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PRINCIPALS FELLOWSHIP**

911! What's Your Emergency?

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2023 Cahn Cohort

ABSTRACT

After the pandemic, student achievement and social emotional wellness was at an all time low. Our school was on life support, and we were in triage mode! We realized in order to survive, we had to come out of triage mode and put together a long range strategic plan if a cure was ever going to be achieved. After examining the data, the only thing that could resuscitate our school was a continuous healthy dose of MTSS. With tailored support that caters to each student, Robert A. Black Magnet embodied a new way of learning that pushes students to their greatest potential.

INTRODUCTION

Our Cahn project focused on using MTSS(Multi-Tiered Systems of Support) as a catalyst for improving student achievement and social emotional learning. This helped close academic gaps due to a learning loss experienced during the pandemic. Historically, intervention has been instrumental in our work as we support our students by meeting their needs through personalized and differentiated instruction. School-wide MTSS implementation began with solidifying a process that teachers could utilize to address student needs. During this year of implementation, teachers participated in professional development, observational feedback, and intervention support. This project was important because it allowed our school to develop and implement a viable MTSS process.

Founded in 1968 as the first magnet school in the United States of America, Robert A. Black Magnet Elementary School is a prominent Chicago Public School that was destined to seek change, exceed expectations, and pivot to create equitable opportunities for all. Located on the Southeast side of Chicago, Illinois, split into two campuses, Black holds a place for students to

thrive at both the Main, located on 9101 S Euclid Ave, and the Branch, located four miles away on 7133 S Coles. The Branch houses grades kindergarten to third and the Main houses grades fourth to eighth with an average classroom size of twenty one students; two classroom cohorts per grade. Students are selected through a lottery that is open to families from all over the city of Chicago, resulting in a diverse group of students from different neighborhoods, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds. We serve a population of 389 students currently. Of our 389 students, approximately 98% of our students are Black/African-American and 2% are LatinX/Hispanic. In addition, 72% of our students are from low-income households.

Our mission at Robert. A Black Magnet is to provide a rigorous education in a safe, respectful, and inclusive environment to develop effective innovators. With a growth mindset, we foster equitable opportunities that cultivate critical thinkers, collaborative learners, and student voice. We value teamwork and strategic partnerships to build global leaders. Through this mission, we have developed our vision of "Building Tomorrow's Leaders". In order to develop an environment of change agents, we teach one grade level ahead, pushing the limits that are constantly placed upon our Black and Brown children. Our staff, made up of twenty-four teachers, creates culturally responsive lesson plans that aim to reach each student, regardless of their academic tier placement. As principal, I worked with my assistant principal, team of teachers, administrators, and other staff members to develop a cohesive plan that works to decrease the deficits that we see in class, emphasize skills necessary to engage in higher level learning, and ultimately develop young leaders that are ready to take on anything that comes their way.

After four months of working on this project, our Network Chief invited us to share how this project was growing our data and achieving the highest growth in the network for our K-2 team.

While we are committed to the growth of our students both socially and academically, we are still a work in progress. In this narrative you will learn what it takes to reimagine education, build resilience, and ultimately thrive again.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Robert A. Black Magnet School is notoriously known for its push to raise the bar for our students. Year after year, students would rise to the occasion and meet or exceed expectations on class, district-wide, and state assessments. However, after the pandemic, we saw a decline in scores. In the year of 2020-2021, at the height of the pandemic, only 16.13% of our third to eighth grade students were on grade level in reading (*Appendix A - IAR ELA Proficiency*). We were left wondering “Did we raise the bar too high? Should we lower our expectations for our students? What leadership moves did we need to make to change the narrative?”

