigorous standards and assessments, 19 states and the District of Columbia have developed college preparatory curriculums designed to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for college and career readiness. This curriculum requirement typically includes four years of English and mathematics and three or more years of science and social studies (Achieve, 2013).

Despite these efforts, research indicates that adopting new standards, assessments, and curriculum may not be sufficient to markedly improve student outcomes. Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, and Lee (2009) studied the effects of requiring all ninth-grade students to take English I and Algebra I in a mandated college-preparatory curriculum in Chicago. Overall, the researchers found that scores in mathematics and English were unaffected by the increase in college-preparatory coursework. More importantly, this same study found that students with the weakest skills were more likely to fail the newly required courses. Similarly, a more recent study in Illinois examined the impact of increasing the number of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses for all high school students and showed no significant gains in student achievement in either mathematics or science (Buddin & Croft, 2014). These studies and others like them suggest that students lack the necessary prerequisite skills to succeed in challenging classes designed to improve college and career readiness.

At the same time, the success of more rigorous academic standards and curricula requires that higher education institutions, states, districts, and schools provide the

necessary training for teachers to implement the reforms. According to a report issued by Education First and the EPE Research Center (2013), a majority of the states implementing college and career readiness standards have taken steps to develop professional development training, curriculum guides or instructional materials, and teacher evaluation systems aligned to the standards. Despite these efforts, a survey conducted by the Education Week Research Center (2013) found that more than half of the teachers in the 2013–2014 school year believed they were inadequately prepared to teach the Common Core. Furthermore, nearly 60 percent of the teachers that responded to the survey reported that they were provided with only five days of training or less.

Helping teachers understand the changes required by college and career readiness standards to make meaningful change will require systemic changes to professional development. Schools will need to provide opportunities for teachers to learn or understand policy messages and then discuss the details about implementation of those policies with their colleagues (Coburn, 2001). For example, in their research on California mathematics reforms, Cohen and Hill (2001) found that teacher reports of practices were better aligned with reformer goals when they were given the opportunity to study and learn the new curriculum as well as focus on student work on the new state assessments.

A New Approach to Preparing Students for College and Careers: Ready Now Yuma

Yuma Union High School District (YUHSD) in Yuma, Arizona, and Helios Education Foundation used knowledge from educational research to build an innovative initiative to prepare all students in the district for college and career. This means going beyond just the adoption of a new curriculum by adding the necessary teacher and student support structures to make it successful. Organized heavily around two lines of research, change theory and professional learning communities (PLCs), the design of the Ready Now Yuma initiative seeks to provide all students with a rigorous, high-expectations curriculum while simultaneously creating a collaborative educational culture aimed at building capacity for continuous improvement.¹ The theory of action underlying this change is that providing learning communities within the schools and across the district will lead to increased student achievement. This Education Brief discusses the design of the Ready Now Yuma initiative and the theory

behind it, examines accomplishments and lessons learned around implementation, and outlines potential influences on policy and practice.

To better inform state, district, and local schools on successful approaches to the implementation of systemic reform efforts around college and career readiness standards, Helios Education Foundation commissioned both an external evaluation and a smaller scale internal evaluation of the work taking place in Yuma, Arizona. The lessons for policymakers and school leaders contained in this brief come from the interim evaluation findings two and a half years into a five-year grant. Annual formative evaluations will continue until the release of the final evaluation in 2017.

This brief summarizes the early evaluation findings around the following three research questions:

1. What are the core components of the Ready Now Yuma initiative, and what is its underlying theory of action?
2. What are the district's biggest achievements and how has the district learned from and improved upon the implementation work?
3. How has the implementation of the Ready Now Yuma initiative influenced school and district culture?

What Are the Core Components of the Ready Now Yuma Initiative, and What Is Its Underlying Theory of Action?

