

Success Story

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# From Device-Centric Instruction To Student-Led Learning: How Arthur Elementary Achieved Schoolwide Success



**INSTRUCTIONAL  
EMPOWERMENT**

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# Executive Summary

This success story examines the implementation of Instructional Empowerment's Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning at Arthur Elementary School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Field interviews of teachers, instructional coaches, and school and district leaders were conducted in 2024.

## The Challenge

Arthur Elementary School faced significant academic and behavioral challenges. Students were disengaged, and academic performance was among the lowest in the district. Instruction was largely technology focused.

## Partnership

In 2018, new principal Ronda Hamilton partnered with Instructional Empowerment to implement the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, shifting from device-centric instruction to a more rigorous, student-led learning approach. As the partnership evolved, Arthur Elementary began to use Instructional Empowerment's Rigor Appraisal, a non-evaluative tool that measures the

effectiveness of instructional systems in schools and can predict student achievement without additional testing and is correlated to student attendance, behavior, and school culture. To support their implementation of the model, Arthur's principal and staff also received expert leadership and faculty coaching from Instructional Empowerment.

## Results and Notable Changes

- Classrooms transformed from device-centric to student-led environments, resulting in students becoming more active participants in their learning.
- Student engagement and academic performance improved, with the school seeing student assessment growth across multiple areas.
- School leaders noted a decrease in behavioral challenges as students developed enhanced collaboration, problem-solving, and communication skills.
- Educators adopted more strategic lesson planning aligned with standards and reported increased teaching effectiveness.

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# The Challenges of Technology-Focused Instruction

When Ronda Hamilton became principal of Arthur Elementary School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma at the start of the 2018-2019 school year, she faced the challenge of improving academics. Hamilton noted, “When I came to Arthur, the academics were really low.” In addition, staff identified the school as low-income.

The school had previously emphasized technology integration, resulting in device-centric instruction for students. Hamilton explained, “All of their assignments, everything they did throughout the day was on a device.”

Dr. Laura Morris, the district’s Instructional Leadership Director, reflected:

“Arthur was a technology school. Every single child had a device and the instruction, for the most part, was in that format. Students were mostly engaged with their devices.”

While technology can be a useful classroom tool, research shows that excessive screen time can harm students’ social and emotional development. Studies link prolonged screen exposure to impaired interpersonal skills, including difficulty reading facial expressions and social cues (Goswami & Parekh, 2023). This overuse may hinder students’ ability to form meaningful relationships and navigate social situations effectively.

The negative effects of excessive screen time can manifest in various ways within the classroom setting. At Arthur, this disengagement manifested as challenging behaviors. Hamilton noted “a lot of discipline and behavior problems.” She recognized that the instructional approach itself was the source of these challenges, observing, “If kids aren’t engaged, then they find other things to do. They’re not focused on learning.”

## A Partner to Transform Students’ Lives

Recognizing the need for change at Arthur, Principal Ronda Hamilton was determined to find a new approach. “I realized that I have to take the computers away,” she shared. “It’s not a bad thing, but nothing beats a teacher.”

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*“I knew it was something that would be beneficial to teach teachers, in order to teach students to be successful.”*

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In her search for solutions, Hamilton learned

about the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning. This model, which emphasizes rigorous, student-led learning approaches, was already being implemented at another Oklahoma City public school. Intrigued by its potential, Hamilton attended a professional development workshop on the model.

After experiencing the workshop, Hamilton became convinced of its value. “I knew it was something that would be beneficial to teach teachers, in order to teach students to be successful.” Hamilton saw the potential

partnership as a way to support educators by not only enhancing their craft but also by coaching them to gain strategies to support students in taking ownership of their learning.

For additional support in implementing the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, Hamilton also ensured she and her staff received expert coaching. Research shows that the more coaching days a school receives from Instructional Empowerment, the higher the student achievement (Basileo et al., 2024).

