

Case Study

September 2024

Woonsocket Education Department

**From Quiet Classrooms  
to Dynamic Academic  
Discussions:  
How a Model of  
Instruction is  
Transforming  
Teaching and  
Learning**



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# 2022-2023 District Demographics:

Number of schools: **9**

Number of students: **5,690**

Number of core teachers: **587**

Percent free and reduced lunch: **48%**

Percent special education: **27%**

Percent multilingual learners: **16%**

Percent White: **44.3%**

Percent Hispanic: **32.3%**

Percent Black or African American: **11.6%**

Percent two or more races: **6.6%**

Percent Asian: **4.5%**

Percent American Indian or Alaskan Native: **0.5%**

Percent Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander: **0.3%**

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## Executive Summary

This case study examines the implementation of Instructional Empowerment's (IE) Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning within Woonsocket Education Department (WED) in Rhode Island.

### The Challenge

- Despite efforts to incorporate instructional strategies such as blended and personalized learning, the district struggled to foster meaningful academic discourse that went beyond traditional "turn and talk."

- In recognizing the need to support educators throughout this implementation, WED created a role for Innovation Specialists. Similar to instructional coaches, Innovation Specialists collaborated with educators to incorporate the model's strategies, resources, and expert professional development into their classrooms.

### Vision, Mission, & Goal

- WED recognized the alignment of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning with the district's mission to provide all students with a rigorous learning experience.
- They implemented the model to foster increased student engagement, promote academic discourse, facilitate deeper learning, and ultimately prepare students for college, career, and life.
- The adoption of the model also contributed to the district's vision of continuous improvement in teaching and leadership practices for educators.

### The Results

- The approach is transforming classroom dynamics – enabling educators to shift to a facilitator role while empowering students to take ownership of their learning.
- Per data collected by WED, classrooms that partnered with Innovation Specialists to implement the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning saw **higher proficiency rates, with up to 11 percentage points higher in ELA and 27 percentage points higher in math** on the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS), compared to classrooms that did not work with Innovation Specialists to implement the model.
- Beyond academics, students reported increased confidence, life skills, and personal growth.
- Students also reported more effective communication, with many sharing that the model positively impacted the learning

### The Partnership

- Woonsocket Education Department received professional development and coaching from Instructional Empowerment to assist in the implementation of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning.

environment by creating a calmer classroom community.

## Other Highlights

- The impact on student skills and behavior extended outside the classroom, positively affecting families and the community as well. Parents reported that they noticed their child's language becoming more respectful as a result

of the model.

- The positive effects of student-led instruction inspired educators to share these strategies with the next generation of teachers. High school students who expressed interest in teaching were given the opportunity to teach elementary and middle school students within this model, continuing the movement and transforming the future of education.

# A District Driven to Provide All Students with a Rigorous Learning Experience

The Woonsocket Education Department (WED), a school district serving over 5,000 students in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, faced a persistent challenge. As Debra Steers, an Innovation Specialist within the district shared, educators were “struggling with how to get students to even participate at all,” reflecting that within classrooms, many students “didn’t talk.” This issue was particularly pressing given the district’s mission to provide all students with a rigorous learning experience that leads to students becoming productive members of the global community.

According to Heather Neil, Blended and Personalized Learning Coach, this reflected a broader societal issue where communication skills are not adequately developed, noting that “we

don’t teach communication anymore to children, families, people in general.” Despite efforts to prioritize academic discourse through small-group instruction as well as blended and personalized learning pathways, educators continued to grapple with the task of engaging students in rich, student-led discussions that deepened their understanding of academic concepts.

While the curriculum promoted opportunities for brief “turn and talk” interactions, communication between students was limited. As Steers stated, this effort “had a full stop at the end,” and “didn’t have this connection where students were having a deep conversation about learning and pushing each other’s thinking.”