YUHSD is located in a small Arizona city on the border of California and Mexico. The district has five comprehensive high schools and one alternative high school and serves three K-8 partner districts and two private schools. Of the roughly 11,000 students, 80 percent are Hispanic, 16 percent are Caucasian, 2 percent are African American, and another 2 percent are Native American or Asian. Just over 68 percent of the students are classified as receiving free and reduced lunch. In addition, the district as a whole

has a 30 percent student mobility rate, meaning that roughly one third of the students change schools either within or outside of the district ("Yuma Union High School District Profile", 2014). In the 2011-2012 academic year, YUHSD and Helios Education Foundation jointly began work on developing Ready Now Yuma. According to YUHSD Superintendent Toni Badone, the main goal of the work was to prepare all Yuma students for college and career, while at the same time developing the next generation of workers and leaders to continue the economic growth and development of the city of Yuma.

YUHSD's approach to preparing all students for college and career calls for a systemic change in the way that districts and schools operate. Rather than focusing the change on what Fullan (2011) called the "wrong drivers" (p. 3) or policies, the Ready Now Yuma initiative seeks to achieve whole-system reform by concentrating its efforts on capacity building, collaborative work, instruction, and systemness (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Under this theory, a primary goal of the initiative is to change the culture of the schools to reflect a high-expectations mentality for all students. These expectations are encapsulated in the goals of the district, which include having every YUHSD student graduate and be prepared to succeed in college and career, embedding a college-going culture within each school, and increasing the number of students entering and succeeding in postsecondary education.

To create the environment needed to support these goals, district leadership identified four foundational components to guide systemic reform. As Figure 1 shows, the first component requires the establishment of a rigorous curriculum. In particular, this includes a guaranteed, unit-by-unit curriculum offered to all students, regardless of past performance. The second component represents a highly skilled instructional staff. This includes teachers, counselors, leadership, and support staff, all of whom share a common vision and goals. The third component focuses on academic support, which includes the strategies and support structures put in place to help students who might be struggling with the curriculum or need extra time to help them master the content. The fourth component emphasizes the provision of multiple pathways to postsecondary education.

¹See Michael Fullan for more information on change theory and Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Tom Many for more information on professional learning communities.

Figure 1

Foundational components of change under the Ready Now Yuma initiative



All Students Prepared for College and Career

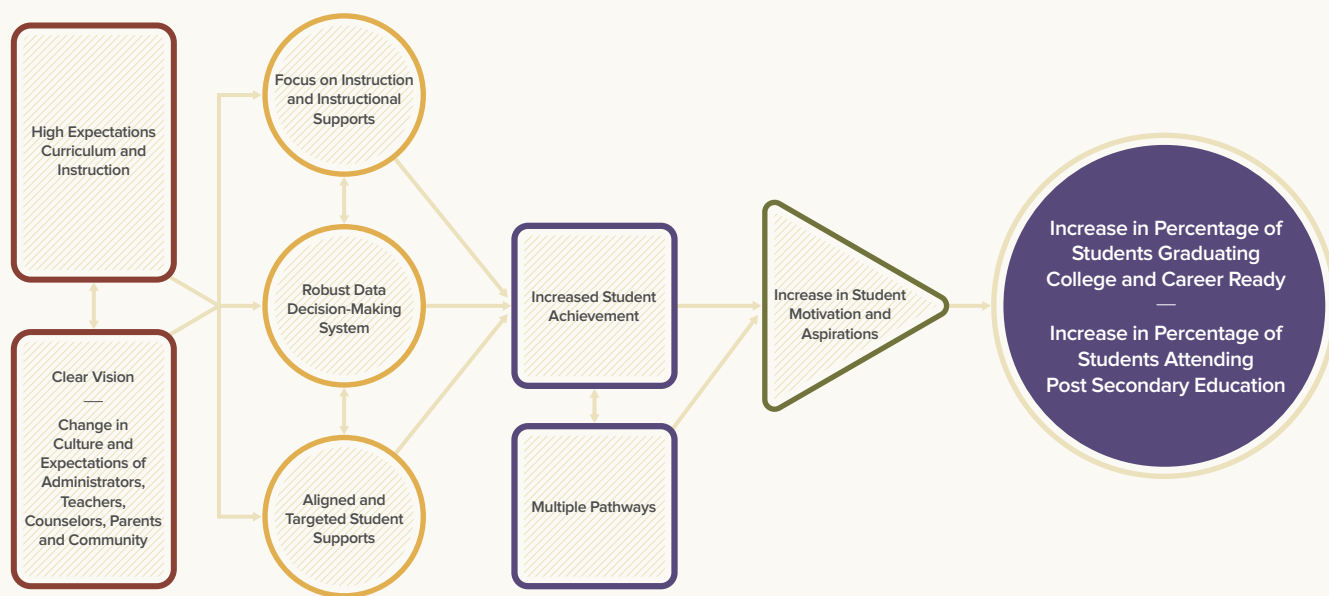
To support the changes required by the Ready Now Yuma initiative, leadership from YUHSD and representatives from Helios Education Foundation identified four *power objectives*, to guide system reform. The first power objective combined elements of the first two components to emphasize a focus on curriculum, assessment, and instructional practices and the support needed to foster a collaborative environment. For example, the first power objective included creating student checkpoints or benchmarks to gauge student mastery of material, providing teachers with the time and opportunity for collaboration (e.g., within subject-specific content areas or in cross-district collaboration) and providing mentor teachers or coaching support to teachers. The second power objective focused on data and how it can be used to drive instructional practice to ensure student learning. This was an important addition to the Ready Now Yuma plan, as it was through data that district leaders and Helios staff believed they could make informed decisions on what was working and what needed to be modified to increase success. The third power objective concentrated on fostering communication and creating a shared vision of college and career expectations. This objective focused on creating a high-expectations culture for all schools. Finally, the fourth power objective emphasized creating systemic and targeted interventions designed to support struggling students.

