



North East Florida Educational Consortium Superintendent Research Project - Yielding Results!

Using a service agency is an excellent way to deliver services to schools in an economic and efficient fashion. It has other benefits as well, one of which is joining districts with similar needs together.

About 10 years ago, the North East Florida Educational Consortium began a project to unite its 15 rural districts behind a single goal each year. It is called the Superintendent Research Project. Each year the superintendents vote on a topic that they research, then develop a clear plan of action, then implement that plan. And it worked.

The projects were run by the consortium's Board of Directors Leadership Development Program. Mark Bracewell is the manager of the leadership program for the NEFEC. He said that in the first couple of years, the projects lasted one year each and mostly involved legislative initiatives. The superintendents would pool their resources to lobby for a specific goal or specific funding.

Several years ago, it became plain to the group that Superintendent Research Project could be expanded to tackle bigger issues and last longer than one year. The group's first multi-year project involved STEM. They wanted to find where their STEM education was weakest, then they wanted to make a plan to address that problem, and track the progress.

Their problem became evident quickly: After years of focusing on reading and writing in early elementary, instruction time had been stolen from science and social studies. To no one's surprise, Florida's first measurement of 5th-grade science ability showed a massive gap between where students should be and where they actually were.

Now that they had their target - early elementary science - the superintendents used a variety of methods to increase science education, each specific to their districts. Some set up professional learning communities, others used project-based learning and others brought in teaching specialists. Bracewell said the results were nearly immediate: Test scores shot up right away and the practices implemented during this Superintendent Research Project are in play today.

Last year, the Board of Directors decided to try a new multi-year project. They wanted to examine how best to manage their employees. Bracewell said the topic is important for several reasons: The NEFEC has 15 rural districts and attracting the best employees, much less getting them to stay, has always been difficult. The problem will reach catastrophic proportions with the retirement of the baby boom generation within the next five years - some projections show up to 35 percent to 40 percent total staff retirement. Add to that the increasing number of state and federal mandates on both student and teacher performance, there is no room for bad hires.

So the board cobbled together some money from a state program and some from a federal program and hired the University of Wisconsin-Madison and statistical service firm Westat to examine and define their human capital management practices. As any rural superintendent can testify, good hires are catch-as-catch-can and retaining the best employees is difficult. They wanted hard, actionable information to create a stronger, more robust faculty.

Westat and UW-Madison were able to break down the hiring and retention of employees into seven competencies. "You can't know what you need or want from employees until you know the competencies you need from them," Bracewell said. "These are qualities that we all instinctually know but this process puts a definition on them."

The two organizations spent several days in Florida last year presenting their information and offering help to the districts. Bracewell said that as the project enters its second year, some districts are still mulling the proposals while others are actively pursuing them.

One area of need is in new teacher recruitment, and some districts are becoming much more aggressive with recruiting new teachers and staff. In the past, they would simply see who answered their ads or who asked for information at a booth at a career fair. But to get the best teachers to come to their districts, superintendents are now working with teaching colleges and picking the best students a year or two before they graduate. They are looking for good fits long before there is even a need in the district.

Superintendents are also using the data to look at their employee retention - specifically, are they keeping the most highly effective employees and letting those who are less effective go?

The state is mandating action on teacher compensation, so the districts would be taking action on that front anyway, but superintendents are using this information to examine how to measure teacher performance and use that measure to determine compensation.

The project is a work in progress, but Bracewell emphasizes that the goal is to look at the entire human management system and not to focus on short-term patches but to move the entire system to address long-term issues. It's a project that all 15 districts in the NEFEC work on together, and it results in an improvement that wouldn't have happened if they had been working as individuals.

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