## A Transformative Path for Teaching and Learning

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*“It was noisy, it was exciting, and it was best practice.”*

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It was amid these challenges that the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning emerged, offering a potentially transformative path for teaching and learning. When Neil attended her first professional development session on the model

at the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year, she realized the potential impact it would have on students and educators. “It was just this a-ha moment that blew me over,” Neil recalled. “It was noisy, it was exciting, and it was best practice.” The Model’s emphasis on student engagement, academic discourse, and fostering deeper conceptual understanding resonated with Neil, offering a potential solution to the challenges they had been grappling with.

To further their understanding of the model's impact, both Neil and Steers read *The Power of Student Teams: Achieving Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning in Every Classroom through Academic Teaming*. This multi-award-winning book, co-written by Instructional Empowerment's founder and education author Michael Toth and educational neuroscience consultant and author David Sousa, emphasizes the neuroscience behind engaging students in rigorous, standards-based tasks in academic teams. Academic teaming, now called the Model of Instruction for Deeper learning, fosters student agency – or student ownership and

autonomy over their learning.

The book's insights, combined with the district's vision to promote academic discourse, led Neil and Steers to analyze the research on the significance of classroom talk. As Toth and Sousa share in their book, "Talk is one of the most powerful memory devices. Adding the auditory modality increases the number of brain regions that process the new learning" (2019, p. 71). With these insights, Neil recognized the district's previous challenges, stating, "We just weren't putting the appropriate emphasis on [discourse] and making both teachers and students cognizant of its importance."

## Specialists Support Student and Educator Growth

With a newfound enthusiasm and understanding for the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, Heather Neil worked with an Instructional Empowerment expert educator, Deana Senn, to pilot the implementation in individual classrooms with teachers who volunteered – a group referred to as 'early adopters.' Committed to ensuring the implementation was successful, WED established the role of Innovation Specialists to provide additional support and guidance for teachers adopting the model.

Innovation Specialists conducted classroom demonstrations, allowing educators to observe the student-led model in action after engaging with professional development from Instructional Empowerment. Teachers then worked alongside Innovation Specialists to implement the model, with a focus on cultivating a learning environment where students would develop deeper learning skills. Teachers shifted from traditional pedagogy by using the model to

### 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.

design lessons and plan team structures where students would communicate effectively, analyze information critically, evaluate ideas, and co-construct knowledge collaboratively.

Innovation Specialist Debra Steers shared that while educators had previously understood that “it’s important to talk,” the model provided them with “the tools to help students learn how to talk to each other.” Steers expanded on this idea, stating that “the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning has given us the ground to say, ‘How do we ask higher order questions? How do we help students get engaged in different ways?’”

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*“I think that’s unique to the work of the model where students start pushing each other rather than the teacher doing the lift all the time.”*

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After witnessing the increase in student ownership in classrooms that implemented the model, Steers highlighted how the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning enabled that profound shift, “I think that’s unique to the work of the model where students start pushing each other rather than the teacher doing the lift all the time.” Steers contrasted this student-led approach against traditional teacher-driven instruction, explaining “It’s asking student-generated questions and building connections. They’re exploring and

discovering with one another rather than the teacher driving the instruction.”

When reflecting on the experience of working with previous providers, Neil expressed that the district had “done anything and everything over the years,” yet they were frequently told that they would witness “real results in five years,” remarking on the considerable length of time it would take to see meaningful changes. Yet, after observing classrooms where educators had implemented the model, she reflected that she “could not believe the level of what we were seeing that first year. Not only did we see stuff right away, but it was also the level that we saw it at in such a short time that I was shocked.”

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In the two years since implementing the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, early adopters have significantly shifted their instructional practices. The impact has been particularly evident for teachers, who have transitioned to a more facilitating role as students demonstrate improved critical thinking and self-directed abilities.