These four power objectives are complex and interrelated. For example, the identification of targeted interventions for students (i.e., the fourth power objective) requires the district to have an effective data decision-making system in place (i.e., the second power objective) and opportunities for teachers to collaborate on the best approaches to take (i.e., the first power objective). In order to provide a better understanding of the steps the district took to implement each of these changes, the Ready Now Yuma theory of action is presented in Figure 2. This figure includes a brief description of each element.

Furthest to the left in Figure 2 are the two foundational pieces of the initiative, including: (a) changing the culture and expectations for all members of the community; and (b) adopting and implementing a high-expectations curriculum for all students. Changing the culture required the district to create a clear vision of high expectations for both staff and students. In addition to conveying this message to students and staff, district and school leadership met with the larger community (e.g., business leaders, local politicians, and parents) to underscore the importance of preparing all students for college and career. They emphasized the benefit a program like this could have for the economic health of the community. To reinforce this change in culture, district and school

Figure 2

Ready Now Yuma theory of action



leaders adopted a high-expectations curriculum for nearly all of its 11,000 students. Knowing that the curriculum was a key element of its plan, district leaders adopted the Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) curriculum from Cambridge International Examinations.² Adopting IGCSE as the core curriculum meant the introduction of IGCSE courses in English, mathematics, science, social sciences, and the arts for all ninth- and 10th-grade students. The adoption of the Cambridge curriculum was important to district leadership because Cambridge had already begun taking steps to align its English and mathematics courses with Arizona's College and Career Ready Standards and the Common Core State Standards.

To the right of the foundational pieces, Figure 2 presents an intersection of the curriculum with instructional support, robust data decision-making, and targeted support. In practice, providing instructional support and data decision-making forms the basis of component 2 (see Figure 1). To promote effective instruction, district leaders adopted a multilayered approach to improving instructional practice. First, district leaders required

all new and continuing teachers to attend multiple training sessions provided by Cambridge, including three days of face-to-face training, best practices training, and coursework accreditation. Second, following aligned professional development opportunities, the district developed a district-wide common curriculum by organizing summer planning sessions followed by subject-specific collaborative learning sessions throughout the academic year. Third, to assist both teachers and departments, the district embedded instructional, curricular, and data coaches in each high school. Fourth, to promote collaborative learning, the district and schools implemented PLCs on each campus. As previously mentioned, the establishment of PLCs was central to the district's plan of improving instruction and student learning. The PLC structure in Yuma served as the collaborative hub for discussions on curriculum, assessment, and instructional practice.

²Cambridge IGCSE offers a diverse curriculum for students (typically for 14-, 15-, and 16-year-olds). Along with the curriculum, Cambridge IGCSE end-of-course examinations are used worldwide as qualification examinations for course progression.

