

Project Momentum Arizona: The Avondale ESD Case Study

If you are an educator with even a few years of experience, you probably have been involved in a school improvement initiative of some type. When measured to scale, analysis shows that the chances are these efforts did not work (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Only through a thorough, research-based approach to teaching and learning can meaningful gains in student achievement be sustained. It is not enough just to commit to a course of action, no matter how well intentioned, it must be nurtured continually and supported to succeed. Project Momentum Arizona provides this guiding force.

Background

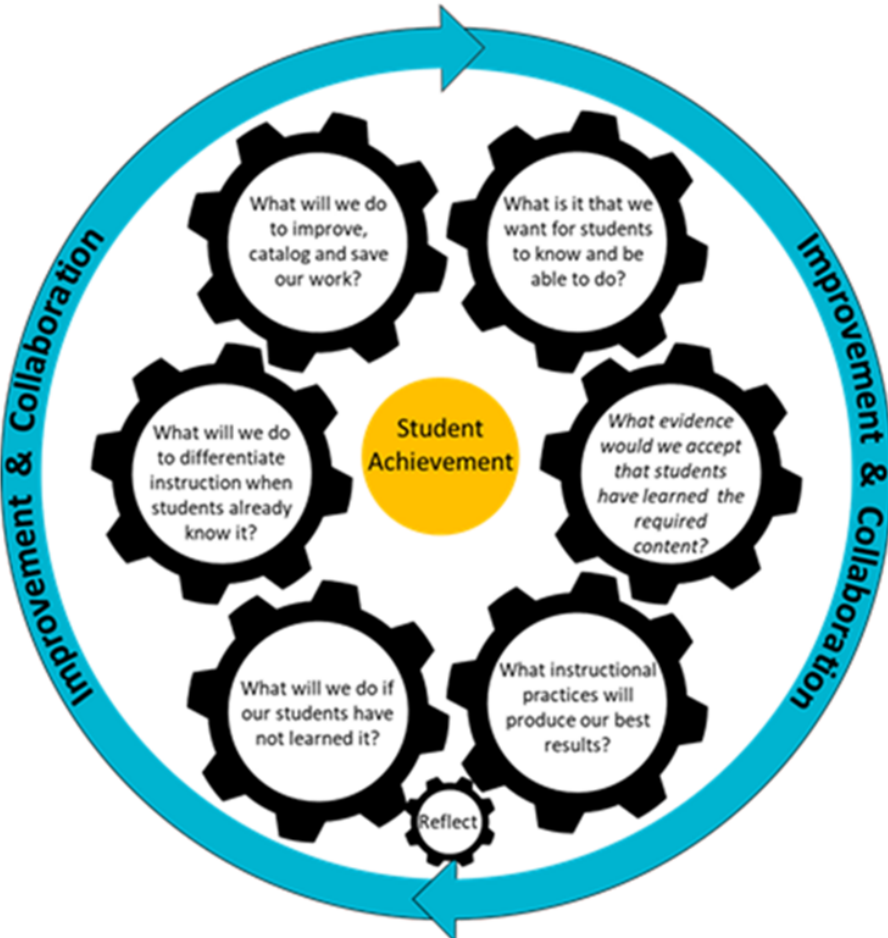
The work of Project Momentum Arizona embraced three powerful actions to drive school improvement:

1. Focus and align the work of schools with the high-yield instructional practices that produce the largest gains in student learning. (Hattie and Zierer, 2018)
2. Provide the time, training and support needed for teachers to implement the targeted strategies.
3. Establish well-defined expectations for increasing student learning, monitoring progress continuously to improve instructional practice and acting to hold each other accountable for achieving our shared goals.

Project Momentum was made possible through a unique public and private partnership. Funding was provided through grants from the Governor's Office to fund the additional time and work of teachers. Training and oversight were initiated by philanthropic support from caring members of the Arizona community. Both partners recognized the value of a high-quality education for all students and the essential role teachers serve in ensuring that outcome.

Project Momentum provided an opportunity for school leaders to frontload instructional planning and preparation during the summer months and repurpose the collaborative planning time that most districts and schools already have in place, to build teacher expertise aligned with the most influential instructional strategies. The sole focus of this effort was to increase student learning. Project Momentum provided a clear pathway for making sure that teacher practice was aligned with required standards. The approach combined formative assessment and collaborative inquiry to promote a culture in which teachers and students are partners in learning. This model and process were inclusive of the district leadership and engaged all schools and teachers in the work. Educators came together regularly to assess student performance and plan differentiated support. This ensured that students who had already achieved mastery were able to extend their growth and struggling learners had the opportunity to revisit needed skills and get the help that they need to be successful.

Project Momentum Arizona provided a common cycle of work centered around six essential questions which create the foundation for collaboration. See figure below.



The important elements of Project Momentum Arizona can be best understood by examining their application in a real-life setting.