## **Educator & Student Growth in an Elementary Classroom**

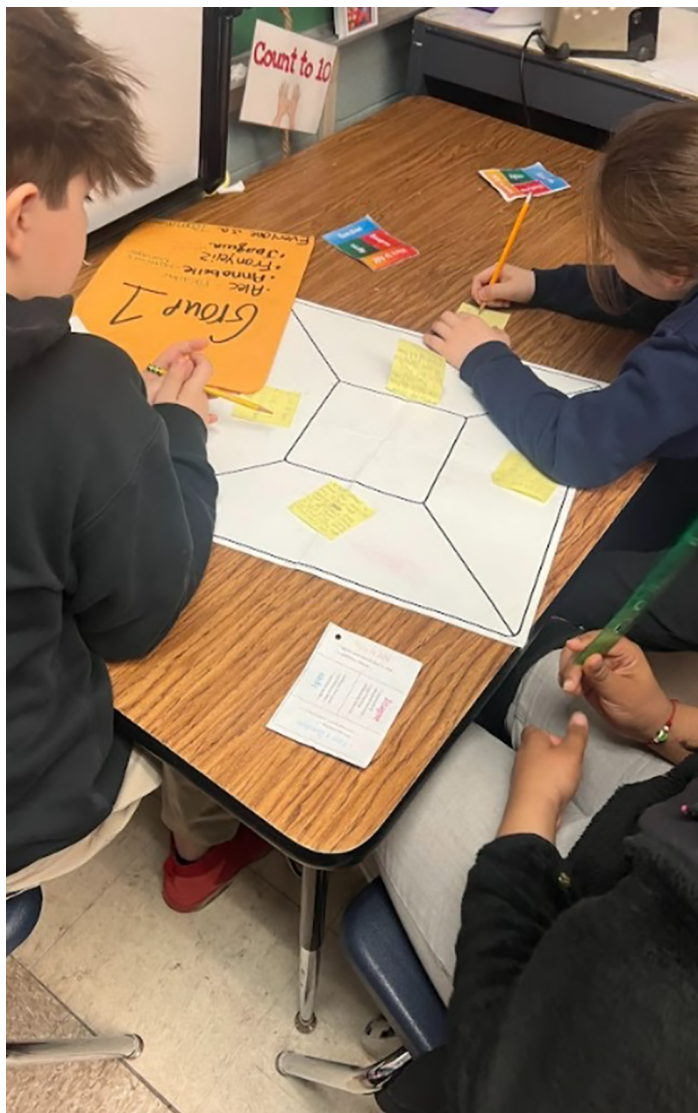
### *From Directing to Facilitating: How Teaching Became More Empowering*

One educator who experienced this shift firsthand was Ashley Paille, a fifth-grade teacher at Bernon Heights Elementary School. “My work with Instructional Empowerment has absolutely changed the way that I teach,” Paille said, reflecting on the previous two years of implementation:

Before, I was the only resource in the room.  
I was the more knowledgeable other and

it’s exhausting to do that. With the skills and resources that I have gotten in the past two years, I’ve been able to shift that to the students. Now the students are the resources. They are the more knowledgeable others.

This shift in instruction allowed Paille to “take a step back and listen more,” redefining her role in the classroom from lecturer to facilitator. “I’ve been able to dig deeper and have rich



conversations,” she said, “and I’ve been able to find misconceptions that I might not have before.”

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## Students Develop Real-World Communication Skills

Paille, who has used the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning since its adoption in Woonsocket, has witnessed its transformative impact on student learning firsthand. “It’s just amazing that these students are able to verbalize it at such a young age. It’s taught my students how to work

together, it’s taught my students how to be respectful, and it’s taught my students how to have conversations with people and not just behind a screen.”

With the resources available within the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, students are empowered to address challenges collaboratively and overcome them. “If there are misconceptions or misunderstandings,” Paille says, “my students are jumping up to fix them.”

With the emphasis on student agency that the model has given students, Paille also recognizes its impact. “It’s an amazing thing to see, not only that the students feel that confident in their depth of knowledge, but also that they feel that comfortable to share their ideas and respectfully agree, disagree, add on to others’ thinking, or even question it,” Paille noted.

