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WestEd 

Three-way Partnership

transforms Arizona district

In 2008, the struggling Creighton Elementary School District in Phoenix was offered a unique opportunity for comprehensive improvement. Now, two years later, student achievement exceeds expectations, and the district itself has transformed the way it operates.

Creighton was approached in May of 2008 by WestEd and the Ellis Center for Educational Excellence, a Phoenix-based philanthropy, to participate in a districtwide reform initiative. Ellis and WestEd formed a partnership in early 2008 aimed at building capacity in Arizona's underperforming and underserved districts, particularly those with high poverty and large minority populations. Ellis provided the funding and a multiyear commitment to the initiative; WestEd has provided district- and school-improvement expertise, experience, and assistance teams.

Creighton was selected as the third partner based on the district's student population and achievement data. The central Phoenix district has nine schools that serve roughly 7,200 K-8 students, 85 percent of whom are Hispanic. "Nearly half the students are second language learners," says Superintendent Charlotte Boyle, "and 90 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch."

For WestEd, the well-funded, multiyear, flexible commitment from Ellis brought a unique opportunity to effect change. Through the initiative, Creighton district staff developed a collaboration with WestEd's Districts MovingUp (DMU) program, whose instructional and administrative coaches offer Creighton a systemic, sustainable approach to improving student achievement.

By the fall of 2010, the partners' intensive efforts had produced significant change. "From a failing district,"

says Ellis Center CEO Steve Mittenenthal, "Creighton has moved to a 'performing plus' district, with all nine of its schools relabeled. If you look at reading proficiency scores, Creighton outpaces the state average by three-fold, which is extraordinary."

Number of Creighton Elementary School District Schools Across Performance Levels

Highly Performing	0	0	1
Performing Plus	0	4	7
Performing	2	5	1
Underperforming or Failing to Meet Academic Standards	7	0	0
	Pre-WestEd	Post-WestEd	
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10

GATHERING STAKEHOLDERS TO ASSESS NEEDS

Creighton's reform initiative was built on a foundation of school, district, and community input. As a first step in the reform project, DMU staff conducted a districtwide needs assessment in August of 2008, gathering data on district operations from all its stakeholders.

DMU staff presented the results at a four-day workshop convened in mid-September with a district leadership





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team that included the superintendent, principals, instructional coaches, teachers from all nine of the district's schools, parents, and Arizona Department of Education staff. Among the findings:

- » Only 13 percent of building-level administrators strongly agreed that all students had opportunities to learn rigorous content.
- » Only 30 percent of teachers strongly agreed that all teachers understood or implemented a rigorous curriculum.
- » Only 31 percent of principals and assistant principals strongly agreed that the district had well-defined learning expectations for all students.

In addition, the results showed that the district's instructional coaches spent less than 50 percent of their time in classrooms; principals had inadequate on-site time to observe teachers; and education practices differed widely from school to school.

Damon Twist, principal of Creighton's Excelencia School summed it up well: "Our district really operated as nine separate islands, as far as how we defined effective teaching, how we determined whether or not students had learned, and what we did with that information once we had it."

Workshop participants used the needs assessment findings to develop an action plan that would have the maximum impact on student learning. What emerged were three core goals to be implemented districtwide:

- » improving instruction,
- » aligning curriculum with state academic standards, and

- » developing common formative assessments so that principals, coaches, and teachers at each school could analyze each student's learning needs, plan interventions, and track their progress toward mastery.

That summer, the partners learned that Creighton had become the first Arizona district to be labeled failing by the Arizona Department of Education, underscoring the urgency of their reform effort.

FOCUSING ON THE "WHAT" AND "HOW" OF HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION

Based on ten evidence-based principles that characterize highly performing districts, WestEd's DistrictsMovingUp (DMU) project developed a customized plan to meet the district's particular needs, goals, and culture. The DMU improvement process aims to build district capacity and is structured around a four-phase cycle of needs assessment, action planning, implementing and monitoring, and evaluation.

