

“Improving the Literacy Skills of Children and Young Adults”
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Secondary Education

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Good morning. Chairman Kildee, Ranking Member Castle, Representative Polis and members of the subcommittee thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. I am Mary Kay Doré, District Student Support Services Manager in Summit School District located in Frisco, Colorado. I am honored to share some of the work we've done in Summit School District over the past few years in regards to improving instructional practices and achieving positive gains for students in literacy and learning.

BACKGROUND OF SUMMIT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Summit County is a rural resort district that is located 70 miles west of Denver in the Ten Mile Range of the Rocky Mountains. The county sits high in the Rockies at about 9,000 feet. We are home to 4 world class ski resorts and many other outdoor activities that attract year round visitors. Our year round population is approximately 25,000 residents, but during high tourist season the county's population can swell upwards of 100,000. The county has also experienced a great deal of growth in the past several decades, and with that has come an increase in the diversity of our resident families. In 1995, the district had a total of 40 students whose native language was other than English. Fourteen years later, in 2009, we have 864 students who speak 24 different languages. The predominant first language for these students is Spanish. The changes in poverty echo the same trend - in 2000, 354 students qualified for either free or reduced lunch; in 2009, 949 students qualified for the assistance.

Summit School District serves six towns and a little over three thousand students at our nine preschool programs, six elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, and three alternative programs which include diploma outreach and programming for students who are at risk of being expelled. Within our six elementary schools we have two schools that qualify for Title I Program assistance, one of which is a dual language school. The district is working toward full district authorization in the International Baccalaureate Programme. Summit County Schools has also been chosen as one of six districts statewide to participate in the Colorado Department of Education's CTAG, or Closing the Achievement Gap program, to address our higher than-state-average gap of English and non-English speaking student achievement.

CHANGES IN INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE

As we experienced growth in our community and an increase in our diversity, our district saw a decline in its standardized test scores. As school district officials examined new student data, they realized a need to change some of their long held practices. They refused to attribute lower test scores to students who didn't speak English well enough, or whose parents were struggling financially. It wasn't the children's fault; it was the schools' practices that needed to improve.

The district first adopted a core literacy program K-6 and empowered literacy resource teachers to examine student performance on common literacy assessments. Two key questions surfaced:

Why were some students making progress in the area of literacy while others were not?

What could we change for the students not making the progress we would expect?

In 2001, we formed a district Instructional Team, or Iteam, which included the district staff in the areas of literacy, ELA, gifted and talented, IB, special education and technology to focus on students who continued to struggle academically even with parent involvement and school support services. After listening to national leaders and speakers in literacy and language development, early intervention for at-risk students, and Response to Intervention, we were inspired to challenge our own status quo and develop a Summit County system of multi-tiered supports for students.

Following several years of internal fine tuning and cross departmental process planning, we established a new system with four components we believe hold the key to improved instruction and student achievement:

- ✓ Using formative and summative assessment data to driven instruction and interventions
- ✓ Focused collaborative time for teachers to discuss data, instruction, and students
- ✓ Discrete progress monitoring of student achievement
- ✓ Professional development linked to identified student need

This system, which we called Response to Instruction instead of Response to Intervention to emphasize the importance of instruction, began its implementation at Upper Blue Elementary. The team worked with the school's teachers to create a framework and mechanism for responding to student needs. Once every quarter the staff reviewed a body of evidence on each student regarding their academics. Teachers looked at students who were at grade level and those who needed further conversation. The principal carved out time during the school day for grade levels of teachers to work with their building specialists; literacy, English language acquisition, special education, counselors and their building principal for an hour week, rotating through all of the grade levels preschool through fifth grade in a three week rotation cycle.

During this grade-level collaborative time the team would review the universal screening data and results from formative and summative assessments. This gave the team the opportunity to look at students beyond their “label (special ed, ELL, ILP)” and flexibly group students by their individual needs, even across grade levels. This cross departmental approach matched the professional with the best skills for addressing each student’s need.

Data from benchmark assessments were critical elements of this process. Teachers learned how to use the data with confidence when discussing a student’s progress with their parents. It helped parents understand their child’s current literacy skills and what parents could do at home to help. Teachers were even using data with their students so students could see their progress and buy-in to their own learning. Literacy resource teachers developed a document that housed all literacy data for a class that was easy to reference. See Appendix A.