Avondale ESD Case Study

Avondale Elementary School District is located about twenty miles west of Phoenix, Arizona. The district serves approximately 6,000 PK to eighth grade students across nine schools. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of students receive free or reduced lunch and many students speak another language at home, primarily Spanish. The community is hardworking and very supportive of its schools. During the 2014-15 school year, many students struggled with the new standardized tests achieving a pass rate of twenty-three percent (23%) in mathematics and twenty-five percent (25%) in English Language Arts as measured by the revised AZMerit tests.

During the 2015-16 school year, district leadership began work with the Project Momentum Arizona implementation team to develop a strategic plan for improvement. Governor Ducey committed to support these efforts and provided funds to extend the time of approximately one-third of the teachers across the nine district schools. These staff members received a stipend to

form a guiding coalition, along with their principal, to plan and drive improvement efforts at their individual schools. Specific support received from the Governor's Office included:

- Teacher leadership grants for select staff members at each school
- District principals and assistant principals received a corresponding stipend to similarly extend their days of service to help facilitate and actively participate in the teacher leadership grant initiative.
- The work of the teacher leadership grant teams was advanced by bringing all core teachers in for preservice training prior to the beginning of the regular school year to help on-board the specific improvement plan developed by the teachers at their site.
- The parameters and expectations for this work were clearly defined by the Project Momentum implementation team during a required pre-service training session.

The Governor was supported in his work by a caring group of philanthropic partners from the Phoenix community. These partners recognized the importance of giving every child access to a great education and invested in their local public schools to carry out this work. Their financial support made possible the initial training for Avondale ESD schools. Additional assistance to these schools included:

- District principals were supported throughout this effort by experienced principal partners from the Project Momentum Arizona implementation team who visited campuses regularly and provided ongoing phone and Zoom consultation with school leaders. They worked in collaboration with the site principal to identify and engage needed improvements.
- Teachers in the district received ongoing professional development and expert training aligned with project components.
- District leaders were supported by an experienced Project Momentum Arizona implementation team with the mission to help provide oversight, nurture the developing collaborative process and assist with needed structure to drive project goals.
- District instructional team leaders were supported with technical assistance to help catalogue curriculum maps and pacing guides, organize and preserve lesson materials, deploy frequent formative assessments, analyze data, track student progress and evaluate program outcomes.

The Project Momentum improvement framework enlists the benefits from the high-yield instructional practices identified in John Hattie's research and places them within a recurring cycle of work based on the professional learning community model (DuFour, 2019). These practices are presented in the form of six guiding questions shown below:

1. What is it that we want all students to know and be able to do?
2. What evidence would we accept that students know the required content and that they have mastered the expected skills?
3. What instructional practices and pedagogy produce the best results in regards to student learning?

4. What will we do if our students have not achieved the required learning?
5. What will we do to differentiate instruction when students already know the content and achieve the required outcomes?
6. What will we do to improve, catalog and save our work?

Teachers received ongoing training aligned to each cycle step or *Gear* and focused their efforts on answering these guiding questions. This approach allowed teachers to shape the work to their specific needs and built “ownership” in the process. As school teams completed their work, attention was paid to organizing and preserving the products of the collaborative effort in a searchable online system. As a result, each school constructed a *Playbook* of effective strategies from which to innovate and improve. The long-term intent for schools participating in Project Momentum Arizona would be to use this resource to search and learn from exemplars provided by other successful schools.

Data support and assistance were provided by the Project Momentum Team to ensure the success of the project. Careful attention was paid to closely monitoring results from frequent short-cycle common assessments adopted or created by each collaborative team to identify teaching strategies that had the greatest impact on student learning. Following analysis, collaborative teacher teams placed emphasis on sharing these practices across all members.

By following the Project Momentum Arizona pathway, school leaders were able to develop the instructional expertise necessary to build capacity across the entire district and begin a transformation in student outcomes. It was the expectation of the Project Momentum implementation team that Avondale ESD would be able to sustain this work independently within three years.

Following the first year of implementation, Avondale ESD saw many tangible benefits begin to emerge from their participating in Project Momentum Arizona. From the baseline year of 2014-15, performance of students on the AzMerit Assessment for English Language Arts improved thirteen percentage points (13%) by the 2017-2018 school year. This growth rate was almost double the state growth rate over the same period of seven percentage points (7%). Additionally, performance of students on the AzMerit Assessment for Mathematics improved eighteen percentage points (18%) by the 2017-2018 school year. This growth rate was triple the state growth rate over the same period of six percentage points (6%). Additional benefits included improvements in teacher and principal retention, increased enrollments at some school sites and advances in state report card assessments with four schools earning ‘A’ performance ratings for the first time in district history.

The efforts of educators in Avondale Elementary School District made a lasting difference in the lives of students. Their work with Project Momentum Arizona, or G.E.A.R.S. - *Growing Educators, Achieving Results with Students* (project name rebranded by the district), increased not only student learning but also that of teachers. The shared mission of these courageous teacher leaders was to help students exceed what they think is their potential and achieve life goals without limits. All of the participants in Project Momentum Arizona are extremely proud

of this work that has benefited students, teachers and the entire school community. Their efforts to improve are ongoing.

Select References

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