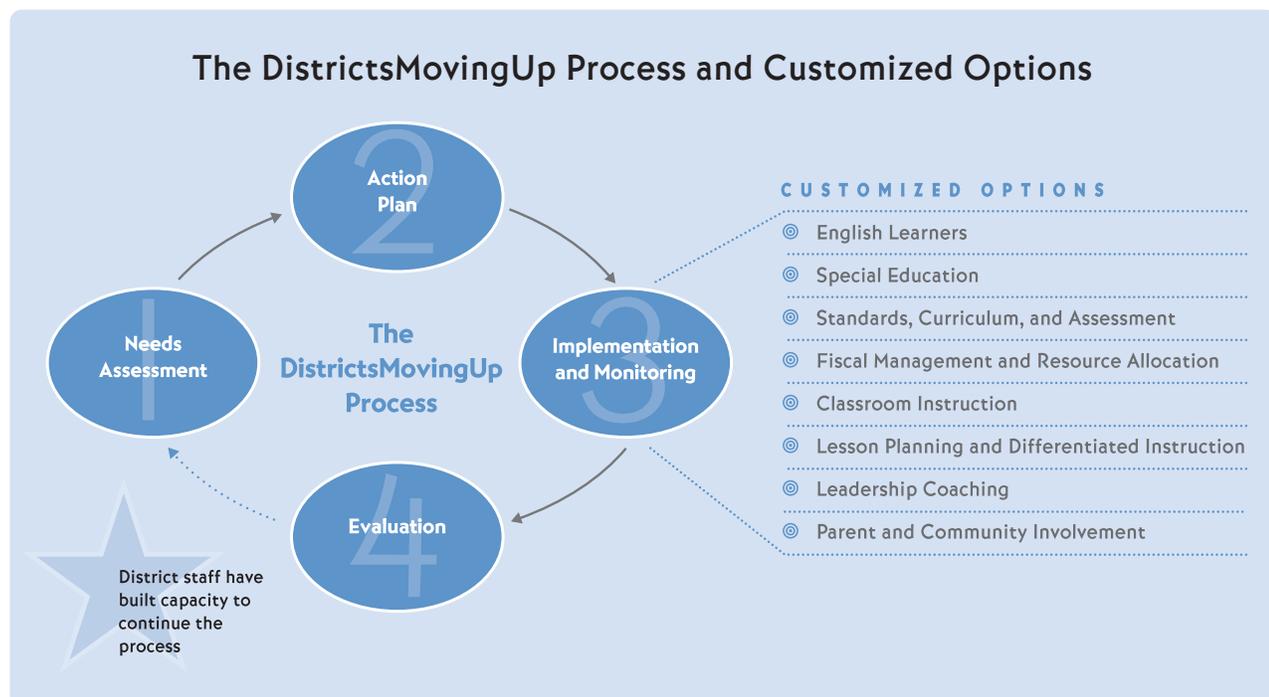
In the first nine months of the initiative, DMU instruction and curriculum coaches logged a total of 2,616 hours in the Creighton district with trainings, site visits, and meetings. Creighton's Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Connie Witte, worked with DMU and the district leadership team to develop a standards-aligned curriculum, the first-year focus of which was essential standards and performance objectives in reading and math. "We began by analyzing what was really happening in the classrooms," says Witte "and we found there were many disconnects. We needed to align the work that all of us were doing."

As the district improvement effort moved forward on several fronts, high-quality curriculum and instruction

remained the focus. “Although WestEd’s approach to district improvement is of necessity multifaceted,” says WestEd Senior Program Director Fred Tempes, who oversees the Creighton initiative, “there are two essential features that inform all improvement efforts. One is: defining what kids learn, the core curriculum, the knowledge and skills they will master by the time they leave the Creighton Elementary School District. And secondly: improving how it’s taught – training faculty in instructional practices that the research tells us are effective. We work collaboratively with the district and the site-based staff on those two features over and over and over again to get steadily better.”

Establishing a “guaranteed and viable curriculum” is how Joe Sassone, who directs WestEd’s curriculum and assessment coaching team in Creighton, describes the work. “We want to make sure that at each grade level students are gaining the knowledge and skills in reading and in math that they need in order to be ready for the next grade,” he explains. “Every week or two, we measure each student’s progress in attaining the guaranteed curriculum. If the assessment shows that a student is not keeping up, we want to make sure that we have an intervention plan ready immediately.”

The DistrictsMovingUp Process and Customized Options



No less intensive has been the coaching in high-quality instruction geared to accelerating student achievement and learning, an effort led by WestEd Director of Field Services, Huck Fitterer. By the end of the fall of 2009, every principal, instructional coach, and teacher in the district had received training in classroom strategies designed to improve student engagement, understanding of learning objectives, and key academic vocabulary. For the instructional coaching, WestEd combined components of its Teach for Success (T4S) and English Learner and Language Arts (ELLA) programs.

BUILDING DISTRICT CAPACITY TO SUSTAIN REFORMS

Now in its third year, the reform initiative has brought profound changes to the role the district plays in overseeing the development of common goals, standards, and practices across all schools, and supporting site-based faculty and staff to implement them.

