Teacher Mini-Grant Programs: An Asset to Schools and Classroom Practice

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ABSTRACT: A rural university and an urban school district developed a professional partnership that focused on promoting quality teaching by improving the skills, knowledge, and disposition of teachers. The major goals of this professional development initiative including the following objectives: first, establish a quality environment for teaching and learning; second, raise student achievement; and third, increase professional development opportunities for educators in partner schools. The results of the mini-grant projects on which the authors report here were very positive. In addition to specific project outcomes, four results were noted. The benchmark scores increased, teachers noted that students performed more confidently on daily assessments, teachers and students benefited from the enhanced instruction and materials, and teachers were able to accommodate the multiple learning styles of students with the greatest need. The authors suggest that mini-grants offer schools an opportunity to inexpensively provide professional development that is engaging and results oriented.

NAPDS Essentials Addressed: #4/A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants.

Introduction

A rural University and an urban school district developed a professional partnership that focused on promoting quality teaching by improving the skills, knowledge, and disposition of teachers. Most activities of the partnership were related to two K-8 school partnerships but, for some activities, as many as 30 schools in the district participated. The major goals of this initiative were threefold: 1) establish a quality environment for teaching and learning; 2) raise student achievement; and 3) increase professional development opportunities for educators in partner schools.

All of the activities and initiatives developed in this five-year partnership targeted one or more of these goals. The mini-grant program on which we report here was somewhat unique in that it addressed each of the three goals. Mini-grants provided teachers with the opportunity to be creative while implementing standards and clearly defined learning objectives in the classroom. Importantly, the mini-grant program aligned with national standards integral to professional development programming in the areas of creating learning communities and collaboration. Mini-grants exemplify the ideas that learning best occurs within the context of practice and that interdependent practice of universities and schools is important in improving performance of P-12 students.

The mini-grant program encouraged teachers at our partner schools to: (a) identify

a state standard and/or series of objectives that they would like to meet in the classroom, (b) propose a method for meeting the standard/objectives in their classroom, (c) outline a budget for educational materials to support their efforts, (d) establish a pre and post test assessment to measure progress, (e) create a time-line for implementation, (f) provide a summary report that analyzed the results and implications of the project.

The mini-grant proposals and subsequent projects addressed curriculum needs, pedagogical interventions, professional development needs of teachers, and efforts to meet specific standards. In addition, the efforts led to familiarizing teachers with data collection, data driven decision-making, and the basic elements of implementing action research in their classroom(s). Teachers welcomed the opportunity to access new resources for their classrooms through the implementation of the mini-grant program. Thirty-eight (38) of the proposed projects were granted up to $500 in funding. School-wide projects were encouraged allowing teachers to share budgets and maximize benefits to students. In total, the projects involved sixty-seven (67) teachers and directly impacted more than 900 students.

From Program Idea to Implementation

Teachers' reaction to mini-grant opportunities varied and our leadership team, comprised of university faculty, school administrators, and teachers, worked closely with mini-grant project leaders in planning the program. Nolan, et. al. (2009) suggest the power that collaborative structures have as a vehicle for innovation, inquiry, and reflection. Implementation of this project called for a three-part process focusing upon collaboration between teachers, university faculty, and school administrators. The process components were project introduction (PI) sessions, individual planning support (IPS), and mentoring.

Project Introduction Sessions (PI)

Before teachers started the mini-grant projects, we provided PI sessions for all teachers. PI sessions provided a comprehensive framework including guidelines for applications, overview of the action research process, a review of documentation and data collection methods, and an explanation of final report requirements. Our goal in the initial PI sessions was to support teachers to:

- make use of information about the learning-teaching context to set challenging learning goals and plan instruction and assessment;
- employ multiple assessment strategies, aligned with learning goals, to assess student learning before, during, and after instruction;
- utilize assessment data to profile student learning and communicate information about student achievement; and
- analyze and reflect upon his/her instruction and student learning in order to improve teaching practice.

The team agreed that individual teacher-project leaders (TPL) would identify learning goals and objectives based on the state or district content standards, create an assessment plan designed to measure student performance before (pre-assessment), during (formative assessment) and after (post-assessment), and plan for their instruction. The team noted that after the instruction or unit was implemented the teacher-project leader (TPL) would need to analyze student learning and then reflect upon and evaluate their teaching in relation to student learning.