The teachers at Upper Blue also shifted to a “culture of problem solving.” One teacher reflected that it allowed her to look at all students in her classroom which impacted her daily instruction and made her differentiate and use a variety of literacy strategies, including small groups, centers, read aloud, writers workshop and other strategies based on the needs of her students. The problem solving process also held her accountable for the fidelity of interventions and student results. This contributed an increased awareness of the need for differentiated instruction based on a guaranteed and viable curriculum that was grounded in sound instructional practice. As teachers worked together they strengthened their understanding of essential learning outcomes, linked to the state standards and curriculum, and most importantly how they could support all students.

An important change that we observed was that fewer students were being referred for a special education evaluation. As the teams worked together, looking at student data, intentional interventions and their results, referrals became more focused; evaluations for learning and other disabilities now included a discussion about the need for the sustained intensity and duration of the interventions that were currently occurring with students. Teachers began to load their “tool boxes” with research-based literacy strategies and supplemental programs that addressed students’ needs through universal, targeted, and intensive levels of instruction. Student results were continually monitored, determining if progress had been sufficient, and if interventions needed to be continued or altered. This collaborative time and multi-tiered system of support structure has helped the staff continue the educational practices that were effective and allowed them to let go of the program that didn’t produce results.

As shown in Appendix B, since RTI began at Upper Blue Elementary in 2007, the school has consistently seen results on the Colorado reading assessment that outpace the district and state averages. At present, reading scores are higher than the writing scores; however, the building staff has been working on common writing benchmark assessments and writing samples that will better assess student’s writing needs.

DISTRICT WIDE WORK

The district has also seen a great deal of success in implementing this systemic reform. For many buildings this is the first year they are formally beginning the school wide initiative. The Middle School has started to track trends, allowing it to enact innovative programs such as a group that engages Latino boys with the school, increasing their engagement and achievement. Teachers are experiencing a paradigm shift of moving from the “I taught it” point of view to the “They learned it” philosophy. At administrative team meetings principals are beginning to share their school data to help build professional development offerings for all staff members in the district. Dillon Valley, our dual language elementary school, is using its data in both English and Spanish to build appropriate interventions to increase student achievement. Also, our two Title I program assistance schools have implemented before and after school intervention groups, summer programming, and literacy and math nights for parents to help impact student achievement. The increase of systems thinking has altered the way we look at our students, our expectations for them and how we can make the difference.

REFLECTIONS

As we continue today’s discussion on the literacy skills of children, I want to leave you with a few reflections based on my work in the field.

First, I want to applaud my own Congressman Jared Polis and Congressman Yarmuth for introducing H.R. 4037, the LEARN Act, which will hopefully give districts across the nation the much-needed resources to implement intensive, multi-tiered support systems for literacy just like the one we have implemented at Upper Blue Elementary School and in other Summit County schools.

Second, I know that we need to work with teachers in higher education. Teachers new to the field need to understand systems of multi-tiered support. They need to understand the principles of the problem solving process when it comes to students. They need to be well versed in the five components of literacy, including oral language development and its effective instruction.

Third, schools need to shift to systems thinking to make any sustainable change. This process begins with a strong universal tier of instruction that is linked to state standards and district curriculum. Additionally there needs to be systems in place that allow teachers time to look at data, discuss students, and plan for interventions or extensions and track their effectiveness in a continuous improvement cycle. Even though we have placed a priority on literacy, the system must be able to discuss many competing topics: math, behavior, science, bullying, and inquiry based instruction, wellness, and 21st century skills, just to name a few. Teachers have more to accomplish with less time. We need to make the time they have effective.

And finally, I also have learned that just having binders on how to do something does not change a system. Leadership at the school building level that supports cultural changes and a strong instructional focus are the essential components to guide this difficult

process of continuous improvement. With looming budget cuts in the State of Colorado, the already limited amount of time that we have currently for teacher professional development and collaborative work time will become an increasingly difficult practice to support. We need to provide the setting that works for children - one of time and support - to schools and districts so that they can focus on instruction, particularly in the area of literacy. We need to make changes if we are going to impact our children and after all, isn't that our true purpose?

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of our successes