"In the last two years," says Superintendent Boyle, "our collaborative improvement effort has become focused around the use of student performance data to inform instruction. We've also come to understand the

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Evidence-Based Principles that Guide Districts MovingUp's Work

1. Focus unwaveringly on good instruction that reflects sound research and best practices.
2. Align standards, curriculum, assessment, and instruction.
3. Build capacity to analyze and use data effectively to make decisions.
4. Build capacity to develop and use effective common formative assessments at regular intervals throughout the school year to monitor progress and make adjustments accordingly.
5. Use fiscal and human resources effectively to support student achievement.
6. Provide high-quality, ongoing, job-embedded professional development that helps all personnel acquire the knowledge and skills they need to perform their jobs effectively.
7. Hold all people in the system appropriately accountable for improved student achievement.
8. Develop courageous leaders at all levels of the district who can effectively implement and manage ongoing improvement.
9. Be customized and flexible enough to meet the unique needs of each district.
10. Gain active engagement from family and community.

This is a transformative process. They are closing the achievement gap with the state, and they are closing it for all of the different subpopulations in the district — in a much shorter time than we anticipated.

importance of principals spending more time at their school sites so that they have time daily to be in classrooms with their assistant principals and the coaches. And every Friday afternoon, we schedule time with one of the principals to look at data and talk about what's going well and what support the site needs from the district office."

The district's 2010–2011 focus is on increasing academic rigor, addressing ongoing instructional needs of the district's ELL population, and building district capacity to sustain the reform.

Creighton is now a district on the move. "The culture and spirit that the district is displaying is very positive, very upbeat," says WestEd's Tempes. "This is a transformative process. They are closing the achievement gap with the state, and they are closing it for all of the different subpopulations in the district — in a much shorter time than we anticipated."

The change in culture is also evident from reforms the district has initiated on its own. These include extending the school day by 70 minutes and revamping the roles and responsibilities of the district's instructional coaches. Beyond the Ellis Center's support, the district allocated \$250,000 of its federal stimulus funding to expand WestEd services and training from T4S and ELLA in Creighton schools.

In addition, a new family engagement program reorganized parent-teacher conferences to focus on student performance data, parent-student goal setting, and study skills to practice at home. Community Education Director Maria Paredes developed the program. Her research, published last October by the Harvard Family Research Project, showed that Creighton parents were more interested in attending academically oriented activities than other types of events such as potlucks or family-fun nights. Creighton Superintendent Boyle presented Paredes' work on November 9 at The National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement, hosted by the U.S. Department of Education.

Ellis plans to expand the Creighton project by adding early childhood and high school transition components, and to conduct tracking studies to document the progress of Creighton students once they leave the district.

"We are focused intensively on district-level, comprehensive reform," says Ellis CEO Steve Mittenthal, "and we are in it for the long haul."



For further information on the Ellis Center–WestEd partnership in Creighton Elementary School District, contact: Fred Tempes at 916.492.4039 or ftempes@WestEd.org.

For information on WestEd's Districts MovingUp services, contact: Ruth McKenna at 360.472.1876 or rmckenn@WestEd.org.

Language-rich approach boosts English Learner Skills

Four years ago, teachers at International High School in Austin, Texas, thought they were doing a great job. Visitors to the school for new immigrants often praised the faculty for working with such a diverse population of students, some of whom had no prior formal education.

Aída Walqui's observation was different. The director of WestEd's Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) project told faculty members there was so much more they could do to engage students and accelerate their learning.

Although the constructive criticism initially stung, International's teachers said they respected Walqui's assessment because she also offered solutions. When she and her WestEd colleagues suggested a detailed improvement plan that included lesson makeovers and classroom coaching, the International staff jumped on board.

In 2007–2008, International became part of a three-year pilot of the QTEL approach to schoolwide instructional improvement, which included two other Austin high schools, Lanier High School beginning in 2007 – 2008 and Reagan High School in 2009–2010. Through the pilot, all three schools accelerated student achievement and improved teacher practice.

Austin's success has important implications for districts across the country that are struggling to serve English language learner (ELL) students, as well as low-income and minority students who do not speak standard English. "While the QTEL approach is really for ELL students," says Melissa Hutchins, administrative supervisor in Austin's Office of English Language Learners, "we see the benefit of this for all students."

ENGAGING ALL STUDENTS IN ACTIVE, LANGUAGE-RICH LEARNING

QTEL's approach is grounded in the theory that learning is not a passive process of receiving information presented by a teacher. Rather, it requires students to actively construct their own understanding of new concepts and skills, most often in a social context and always through active and purposeful use of language. Reflecting this theory, QTEL's foundation for effective instruction is the "three-part architecture of a lesson": prepare students for the theme to be explored, construct deliberate invitations for students to interact with related texts, and then extend their understanding through exposure to rigorous and engaging applications of new concepts.