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By actively participating in their learning through academic discourse, students are gaining the skills necessary to succeed. As stated in *The Power of Student Teams: Achieving Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning in Every Classroom through Academic Teaming* (2019):

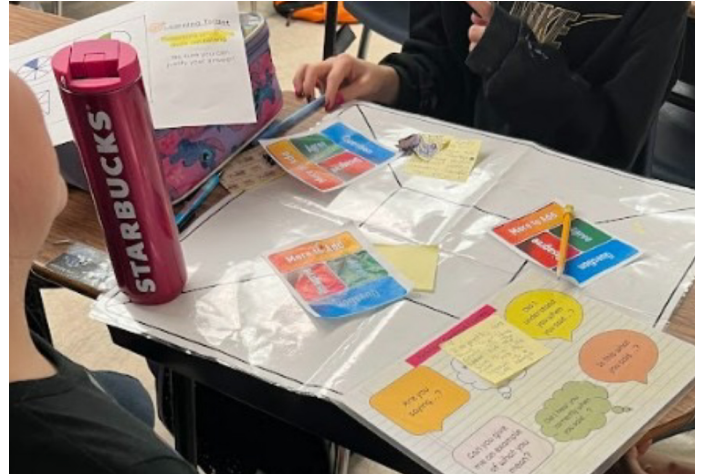
[Students] need to discuss aloud with each other their understandings, determine how they can be connected to what they already know, and make predictions about how the new learning can be applied to the real world. In many instances, direct instruction does not allow this to happen. (p. 23)

While the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning has fostered significant student growth at the elementary school level, as observed by Paille, its impact has resonated across all grade levels. One high school educator, in particular, has witnessed firsthand how this approach has transformed the learning experience for older students.

# A Transformative High School Learning Experience

Morgan Zinni, a Woonsocket High School educator, has witnessed firsthand how the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning has transformed the learning experience for older students. Initially, Zinni admitted, “I felt a little bit in a rut with my students. I was having difficulty getting 100% participation when we were doing discussions or even 80% participation.”

In addition to the challenge of engaging students in collaborative, academic discussions, Zinni also struggled to find ways for students to take accountability for their learning. However, by collaborating with an Innovation Specialist to implement strategies from the model, Zinni saw a remarkable shift. “For students to get to that next level in their learning, they have to come up with their own thinking, share it, debate it, and analyze it. The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning has been really instrumental in facilitating that.” Zinni also remarked on the impact of the resources and corresponding professional development available within the model, sharing that the use of *Agree/Disagree Cards* allowed “less confident or quieter students to participate.”



I ultimately saw a big difference in my classroom as a community. I saw students that had never even interacted with each other, interacting. I saw students that had previously been quiet voice their opinions. It led to some really phenomenal higher-level thinking and additional questioning about the text and how the text related to their lives.

Zinni also shared how the strategies students have learned will support their lives beyond the classroom, “I think that the ultimate goal is to teach them how to apply what they learn in the classroom to their everyday life skills. That’s a skill they’re going to need for the rest of their lives: to articulate, communicate, and argue effectively.”

While the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning has reimagined the classroom experience for Woonsocket educators like Ashley Paille and Morgan Zinni, it’s also had an immense impact on student achievement.

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Through the support of Innovation Specialist Debra Steers, Zinni also learned to step back and let students grapple with ideas. “Deb was great at reminding me that sometimes I’m tempted to jump in and rescue them a little too much,” Zinni noted. “I liked having the opportunity to be quiet and let some of their own thoughts come out, even if it was messy or uncomfortable or more prolonged pauses.”

Although Zinni has worked with the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning for just under a year, she shared that the results have been transformative:

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# State Assessment Results Showcase

## Remarkable Proficiency Gains

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, the Woonsocket Education Department's Curriculum Team analyzed how students performed on the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS) in classrooms where educators collaborated with Innovation Specialists.