As displayed by Figure 2, a focus on instruction intersects with a robust data decision-making system, which also intersects with targeted student support. This is because under the Ready Now Yuma design, the data decision-making process drives decisions on how to change and modify instruction while also driving the instructional support that both the district and teachers provide to students. For example, the biology department could use assessment data to monitor how well students have mastered curricular content around cell functions or energy transfer. As a department, the teachers could then use this information to identify which instructional practices were more effective or to pinpoint common misunderstandings among students. Furthermore, the biology department could identify which students were struggling with the curriculum and the best ways to provide targeted support for them.

The theory of action envisions that when these power objectives are successfully put into place, student achievement and mastery of content will increase. When combined with the multiple pathways that the district offers in its upper grades (e.g., career and technical education pathways, dual enrollment, early graduation, Cambridge A and AS courses, and AP courses), the theory holds the expectation of an increase in student motivation and aspiration. As a result, there would be an increase in the percentage of students graduating from high school ready for college and careers along with an increase in the percentage of students attending postsecondary education.

The process of implementing such a comprehensive reform takes time and commitment from all stakeholders involved. To support the successful implementation of the initiative, YUHSD and Helios Education Foundation developed a five-year plan to design, develop, and implement the key power objectives. The aim of the next two sections is to understand how implementation has influenced school and district culture and to discuss early lessons learned from implementing the initiative. Overall impacts (e.g., increases in achievement and postsecondary enrollment) would be premature at this time, as the first cohort of students to move through the initiative are currently juniors.

What Have Been the Most Significant Accomplishments and Major Lessons Learned During the Implementation of Ready Now Yuma?

The Ready Now Yuma initiative is aimed at improving the high school system through continuous learning. Given the

nature of the program, district leadership has been free to modify and restructure elements of the initiative based on guidance from Helios Education Foundation and formative feedback from external evaluators. As a result of this feedback, YUHSD has identified a number of achievements and lessons learned since the first year of implementation (i.e., 2012–2013).

Systemic Accomplishments. Across YUHSD, there is a consensus that the two major achievements have been the installation of a high-expectations curriculum and the restructuring of the master schedule to provide for collaborative learning communities, both within the schools and across the district.

Installation of a high-expectations curriculum. Perhaps the greatest achievement under Ready Now Yuma has been the success the district has had in installing a high-expectations curriculum for nearly all of its students. Since the 2012–2013 school year, the district has enrolled nearly 94 percent, or approximately 11,000, of its students in Cambridge IGCSE secondary courses. Figure 3 illustrates the foundational curriculum to which all ninth- and 10th-grade YUHSD students are exposed, with the exception of those designated as structured English immersion (SEI) under Arizona law and a small population of students with disabilities. As Figure 3 shows, the freshman core courses include IGCSE English First Language, IGCSE Mathematics, IGCSE World History, and either IGCSE Biology or IGCSE Chemistry. Sophomore core courses include IGCSE English Literature, a continuation of IGCSE Mathematics, IGCSE American History, and either IGCSE Chemistry, IGCSE Physics, or Cambridge AS Environmental Science.

Beginning in the pre-implementation year (i.e., 2011–2012), the schools and the district made the development of an aligned curriculum a priority. As a first step, district leadership sent all teachers to course-specific training, which included three days of face-to-face training, best practices training, and coursework accreditation which verified that teachers could accurately assess Cambridge coursework. Next, district leadership organized a district-wide collaborative planning session during the summer of 2012 for teachers from each of the participating schools. The work sessions were organized by content area and subject and were guided by two goals. The first goal was that teachers would use the instructional materials from Cambridge (e.g., syllabus and prior assessments)

Core curriculum for ninth- and 10th-grade students in YUHSD

Freshmen Core Courses	Sophomore Core Courses
IGCSE English First Language	IGCSE English Literature
IGCSE Mathematics	IGCSE Mathematics
IGCSE World History	IGCSE U.S./American History
IGCSE Biology or IGCSE Chemistry	IGCSE Biology, IGCSE Chemistry or Cambridge AS Environmental Science

to develop a common scope and sequence or pacing guide. District leadership believed it was important to have a structured curriculum across the district due to the high student mobility rate within the district. The second goal for the collaborative planning sessions was to have teachers from the various subject areas identify and develop inquiry-based instructional practices and strategies aimed at increasing student proficiency throughout each course.