For example, in a science unit about brain injuries, a teacher begins by activating students' prior knowledge, asking them if they know anyone who has suffered an accident involving a brain injury, and whether the person changed as a result of that injury. After creating a context for the topic through whole-class discussion of the brain and what happens when it is damaged, the teacher splits students into groups according to their language proficiency and reading levels so that each group becomes expert in one of four case studies of brain damage.

All four texts are highly compelling, and while the text assignments for ELL students might be shorter and more





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explanatory, the questions, focus, and expectations for all groups are the same. Students share insights with peers in small groups, and then return to the whole class for more exploration of the topic. Additional targeted reading and writing assignments are designed to weave together and reinforce the academic vocabulary and science knowledge.

“One of the common misconceptions about ELL students is that they need simplified and isolated instruction,” explains Walqui. To address ELL students, teachers often speak slowly, using simple sentence structure and careful enunciation; they provide less complex assignments and rarely expect ELL students to participate in classroom conversations. However well-intended, the attitudes embodied in these typical approaches reinforce the huge learning gap between new and native English speakers.

“We propose that after students have a threshold level of proficiency in English, what they need is access and time to engage with the really valuable and rigorous core curriculum,” Walqui says. “What we see all the time is ELL students filling in the blanks on worksheets, working individually at their desks. We want to break that pattern so that rich conversations are always part of their learning.”

USING QTEL TO DRIVE SCHOOLWIDE INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

QTEL starts with the premise that every teacher interacts with ELL students, so the entire faculty must be collectively committed to setting high expectations for these students and helping them excel. An important lesson of QTEL’s work in Austin is that a school must have

a clear vision of what high achievement looks like in the classroom and a coherent set of instructional practices to bring about the achievement. To develop that vision, instructional coaches work with individual teachers on every aspect of the instruction cycle, from creating purposeful lesson plans to evaluating whether students have met daily learning goals.

“One of the revolutionary moments for me in lesson planning and design was that I used to think that something would be cool to do with kids, so I’d want to use it in class,” says International High School history and geography teacher Kyle Olson. “But was it purposeful? Was I scaffolding their learning? Was it moving them toward the learning goals? Those kinds of questions I started asking after QTEL.”

Olson’s colleague, English teacher Angela Hinz, discovered she had to do a better job of balancing content instruction with language acquisition strategies. Instead of marching sophomores through a drawn-out reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Hinz learned to prepare students for the play’s central theme by drawing on their prior knowledge of family conflict. Then she chooses key sections of the play that will engage students in the story of infatuated teenagers caught between feuding families.

To strengthen understanding of the play and use of literary terms, Hinz has students design posters defining the main characters’ roles, write postcards to friends concisely describing the play’s setting and context, and use evidence from the play to justify a character’s actions.

QTEL Instructional Coaching

Whole-school Change, One Teacher at a Time

Instructional coaches from outside a school offer fresh eyes and needed expertise to school improvement efforts. But to be effective change agents, they must build a genuine partnership with each teacher they coach.

Donna Gaarder, a mathematics coach for WestEd's Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) project, has more than 40 years of experience as a high school and college mathematics instructor and district math specialist. For the past three years, she has worked intensively with 28 math teachers in three Austin, Texas, high schools engaged in school-wide initiatives to improve instruction for English language learner students.

Gaarder seldom needs to present her credentials as a veteran classroom teacher to establish her credibility as a coach. "Most teachers know right away that I'm a teacher too, and that helps enormously," she says. But credibility alone is not sufficient to gain a teacher's trust. That requires listening, asking questions, and offering a vision and concrete goals for improving pedagogical practices.

Gaarder says. "This is their classroom and their job, and these are their students. They know them much better than I do. So initially I spend time observing teachers as they work and talking with them about that, always noting the positive things they are doing."

She also checks in with the district's math specialist and the school's mathematics coach to share initial observations and get feedback.

The QTEL approach defines three stages in a classroom lesson: preparing students for the topic, guiding students to interact with new concepts and skills, and extending their understanding by having them apply what they've learned to new and more challenging problems. Because QTEL is aimed at English language learners, each stage involves carefully structured interactive tasks that require students to problem solve with others and to support their ideas with language. In doing so, students are repeatedly practicing the vocabulary and conventions of academic language, which is essential to mastering rigorous academic content.

An important part of Gaarder's work is to look with the teacher at every aspect of the teacher's lesson plan. Together, they ensure that each step moves students toward a specific learning goal and is structured so that students take maximum appropriate responsibility for their own learning.