Individual Planning Support

Following the introduction sessions, TPLs were encouraged to contact any of five mini-grant project leaders for guidance in structuring their application(s). This individual planning support was a popular component of the process

and made the process more seamless. One teacher noted that she was a bit lost about the specific requirements until she was "able to connect with project leaders on a one-to-one basis for feedback, consultation, and guidance." TPLs took advantage of this opportunity to receive feedback regarding their ideas, structure the methods and data collection, and assure that their learning objectives and standards were viewed as appropriate given the parameters of the project.

Mentoring

As the mini-grants were being implemented in the classrooms, project leaders provided mentoring. The mentorship was designed to facilitate action research processes and to provide technical support for teachers. Ultimately, mentors worked with TPLs to reach their project goals while encouraging reflective practice.

Bognar (2013) identifies vision as the seed of the educational process that changes the existing school from its roots. The vision and creativity of teachers in exploring ways to meet standards and develop exciting student learning projects was inspiring. Projects varied in their collaboration (within grade, across grade, across schools, etc.), content focus (reading, mathematics, etc.), and target (teacher development and/or student performance). The number of students involved or targeted was as small as 15–20 students (for an after school reading mini-grant) and as large as whole school projects that impacted as many as 450 students in one project. This flexibility was an asset to the project, which sought to focus on the relevant issues teachers wanted to address in their schools. Summary descriptions of ten projects are included in Table 1.

Two projects are described in more detail below.

The Dream Flag Project

One partner school chose to do a school-wide mini-grant called the Dream Flag Project. The coordinating teachers described it as a poetry publication and community-building project for dreamers of all ages. The poetry unit(s) included opportunities for participating students to be exposed to and read a range of poems by different authors, a study of the life and poetry of the poet Langston Hughes, lessons about different genres of poetry, and writing practice enabling students to create their own poems. The culminating activity was the creation of the "dream flag" by each student. Their poems were transferred to a piece of cloth 8½ inches by 11 inches and decorated accordingly. Each student's dream flag was connected to others created in their class, joined with the dream flags created within the school. Finally these flags were joined with other dream flags from around the school district. This project addressed the standards related to reading, analyzing, and interpreting literature; quality of writing; and speaking and listening. This project helped to enhance the reading and writing skills of all students. It also exposed the students to poetry of African-American authors.

Reading Improvement Project

The reading improvement project was a single classroom project that identified students who were at basic and proficient levels in reading. The group met once a week to discuss the selected novel. They read assigned chapters at home and came to class with discussion ideas. Discussion took place regarding major themes, characters, plots, literacy devices, and the author's purpose. Students learned new vocabulary, increased their fluency and decoding strategies, and improved their comprehension skills. Finally, students were able to keep their novels and begin to add to their personal libraries at home. The standards addressed in this project were reading, analyzing, and interpreting literature.

Table 1.   Summary Descriptions of Ten of the Thirty-eight Funded Mini-grant Projects

Project Name	Brief Description
School beautification through the arts	School environment beautification through visual and mural arts; the design of murals for the cafeteria and schoolyard; the creation of a Mural Arts Club
Building Literacy across the Curriculum	Immerse students in a print rich environment with learning supports necessary to build and maintain the skills to improve academic performance across the curriculum
Heritage Quilt Project	Collaboration across grades within a school exploring genealogy utilizing African-American quilting traditions as a foundational activity
Community Violence	The impact of violence in the community upon our school; an exploration through multiple methods designed to support awareness
Analysis and interpretation of literature	A series of after school sessions focused on Socratic method in supporting students improve ability to analyze and interpret literature and increase reading comprehension; participants included 20 students identified as below proficient in reading
Multicultural Reader	A multicultural reader utilized to support students in extending the conversation about the issues and topics of multicultural literature; a mini-grant utilizing reading, writing, and discussion in combination with multicultural celebrations in the school to enrich experiences of students and teacher
Emergent Readers project	Designed to increase reading performance for kindergarten and first grade children through guided reading
New Teachers Project	To develop teacher capacity, direct support toward improvement of student performance, and to foster collaboration and leadership. The project introduced a number of teaching strategies to enhance reflective practice.
Girls, girls, girls.	Addressed the need for girls to be exposed to positive role influences through literature; utilized a female only environment to create a safe haven for students to openly discuss and make connections with the literature
Science development for Students in grades 1 through 8	Promoting best practice instruction in the sciences across the grades; encouraged collaborative science instruction; foci included technology, problem solving, integrating scientific methodology, scientific vocabulary and more

