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Laurie Olsen Ph.D.

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The PROMISE Model: An English-Learner Focused Approach to School Reform

By Laurie Olsen, Ph.D.

Results from the PROMISE Initiative¹: This is the second in a series of four policy briefs reporting on the findings from the PROMISE pilot study (2006-2009).

Despite decades of public investment in school improvement, a persistent achievement gap between English Learners (ELs) and English proficient students demonstrates the inadequacy of school improvement models to ensure ELs receive meaningful access to education (Datnow, Stringfield, & Castellano, 2002). This ethnographic study documented a school change model, the PROMISE Initiative, that posited to address this achievement gap for ELs, preschool through twelfth grade. From January 2006 through June 2009, the PROMISE model was piloted in 15 schools, preschool through twelfth grade, in six districts across southern California through a collaborative of six county offices of education. This education and policy brief reports on one of several studies conducted on the PROMISE Initiative. The present study (1) analyzed the power and efficacy of the PROMISE model to facilitate the implementation of research-based practices for ELs and (2) identified lessons learned for equity-focused school improvement.

METHODOLOGY

This research addressed three questions:

- What is the PROMISE model?
- What changes occurred in schools as a result of PROMISE implementation?
- What lessons can be derived from the PROMISE pilot that contribute to an understanding of school reform for English Learners?

A qualitative, ethnographic study was conducted utilizing observation, documentation of events, interviews with participating educators, collection of materials, facilitated dialogues and activities engaging PROMISE participants in identifying lessons learned at eight critical points throughout the initiative. Tools were created and utilized with the dual-role of prompting reflection among participants

to inform their ongoing work, and to inform the research. All data was analyzed by school site, by chronology, by level of schooling, and by focus.

THE PROMISE THEORETICAL MODEL

What is the PROMISE Model?

The PROMISE model is based upon a theory of change for strengthening school responses to ELs and accomplishing EL academic success. The descriptive component of the research was designed to explore whether and how the PROMISE Theory of Change actually functioned in a variety of real-life school, district and community contexts.

The PROMISE Model – Foundational Elements

The PROMISE model for comprehensive school reform and English Learner success is based on research on effective practices for ELs and the research on effective school improvement strategies. It has five foundational elements:

1. A research-driven and values-driven vision of student success that is the core of the PROMISE outcome-based reform
2. A set of eight inter-related and research-based core principles that frame and provide cohesion for the work of schools to improve outcomes for ELs
3. A process of co-design and reflective practice through which schools develop and continuously refine customized plans for improvement, deepening and strengthening their work in the process
4. An infrastructure of leadership and support for implementing the school reform effort
5. The recruitment and engagement of PROMISE school sites and districts in a professional community and network with other schools and districts making meaning of and implementing the PROMISE model

THE PROMISE THEORY OF CHANGE

BEGIN WITH ►

A vision of student success

Research-derived core principles

Processes of codesign and reflective practices

PROVIDE ►

A professional community of schools

An infrastructure of leadership and support

RESULTING IN ►

Customized research-based & continually refined PROMISE plans for action

IMPACTING ►

Changes in policies, leadership capacity, structures & climate

Changes in classroom practices

OUTCOMES ►

The PROMISE vision of student success

THE PROMISE MODEL – FIVE FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS

VISION

PROMISE advanced a values-based vision of student success. Clear mission, a shared vision of success, consensus on goals, common values, and a clear sense of purpose are major factors impacting maintenance of focus and movement towards school improvement (Day, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Senge, 1990; Raywid, 1992; Evans, 1996).

CORE PRINCIPLES

**ENRICHED AND AFFIRMING LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS • EMPOWERING PEDAGOGY • CHALLENGING AND RELEVANT CURRICULUM
POWERFUL PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT • HIGH QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES • HIGH QUALITY
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT • VALID AND COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS • ADVOCACY ORIENTED LEADERSHIP**

The research-based, core principles framed and provided cohesion for the work of the PROMISE schools. As educators “make meaning” about core principles, they are able to knowledgeably select strategies to move the school in a coherent direction (Senge, McCabe, Lucas, Smith, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1999; Fullan, 2003; Raywid, 1992).

CO-DESIGN PROCESS

The PROMISE model employs a co-design process through which schools develop and continuously reflect on and refine customized plans for improvement. Educators are immersed in a collaborative, iterative and dialogue-based planning process leading to the development of PROMISE Implementation Plans (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Senge, 1990).

INFRASTRUCTURE OF LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT

The PROMISE support includes: county offices of education, district offices, facilitators, and external partners. This infrastructure provides links to research, expertise on EL models and resources, strategic counsel regarding school change, and professional development. Articulation, consistency and comprehensiveness require alignment across grades, among different arenas of schooling (e.g., policy, curriculum, instruction, assessment), and different stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers). (Berman et al., 1995; Datnow, Stringfield & Castellano, 2002).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS

Systemic reform requires the development of leadership at multiple levels, and a distributive leadership approach that enables continuity in the innovations even as individual leaders leave the site. To address this need, the PROMISE model calls for the creation of PROMISE Lead Teams at each site – teams of teacher leaders, administrators and others (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005).