"Most mathematics teachers want to 'tell the mathematics,'" Gaarder says, "rather than letting students muck around with the math to get a deeper understanding of the concepts." She notes that it can be a "huge shift" for a teacher to move away from this more lecture- and textbook-centered approach. "The interactive instructional approach QTEL uses," Gaarder says, "sometimes results in unexpected responses from students, which can come as a surprise to teachers at first. So we start by introducing just one or two tasks and providing opportunities to practice them.

"Even then, it can take a long time to convince a teacher that this really improves students' mathematics understanding and achievement," she adds.

I work with each teacher differently. Teaching is really hard work, and teachers are human beings, not machines. There is no formula that applies to everyone.

One teacher with whom Gaarder worked had for several years conducted the same lesson on calculating volume: She simply presented students the formula — volume equals height times width times depth — and gave them assignments to practice calculations, without any conceptual instruction. After they'd worked together for awhile, the teacher confided to Gaarder that she suspected her students didn't really understand what volume was — and she created a lesson to find out.

To introduce the concept, the teacher had students work in small groups on a structured task to figure out which has more volume: a pound of lead or a pound of feathers? Once students were fully engaged in problem solving, the teacher made the task more challenging: "Before you report to the whole class, all group members must agree on the group's answer."

Gaarder describes the videotape of that lesson as "hilarious" because of students' intense and animated discussions, but also rich with evidence about how students understood — or misunderstood — the concept of volume. One student tried to get his group to envision a pound of feathers by waving his hands in the air to frame a space the size of a mattress. A group of students in another class could not conceptualize a pound of lead, so the teacher changed the problem's wording to "a pound of bricks."

Throughout the problem-solving process and whole-class discussion, the teacher and Gaarder took note of students' ideas, problem-solving approaches, and use of academic language. Only when they were satisfied that students grasped the essential concept of volume as taking up space did they begin to structure the next lesson on calculating the volume of various real objects.

Each teacher prefers different amounts and types of coaching, Gaarder says. In some classrooms, a teacher might

interact with Gaarder while the actual lesson is in progress; others only talk with her during post-lesson discussions. "I work with each teacher differently," Gaarder says. "Teaching is really hard work, and teachers are human beings, not machines. There is no formula that applies to everyone."

That same principle applies when a teacher becomes frustrated or discouraged. "I support teachers by asking questions and listening," she says. "Sometimes we'll try to get at the root of the discouragement, and sometimes we just note that it's there. I feel that it's okay to be discouraged once in awhile; that's part of the process and it can be an opportunity to figure out what to do next."

Gaarder also makes sure teachers take note of their successes, whether a small step forward or a major breakthrough. "It's exciting when teachers reach the point where they can structure a lesson so well that the students 'don't need them,'" Gaarder says. After observing a particularly successful lesson in one young teacher's classroom, Gaarder immediately walked up to him and said, "Go home and write it down!" When he looked baffled, she explained half-jokingly, "Your students didn't need you today. Write down what you did. You structured the lesson so well that the kids knew what they were doing, they were supporting each other, and they were understanding the concepts!"

Gaarder says that seeing their students excited about learning can fuel teachers' enthusiasm for the hard, ongoing work of improving pedagogical practices. "Children amaze you if you give them the opportunity to use the wealth of knowledge they already have and offer them multiple ways to think and solve problems," she says. When she shows district educators and administrators videos of successful mathematics lessons in the three Austin high schools, they are often astonished and delighted at the accomplishments of "our kids," she says.

During 2010–2011, her fourth and final year in Austin, Gaarder is shifting her focus from individual coaching to helping faculty institute schoolwide practices that make pedagogical improvement an ongoing, collaborative process headed by teachers.

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IMPLEMENTING CHANGE THAT CAN BE SUSTAINED

To help institutionalize instructional reform, QTEL provides extended professional development for administrators as well as teachers. At Lanier High School, former principal Edmund Oropez says, he and his entire administrative team taught at least one class a day so they would understand how the recommended instructional changes affected students and staff across the school. He also adjusted the school schedule so teachers could have common planning periods with colleagues from the same departments. This resulted in more instructional consistency across the school because teachers could collaborate “as physicians do in a teaching hospital.”

Because of QTEL, says International High School Principal Leticia Vega, she has developed a shared leadership approach to school management that focuses on relationships and results. For example, rather than treat classroom observations as checklist walk-throughs — lesson plans aligned to standards, check; students working in groups, check — Vega began looking for evidence of deep and progressive learning.

“We are not satisfied so quickly now,” Vega says. “Before, classroom observations resulted in an administrator telling teachers what they needed to change. Now conversations are much more purposeful and give teachers a voice in explaining what they’re doing and why.”