District leadership continues to make further development and refinement of the curriculum a primary objective. With the understanding that overall growth can only develop through continuous improvement, the district continues to build in cross-district, collaborative sessions throughout the academic year. Similar to the early planning session, current cross-district, collaborative sessions aim to improve the alignment of the curriculum with Arizona College and Career Readiness Standards while identifying more effective strategies to promote student growth.

Installation of professional learning communities.

The establishment of PLCs has always been and continues to be central to YUHSD's approach to improving instruction and ultimately preparing students for college and career. According to DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010), PLCs are "educators committed to working collaboratively

in an ongoing process of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 11). To guide their work, DuFour and Fullan (2013) organized PLC operation around four critical questions:

1. What is it we want our students to learn? What knowledge, skills, and dispositions do we expect them to acquire as a result of this course, grade level, and unit of instruction?
2. How will we know if every student is learning each of the skills, concepts, and dispositions we have deemed most essential?
3. How will we respond when some of our students do not learn? What process will we put in place to ensure students receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, precise, diagnostic, directive, and systematic?
4. How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

A major task that district and school leadership have taken on during implementation is to find a way to systemize DuFour's theory of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2010) along several dimensions: (a) within specific subject areas; (b) within the schools; and (c) across the district. To implement this, the district and schools reorganized the master schedule.

Specifically, district leadership and school principals reserved 90 minutes during the instructional week for teachers to meet in subject-specific PLCs. The only requirement during these sessions was that teachers work to address at least one or more of the guiding questions previously outlined. Along with the weekly PLC time, district leadership organized cross-district collaboration for each of the subject areas. Like the PLCs themselves, cross-district collaboration was also organized around the four guiding questions. While the school-level PLCs focus on improving instruction and student learning at the school level, cross-district collaborations aim to make sure that the curriculum is aligned across the district, while identifying promising instructional practices and strategies (e.g., specific lessons around content) that can lead to overall student improvement across the district.

Both quantitative and qualitative research across the high schools and with district leadership indicated that the PLCs were positively influencing the schools and teaching environment. Data from semi-structured interviews with the district superintendent, associate superintendents, and the Ready Now Yuma director showed a strong belief that PLCs were improving instructional practice. In particular, district leadership identified positive changes that they observed in instructional practice. With the implementation of Cambridge, district leaders found classrooms they observed to be more engaged in inquiry-based learning and teachers guiding instruction with questions that demanded higher cognitive demand. Similarly, principals also reported that the teacher evaluation system revealed an increase in the effectiveness of their teachers. Furthermore, teachers also reported positive influences of the PLCs on collaboration, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Lessons Learned

Despite the level of success that administrators and teachers reported around the implementation of the Cambridge curriculum and PLCs, a number of lessons have been learned about how policymakers and practitioners can improve future implementation.

Protecting PLC collaborative meeting times. In the school setting, there are a myriad of distractions that can undermine the success of PLCs. One major issue that school leadership and teachers identified early on was that PLC time was often being used for purposes other than for what it was established. For example, district leadership would schedule professional development during PLC time, school principals would use PLC time to carry out

staff meetings, and teachers would use PLC time to grade homework or for other administrative tasks. As a result, administrators and teachers found that the amount of time teachers were spending working as a PLC (as defined by the description) could vary from as high as 90 minutes a week to as low as zero minutes a week.

To combat this challenge, both district-level administrators and school principals reported that they have sought alternative scheduling to reduce the amount of time taken away from PLCs. In two of the schools, principals reported that, when possible, they try to schedule subject-area prep hours during the same time of the day. In other cases, principals have sought to protect a minimum of 60 minutes of scheduled PLC time each week, balancing the other 30 minutes with district and school priorities. While important, none of these strategies fully addresses the need that administrators and teachers have expressed for completely protecting time for PLCs to investigate instruction. Additionally, they also have had the unintended consequences of undoing district strategies on cross-curricular planning. Moving forward, this is a lesson that both leadership and the teaching staff must figure out. Nevertheless, both teachers and administrators agree that protecting the time of communities to meet is key to their effectiveness.

