MSQI IN ACTION: Findings from the 2014-15 Evaluation

I. BACKGROUND

In 2011, the NYCDOE and the City Council's Middle School Taskforce launched the Middle School Quality Initiative (MSQI) as an instructional intervention for improving literacy levels in the lowest performing middle schools in New York City. The initiative grew rapidly and now serves over 100 schools and 53,000 students (table 1).

Cohorts (Year of Entry)	# of Schools	# of Students	# of Teachers
Cohort 1 (2011)	21	9,284	782
Cohort 2 (2012)	19	13,762	1,047
Cohort 3 (2013)	17	10,296	719
Cohort 3 Extra (2013)	19	8,280	601
Cohort 4 (2015)	31	12,245	838
Schools discontinued	11	5,503	444
Active schools in SY 2015-16	**107**	**53,867**	**3,987**

When designing last year's evaluation, MSQI leadership and the Research and Policy Support Group (RPSG) agreed to focus on uniformly collecting implementation fidelity data. The 2014-2015 fidelity survey provides a snapshot of MSQI implementation in SY 2014-15, describing pillar activities across all 87 schools.

II. EVALUATION FINDINGS

Findings on the four key evaluation questions for SY 2014-15 are presented below.

❶ What are the patterns of implementation fidelity across MSQI schools?

From MSQI's initiation, school leaders possessed ample freedom to implement the most relevant pillars for their schools. Few schools were able to simultaneously take all pillar activities from an early stage of development (pre-emergent or emergent) to a deeper level of engagement (active or full).

- Schools need support to improve their proctoring of universal literacy screeners (DRP) and the subsequent use of results to maximize the benefit of these exams for students.
- Strategic Reading Periods are in progress, though few schools have yet to implement it as MSQI recommends (5 days/week, 40 minutes per period, using tiered interventions).
- Few schools are monitoring essential data (ELA, DRP, and secondary diagnostics) in a single data system, or discussing student scores during teacher team meetings.
- Promoted by multiple DOE initiatives, most schools report addressing literacy across content areas, holding teacher team meetings, and planning professional learning opportunities.

❷ What school-level contextual factors (including principal leadership capacity, teacher performance, and student ELA outcomes) are associated with MSQI implementation fidelity?

- Schools with both effective principals and high ELA performance exhibit high fidelity.
- Coaches mitigate the difficulty of implementing MSQI in schools with low ELA performance.
- Coaches mitigate the difficulty of implementing MSQI in schools with a low proportion of effective teachers.
- There is no difference in fidelity between MSQI cohorts.

❸ What is the relationship, if any, among MSQI implementation fidelity and gains in literacy achievement as measured through the DRP, net of contextual factors?

- Schools with higher ratings for rigorous instruction, as indicated by the NYC School Survey, tend to show greater DRP growth.
- Schools with low ELA scores are just as likely as schools with high ELA scores to show DRP growth.
- There is uncertainty about the relationship between fidelity and DRP growth.

MSQI PILLARS

Pillar 1
Reading Screening and Monitoring

Pillar 2
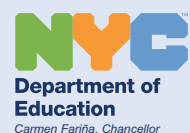CCLS Literacy across the Content Areas

Pillar 3
Strategic Reading Period (SRP)

Pillar 4
Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams

Pillar 5
Continuous Professional Development

**④ What additional school-level factors may influence MSQI implementation?**

- School-Wide Literacy Vision: Of the 86 schools interviewed, 56 principals provided a neutral or poorly-articulated literacy vision for their schools. A common difficulty was a focus on very distant outcomes, such as "college and career readiness", to the exclusion of more proximate outcomes.

- School Libraries: A key factor in implementing a successful literacy program is to ensure that students have access to reading materials throughout the school day. Close to 50% report that their library is staffed less than part-time and only 45% report that students have regular access to materials in library.

- Program Coherence: Schools often implement some pillars with higher fidelity than others. This suggests that schools may not be approaching these programmatic activities in a cohesive manner, providing equal attention to all 5 pillars as supporting one another to achieve the goal of all eighth graders reading on or above grade-level.

III. ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

- Respondents expressed a desire for greater inter-school collaboration. "Sustainability of MSQI activities is not a money issue, it's an issue of networks. It would be difficult to continue without having access to a support network and/or community to bounce ideas off each other."

- Schools requested stronger alignment across MSQI, CCLS literacy requirements, and curricula for content areas in order to make integration of MSQI more feasible.

- There is a concern about over testing in schools, suggesting that numerous assessments are strenuous for students and for teachers. "There is just an overwhelming number of tests and the testing anxiety that students experience reduces their focus on non-DOE mandated, low stakes test like the DRP. "

- Findings suggest that schools have misunderstood SRPs as defined by MSQI (40 minute period, 5 days per week, with tiered literacy instruction, and homogenous grouping). Limited time in the school day, staff unavailability, teacher contract issues, and school size make accurate SRP implementation difficult.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

① Provide literacy coaching in all MSQI schools.
Findings suggest that schools with low ELA performance tend to have low fidelity, but that literacy coaches may mitigate this difficulty. Maintaining a ratio of 1 coach to 6-8 schools is critical for achieving such mitigation.

② Build upon programs aimed at addressing contextual factors and the Framework for Great Schools.
Schools with a high proportion of effective teachers, and high ratings on instructional rigor tend to show greater DRP growth. The evaluation also found that schools with stronger leadership tend to have higher fidelity. Together, these findings suggest that assisting schools to improve these broader contextual factors, specifically strengthening school leadership and providing literacy coaching support, influences program implementation.

③ Support school efforts to deepen the understanding and implementation of MSQI's 5 pillars.
The evaluation indicates that schools need targeted guidance to deepen their work with the pillar activities and achieve full fidelity. It may be valuable for literacy coaches to concentrate on the details of implementing activities jointly emphasized by multiple DOE initiatives mentioned above.

④ Support principals in articulating a literacy vision and establishing program coherence.
While it makes sense to let schools adopt the different parts of MSQI according to what fits them best, the pillars support one another and are theorized to lead to student learning gains best when implemented together. Schools should be encouraged to approach programmatic activities in a cohesive manner. Additionally, only one third of school leaders interviewed were able to share a well-articulated vision for literacy in their schools. Helping school leaders build and articulate a literacy vision is a key priority for MSQI literacy coaches.

" All of our scholars will graduate from middle school reading at (or above) grade level. This work begins with our teachers, who will as a community learn the science behind literacy development and enhance their capacity to implement high-impact literacy instruction in their classrooms. In all of our classes, we will plan opportunities for students to engage with a variety of challenging texts, and students will have meaningful discussions to help them strengthen their comprehension and appreciation of the written word. Most importantly, we will celebrate books and reading, pushing students to understand the relationship between literacy and personal and academic success."

~ Literacy vision from an MSQI principal