During the three-year cycle of change, QTEL identifies teachers in all subject areas and extends their learning on how to translate educational theory into purposeful classroom tasks. With support and coaching, the teachers will be able, in turn, to coach their colleagues in years to

come. Kyle Olson and Angela Hinz have become instructional coaches at International High School.

Building trust so that teachers feel comfortable changing practices is “tricky,” Hinz acknowledges, “but if you have respect and lay down your ego, then other people shift, too, and you can have honest conversations about teaching.”

“One of the nice surprises for all of us has been how willing, how friendly and receptive teachers become,” Walqui comments, “when you provide them with targeted support — even though this requires them to significantly change how they are teaching. Whenever we begin our work at a school, we meet some teachers who have become jaded and bitter because they have seen so few positive outcomes from their efforts and no one is helping them with the concrete aspects of teaching. It is exciting when, through collegial conversations and follow-up, they begin to renew their teaching and themselves, and to sense that their work really does matter.”

A full study of QTEL’s impact in Austin, as well as of similar QTEL projects in New York City and San Diego, is under way.



For further information about QTEL or to learn preliminary results of the impact study, contact Aída Walqui at 415.615.3262 or awalqui@WestEd.org.

special education gains shape MIDDLE SCHOOL REFORM

In response to an intensive reading intervention in 2007–2008, the reading proficiency rate for sixth-grade special education students at Lennox Middle School in southern California jumped from 8 percent to 43 percent in one year. In fact, they performed better than their general education classmates, whose proficiency rate was under 37 percent.

This dramatic achievement helped drive a schoolwide instructional improvement effort. It also redefined how the school's general and special education teachers worked with one another — and with students.

"Once we saw the progress the kids receiving special education services were making, we were convinced that all students in the school would benefit from the systematic, direct instructional approach provided to this subgroup," says Silvia DeRuvo, a member of the WestEd District Assistance and Intervention Team (DAIT) brought in during the fall of 2007 to help the Lennox School District meet its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals.

The Lennox district occupies a one-square-mile area in a close-knit, predominantly Hispanic neighborhood near Los Angeles that comprises five elementary schools and Lennox Middle School. The sixth grade at the middle school is separately housed and has its own principal and staff. Of the Lennox district's 7,200 students, some 46 percent are English language learners, and 78 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

DeRuvo, who is a special education resources development specialist with WestEd's Center for Prevention and Early Intervention, says she was excited about the opportunity to focus initial instructional improvement efforts

on special education students in the middle school's sixth grade, known as LMS 6. "Students with learning disabilities and AD/HD are often the last group whose needs are addressed," she comments, "and they should be the first because so many of them become discouraged early and fall behind."

DeRuvo also knew that, like most districts across the country, Lennox had not been able to meet its AYP goals largely because of the poor standardized test performance of its special education students. "Under No Child Left Behind, districts can no longer sweep the achievement data for this subgroup and all the other identified subgroups under the rug in their AYP calculations. These students' scores count."

REINFORCING THE BASICS OF EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION

Current professional development for all LMS 6 faculty includes training in many of the same evidence-based practices implemented with special education students in the first year of intervention. In addition to learning to deliver standards- and research-based reading and mathematics instruction in a cohesive and consistent way, teachers receive training in strategies for actively engaging students in lesson topics, helping them sustain





their focus during a lesson, and expecting them to take more responsibility for their own learning.

“The fact is, the same teaching practices that are effective for students with learning disabilities, other mild to moderate disabilities, and ADHD are essentially good teaching practice for all students,” DeRuvo notes. “For example, to keep students cognitively engaged in a lesson, we really emphasize the need for them to respond during instruction, whether it be through speaking, performing, writing, or gesturing; they can’t choose to check out and not participate.”

To encourage students to take charge of their own learning, teachers adopt such practices as telling them the instructional objective for each lesson and having them monitor their own progress toward learning goals. “At this age, they’re old enough to track their own academic growth,” DeRuvo says, “and they like doing it.”

CREATING AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR IMPROVEMENT

Under the leadership of site principal, Yesenia Alvarez, LMS 6 made two fundamental changes in how the school operates in order to support and strengthen instructional improvement. First, an inclusionary Learning Center was created in the fall of 2009, where five general education and two special education teachers provide intensive language arts and mathematics intervention to all students performing below grade level. Performance data for both regular and general education students determine the intensity of intervention they receive. Students spend a double block of instructional time in the Learning Center each day and exit the intervention programs only after the data show they’ve achieved grade-level proficiency.

