

# 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 & 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 inter-

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vention. 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 schoolwide 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 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.