

Cicero School District 99, IL

Using classroom visits and MAP Growth data to discover professional learning needs in real time

When superintendent Rudy Hernandez first arrived at Cicero School District 99, he knew he had challenges to address across the district. With a near-90 percent poverty level and a student population made up of 50 percent English language learners, he knew he needed to work with teachers to build a data-driven support system to affect change.

“The first thing that I did was get feedback from the staff about what they thought was working, and what they would like to see being implemented in the district. And I shared my superintendent goals, too—that was key. We all came to the agreement that we had a shared mission: to ignite the road to excellence,” says Hernandez.

Through that collaboration, they identified the areas where they needed to focus to affect change: understanding their current classroom practices and pairing their observations with student data to identify professional development needs.

Focused learning walks

To better understand the specific needs of the district, Hernandez started a new practice: focused learning walks. These walks—in-person visits to classrooms for first-hand observation and instructional data collection—served as opportunities to both understand current challenges and build a data-centric culture across the district.

Maria Burgos, assistant superintendent of student services,

was part of the walks from the beginning. “We took focused learning walks with different groups of people,” she says. “It started with our administration, and then trickled down with having teachers participate. Focused learning walks were a way for us to assess at a building level, and also at a district level, the support that our students were receiving, and to better understand the specific areas our staff needed professional development. Now, building administration, teachers, and district staff are involved, and having conversations about what they’re seeing in the classroom.”

Elisabeth Nealon, assistant superintendent of educational services, adds, “Through our focused learning walks, we collected data about our math curriculum. And we got the opportunity to focus on the discourse. We wanted to see how often students were speaking in our classroom, and we wanted to examine the sequence of our units. Based on the data we collected on our walks, as well as input from our staff on our sequence of units, we restructured our math units to ensure that our students were getting exposed to the math content they needed at the right time of the year. It also helped us provide more chances for students to take ownership of their learning, which was what we really wanted—students taking the lead in the classroom, and doing more of the talking than the teachers.”

As the walks continued, Hernandez and his team found a common theme: teachers were doing most of what he calls “the heavy lifting,” and students needed more

opportunities to talk, ask questions, and engage with different subjects. They compared their observations alongside their MAP® Growth™ data, and found key opportunities to change their approach.

Connecting observations with data

They started with their kindergarten program. Hernandez explains, “Three years ago, our MAP Growth data showed us that our students were about ten points below the national norm in math, and seven points below the norm in reading. Through our focused learning walks, we identified that in our community, many of our teachers weren’t practiced at using data to inform their instruction, and our kids weren’t always coming in with the resources necessary to be successful. We were really looking to empower teachers to drive change and empower students to drive their own learning.”

For the teachers, that meant providing professional development opportunities. But instead of creating a mandate, the district made resources available to teachers to approach based on their interests and needs. “As the teachers saw the benefit of how to use the resources, they started asking for more professional development, which was very, very rewarding for us, because that’s what we wanted. And that inspired learning communities across the district, so we worked hard to provide them with the right training as well,” says Hernandez. As momentum picked up, they explored different types of learning experiences—including four separate custom Professional Learning workshops with experts from NWEA®.

For students, the data and observations also lead the Cicero staff to the conclusion that the students needed more instructional time.

“We identified that we needed a full-day kindergarten program, so we moved forward with that decision. And now, two years after we made the switch to full-day kindergarten, we’ve started closing those gaps. We increased by 22 points in math, and in reading, it’s increased by 16 points.”

Lessons learned

Equipped with the right practices, the right data, and a community of teachers passionate about supporting their students, the staff at Cicero School District 99 are just getting started. Their advice for other school districts facing similar challenges: never stop using the data.

“When you start using MAP Growth, you really need to take advantage of the data, take advantage of the trainers and the trainings that NWEA provides. That has really helped us key in on important pieces of information, really read the data the right way, and be able to roll it out to our staff.

And although we’re five years into this plan, we’re still showing incredible growth, and we’re still making new plans, and still having conversations with teachers about how to use our data on a day-to-day basis. So really, taking advantage of what MAP Growth has to offer, I think is step one.”



District snapshot

CICERO, IL



PRE-K-8 STUDENTS

11,874

LEARNING NEEDS

54%

OF STUDENTS ARE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

ECONOMIC MARKERS

76%

OF STUDENTS QUALIFY FOR FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH

PRODUCT USE

IMPLEMENTED MAP GROWTH IN

2011

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