The second element integral to the success of school-wide improvement was implementation of a Response to Intervention (RtI) model during the 2009–2010 school year. The RtI model requires initial screening and regular monitoring and recording of all students’ academic progress, followed by immediate intervention with any student who falls behind. It took staff six months to plan and put the model into action.

Blanca Estrada, the school’s RtI specialist and one of the prime movers in instructional reform, says that the most exciting aspect of the combined RtI and Learning Center model is that “it’s truly inclusive and, instead of being confined to a rigid intervention structure based on labels, we have created a ‘living organism’ that can respond flexibly to all students’ needs.” Of the roughly 200 students enrolled in the Center at any given time, 40 to 50 may be students who are gifted in math, but struggling in other subjects. Others may have mild, moderate, or severe disabilities; and some receive temporary academic support on a drop-in basis. To provide social and emotional support, students are placed in teams within the Center, and those with the greatest learning challenges are taught exclusively by special education teachers.

By the spring of 2010, after a full year of schoolwide instructional improvement, all students in the Learning Center intervention program, including those with disabilities, had achieved at least a year’s growth in language arts, and most made two years’ growth.

Although the Learning Center model was ultimately very successful, parents had to be convinced of its value at first. Those with children in the special education

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program had to be reassured that their children's needs were still being met even though they were sometimes receiving instruction from regular classroom teachers. Those whose children were in the regular education population but now would be working with special education teachers received letters explaining that the change didn't mean the children had been labeled. "We explained it just meant they were receiving intensive instruction from someone with the appropriate expertise to accelerate their learning to grade level," says WestEd's DeRuvo.

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE ON "SPECIAL" AND "GENERAL" EDUCATION

The Learning Center model has made the distinction between special and general education less important for students as well as teachers, according to DeRuvo. "The students don't know who is in special education and who isn't. I recently reminded a special education student that his Individualized Education Program meeting was coming up soon, and he said, 'Oh, do I still have an IEP?'"

"We promote the Learning Center intervention program to all sixth graders as an opportunity to get a big head start on their preparation for high school," DeRuvo says. "For example, I tell them, 'You'll learn two new vocabulary words every week; just think what that will mean by the end of the year.'"

Implementation of the Learning Center model has also resulted in a fundamental shift in how teachers view their roles and responsibilities, DeRuvo says, because teachers discover that focusing on a few overarching principles can help boost achievement for any student

in need of intervention. "The idea is for all teachers to think of all students, including those in special education or English language learners, as 'our kids,' rather than as 'mine' or 'yours,'" she adds. "And to remember that they all can learn when we have high expectations and provide them access to rigorous instruction."

During the second year, 2009-2010, periodic assessment of essential standards began. On the release days following each assessment cycle, teachers analyzed the assessment data. DeRuvo said the discussions quickly went from merely evaluative to being analytical. "We'd hear teachers say, 'Your students scored 80 percent on that standard? Can you share how you did that?'" Teachers were swift to share the strategies and materials they employed to gain a positive result. In this way, instruction has become truly collaborative and data driven.

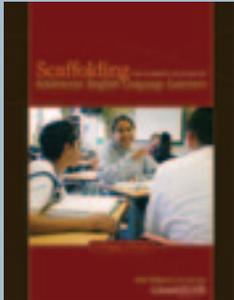
As professional development progresses, DeRuvo has encouraged this shift, urging teachers to be willing to learn from each other and to be flexible in trying a variety of instructional approaches. "When that happens, teachers do incredible things."

As a result of LMS 6 achievement, the district has asked DeRuvo to help implement a similar intervention model in Lennox Middle School's seventh and eighth grades in 2010-2011.



For more information about WestEd's work on improving instructional practices and programs, contact Silvia DeRuvo at 916.492.4010 or sderuvo@WestEd.org.

Featured Resources



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(1) Scaffolding the Academic Success of Adolescent English Language Learners: A Pedagogy of Promise

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Too often, the needs of English language learners are met with simplified curriculum and lowered expectations. What if instead classrooms were organized to honor the promise of these students by increasing rather than decreasing the intellectual challenge of instruction, by increasing the support such challenge requires, and by increasing students' active engagement with their own learning? This book is the result of a decade-long effort in school districts such as New York City, Austin, and San Diego to implement challenging instruction that is designed for classrooms that include English learners and that raises the bar and increases engagement for all learners.

(2) Grappling with the Gaps: Toward a Research Agenda to Meet the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care

Author: The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning

Publisher: The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010

Pages: 19

Price: FREE online at <http://www.WestEd.org/cs/we/view/rs/1028>

Students living in foster care face additional stresses and disruptions that can create serious barriers to a high-quality education. This report, prepared by BethAnn Berliner of WestEd for The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, lays the groundwork for new research priorities to improve the education outcomes for students living in foster care.