STUDY RESULTS

What occurred in schools as a result of implementing the PROMISE model?

In Fall of 2005, the beginning of the three year PROMISE pilot, an invitation on behalf of six county offices of education was distributed widely “... to join the vision and work of the PROMISE Initiative... to boldly address the needs of ELs in our region.” Educators from across the six-county region were drawn to PROMISE by four factors: 1) the vision; 2) a sense of urgency about EL achievement;

3) a need for support from county offices of education and partners; 4) the opportunity to be part of a professional community focused on excellent EL education. Driven by the PROMISE Theory of Change Model, the pilot progressed in different stages over the course of the three years.

What EL specific research-based changes were documented as a result of the implementation of the PROMISE Model?

Implementation of the PROMISE Model resulted in increased use of EL specific research-based approaches to student grouping, student

PROMISE MODEL THREE-YEAR PILOT

YEAR 1 ►

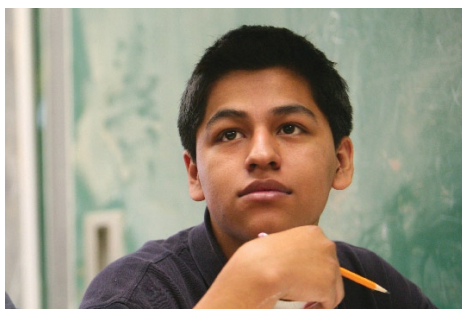
- Development of vision and PROMISE plans
- Selection of Core Principles
- Creation of Lead Teams
- Collaboration with other schools

YEAR 2 ►

- Implementation of PROMISE plans
- Critical examination of school practices for English Learners
- Identification of obstacles
- Clearer vision of biliteracy
- Revision of PROMISE plans

YEAR 3 ►

- Broadened scope of PROMISE plans
- Incorporated more Core Principles
- Some expansion of PROMISE work to other schools in district
- Variance in range of PROMISE plan implementation
- Many Lead Teams cite major improvements in schools



placement, instruction, school structures, curriculum choices, program design and practices. Across the pilot sites, common patterns emerged. Preschools concentrated on: clarifying program models for early bilingual development, intentional instructional strategies for language development, and identifying and implementing appropriate curriculum. Elementary schools varied in the extent of PROMISE work. Most focused on instruction, support services, English Language Development, program coherence, parent engagement, school culture and assessment. Middle schools designed programs for diverse EL needs; instituted Spanish for Native Speakers programs; engaged ELs in responsibility for their own achievement; created more inclusive school cultures; strengthened instruction, and engaged parents. The high schools addressed the needs of different “typologies” of ELs and worked on appropriate course placement, academic support for success in rigorous classes, building faculty awareness of ELs, changing instruction, monitoring academic progress and student voice and leadership. The differences between high implementation and mid-implementation sites were not in the types of changes made, but in the extent and breadth. The more deeply schools engaged in the PROMISE model, the more comprehensively their work addressed the schooling experiences of their ELs.

What leadership dimensions were affected by the PROMISE model?

The research tracked several dimensions of leadership: consistency in leadership across the years of the pilot, knowledge held by school leaders about ELs, degree of advocacy orientation and practices related to ELs, alignment of leadership across levels of the system around a vision for ELs, and the degree to which leadership was collaborative and distributed across the site. Overall, involvement in the PROMISE pilot resulted in more knowledgeable and advocacy oriented leaders, and more distributive leadership. Leadership in PROMISE was not specific to formal roles. Teachers who served on the Lead Teams emerged as effective school-wide leaders as a result of their work in PROMISE. Principals strengthened their capacity to lead an effective change process. More collaborative formats came about for talking about EL issues, raising policy and practice concerns related to EL education.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

What lessons can be learned?

1. Vision matters, but needs attention.
2. A principles-based approach reduces fragmentation and leads to comprehensive reform.
3. Co-design and reflective practice were powerful in strengthening plans, developing strategy, and engaging others to “buy in”.
4. Professional networks and learning communities provided a source of peer expertise and support, inspiration and motivation for change.
5. The PROMISE model works across all levels of the school system, preschool through high school.

Vision matters, but needs attention.

The PROMISE vision inspired participation, although the content of the PROMISE vision had to be revisited regularly throughout the

life of the pilot. The fact that the initiative was based upon high expectations and an asset-orientation and was not a compensatory model separated it from other reforms. Yet those aspects of the vision that were not codified in state standards, nor assessed in state and federal accountability systems fell or were pushed off the plate time and again. Biliteracy, multicultural competencies, 21st century global skills, and motivation were the most illusive and difficult to hold onto. PROMISE learned the importance of immersing educators in dialogue and research supporting the vision, and to engage educators in exploring a wide range of models, curriculum, and activities to enact the vision.

A principles-based approach reduces fragmentation and leads to comprehensive reform.