Our teachers at Black were struggling to create lessons that were engaging because so many of our students were unable to access the material due to various reasons. What do we do as leaders to alleviate the pressure that was inevitably placed on our teachers? How can we support our students both academically and emotionally after an isolation period that no one saw coming? As a team, we identified our first cause of the decline in scores- curriculum. Our core curriculum no longer met the cultural needs of our students post pandemic. After reading Zaretta Hammond’s *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, she explains how

our brain is comprised of emotions that can either ignite our learning or guard us from it (amygdala). Hammond states:

From neuroscience, we know emotions are contagious, so if one person in the classroom gets emotionally hijacked, it's likely others will be infected with anxiety, resistance, or disengagement. So just as we take precautions not to spread physical viruses, we want to avoid spreading toxic emotions that make everyone reactive rather than responsive. Remember that the brain has a **negativity bias**, meaning that the brain is more than 20 times more focused on negative experiences than on positive ones (Hammond, 66).

Our students were becoming more frustrated in class because they did not understand the material, it was not engaging, and overall they could not relate to it. The once positive culture in Robert A. Black's classrooms became extremely grim, pushing our students further away from our goal. We needed to figure out a way to "ignite our learning" for both students and staff alike. We were on a mission to rebuild the positive culture we once had throughout our school. After surveys, discussions, and a slew of data deep dives, we as a school decided to focus the root of our work on learning loss. This led us to our driving question:

How could we close the achievement gap by a minimum of 10%?

By focusing on the systems we currently have that places learning at the forefront, we needed to make a choice- revamp or remove. Curriculum was the first major change we as a school need to make. We decided to engage with the SKYLINE ELA curriculum which aims to leverage our students' multitude of cultures and backgrounds. This was the first step to closing the gap; however, we knew that would only scratch the surface of what we were seeking out to do. With the rise in deficits that our students had across grade bands, our previous MTSS model was not equipped to produce results that were needed to close the achievement gap caused by the pandemic. Moreover, our Cahn project was an opportunity to create a revamped MTSS

model that tailors to all students ranging from tier 1 to 3 at a larger capacity. In order to close the achievement gap through the means of MTSS, teachers must develop cohesive plans that address the foundational skills that our students lack, actively engage students in consistent small group support that teaches the conceptual and procedural skills of aforementioned skills, ending in student mastery of several skills that were previously labeled as deficits.

METHODS

We utilized the problem solving method throughout this process to arrive at our results. The problem solving method consists of identifying the problem of practice and the goal. In order to identify the problem we used several methods of data collection. We used Data deep dives, round table discussions, interviews with key stakeholders, and student and staff surveys.

Once we determined the problem, we had to determine the root cause. We used the five whys root cause analysis protocol and the fishbone cause and effect organizer to help us narrow down the root cause. We determined 5 root causes. The first was that our core curriculum no longer met the cultural needs of our students after the pandemic - A lack of a strong core curriculum, increased the need for more students needing tier two and three MTSS supports. The second root cause was that we had weak systems and structures around MTSS to help close the achievement gap caused by the Pandemic. The third root cause was that staff had a fixed mindset that saw MTSS as “extra work” that didn’t move student achievement. The fourth root cause was that we had a lack of human and material resources to implement a high quality MTSS program. The fifth and final root cause was that there was an increase in students

needing support with social emotional learning (SEL) after the trauma caused by the pandemic, especially in our primary department.

After determining the root cause, we had to explore possible solutions as part of the problem solving process. We used a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis to explore possible solutions. From there we conducted a brainstorming session with a variety of stakeholders. Finally, we used the open narrow close method to arrive at our solutions. When looking at each root cause we looked at solutions from a technical and adaptive stand point.

Next, as part of the problem solving process, we created and implemented a strategic action plan that included key milestones along the way. We utilized the Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CWIP) format when developing the plan. We looked at each root cause and developed a strategic plan that included both technical and adaptive fixes. Our technical solution to address our poor tier one, core curriculum was adopting the district's funded, culturally responsive, standards based, vertically aligned, rigorous Curriculum – ELA Skyline. We also provided frequent job embedded professional development to teachers year round in multiple formats. From an adaptive perspective, we were careful to only adopt one core curriculum, ELA, that year; so teachers would not feel overwhelmed. We also changed the mindsets of staff through literature, reflective thinking and PLCs. These methods helped teachers understand that culturally responsive teaching is the complex combination of background, history, fears, interests and desires that create a personality beyond race, ethnicity, ability or gender. Finally, we created buy-in by having teachers be a part of the decision making process through the ILT when choosing the new curriculum