(3) What Are We Doing to Middle School English Learners? Findings and Recommendations for Change from a Study of California EL Programs (Narrative Summary)

This summary provides an accessible overview of English learner (EL) programs in California middle schools. Researchers from the Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) program at WestEd surveyed middle schools in the California school districts with the highest concentrations of English learners. Excerpts from case study observations in a subset of schools provide context for the highlighted recommendations for change. This study finds that middle school EL programs are failing English learners and limiting their futures in profound ways.

Authors: Aída Walqui, Nanette Koelsch, Leslie Hamburger, Donna Gaarder, Alex Insaurralde, Mary Schmida, Steven Weiss

Publisher: WestEd, 2010

Product #: PD-10-02RD

Pages: 20

Price: FREE online at <http://www.WestEd.org/MiddleSchoolEnglishLearners>

(4) One-Shot Deal? Students' Perceptions of Assessment and Course Placement in California's Community Colleges

This report examines the assessment and course placement practices across California's community colleges for incoming students and recommends strategies for overall improvement. The study revealed a wide gap between counselors' hopes regarding student experiences of assessment and placement on the one hand, and students' perceptions of these practices on the other.

Authors: Andrea Venezia, Kathy Reeves Bracco, Thad Nodine

Publisher: WestEd, 2010

Pages: 33

Price: FREE online at <http://www.WestEd.org/oneshotdeal>

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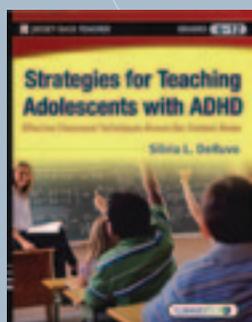
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(5) What Characteristics of Bullying, Bullying Victims, and Schools Are Associated with Increased Reporting of Bullying to School Officials?

This study, prepared by researchers in WestEd's Learning Innovations Program, tested 51 characteristics of bullying victimization, bullying victims, and bullying victims' schools to determine which were associated with reporting to school officials. It found that 11 characteristics in two categories — bullying victimization and bullying victims — showed a significant association with reporting. The study also notes the high percentage of respondents who experienced bullying but did not report it.

Authors: Anthony Petrosino, Sarah Guckenbug, Jill DeVoe, Thomas L. Hanson

Publisher: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2010

Pages: 45

Price: FREE online at <http://www.WestEd.org/cs/we/view/rs/1042>

(6) Strategies for Teaching Adolescents with ADHD: Effective Classroom Techniques Across the Content Areas, Grades 6-12

Written by WestEd's Silvia DeRuvo, a nationally known expert in the field, this practical, hands-on guide is filled with information that will help teachers teach content areas to adolescent students with ADHD. The strategies offered in this book are research-based, classroom-tested, and proven to improve learning across core areas. DeRuvo shows teachers how to engage students during instruction seamlessly using speaking, writing, drawing, movement, and other creative activities, enabling ADHD students to understand the material, retain the knowledge over time, and attain postsecondary education and employment.

Author: Silvia DeRuvo

Publisher: Jossey-Bass, 2009

Pages: 176 / Price: \$29.95

Product #: CPEI-09-02RD

ISBN: 978-0-470-24671-9

(7) Cultural Validity in Assessment: Addressing Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

This resource for practicing and prospective teachers — as well as others concerned with fair and valid assessment — provides a thorough grounding in relevant theory, research, and practice, and is essential reading for addressing this important, relevant topic.

Editors: María del Rosario Bastera, Elise Trumbull, Guillermo Solano-Flores

Publisher: Routledge, 2010

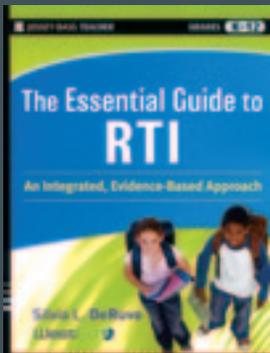
Pages: 320 / Price: \$44.95

Product #: PD-10-03RD

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Silvia
DeRuvo

A Special Education Resources Development Specialist in WestEd’s Center for Prevention and Early Intervention program, Silvia DeRuvo works with schools and districts to improve instructional practices and programs for students with disabilities.

DeRuvo’s work focuses primarily on the implementation of Response to Intervention models of schoolwide instructional and behavioral support. As a member of WestEd’s California Comprehensive Center, DeRuvo works primarily with the California Department of Education’s Special Education Division to support its statewide efforts on implementation of standards-based Individualized Education Programs and collaborative special education instructional models.