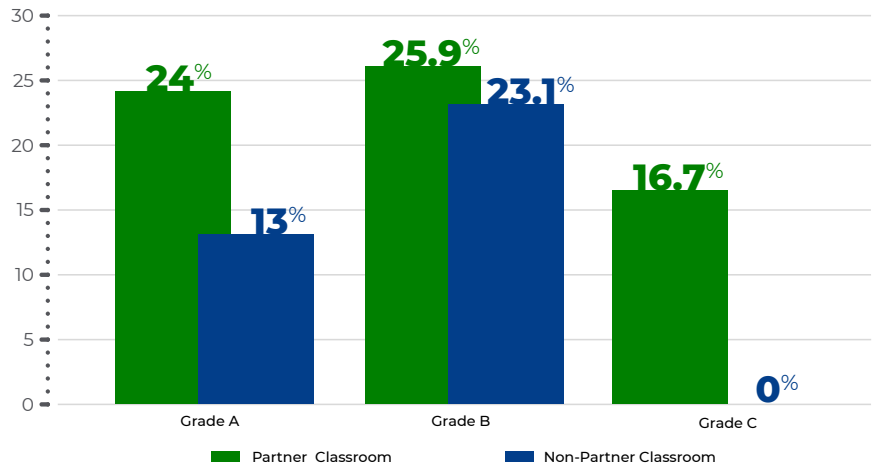
Data collected and analyzed by the district on six classrooms across three grade levels revealed promising outcomes in improving student proficiency rates. Classrooms partnering with an Innovation Specialist to implement the model consistently demonstrated higher proficiency rates in both ELA and math compared to non-partner classrooms.

In ELA, partner classrooms consistently outperformed non-partner classrooms across all grades. The most significant improvement was seen in Grade C, with a 16.7 percentage point advantage. Grade A showed an 11 percentage point increase, while Grade B demonstrated a 2.8 percentage point difference.

The impact was even more pronounced in math. The partner classroom in Grade A exhibited a 27 percentage point lead over their non-partner counterpart. Grade B showed an 11.2 percentage point advantage, while Grade C maintained a 10 percentage point improvement.

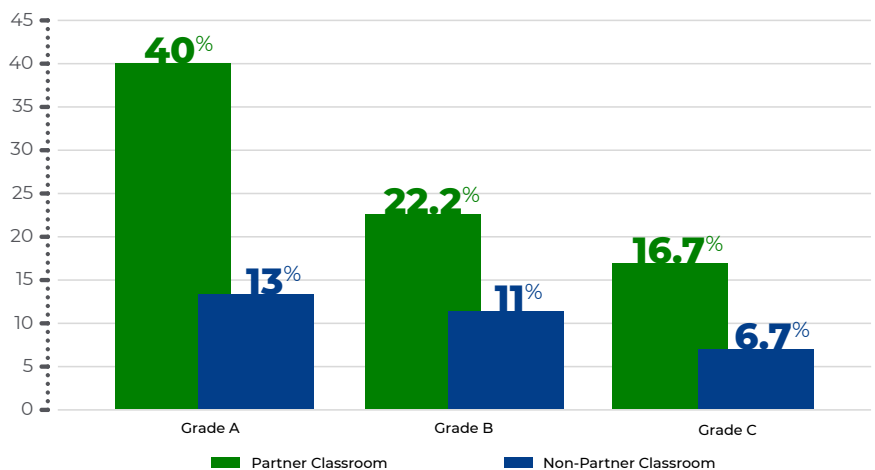
The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning at Woonsocket Education Department has significantly improved student academic

### RICAS ELA Proficiency



\*Individualized Education Program (IEP) & Multilingual Learners (MLL) students are represented in this data.

### RICAS Math Proficiency



\*Individualized Education Program (IEP) & Multilingual Learners (MLL) students are represented in this data.

performance, as these figures show. Its impact, however, goes beyond just test scores. Students shared their perspectives on how the shift to the model nurtured effective communication, appreciation for diverse perspectives, productive collaboration, and a supportive learning environment.



# Changing Students' Lives Through Discourse

## Communication and Collaboration Skills

In 2nd grade, students discussed how the model has influenced their communication skills. “We get to be effective communicators. We get to learn about other people’s ideas and share our ideas.” When asked about the impact that the model’s resources have had on communication, one 5th grader shared, “I feel like the discussion cards help me get my thoughts out and I’m not just sitting there struggling.” A high school student had a similar experience, sharing, “It’s taught me how to word my questions to make other people want to respond and be interested.”

With the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, students have also learned how to support their classmates who may be struggling, with one 5th grade student sharing, “We can help others by explaining our ideas and it might give them an idea. They ask a question, and we can answer it.” A 6th grader noted, “One thing is that everyone gets a turn, and everyone gets their voice heard.”