Next, our strategic plan addressed our weak systems and structures around MTSS. From a technical standpoint, we utilized Branching Minds- a digital MTSS Platform with fidelity and implemented stronger monitoring systems. We also provide created structures such as the data cycle calendars, MTSS Binders, and Built-in time for MTSS in the daily schedule. In addition, we provide support through a teacher lead, fully functioning MTSS committee. Finally, we provided professional development to help teachers navigate the new systems and structures and Universal Screeners. From an adaptive perspective, we used distributive leadership to build capacity within our teacher leaders to lead this work. We also used MTSS help request forms to help us tier our support and adapt to the individual needs of teachers.

Additionally, our strategic plan addressed the Staff's fixed mindset that saw MTSS as "extra work" that didn't move student achievement. On the technical side, we provided built-in time during the work day and after school compensation to our teachers to complete MTSS tasks. We also provided office hours to provide teacher-to-teacher support from our teacher MTSS leads and team members. Our adaptive solutions included changing mindsets though focusing on the positive results of those implementing MTSS with fidelity and sharing their success. Another adaptive solution was focusing on the "Leader in Me" paradigm shift - Everyone has genius - Believing all students can achieve. No longer would we as leaders except the excuse....."because of the pandemic we can't...". Instead, our focus would shift to a focus on our circle of control- a focus on things that we have control over. Our final adaptive solution was utilizing the thinking preference inventory from our learning in Cahn to have courageous conversations that inspired and motivated our staff to champion the work ahead of them to bring about real change.

Our strategic plan also addressed the lack of human and material resources to implement a high quality MTSS program. Our technical solutions included investing in an Interventionist that focused primarily on Kdg-3rd grade (district funded). Another technical solution was moving from a one man MTSS Lead to a MTSS team to provide teacher lead support. We also invested in some research based interventions such as IReady Suit and Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) Kits to broaden our intervention tool kit at the school level. The adaptive solution was around having courageous conversations with the Local School Council (LSC) to approve the budget for software programs, extended hours for the PLCs, positions, and afterschool.

Finally, our strategic plan focused on solutions around support for our increasing population of students needing support with SEL after the pandemic, especially in our primary department. As a technical solution we hired a second counselor. We also created a referral system for students in need of tier 2 and 3 support. Our adaptive approach was the work around changing hearts and minds regarding handling student misconduct. We moved from a punitive approach to a trauma informed approach through Professional Development and training and case studies.

The last part of the problem solving approach was to analyze the results and reflect on the process. As I reflect, there were a lot of lessons learned and new learning that took place throughout our journey. This approach forced us to slow down and really listen to our stakeholders. We realized that the Robert A. Black school we once knew was forever changed by the pandemic and we had to relearn our students. Our priorities had to shift. One of the biggest lessons we learned was that we could not assume that over time things would automatically

return to normal. We had to learn what our new normal was and how to navigate in this new world. This required us to apply many of the new strategies and learning for the Cahn Fellows program. As leaders, we had to examine our own strengths and consider our communication styles as well as the communication styles of those around us by utilizing Dr. Anthony Hacking's NBI Assessment tool. We had to look at every problem from an adaptive and technical approach. It forced us to have courageous conversations to create the needed buy-in, motivation and inspiration to bring everyone together to do the heavy lifting needed.

We also had to face the fact that our staff wasn't as skilled as we thought at differentiating their instruction. There was a huge learning curve that we didn't realize existed because we were not accustomed to having students that were two and three years below level. This experience forced us to learn how to personalize and differentiate learning, prioritize SEL and build capacity within our staff through distributive leadership. In addition, it forced us to focus on the needs of the students in front of us and not rely on past successes and tradition. But most, importantly, it forced us to slow down long enough to start the healing process. This experience ultimately helped us become a more collaborative, cohesive, and student focused community.

