



A suite of services brings cohesion to districts in Michigan's Eastern Upper Peninsula



The Challenge

Michigan's Eastern Upper Peninsula Intermediate School District (EUPISD) oversees 19 small, rural school districts across 4,000 square miles. Slightly more than half of the 7,300 students receive free or reduced-priced lunch.

District leaders struggled for years with low student achievement and test scores that consistently lagged behind the state average. "Our scores were not where we wanted them to be," says Michelle Ribant, the district's director of general education.

To help improve results, the district homed in on three areas of focus: develop a common curriculum, strengthen principals' leadership skills, and improve professional development for teachers.

Strategic Solution

First, superintendents came together to rebuild the existing curriculum, which was "in disarray," says Ribant. Assessments for reading and math in grades 1–8 were also redesigned to align better with state assessments.

The district then turned its attention to school leadership, using *School Leadership That Works* as a guide. McREL's groundbreaking research on principal and superintendent behaviors and practices that lead to increased student achievement is the basis of the book and of the *Balanced Leadership*® program, which guides principals in putting into practice 21 responsibilities of effective principals.

When McREL included EUPISD in a grant proposal to the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) for a study of the impact of *Balanced Leadership* on student achievement at the elementary level, the district had the opportunity to participate in an 18-month training program. Matt Seebaum, principal consultant with McREL, said, "That brought a common language for leadership to the Eastern Upper Peninsula and a way for principals to connect with each other."

The district also took part in McREL's *Power Walkthrough*® training to align instructional strategies with classroom observations. Based on *Classroom Instruction That Works (2nd ed.)*, the *Power Walkthrough* software allows principals to collect data that inform professional development, which provided EUPISD with a systemic way to focus on continuous improvement.

And, because EUPISD had several technology projects underway at the time, Ribant says, they added *Using Technology with Classroom Instruction That Works* training. The workshops McREL delivered to 650 teachers helped the district better integrate technology across the board.

Results

District leaders credit McREL's suite of services for helping turn around student achievement. On recent state assessments, Ribant says, students scored at or above the state average in proficiency in all grades (3–8) in both reading and math; moreover, EUPISD scores are improving at a faster rate than those of other districts in the region.

The USDOE study showed that teachers' level of satisfaction has increased; they are communicating better with principals and are more open to participating in school-level committees and task forces, says Seebaum. Ribant has also seen more collaboration between the EUPISD and its districts and among the districts themselves.

"We needed a systemic approach to frame leadership, assessment, data monitoring and instruction," says Ribant. "That's what McREL has given us—the ability to strategically approach an educational system and improve it on behalf of kids."

Next Steps

District leaders are focusing next on strengthening school leadership and student performance at the high school level.