

Success at the Core **Pilot Evaluation Findings**

Background

Most schools have leadership teams, but many lack the tools and direction to be more effective. Existing resources often stop short of showing what quality instruction looks like in real classrooms. While this is prevalent at all school levels, there is a particular shortage of effective and scalable methodologies for middle schools.

Success at the Core was created to meet just this need. This free professional development toolkit was designed to strengthen leadership teams' ability to define quality instruction and advocate for it in their schools, while also providing practical methods to implement quality instruction in the classroom.

Available entirely online, the toolkit includes seven modules for leadership teams; 24 practical strategies for classroom teachers; and 47 documentary-quality videos that show how highly effective leadership teams operate and what outstanding classroom instruction looks like.

This innovative approach to professional development is a collaboration between Education Development Center (EDC), a non-profit with a track record in fostering school improvement through innovative materials and professional development, and Vulcan Productions of Seattle, Paul G. Allen's award-winning film company.

Evaluation Methodology

EDC commissioned Inverness Research to conduct an independent evaluation of the pilot of *SaC* in 11 Washington State middle schools and one school district. The goal of the evaluation, conducted during the 2009-2010 school year, was to document usage of the resources and strategies in actual school settings. The major sources of data included:

- 1) On-site visits to each pilot school
- 2) In-depth telephone interviews with leadership team facilitators and documenters (designated as log-keepers for the study)
- 3) In-depth telephone interviews with teacher pilots

Evaluation Summary

Pilot results show that *SaC* is of very high quality, both substantively and in its design. According to Inverness Research, *SaC* is neither a top-down one-size-fits-all program, nor a grab bag of tricks. Rather, *SaC*'s great strength is that it is a carefully designed toolkit that a wide range of school teams and teachers can use effectively. The leadership and teaching practices that *SaC* promotes are relevant and appealing to many middle school professionals. Furthermore, the great majority of pilot leadership teams and teachers found that *SaC* modules and strategies gave them the means to enact practices and take concrete steps that began moving them closer to their own visions of professionalized school culture and engaging, high quality instruction.

SaC is based on professional literature that reflects the best thinking available from the field, which identifies effective school leadership, strong professional cultures in schools, and effective classroom instruction that

engages students in rigorous content as key elements of successful middle schools. Pilot results suggest that usage of *SaC* helps to promote growth and improvement in these areas.

The results of Inverness Research's pilot evaluation also suggest that *SaC* addresses a felt need in the field, because it is of high quality and is readily usable, and because usage of it promotes improvement in critically important areas. Inverness Research believes (and we agree) *SaC* has strong potential to make a substantial long-term contribution to middle schools' instructional improvement efforts.

Key Findings

Pilot results suggest that *SaC* has very strong potential to contribute to instructional improvement in middle schools. Inverness Research evaluated the toolkit on five criteria: quality, relevance, usability, value and impact. Top-line results from the evaluation are below.

Quality – Piloters found the full suite of materials to be very high quality and well-designed. The videos stood out for everyone as exceptionally high in quality and the modules and strategies were regarded as comprehensive.

Relevance – For both leadership teams and teacher piloters, the materials were strongly relevant, and the topics, questions, strategies, and research-based resources all resonated with the school improvement climate within which the leadership teams and teacher piloters work.

Usability –The website was readily understandable and easy to navigate, and the materials were clearly organized. With preparation, facilitators and teachers could put the modules or strategies to use with confidence and can garner the results, as the materials were well structured and flexible.

Value –The Leadership Development modules had great value in enabling leadership teams to build the collegial relationships that are vital to developing professional learning communities, and they gave these teams the tools to foster professional discussions that really did focus on instructional improvement. The Teacher Development strategies were valuable in giving teachers the know-how and the inspiration to put into practice teaching approaches that they believe in, but either did not know how to do or had not put the effort into doing well or consistently.

Impact – The Leadership Development modules had observable impact on the areas of building leadership capacity and strengthening professional culture. Professional dialogue within pilot school leadership teams became more focused on instructional improvement, with an underlying improvement in tone and the quality of relationships. The Teacher Development strategies led to changes or refinements in pilot teachers' classroom practices. Teachers reported that these changes improved the quality of students' learning experiences, including greater engagement with the content and with one another, and more responsible participation in their own learning.

Inverness Research's evaluation of *SaC* determined the toolkit can be used effectively by a wide range of school teams and teachers, and fulfills an immediate need in the field by giving leadership teams and teachers a means to enact practices and take concrete steps that will move them closer to their own visions of high quality instruction.

To learn more about Success at the Core please visit www.successatthecore.com or email info@successatthecore.com.