SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE:

MAXIMIZING LEARNING TIME

KIT CARSON INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY
CLARK COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT ♦ LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

Because less than half of the students at Kit Carson International Academy (Carson) were reaching proficiency in reading, school administrators sought to increase the amount of time dedicated to building students' reading skills. Specifically, Carson increased its investments in the quality of reading instruction by (1) extending the school day to increase the amount of reading instruction and (2) using a set of common schoolwide approaches that target reading instruction and support teachers.

THE STRATEGY: Increasing the Duration and Improving the Quality of Reading Instruction for All Students

In 2011–12,[1] Carson added 30 minutes to the school day to allow for a reading intervention period for every student. This time is used to provide additional reading support to all students in grades K–5, in addition to the daily 138-minute literacy block. This additional time allows teachers to provide individualized reading instruction that is targeted to students' needs. It also provides an opportunity for teachers to participate in coaching on differentiated instructional strategies.

The strategy has two key components:

- Grouping students based on different needs for supplemental reading instruction and then targeting the reading instruction to each ability-level grouping

- Providing teachers with guidance and support to meet the school's instructional expectations and helping them deliver targeted, differentiated instruction to address student reading deficiencies

Student Grouping. All Carson students in kindergarten through fifth grade are grouped by reading ability. To determine students' reading ability levels, Carson uses a benchmark assessment[2] that is administered three times each school year. After analysis of results from each assessment administration, Carson staff adjust the student groupings to ensure that students are in appropriate reading-ability groups.

Generally, there are three to four groupings of students per grade in grades K–5, with the lowest performing students at each grade receiving intensive support. The number of student groupings is dependent on the number of

Memorial Middle School at a Glance
SIG Model: Turnaround
Start of SIG Implementation: 2010–11
Locale: City, Large
Grades: PK–5
Enrollment: 314
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 83%
Racial/Ethnic Composition: 41% Black, 40% Hispanic, 13% White, 4% Other, 3% Asian
English Learners: 18%
Students With Disabilities: 8%

Student Outcomes	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12
Reading % proficient	30%–44%*	45%–49%*	65%–69%*
Math % proficient	40%–44%*	60%–64%*	65%–69%*

Note: Percentages for English Learners and students with disabilities are from the Civil Rights Data Collection and may be based on a different total enrollment of students than the enrollment figure reported by the Common Core of Data.

* Because the school's number of test takers aggregates to 200 students or fewer, the assessment percentages are displayed as a range.

classroom teachers at each grade level. The lowest performing students, who work with three SIG-funded reading interventionists, receive focused support in smaller groupings of five to six students. All other students receive instruction from their grade-level teachers (e.g., first-graders attend a reading intervention period taught by a first-grade teacher) in larger groupings of approximately 15 students within each ability group.

The Carson school leadership team (consisting of the principal, assistant principal, literacy coach, mathematics coach, data coach, and district-provided instructional coach) matches students to interventionists and teachers who have the skills to address the specific needs of each student group. The team assigns all other teachers using information from their observations of teachers' instructional strengths and weaknesses as well as conversations with the teachers about the needs of a particular student group. In instances when teachers are new to Carson, the leadership team assigns these teachers to the highest performing student groups. After instruction begins, teachers remain with their intervention groups through the end of the school year.

Teachers and interventionists are responsible for targeting their instruction to meet student needs and for developing action plans to monitor student progress.

Targeted Instruction. Students in each student grouping receive daily intensive instruction on reading skills during the intervention period. Teachers use data from the benchmark assessment to determine the focus areas for each grouping. During the reading intervention period, teachers customize their instruction to meet students' specific needs. For example, students who are reading on or slightly below grade level receive instruction in basic reading skills (e.g., phonemic awareness and sight words) and in supplementary reading activities (e.g., novel reading). Students who are reading above grade level participate in enrichment activities, such as research projects and literature circles. During this time, students read and discuss books.

For the lowest performing students, one reading interventionist (who has 25 years of experience as a reading teacher) uses an off-the-shelf, scripted, computer-based reading program that helps these students develop basic literacy skills. The school chose this computer-based reading program because its lowest performing students have significant deficiencies in basic reading and comprehension skills. The program provides the needed types of remediation, including phonemic awareness and sight word vocabulary. Two contracted staff under the supervision of the interventionist each lead small groups of five or six students through the scripted lessons and online activities. The sessions last for 30 minutes. The computer-based program's embedded assessments provide the interventionists with regular updates on student progress. The interventionists review the program-generated progress reports weekly to monitor student progress. After students master the targeted skill, the interventionists move to the next series of lessons and skills.

Action Plans. All teachers and interventionists must ensure that they address the Nevada reading/language arts standards. To accomplish this goal, teachers develop an action plan for their grouping in collaboration with interventionists. Revisions to action plans are made after each benchmark assessment and are the basis for instruction between benchmark assessments. Each action plan:

- Identifies each specific standard that students have not mastered.

- Describes why teachers think that students failed to master the standard.

- Identifies specific instructional strategies to help students master the standard.

Teachers and interventionists also use the action plans to track standards that individual students need to master, in addition to identifying standards that the student groups need to master. Teachers update their action plans three times per year, when new assessment data become available.

Guidance and Support. Carson provides teachers with guidance and support to minimize the variation among teachers' skills and pedagogy. Such support includes group and targeted assistance to help teachers build their instructional skills, review and feedback on lesson planning, and feedback following monthly walk-throughs.