RESULTS

In the year of 2020-2021, at the height of the pandemic, only 16.13% of our third to eighth grade students were on grade level in reading (*Appendix A - IAR ELA Proficiency*). Our goal was to increase the percentage of students at or or above grade level by 10% on the ELA Illinois assessment of readiness. By utilizing the problem solving process, strategic planning,

leveraging resources, and distributive leadership, we exceeded our goal. By the end of the 2022-2023 school year we had 50.94% of our students at or above grade level in ELA. We exceeded our 2020-2021 ELS score by 34.81% and had exceeded our growth goal of 10% by 24.81% (See Appendix C - IAR ELA Proficiency 2020-2021 and 2022-2023) .

Historically, 3rd grade has had the worst scores in our district. This is an indication of the need to provide more intervention, training and support in our primary grades. Therefore a great deal of our resources went towards closing the achievement gap in 3rd grade. When comparing our scores to network 12, we scored 47% compared to the network's score of 13% in math. We outpaced the network by 33%. When comparing our scores to the Chicago Public School district, we scored 47% compared to the district's score of 26% in math. We outscored the district by 20% on the ELA state assessment (See Appendix D - IAR 3rd Grade ONLY Achievement Gap Comparison District, Network 12, Black Magnet)

Not only did we surpass the goal we set for ourselves, our scores out paced the district and the network scores in ELA. When comparing our scores to network 12, we scored 51% compared to the network's score of 16% in ELA. We outpaced the network by 34%. When comparing our scores to the Chicago Public School district, we scored 51% compared to the district's score of 26% in ELA. We outscored the district by 25% on the ELA state assessment (See Appendix E - IAR 3rd - 8th Grade Achievement Gap Comparison District, Network 12, Black Magnet).

In addition to closing the achievement gap, many more positive outcomes were achieved. For our teachers, we developed buy-in, developed a shared vision around closing the achievement gap, cultivated a culture of collaboration where we all shared the heavy lifting.

Through our distributive leadership approach, we were able to build the capacity amongst our staff and focus on data driven decisions. Finally, we were able to reduce the number of unnecessary teacher referrals for special education for black and brown students.

Positive outcomes for our students included being able to provide individualized instruction tailored to their needs, increase student attendance, and increase student engagement. Another positive student outcome included fostering positive student teacher relationships and providing equitable learning opportunities. Students were also able to begin the healing process from the trauma caused by the pandemic which allowed them to be more present at school. Finally, students learned to become data driven and took ownership of their learning through goal setting.

REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

I only had 3 three years under my belt as the principal at Robert A. Black Magnet School before the pandemic hit. When the pandemic hit, I was in my fourth year as principal. We had been making nice strides towards our goals until then. However, normally in your fourth year of transformational leadership, you really start to see all of your hard work and efforts start to gel together and you can see noticeable change happen. Unfortunately, in CPS, this fourth year was riddled with obstacles. This year started out with a teacher strike and ended with the pandemic. I didn't realize it at the time, but any and all momentum and progress we had achieved came to a halt by the end of that year. And, things only got worse the longer the pandemic went on. Seeing our single digit scores after the pandemic was humbling. It was during this time I thought about my time as an Cahn Ally in 2015 and how the training and support from Cahn

helped us tackle a major issue at my former school. I reflected on how my Cahn experience as an Ally prepared me for my role as a principal. This humbling experience and reflection led me to reaching back out to my Cahn roots and applying to be a Cahn Fellow. I was in need of the support and ideas of the talented pool of Cahn Fellows and Allies from across the country; and the Cahn program did not disappoint.

Through Cahn, my year of new learning with some of the best and brightest minds in education, helped me reimagine what school looks like after the pandemic. My experience with Cahn this year has made me a more reflective practitioner. The diversity of the program has helped me think outside the box. It has helped my Ally and I grow together as a team and build our capacity as leaders. This year of learning has forever changed our thinking and how we problem solve and engage with our stakeholders.

In addition to my growth and reflection as a leader, Cahn has built the capacity of my Ally. As co-leaders of our school, we have worked together to create the theory of action for this project. My Ally has learned from me how to use the theory of action for school change along with the readings and discussions from Cahn.