## Classroom Culture and Social Connections

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*The structured discussions seemed to help break down social barriers and create a “big family” atmosphere, as described by multiple students.*

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Many students spoke about how the model fostered a supportive classroom environment conducive to learning. “It helps people feel more comfortable,” one 6th grader said. For students in 2nd grade, the model has helped to build

relationships, with one student sharing that engaging in discussions “help us get along with each other.” When reflecting on how the classroom has changed with the implementation of the model, one student stated that, “Last year, it was more interrupting. This year, it’s been a calmer classroom.” The structured discussions seemed to help break down social barriers and create a “big family” atmosphere, as described by multiple students. Even at the high school level, students felt that the model supported those who were impacted by remote learning. “People got used to being isolated, so I think this helps a lot.”

## Personal Growth and Confidence

While students discussed the benefits the model has had on their learning, they also shared how these skills have supported them beyond just academics. “It has helped me become a better person and communicate better,” said a 6th grader. One student who recently joined the district from out of state shared that it has “helped me get out of my small shell.” Notably, students across grade levels expressed feeling more comfortable and confident voicing their thoughts through the model’s strategies. A 5th grader admitted, “On the first day of school I was embarrassed because there’s new people and we have some new students that I don’t know and what if I mess up? What if I say the wrong thing? But now that we’re at the end of the school year, I’ve gained more confidence to work and talk.”

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*“It has helped me become a better person and communicate better.”*

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# Community Impacted by Enhanced Student Learning

The profound effects of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning have also reverberated far beyond individual students and classrooms – rippling outward onto their families. One such example was the experience of a Woonsocket parent, as detailed by the local newspaper, [Blackstone Valley's Call & Times](#). While speaking at a subcommittee meeting, Irvin Williams recounted an anecdote about his son that exemplified the model's far-reaching impact. He noticed a remarkable change in his son's communication skills and confidence while conversing with him in the car.

His kindergartener son, utilizing the respectful language promoted by the model, stated that he “respectfully disagree[d]” with Williams' viewpoint.

This impact has extended to other families as well. After finding success using the communication tools within the model, one 5th grade student decided to utilize the *Agree/Disagree Cards* at home. “Family can argue a lot so I thought of the idea to take some of the cards home. It worked,” the student shared with pride. “They started talking to each other a little bit more respectfully.”

# The Next Generation of Teachers Prepare to Continue the Movement

As the Woonsocket Education Department continues to expand the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning districtwide, they are also working to impact a generation of future educators. Within their Child Studies program, students interested in exploring careers in education are learning how to implement the model's strategies, with the hope of one day utilizing these techniques to transform students' learning experiences. By completing the same professional development as Woonsocket's teachers, students in the Child Studies program are understanding how to build instructional systems for student-led learning.

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*“Instead of arguing about how they feel, they really are able to question each other and challenge each other.”*

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Putting theory into practice, these aspiring educators are tasked with becoming student teachers in classrooms throughout the district. Through this hands-on experience, they are witnessing firsthand the power of the model in fostering rich academic discourse and cultivating essential communication skills. One Child



Studies student, reflecting on her experience co-facilitating a 5th grade classroom, shared, “Instead of arguing about how they feel, they really are able to question each other and challenge each other.” She further emphasized the model’s impact, stating, “I feel like it definitely needs to be implemented in more classrooms because I feel like it helps with discussions better because a lot of kids don’t like participating.”

By exposing future educators to the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning early in their

academic journey, Woonsocket Education Department is not only equipping them with valuable tools but also instilling a commitment to student-led learning approaches that prioritize critical thinking, collaboration, and effective communication. This proactive measure ensures that the transformative impact witnessed in Woonsocket classrooms today will continue to ripple across generations, shaping the educational experiences of countless students yet to come.

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## **Instructional Empowerment's Social Mission**

**Our social mission is to end generational poverty  
and eliminate racial achievement gaps through  
transformed core instruction.**

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[InstructionalEmpowerment.com](https://InstructionalEmpowerment.com)**



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