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Dr. Laura Morris, the district’s Instructional Leadership Director, was already familiar with the model and supported Hamilton’s initiative. Morris noted that she previously “saw the

possibilities of bringing 21st century workplace thinking into elementary schools.” She believed this approach could be a means of “increasing our levels of engagement,” particularly for Special Education students and English Learners, as it would provide these students “the opportunities to use their voice.”

Furthermore, Dr. Morris was intrigued by the comprehensive nature of the partnership. She explained, “It addresses every piece of what makes or breaks a school. It’s not just about climate. It’s not just about culture. It’s not just about professional development for teachers or students. It covers every single system within a school.”

Driven by her commitment to improving Arthur Elementary, Hamilton took the lead in partnering with Instructional Empowerment to implement the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning. This proactive step marked a significant shift away from the school’s previous technology-focused instruction and toward an approach that empowered students to take ownership of their learning.

## A Schoolwide Shift from Passive Learning to Engaged and Taking Ownership

In the years since implementing the model, both Principal Ronda Hamilton and Dr. Laura Morris have observed a significant transformation at Arthur Elementary School.

“We’ve seen so much improvement at Arthur,” shared Hamilton. “This has been the most pleasurable years of my principalship because every year I can see positivity and I see growth.”

Hamilton elaborated, saying, “I’ve seen student academics go up as well as their

pride in their work.” Beyond the increase in student achievement, she has also noticed improvements in “self-confidence and self-esteem,” adding that “it’s just positive. Behaviors have gone down. They know that school is a safe place and students come here to learn.”

Regarding the model’s impact on classroom dynamics, Hamilton noted, “students are more apt to speak up. They know that their thought process matters. It’s taught them that they can agree to disagree.” She believes that the

model's focus on peer discourse has provided students with the ability to be "respectful of other people's opinions."

Dr. Morris observed that with the model's implementation, "children become actively engaged in their own learning." This engagement was inclusive, extending to students who previously struggled with participation. "I have seen students who were not participating at all become actively engaged," Dr. Morris reported. "I have seen students who hardly ever talked, talk."

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Commenting on the overall transformation of Arthur Elementary's students following the implementation of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, Dr. Morris stated, "I think they just have a lot more confidence. They know how to communicate better and in a productive way."

While school leadership has noted positive changes across the student body, teachers have also reported transformative effects from their perspective in the classroom.

## Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

Instructional Empowerment's Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning centers on student-led teaming, which involves students organized into small, diverse teams with clear protocols for engaging in rigorous standards-based academic work, as defined in the book *The Power of Student Teams: Achieving Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning in Every Classroom Through Academic Teaming* (Toth & Sousa, 2019).

This model cultivates independent, critical thinking instead of dependent, compliant learning. It builds students' academic agency through structures that develop their ability to self-direct their own learning. Students are empowered with real roles and responsibilities within their team structures and become highly motivated to drive their own learning. The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning works in all subjects and grade levels K-12.

# Students Collaborate in Teams and Learning Gaps Close

Before the partnership with Instructional Empowerment began, Fourth Grade Team Lead Cherice McDonald observed “a lot of fighting” between students. She noted, “They didn’t know how to work together as a team or how to rely on each other and learn from each other.”

Alicia Walker, a second grade teacher at Arthur, echoed this sentiment. “Before, there was no interaction between students. They weren’t able to interact in their social skills. They were not able to hold conversations.” Walker added that students “didn’t know how to start a conversation” and couldn’t “share their work.”

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Sonja Sanders, the English Language Arts Team Lead at Arthur, elaborated on the academic challenges students faced prior to the model’s implementation. “I had a lot of students that were struggling,” she said.

Sanders noticed a significant improvement after introducing the new instructional approach. “After the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning was implemented,” the educator shared, “those learning gaps started to decrease significantly. With teaming in place, it has helped my students.”

