

McREL helps Expeditionary Learning connect program to outcomes



The Challenge

Using a whole-school, whole-child approach, Expeditionary Learning partners with schools and districts to open new schools and convert existing schools through professional development, curriculum planning, and new school structures (e.g., interdisciplinary classes and cross-grade grouping). In Expeditionary Learning schools, students engage in team-based, interdisciplinary “learning expeditions,” including fieldwork, case studies, projects, and service learning—all with an underlying focus on culture and character. Although research supports the overall effectiveness of the program, the organization’s theory of action (the program’s features and intended outcomes) was broad, and it lacked a survey instrument to measure certain student qualities, such as effort, persistence, and motivation, which, though not strictly academic, are linked to student achievement, according to many research studies.

Strategic Solution

Expeditionary Learning’s original theory of action was organized into three categories (Habits of Work and Character, Motivation to Learn, and Student Success Outcomes) and 45 subcomponents. McREL **research and evaluation** experts worked with program staff to revise and refine those categories into four, adding Engagement in Learning and making Character and Motivation two separate categories. They also reduced the subcomponents to 10, focusing on those that were most important to the program and could be linked to existing educational psychology concepts. McREL staff then reviewed existing instruments that demonstrated validity and reliability to compile a survey that measures student perceptions of these subcomponents.

Andrea Beesley, the study’s principal investigator, noted, “We worked with Expeditionary Learning to define the ‘it’ of their program. The instrument that we developed, and the data it collects, will help Expeditionary Learning measure the active, essential ingredients that lead to their success.”

Results

McREL piloted the survey instrument in grades 4–12 in five schools in the Denver metro area and found that it performed as intended and measured the constructs that Expeditionary Learning wanted to measure. Expeditionary Learning can now track results across schools, link their core program components and theory of action to student achievement outcomes, and begin to determine how their practices and programs can foster the kinds of results that they want.

Next Steps

Expeditionary Learning has won a grant from Nellie Mae to work with McREL to study student-centered learning practices, specifically student-involved assessment in an Expeditionary Learning school in Springfield, Massachusetts, which has demonstrated a high level of implementation fidelity to the program. McREL researchers will conduct an experimental two-year study of student outcomes for children who were able to enroll in the school via lottery as compared to children who were not admitted via the lottery. Through classroom observations, teacher focus groups, and achievement data analysis, researchers will examine what the school is doing to foster its own success, so that future work can investigate the effects of Expeditionary Learning in multiple schools.