Using Common Formative Assessments to Promote Student Achievement: A Case Study of Culture, Leadership and Practice

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Abstract

This qualitative case study analyzed the perceptions of third, fourth, and fifth grade-level teachers via six focus group discussions. In addition, three leadership interviews and an open-ended online survey gleaned additional insights from the instructional staff at this upper elementary school. Evidence indicated the use of common formative assessments in this school did contribute to sustained mathematics achievement. Three major themes emerged: The focus and alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessments, using assessment data to drive instruction, and differentiating instruction to meet student learning needs. Four predominant types of leadership facilitated the implementation and effective use of common formative assessments: (a) renewal leadership, (b) moral/ethical leadership, (c) instructional leadership, and (d) distributed leadership. Cultural characteristics that emerged as having significant contributions included: (a) reculture, (b) teacher collaboration, (c) high expectations, and (d) caring relationships. This study was significant as it describes the practices, types of leadership, and cultural characteristics of an upper elementary school that has effectively implemented common formative assessments and has experienced a 29% gain in mathematics scores since implementation. Discussion of study findings would be useful for school leaders seeking to implement strategies, especially assessment strategies, in efforts to increase student achievement.