At the beginning of our journey, my Ally found out about her communication and leading preferences. Through the use of the NBI assessment and the activities led by Dr. Anthony Hacking, she was able to see that her preferences didn't always show in her actions. She was able to find her true communication and leading preferences and begin to modify her communications with all stakeholders. She has reached out to me for advice before having difficult conversations with staff, parents, and students. We have discussed her delivery approach in order to motivate her team. She has used what she learned from Drs. Young/Riehl

when they presented on Developing & Using a Theory of Action for School Change. I have seen her show understanding and compassion using adult developmental theory and its practical applications for supporting adult growth. I am most impressed by her commitment and collaborative work with the MTSS Team. She has been able to provide substantial feedback to the team in a way that motivated them to come up with the team's action plan for the next school year. My Ally has helped the team members to become team leaders and first responders to address the needs of our school. She has taken on the responsibility of making this project better and sustainable. Under her leadership, the team has put systems in place that will exist even if any stakeholder leaves.

Beyond our own growth as leaders, we are still working to close achievement gaps for our students. This year we are adding math achievement to our problem of practice. This year, we are also focusing on progress monitoring while working with students during small group instruction for MTSS. Consistent monitoring will provide feedback to the student, teacher, and teacher teams. The monitoring will be used to document students' progress in the Branching Minds platform. This information from Branching Minds will be used to document and share information to parents and the MTSS team.

Parent Communication is another area we will work on to improve this year. Many parents do not understand MTSS. They are unaware of the benefits and how this process is used in the evaluation of students for special education. We aim to make them partners in this process. We want to inform and provide parents with the tools to help their students achieve their goals for MTSS.

We will continue to survey, observe and provide feedback, and collaborate with all parties to make sure we are all working together with a clear understanding of the goal and how to achieve it. We expect to learn from our parents and their needs as we collaborate with them through this journey.

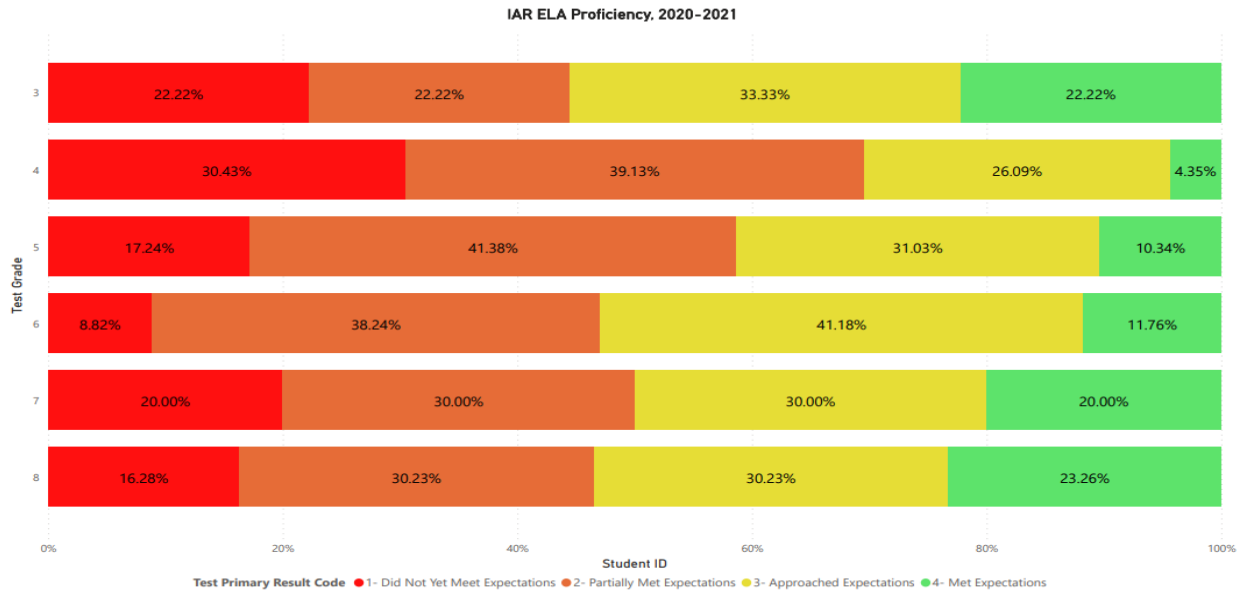
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Cahn Fellows Program for helping us grow as leaders. We would also like to thank [Barbara McKeon](#) and the Cahn leadership team for the amazing year of learning, professional development, and collaboration. In addition, we want to thank our fellow Cahn Fellows and Allies for being thought partners and pushing our thinking by sharing their thoughts, ideas, wisdom, experiences and expertise with the group. We grew as professionals and personally through the shared experiences and collaborative spirit of the Tenacious 20. We would also like to thank our Chicago Cahn crew. We have helped each other along the way and have built bonds that will last well beyond our year of learning together. We would also like to thank our alumni advisors, Stacey Stewart and Allison Tingwall, for their guidance and support. Thank you to our Network 12 Chief, Shenethe Parks, our Deputy Chief of Network 12, [Zaneta Abdul-Ahad](#), and Network 13 Chief, Terrycita Perry, for their unwavering support and belief in our ability to lead change in our school. I want to acknowledge the hard work and tenacity of the staff and teacher leaders of Robert A. Black Magnet School and especially our former MTSS Lead, Shiree Caradine and our current MTSS Lead, Olivia Singleton. Thank you to our personal families for their support and love. Thank you to the students who did the work day after day. We appreciate the families and community of Robert A. Black for