Sanders highlighted the collaborative nature of the model as particularly impactful:

“It gets all students involved. It engages everyone. Everyone has a part in the learning, and you can’t leave anybody out. You’re working independently but you’re still working together as a team, so everyone has a voice.”

Sarah Lasiter, an Instructional Coach in her first year at Arthur Elementary, also witnessed the model’s influence. “The engagement is the number one thing I see. When they are doing tasks, when they are in class, they are all dedicated and focused on what’s going on.”

Lasiter emphasized improved communication among students. “The communication factor is huge,” she said. “They’re learning to problem solve and work things out. If they don’t agree with it, they’re not fighting over it.” She believes that by explaining their thinking and resolving disagreements, students are “learning those social skills that they’re going to need throughout life. I feel like we’re building good citizens.” While the research studies mentioned earlier linked excessive screen time to impaired interpersonal skills, Arthur’s educators witnessed students experiencing an increase in interpersonal skills as they engaged in the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning.

# Lesson Planning, Productive Struggle, and Becoming More Student-Led

While educators are observing changes in students, they have also shared insights on how the model has influenced their teaching practices. “With me personally,” shared Sonja Sanders, “I have seen so much growth because when I’m putting together my lesson plans, they’re specific and strategic. I’m actually making sure that we’re looking at that standard and digging deep.” Sanders further reflected on the lesson planning process, noting that, “I’m doing these lesson plans to make sure those targets are aligned with those tasks.”

Principal Hamilton identified the ability to break down standards to support student learning as the most impactful area for Arthur’s educators. “That was an aha moment for me and that was the thing holding us back. Yes, we’re teaching but we’re not teaching the standard. So now, they’re able to look at that standard and break it down.” Following Instructional Empowerment’s professional development on developing this skill, Hamilton reported that teachers now comprehend “how it works, how it affects student academics, and how it affects them. They can grow and develop in their pedagogy.”

Beyond lesson planning, educators have recognized the value of productive struggle. “It’s okay for them to struggle,” Sanders explained. “That’s just more learning – the

critical thinking, all of that is happening and we’re winning. So, to me, it’s just an eye-opener for me. It’s just made me a stronger teacher for sure.”

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As an instructional coach, Sarah Lasiter has observed teachers stepping back to allow students to take the lead:

“It’s turned more to where it’s not as teacher led. It’s more student led. There’s more autonomy for those teachers to step back and give it to the students. I feel like it takes a weight off their shoulders, and it allows them to see what students’ needs are individually and then adjust their instruction and small groups to make sure those gaps are not staying there. They’re closing those gaps.”

Cherice McDonald concurred with this shift in instruction, noting that her classroom role has evolved due to her “releasing that responsibility and trusting that they can learn from each other.”

# Seeing Positive Growth in School Culture and Student Achievement

Arthur Elementary has experienced a significant improvement in school culture, with Principal Hamilton noting that “behaviors are down, students enjoy coming to school, and teachers enjoy coming to school.” Reflecting on the past year, Hamilton shared that Arthur was among three schools in the district where teacher attendance reached 95%. “They enjoy coming to school because we’re a family.”

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Hamilton also reported that at the conclusion of the 2023-2024 academic year, Arthur witnessed student assessment growth across multiple areas. “We had growth in every band,” she stated. “We’re growing all students, even the students that were on target.”

Nobody’s stagnant.”

In acknowledging the school’s progress, Hamilton emphasized:

“It’s the strategies and training that we’ve seen from Instructional Empowerment that is helping teachers to present those standards and curriculum to students in the correct way so that they can get their juices moving. They are learning based on having conversations about the learning and the standards in class.”

With the upcoming 2024-2025 school year approaching, Hamilton plans to continue the partnership with Instructional Empowerment.

Dr. Morris voiced her support for all the successes happening at Arthur, stating, “We make sure teachers are learning alongside students, alongside families, alongside the rest of the staff because everybody is engaged in the work.”

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