Balancing the loose-tight problem of PLC structure.

One of the biggest challenges with learning communities is that there is no one correct formula for how PLCs should be implemented in schools. According to DuFour and Fullan (2013), the dilemma of being loose or tight presents a constant challenge to education reformers trying to implement systemic change. In Yuma, the concept of being too loose or too tight emerged around the work of PLCs. In some schools, the principals opted for more structure around the PLC. This structure included a formal agenda with a section dedicated to each of the four guiding questions. Each PLC would then create summations of each PLC and then share these summaries with school administration. In contrast, other schools took what Fullan called the *laissez-faire* approach. In these instances, school leadership provided the time to meet in PLCs but left the use of this time up to its members.

During the first and second year of implementation (i.e., 2011–2012 and 2012–2013), both school and district leadership reported they were observing drastic differences in the ways that PLCs were operating across and within

the schools. To counter this challenge, district leadership took a two-pronged approach. First, district and school leadership improved their understanding of how PLCs can operate more efficiently. This was accomplished through dedicated leadership and professional development that not only taught school leaders best practices in implementing PLCs but also helped them identify non-negotiables for PLCs (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Second, based on lessons learned from leadership training, the Ready Now Yuma director designed and implemented a series of professional development trainings that: (a) reinforced the district's vision of using PLCs to improve instruction and student learning, and (b) provided the learning communities with the tools and training they needed to develop systemic PLCs. Finally, more recently, the district has begun to take steps to organize and make plans to use the data so that teachers can use them to make data-based decisions.

According to the YUHSD superintendent, the lesson on targeted professional development is the biggest lesson learned under Ready Now Yuma. She reasoned that without specific professional training for leadership and teachers, it would be next to impossible to get them to do the work that was expected of them. As a result, the district has taken a proactive approach to providing the necessary training to its teachers to effect change. At the same time, district leaders, such as the Ready Now Yuma director, have turned to research on the types of professional development that leads to greater change. For this reason, the district provides little “sit and get” training and instead provides more opportunities for teachers to unpack the learning within a collaborative environment.

Providing adequate time to developing the curriculum and assessments. Another major lesson learned, according to both administrators and teachers, was that districts and schools must provide enough time for teachers not only to unpack the curriculum but also to design new pacing guides and formative and summative assessments. Prior to the first year of implementation, district staff were proactive in this approach. During the 2011–2012 school year, the district sent teachers to Cambridge professional development, while in the summer of 2012 the district organized paid planning time for each subject area. According to teachers, this type of opportunity was important for them to gauge

changes in the content of their courses and address how the new college and career readiness standards impacted the way they delivered instruction.

Despite those efforts, both teachers and administrators indicated that the evolution of the curriculum takes much more time than initial planning. As a result, the district has continued to provide time for curricular development during the summer. Following the initial planning year in 2011–2012, the district set aside time for subject areas to develop unit assessments and summative assessments that are aligned to the curriculum. In addition, the district also set aside planning time both in the summer and within the school year for the development of on-time, proficiency-based remediation tools. Although costly in terms of expenditures, both the superintendent and Ready Now Yuma director indicated that they would have made only a fraction of the progress on the curriculum without this dedicated planning. As noted by the Ready Now Yuma director, who is also a former teacher in the district:

“There isn’t enough time to plan and develop the curriculum during the instructional week when my real focus is on how to make sure my students learn this material and what do I do to support those who don’t learn it the first time.”

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, district leadership also expressed lessons learned about the use of data and the struggle to identify targeted and systemic support. At the same time, however, district leadership also reiterated that Ready Now Yuma is designed to be a system of continuous improvement. Because of this design, they argued that they have learned there is a natural progression in the way the work rolls out. In the initial years of the initiative, the district invested heavily in curriculum redesign and the installation of PLCs. Moving forward, the district aims to continue to improve upon those areas, provide teachers with the necessary training and tools to make data-based decisions in a more systematic fashion, and give teachers the resources to provide students with targeted support.

