

Cargill Core Knowledge Connection

Key evaluation findings in the third year

Student achievement

Achievement test scores were analyzed for Dowling and Longfellow elementary school students at the end of the third year of Core Knowledge implementation. Core Knowledge students did significantly better in math than other students in Minneapolis. Their overall reading scores were not significantly better; however, small differences in first graders' scores on the Oral Reading Assessment indicate a possible positive impact for Core Knowledge. In addition, Kindergarten tests (which assess some reading skills, but no math skills) also show some evidence of an advantage for students who attended the Core Knowledge "Hi-5" preschool program.

Student interest

As in previous years, teachers in schools at the end of the second year of implementation rated children's response to Core Knowledge curriculum compared to other curriculum. These ratings suggest Core Knowledge had a modest positive impact on student enthusiasm, but minimal or no effect on attentiveness, quality of homework, classroom engagement, or cooperation. This result is less positive than for the earlier schools in their second year, but appears to be related mainly to the later schools' more challenging populations of students.

Some teachers in the later schools did report that children with Core Knowledge experience "are better able to connect facts to their own lives," and that they "have a higher level of factual knowledge." The more experience teachers had with Core Knowledge, the more likely they were to report such positive effects on children.

About Core Knowledge

The Core Knowledge curriculum is based on the idea that education is more effective when all students learn a specified body of common content in a coordinated, grade-by-grade sequence that permits them to build on prior learning without repetition or gaps. It strives to promote equity by not assuming students will learn needed information from sources outside of school.

Outcomes for schools at the end of the third year of implementation

- Almost all are meeting their goals for the amount of Core curriculum being taught, in the content areas planned.
- Teachers show a significant level of commitment to, and investment in, the use of Core Knowledge.
- Principals report that parents are relatively familiar with the kinds of content being taught, and pleased with what their children are learning.
- All first-round schools have institutionalized Core Knowledge into at least some components of their on-going operations. Most have incorporated it in a number of different ways, including screening new teaching candidates for commitment to Core Knowledge, setting up organizational structures for planning and monitoring curriculum to be taught, and building common planning time into school schedules.

Implementation

Implementation has strengthened in every participating school over the course of the 2004-05 school year.

- Most schools have maintained relatively high levels of Core curriculum used.
- In most schools, a strong foundation of resource materials has been acquired and made accessible to teachers.

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- Common planning time is in place in all schools but one.
- Most schools have completed a “curriculum mapping” to compare Core curriculum with prior curriculum and/or state standards. Among schools in their third year, there is considerable evidence of curriculum integration across grade levels and disciplines.
- Implementation is more advanced in schools where the principal has shown strong leadership in promoting a vision for the use of Core Knowledge, motivated the staff to adopt it, and led efforts to develop and monitor planning for its implementation.

Almost all schools feel the Humanities Commission has been responsive in planning and offering the kinds of training and other support that are suitable to their specific needs and interests. In particular, the grade-level roundtables in January 2005 were very enthusiastically received.

Implementation challenges

The most common challenges mentioned are student and staff mobility; testing requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act (which place a priority on reading and math skills); and large time requirements for professional development, preparation of new lessons, and fitting additional content into the instructional day. All schools also report challenges related to the need to adapt lesson content and instructional materials for students who have low reading levels or limited English fluency, or are from cultures not in the American mainstream. In addition, the costs for Core Knowledge resources and staff development are significant, and likely would not have been possible without the grant funding.

Issues to consider

The experiences of participating schools so far bear out earlier findings that school leadership, acquisition and accessibility of new resource materials, and availability of common planning time are important.

The additional experience from another year suggests the following are also important considerations in attaining a successful, sustainable level of implementation:

- Gradual introduction of new content, rather than trying to do the entire scope and sequence in the first year.
- Opportunities for personal observation and mentoring with peers in other schools who have greater experience using Core Knowledge.
- Training (and other support) that is highly individualized to schools’ specific needs.

About the study

The Cargill Core Knowledge Connection is funded by the Cargill Foundation and administered by the Minnesota Humanities Commission. It enables nine Minneapolis-area public, alternative, and charter elementary schools and preschools to implement the Core Knowledge curriculum. The first round of six schools received grants beginning in 2001 and ending in December 2005. Three additional schools were awarded grants in a second round one year later. Wilder Research is evaluating the initiative to help the participating organizations understand the challenges involved in implementation, the kinds of training and technical assistance that help, and the kinds of outcomes that occur for students and schools.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the full report, *Cargill Core Knowledge Connection: Evaluation findings in the third year*. For more information about this report, contact Ellen Shelton at Wilder Research Center, 651-637-2470.

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