The Contribution of Mini-Grants

Mini-grants are engaging and results-oriented. In a fiscal environment that requires leaders to focus on finding relevant professional development at a reasonable per-teacher cost, mini-grants offer schools a partial solution. As noted by Archibald, Coggshall, Croft, and Goe (2012) "shrinking budgets can actually provide the impetus needed to examine current expenditures to determine whether they contribute to the quality of teaching and learning in the district or school" (p. 8).

Our five-year Professional Development School-university partnership involved scores of activities. These included but were not limited to a professional development conference featuring leading experts in the field along with a semester-long follow-up structured as a graduate course, graduate school courses, goal directed staff meetings, preservice student teaching, teacher mentoring, Experience Corps programming, faculty and undergraduate student participation in a summer urban seminar, summer science camps, teacher development designed to meet specific needs of schools, the introduction of literacy and mathematics coaching leadership, and a mini-grant project. The mini-grant project was a favorite of teachers.

Discussion

Professional development mini-grants are both relatively low-cost and highly relevant to professional classroom practice. The structure of our program gave teachers explicit guidance, minimal administrative burden, and unique, goal-specific, professional development opportunities. We believe that the most important measure of analyzing the cost benefit of professional development lies in clearly answering the question: "How does the activity benefit students?

The results of the mini-grant projects were very positive and significant. Teachers had to calculate a learning gain score for each individual student. Once the teacher figured individual students' gain scores they calculated the average gain score for the entire class. Based on the learning gains worksheet and achievement table, all students made significant learning gains.

The teacher mini-grants encouraged a high quality teaching and learning environment. Teachers noted that curriculum improvements were made possible as they gained new resources. The mini-grants also became a forum in which teachers conducted enact action research. Students were directly impacted by the new lessons, materials and activities. Moreover teachers and students monitored student learning progress by way of meaningful assessments that directly addressed the state standards.

This project revealed progress in learning outcomes on three levels: specific classroom project increases in academic performance, academic performance on standardized tests and anecdotal evidence. For example, one mini-grant learning goal was to improve nonfiction reading, comprehension, and writing skills. The results proved to be successful on three different assessments testing the standard noted in the mini-grant. There was an overall significant difference between pre-and post-test scores. In grades 7 and 8, the classes participating in the mini-grant project student test scores increased significantly in SRI (Scholastic Reading Inventory) scores. Teachers noted that 8th grade state assessment scores were improved in comparison to the previous year. Students showed improvements in the direct standard that the teachers were addressing in the mini-grant project. All mini-grant projects used multiple assessments to measure the impact of the project. A teacher in this project noted that, "The mini-grant has positively affected my students to become independent learners and thinkers." Through teacher observation and assessments, a great difference was noted in students' reading and writing.

Our experience informed practices that made successive mini-grant offering more successful. First, the response from teachers was most positive when the process was highly structured with regard to the proposal and reporting results components of the project. Specific guidelines for the proposal and final report were helpful and added a sense of objectivity in the rewarding and reporting process. The structure included identification of sections such as purpose, description of activities, measures to be utilized, standards/objectives to be addressed, results, discussion, and, number of pages for the proposal. Second, teachers were appreciative of not carrying a burden of excessive paperwork—generally proposals were three pages and final reports were two to three pages. Third, clearly establishing reporting requirements as a condition of participation was critical. Reporting requirements were designed so that the reports could benefit the school, future project development, data based decision-making, and other teachers. And, finally, sustainability is an ongoing and important issue. It is incumbent upon leadership to determine whether or not projects of this nature are worth the cost of sustaining them, especially in light of the increasing scarcity of resources. SUP

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