The PROMISE core-principles based approach gave coherence among the various initiatives in the schools, reduced a sense of fragmentation and led to more comprehensive reform. The approach to school improvement was unfamiliar, at first, to most educators in PROMISE. It took time for leaders to make sense of and figure out how to use the core principles as a lens for examining practice and a basis for planning. The majority found that over time, the core principles served to provide important coherence to the work being done in the school, and guidance for how to deepen the work. Work on an initially-selected few principles led to work on the other principles – prompting a more comprehensive approach to EL education throughout the school.

Co-design and reflective practice were powerful in strengthening plans, developing strategy, and engaging others to “buy in.”

Co-design creates forums where people can work together across roles. For this reason, the approach was easiest to implement in schools already familiar with professional learning community models and practices. Because co-design with a core-principles approach opens the possibility of a wide range of decisions and actions that could be pursued by a site, it was important to have critical friends, guidance, critique and strong immersion in research at the start. Reflective practice was among the most valued elements of the PROMISE experience for many participants, and it is the component of the PROMISE model leaders had least confidence about being able to continue beyond the pilot. Finally, the co-design process was a factor in fostering a distributive and collaborative model of leadership with increased capacity to “move” the change process, and with lasting impact on leadership in several schools.

Professional networks and learning communities provided a source of peer expertise and support, inspiration and motivation for change.

The creation of a professional learning community across sites, across roles, and engaging researchers with practitioners was a powerful force in motivating and supporting research-based school improvement. The engagement of PROMISE partners and researchers also played a strong role in making PROMISE a research-based reform.

The PROMISE model works across all levels of the school system, preschool through high school.

All levels of schools (from preschool through high school) participated in PROMISE and found a path by way of the PROMISE

model to identifying site specific and level specific challenges, and to selecting and implementing solutions appropriate at their level. This is extraordinary given the very different structural and institutional issues at the different levels of schooling, as well as differing developmental needs of students.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The PROMISE model pilot for EL-focused school improvement suggests two key policy recommendations.

1. Broadly disseminate research on effective EL education, and provide an infrastructure of support infused with EL expertise if the goal is to help schools strengthen EL achievement.

Many schools and districts with underachieving ELs lack access to knowledge of research and best practices for meeting the needs of their students. School leaders guiding reform and improvement for ELs benefit from knowledgeable facilitation and the availability of coaches to help them access appropriate research on EL education, and to help them develop the skills needed to lead schools through the changes in attitudes, understanding and practices required for improvements in EL outcomes. Educational leaders, policy makers and researchers should create partnerships to collaboratively develop and disseminate models and approaches to support districts and school sites in implementing strategies that improve EL success.

2. Adopt the PROMISE model or incorporate the components of the PROMISE approach as a viable school improvement strategy and option within accountability reforms.

Across a three-year period, almost all schools that were involved in the PROMISE pilot implemented research-based EL practices across arenas and grade-levels. The pilot demonstrated that this is a viable school improvement model, resulting in changes that have largely eluded most other school reform approaches. It should become one option for schools in program improvement.

CONCLUSION

The PROMISE Initiative is “reform from within” – an unusual and important school improvement model. Most school improvement efforts are led by a federal or state edict from above, engaged through the incentive of funding, prompted by private foundation agendas, or are designed and managed by institutions of higher education or educational labs external to the school system. PROMISE, however, arose from county offices of education within the school system – launched by leadership of the superintendents and informed by the expertise and research-knowledge of county office staff. The initiative engaged schools and districts to participate on a voluntary basis. Schools did not receive external funding for their participation or to support their PROMISE activities. The county offices of education provided services to PROMISE sites in line with their ongoing roles, but in collaboration with each other that spelled new ways of working. It was reform from within the system – a model of regional collaboration that provided leadership and support for meaningful school reform. Fueled by an asset-oriented vision, guided by research-based principles, and supported by an infrastructure of support that was knowledgeable about EL research, PROMISE resulted in meaningful school reform that has been elusive for ELs for too long.

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LAURIE OLSEN, PH.D., is Director of the Sobrato Early Academic Literacy Initiative for English Learners. Her career spans four decades as a researcher, writer, advocate and provider of technical assistance and professional development on powerful programs for English Learners.

¹ This study was part of a larger educational reform movement in California known as the PROMISE Initiative (Pursuing Regional Opportunities for Mentoring, Innovation, and Success for English Learners), a collaborative of six southern Californian county offices of education wherein reside 65% of the 1.5 million ELs in the state.

The complete report for this study can be found in The PROMISE Research Monograph, Chapter 2: Implementation of the PROMISE Model and Theory of Change – A qualitative analysis by Laurie Olsen, Ph.D. Visit the CEEL website to access the full report. <http://soe.lmu.edu/ceel>

Loyola Marymount University's Center for Equity for English Learners (CEEL) was established in 2006 for the purpose of improving educational outcomes of English Learners (ELs). Our mission is to pursue equity and excellence in the education of English Learners by transforming schools and educational systems through CEEL's research and professional development agendas.

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Chan Lu, Ph.D. | Loyola Marymount University

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Robert Rueda, Ph.D. | University of Southern California

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