How Has Implementation of the Ready Now Yuma Initiative Influenced School and District Culture?

Returning to the graphical depiction of the district's theory of action (see Figure 2), the reader is reminded that one of the foundational pieces for successful implementation of the Ready Now Yuma initiative required the district to create a clear vision that supports a high-expectations culture. Thus far, research collected from schools and the district office has shown that the reform has positively influenced the environments in which it has operated.

Administration. At the administrative level, the reform efforts of the Ready Now Yuma initiative have been popular with district leadership and school principals. In semi-structured interviews, principals reported that the implementation of the initiative has created a more focused effort on specific elements of school improvement. For example, instead of each school taking its own approach to curricular redesign or student support, each school must work collaboratively to identify the practices and strategies it believes will be most effective. Principals also indicated that their own learning and effectiveness increased with collaboration. Specifically, principals reported that they used bimonthly principal PLC meetings to identify best practices they could then take back to their respective school. As noted by one principal, the "effectiveness of these types of meetings was not always as useful when our curriculums were unaligned and when we were using different assessments."

Teachers. Initially, not all teachers agreed with the decision to provide all students with Cambridge's rigorous curriculum. Some teachers reported that their students were not prepared for the level of inquiry demanded by Cambridge, while others believed that putting all students into the Cambridge curriculum would lead to higher failure rates or the "dumbing down" of the curriculum. However, nearly two years later, data from teacher interviews and teacher surveys indicate a much different picture. Across the five comprehensive high schools, teacher survey data showed that the majority of teachers supported the Cambridge curriculum and believed they were capable of delivering the curriculum to all students. This trend was confirmed in follow-up interviews with instructional leaders across the schools in the spring of 2014. During these interviews, teachers identified two factors that may be responsible for the increase in the positive reports of Cambridge: (a) the value teachers have placed on the Cambridge curriculum has increased over time; and (b) those teachers who do not value the Cambridge curriculum have moved on to other opportunities.

Along with improved perceptions about the Cambridge curriculum, teachers also reported positive influences of the PLCs on collaboration and instructional practices. During the pre-implementation year, teachers' reports on collaboration varied across the schools. In one school, teachers identified a higher level of collaboration because its leadership had implemented a variation of PLCs before the initiative began, while in other schools, teachers' reports on collaboration varied by department or course. After the first full year of implementation, teachers' overall reports of collaboration were high. Across the schools, teacher survey data showed that teachers often collaborated with others on the curriculum, working together on aspects such as unit and lesson plans. At the same time, teachers indicated that under Ready Now Yuma, they often spend a lot of time on instructional practices and strategies to deliver instruction.

Despite the positive reports of collaboration across the schools, follow-up interviews with teachers in the spring of 2014 showed room for growth. In particular, both administrators and teachers reported that while the PLC model has led to an increase in the collaborative effort, they continue to struggle with DuFour and Fullan's (2013) third essential question: "How will we respond when some of our students do not learn?" Finding the right approach to student support has been a major challenge for administrative leadership and the teachers. Many students struggle with content for a multitude of reasons; therefore, the district is taking steps to address this issue by providing teachers with targeted professional development.

Students. Research across the high schools showed that Ready Now Yuma was positively influencing student behavior. Interviews with principals and district leadership revealed that all of the schools have seen a steady decline in the number of referrals and the amount of suspensions given to students. Table 1 illustrates student suspensions by school along with the total number of suspensions for the district between 2010 (preplanning year) and 2014. As Table 1 shows, there has been a steady decline in suspensions for the district as a whole from the preplanning year to 2014, for a total reduction of about 33 percent. District leadership attributes this reduction in behavior issues to the rigorous curriculum. Students are more involved and have more opportunities for self-exploration, which has increased their motivation to learn and work harder in the classroom.