your trust and dedication to our students. We could not have done this work without each and everyone of you!

APPENDIX

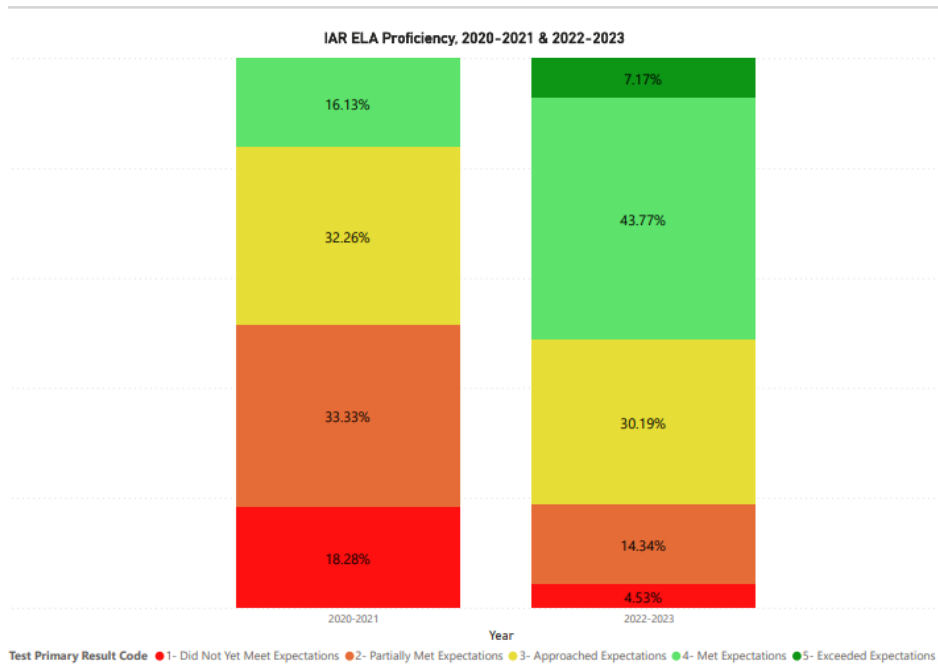
Appendix A - IAR ELA Proficiency 2020-2021 Data



