



Helping All Students Succeed

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At Mountain View Elementary School in Anchorage, AK, a visitor can hear bits of Samoan, Spanish, Russian, Thai, Lao, Hmong, Mien, Cambodian, German, Tagalog, Cup'ik, Yup'ik and Inupiaq in the hallways and at recess. More than 40% of students receive instruction in English as a Second Language classes, and last year, less than 10% of the student body was identified as Caucasian.

While this low-income, inner-city school may be more diverse than others in Alaska or the United States' lower 48, it's not as rare as one might think. More than 10% of all public-school students received English language learner (ELL) services during the 2005–2006 school year,¹ and those numbers are expected to grow dramatically.

According to a Pew Hispanic Center study, “The projected number of school-age children of immigrants will increase from 12.3 million in 2005 to 17.9 million in 2020, accounting for all the projected growth in the school-age population.”²

The changing face of the American classroom—and the wide range in academic proficiency that has accompanied that shift—has put added pressure on schools and forced them to seek innovative ways to improve teaching and learning. Helping these students thrive in the school setting has become not only an equity and social justice issue, but one with federal consequences.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, states must meet annual measurable achievement objectives on students' progress toward English proficiency. In addition, the performance of these students on state reading, math and science tests enters into the mix when determining whether schools are making adequate yearly progress.

In the Northwest and around the country, schools are working to meet this challenge in different ways. Here are a few examples:

1. Direct instruction in reading

For Mountain View Elementary, strong principal leadership and a laser-like focus on reading instruction was the formula that helped turn around the struggling school and boost achievement among the highly diverse student body. The school adopted Reading Mastery, a direct instruction program for all students. It was the only school in the district



to do so. “That turned out to be the best thing for our particular group of kids ... who were coming to school unprepared,” said Roger LeBlanc, a former principal at Mountain View.

LeBlanc, who now leads another nearby Title I school, lobbied for extra professional development funds for intensive training in the new curriculum throughout the first two years of the program’s implementation. He also overhauled Mountain View’s master schedule to allow for 2½ hours of reading instruction, including a 90-minute block in the morning when students “walk to read” at their instructional level. Pull-outs—students who are pulled from their regular classes to attend the more specialized classroom sessions—for gym, library, art and music were scheduled at the same time for all students in a single grade level so their teachers could meet once a week during the school day to focus on improving reading instruction.

Another change was the shift to data-driven instruction. As teachers became more adept at mining the data and targeting their classroom practices accordingly, they saw student progress jump. “Reading skills picked up, and as kids and teachers started to see and experience success in one thing, it transitioned into other things,” LeBlanc said. “The same approach we were taking in reading—in terms of training, professional development and scheduling—we said, ‘Hey, let’s do that for writing and math as well.’”

Mountain View increased its reading proficiency by 19 percentage points in four years. During the same period, it more than doubled its math proficiency, going from 31 percentage points below the state average in 2003–2004 to three points above it in 2007–2008.³ As a U.S. Air Force veteran and current major in the Alaska Air National Guard, LeBlanc terms his experience at Mountain View as “mission accomplished.”

2. ELL program review/video study groups

Dorothy Fox Elementary in rural/suburban Camas, WA, faces a common dilemma: a multilingual population that’s thinly spread throughout the school. Fourteen different languages are represented at the 540-student school, with Russian and Spanish predominating. “We’ve outgrown the pullout system, but we’re not big enough to do a magnet system,” said Principal Cathy Sork. “We have a couple of [ELL] kids in every class, so every teacher was becoming an ELL teacher but really didn’t have the skills and training needed.”



To better understand those needs, Sork contracted with Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) for an independent review describing what happens to an ELL student across the span of a school day. The NWREL evaluators observed classrooms; conducted surveys of teachers and administrators; interviewed staff, parents and students; and examined ELL program documents. During the classroom visits, the observers looked for evidence the teacher was using practices that would be supportive of an ELL student. For example, was she engaging the student in conversation, vocabulary development and attention to language objectives?

The program review revealed that math was an area that needed special attention. “One of the pieces that came out was the teachers were doing most of the talking and thinking about math, and students were doing a lot of listening. It should be the other way around,” Sork said. As a result, the school launched an intensive professional development effort in math, blending research on what works for ELL students and video lesson study. NWREL trained a core group of six teacher leaders to videotape each other’s math lessons with the goal of capturing students’ interactions, questions and responses to instruction.

For two semesters, teachers have met monthly to view portions of the tapes and use them as a springboard for a facilitated discussion about improving instruction. Sork pointed out that the tapes are not used as teacher evaluations. “[The group] is looking to see if kids are talking, if they know how to work in groups, if they using their vocabulary, and if they are showing their thinking by using language,” Sork said.

Staff members are awaiting results from this spring’s mathematics achievement tests to see whether the video study group affected student scores. They’re quick to concede, however, there’s been an impact on classroom practice. As one teacher commented, “This process helped focus my instruction, gave me practical ideas to try and reflect on, offered encouragement and feedback, and helped me think of extensions or modifications to help clarify or differentiate.” Now, the teacher leaders are poised to train their colleagues, spreading video study groups throughout the school.

3. Small learning communities

Hillcrest High School in Queens reflects the rich diversity of the New York City borough. The 3,349-student body is 46% African American, 22% Latino and 29% Asian.



About 12% of the students are ELL students, with many recently arrived from countries such as Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Bangladesh and Guyana.

Three years ago, in an effort to increase graduation rates, Hillcrest made the strategic decision to reorganize into nine small learning communities (SLCs), where teacher teams share approximately 90 to 100 students in common for all four years of high school. The goal was to create a more personalized environment and to help teachers target instruction to each student's needs. In addition to creating the career-themed SLCs, the administration at Hillcrest worked with New Visions for Public Schools to develop an in-depth data reporting system that enables teachers to continuously track where students are in meeting standards in core subjects.

To enhance professional development, the school provides teachers common planning time for a series of learning labs, during which an assistant principal presents a set of strategies, such as differentiated instruction. Then, teaching teams design and implement lessons, incorporating the strategies and follow-up after teaching to evaluate success and identify ways to improve. "We are trying to create a situation in which the teachers have the opportunity to reflect on what they have done and to talk with and coach each other," Principal Stephen Duch said. "We are really beginning to create a community where people feel comfortable talking about what they take into account when they plan the lesson and how successful they think different strategies are."

One strategy that's worked particularly well is to incorporate a student vision of what the ideal classroom would offer. John Binet, director of the education-themed SLC, formed a student leadership group and asked students to design a plan to increase student engagement and present it at the learning lab sessions. Teachers were surprised to discover that the students' suggestions about improving instruction closely matched the expert strategies that had been the focus of their professional development sessions.

"In the beginning, it was difficult for the teachers to relinquish some of that power or to sit in a room where they were being taught by some of the students they teach throughout the day," Binet said. "But it's really worked well. We have challenged our [students] to really show us how to do it." Although many high schools strive to lower drop-out rates, few have turned to students for advice on supporting their needs in the classroom.



Increased student voice, detailed data analysis and more personalized teaching have paid off. During a 10-year period (1998-2008), the percentage of students passing academic courses has soared, with proficiency rates now close to or exceeding the 80th percentile in English, science and math.⁴

Success in academic courses has translated into high graduation rates and increased college attendance. For the 2008 graduating class, 98% of students entered college, with 85% attending four-year institutions.

Meeting all students' needs looks different at each of these schools. The lesson to take away is there's no single formula for success. Schools must assess their strengths and weaknesses and—with strong leadership—find a combination of programs, strategies and technical assistance that best serve their unique student population.

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