TABLE 1

Student Suspensions by School and Total for Yuma Union High School District

High School	2010–2011	2011–2012	2012–2013	2013–2014
A	471	394	433	186
B	358	438	338	203
C	360	500	300	351
D	974	918	1,004	787
E	35	110	152	84
F	512	230	152	147
Total	2,710	2,590	2,379	1,758

At the same time, student surveys and focus group data indicate that most students have high perceptions of the rigorous demand or the challenge of their work. In particular, in focus groups or whole-class discussions, students were quick to report that the Cambridge curriculum was unlike most of their other experiences in school. Under Cambridge, students reported that much of the learning was through self-direction and guidance from the teacher as a facilitator. Students reported that their teachers rarely gave a full lecture or asked them to memorize facts or dates; instead, teachers expected their students to provide justifications for their answers and use evidence to support their claims.

Implications for State and Federal Policy

The design and early findings of the Ready Now Yuma initiative have important implications for policy makers looking to improve instructional practice and enhance student learning in high school. As with Yuma, one of the biggest challenges facing state districts and schools is how to prepare instructors to teach standards that are substantially different from prior standards, both in the degree of the content covered (i.e., depth vs. breadth) and in cognitive demand. The Ready Now Yuma initiative addresses this challenge by integrating a well-specified curriculum provider (i.e., Cambridge International Examinations) with organized learning communities.

Although the implementation of Ready Now Yuma is still in its beginning stages, early findings from the study can serve to inform practitioners and policy makers as to the benefits and challenges associated with implementing such a program. It is still too early, however, to measure any sustained changes in student achievement or instructional practices (other than perception data). Nevertheless, our findings do suggest that the implementation of Ready Now Yuma is positively influencing the culture and capacity of education across the district.

Developing a culture of high expectations. Overall, the Ready Now Yuma initiative has improved the perceptions of what students can learn and do. One likely reason for this change is that YUHSD and Helios Education Foundation have been strategic about advocating for Ready Now Yuma. After developing a clear vision and goals, one of the first steps that district leaders and Helios staff took was to meet with influential stakeholders whose buy-in was going to be necessary to move forward with the plan. This included having meetings and conversations with local politicians, community leaders, school board members, and local business leaders. Nearly everyone within these groups supported the plan, and, as a result, YUHSD has not experienced backlash or challenges

from the community. Another reason for the success in establishing a high-expectations culture stems from the district requiring the Cambridge IGCSE curriculum for all ninth- and 10th-grade students. As one principal noted, this element of the design really hammered home the idea that “high expectations were the new ‘business as usual.’” Instead of a program for some schools, some students, or some teachers, Ready Now Yuma is for all students. This is important for policy makers and practitioners because the adoption of a school-wide curriculum was one of the reasons that teachers reported supporting the idea, even though they knew it would be challenging.

Building the capacity of high schools to improve instruction requires specification. Early research across the six high schools showed that both administrators and teachers believed they were increasing the capacity of schools to improve instruction through PLCs.

Administrators indicated that they were observing more rigorous instruction. Teachers reported high levels of collaboration and a greater focus on problems of instructional practice. Overall, they found the work challenging. Despite these reports, both administrators and teachers reported variation in how often the PLCs were able to meet formally and in how focused the PLCs were on problems of practice.

This raises an important point. When elements of a program or process have weak specifications, policymakers should not expect substantial improvements. Getting PLCs organizationally in place is an important first step; however, real improvement in practice and achievement will require states and districts to develop more organized structures and processes that promote teacher learning. In the case of Yuma, this has meant providing more specification and guidance in how to run PLCs.

CONCLUSION

Although the Ready Now Yuma initiative has not been implemented for a sufficient period of time to demonstrate measurable and sustained improvements in student achievement, our research clearly shows a change in culture and positive influence on collaboration in YUHSD. Additionally, our research shows that, at least organizationally, the district has successfully been able to implement a high-expectations curriculum for nearly all of its students. Moving forward, research suggests that policies around PLCs will require not only protected time in order for teachers to engage in instructional improvement, but also increased specificity in how to manage and operate them. This will be especially important as the district builds in more professional development around data decision-making and support for struggling students.

To guide our continued exploration around Ready Now Yuma, Helios Education Foundation has commissioned a three-year evaluation from the American Institutes of Research and Massell Education Consulting. The goal of this work is to use evaluation to further guide the development of the initiative as well as to examine how it is impacting Ready Now Yuma’s goals.

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