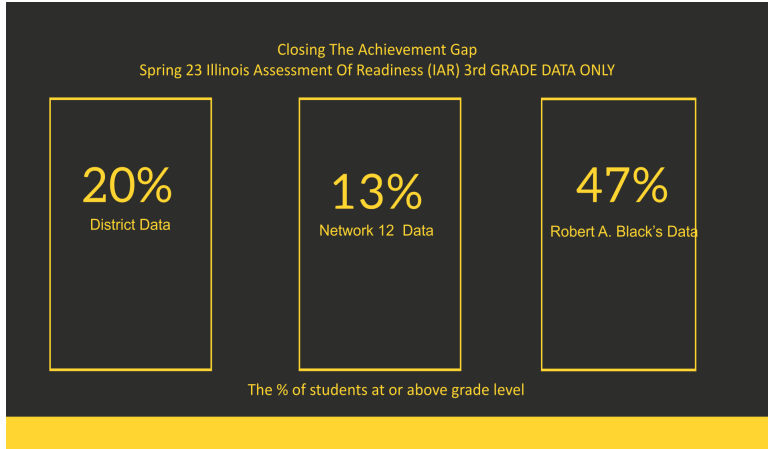
Appendix B - Outcomes Table

Staff	Students
TEACHER/STAFF BUY- IN	STUDENTS WERE PROVIDED WITH INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTIONS SPECIFIC TO THEIR NEEDS
SHARED VISION AROUND CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP	INCREASED STUDENT ATTENDANCE
COLLABORATION - SHARING THE HEAVY LIFTING	INCREASED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
BUILDING CAPACITY AMONG STAFF	FOSTERED POSITIVE STUDENT/TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS
FOCUS ON DATA DRIVEN DECISIONS	PROVIDED STUDENTS WITH EQUITABLE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES
REDUCED THE NUMBER OF SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRALS FOR BLACK AND BROWN MALE STUDENTS AND THE GENERAL POPULATION	STUDENTS BECAME DATA DRIVEN AND TOOK OWNERSHIP OF THEIR LEARNING THROUGH GOAL SETTING
SUPPORT STAFF SUCCESSFULLY CONTRIBUTED TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EXPECTED OUTCOMES	

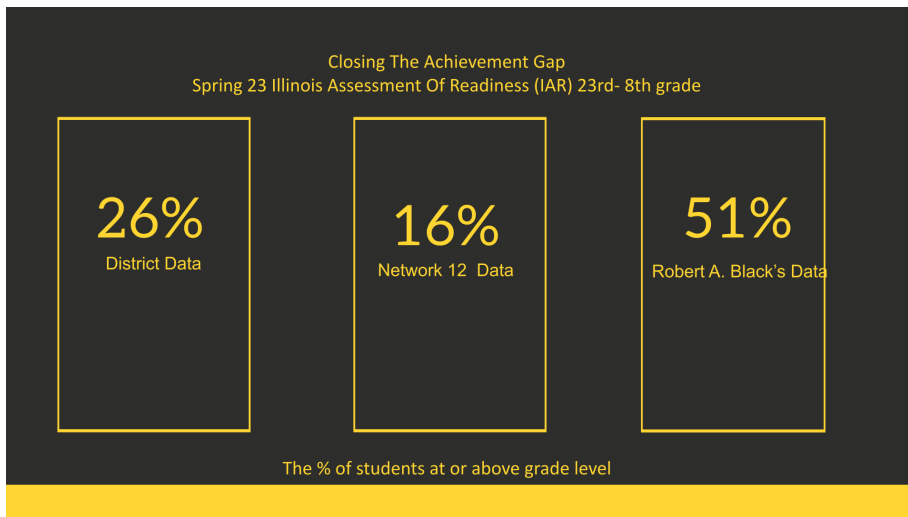
Appendix C - IAR ELA Proficiency 2020-2021 and 2022-2023



Appendix D - IAR 3rd Grade ONLY Achievement Gap Comparison District, Network 12, Black Magnet for Math



Appendix E - IAR 3rd - 8th Grade Achievement Gap Comparison District, Network 12, Black Magnet for Reading



CITATION

Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. Corwin.