Opportunities to Build Teachers' Skills. Teachers meet in grade-level groups each Wednesday during a 45-minute joint planning period to review student reading data and develop plans for addressing student needs. During this weekly period, grade-level clusters (e.g., K–1, 2–3, 4–5) of teachers and a school leadership team member review and discuss literacy instruction, student progress, and student placement in reading intervention groups. They identify literacy standards that students have not mastered and the instructional strategies that teachers (both classroom teachers and interventionists) will use to help students meet those standards. Teachers also develop lesson plans for reading intervention periods and for the daily literacy block.

Each summer, Carson teachers participate in district-provided phonics and phonemic awareness training. The training includes all teachers but is particularly supportive of late-elementary grade teachers, who traditionally need training in building basic reading skills because that area of instruction typically is covered in earlier grades. Teachers also participate in a commercially purchased training[3] that focuses on improving student engagement in instruction through multiple strategies, including questioning techniques and cooperative learning.

Lesson Planning. All teachers develop lesson plans using the Effective Lesson Plan Template, a district-developed tool designed to improve the consistency and quality of reading instruction. The template is a key lever for instructional improvement, according to Carson's principal, and is used for planning all instruction in the school. Based on the district's instructional framework,[4] this template requires teachers to articulate the following components of each reading intervention lesson: (1) targeted standards, (2) essential questions, (3) content objectives, (4) language objectives, (5) review of prior material, (6) reference to students' background knowledge, (7) development of literacy concepts and skills, (8) opportunities for independent practice, and (9) suggestions for assessing student progress.

The principal began requiring that teachers use the template for planning the reading intervention period after observing that some teachers were focusing primarily on increasing fluency rather than on improving other critical literacy skills, such as reading comprehension. She noted that a fluency focus is a common component of many school reading-intervention programs, but this focus often is disconnected from standards-based instruction targeted toward improving student mastery of literacy skills. Teachers complete the templates online, and the principal reviews them and provides feedback. Grade-level teachers and members of the leadership team also discuss the templates and teachers' instructional plans during weekly planning meetings. The focus of these discussions is to gauge the extent to which teachers use the intervention periods for a variety of instructional strategies—including comparing and contrasting, expressing thoughts and ideas through both verbal and written exercises, and structured partnering activities. The principal noted that teachers also are encouraged to focus on using more rigorous questioning strategies to improve student engagement in and comprehension of the reading activity.

Walk-Through Monitoring. To monitor how teachers are meeting the school's instructional expectations, members of the school leadership team conduct 100 three- to five-minute walk-throughs every month. These walk-throughs cover all classes, including the reading intervention period. The five broad components of the walk-through rubric are curriculum, instructional practices, student learner, classroom environment, and differentiated instruction.[5]

The walk-through rubric, developed by the district during the SIG planning process, was designed to address instructional weaknesses identified by district reviewers prior to the beginning of the SIG grant. For example, district reviewers identified student engagement, the components of an effective lesson, and classroom management as the three broad areas in which the school needed to make the most progress to improve teaching and learning. Members of the school leadership team record walk-through data electronically and discuss observed patterns of instruction during teachers' weekly joint planning period. These data inform continuous improvement with

instructional strategies in the short term as well as during the course of the school year. The leadership team reviews the walk-through data for signs of improved instructional practice and then provides schoolwide, grade-level assistance to individual teachers based on the analysis. For example, during the 2012–13 school year, walk-through data for the reading intervention period revealed that teachers were not reviewing content covered in prior lessons and were not adequately modeling the skills they wanted students to develop before allowing students to practice the skill independently. Members of the leadership team provided the teachers with additional training on how to better structure their lessons.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Reducing variation and increasing the quality of reading instruction requires ongoing attention to training teachers and aligning expectations with instructional guidance. Carson leaders realized that training teachers should be ongoing, rather than a one-time or one-year event. As a result, the school continues to monitor current teachers' use of instructional strategies and provides feedback and suggestions for improvements. New teachers receive feedback and support through training and a more intense system of monitoring. In addition, Carson leaders focus on continually improving their own practices and have improved the alignment between the different types of support and guidance offered to teachers. According to the school principal, reflecting on the alignment between expectations, monitoring instructional strategies, and providing feedback for teachers are ongoing and critical to minimizing the variation in the quality of reading instruction.

CONCLUSION

Kit Carson International Academy uses additional time to help strengthen all students' literacy skills. The strategy of providing more time for reading instruction, targeting instruction, and supporting teachers reduces the variation of instruction across classrooms and supports efforts to improve the reading levels of students throughout the school.

SOURCES

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: School at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12); SIG information is from SIG-Awarded Schools (2010–11, 2011–12, 2012–13) located at http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html; students with disabilities and English Learner student percentage enrollment data are from the Civil Rights Data Collection (2011–12); and student outcomes data are from ED*Facts* (2009–10, 2010–11, 2011–12)*.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

[1] In its first year of SIG funding, Carson offered one hour of before- or after-school tutoring in reading and mathematics for all students. However, the tutoring lacked focus and was difficult to coordinate. As a result, Carson opted to extend the regular school day by 30 minutes and to focus the time exclusively on reading instruction.

[2] Carson's benchmark assessments are aligned with the state reading assessment. Specifically, teachers administer the Discovery assessment from Discovery Education, the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment from the Northwest Evaluation Association, and the eValuate assessment from Catapult Learning. For the 2012–13 school year, the goals for the Discovery assessment were a 10 percentage point increase in the number of proficient students in grades 1–2 and a 5 percentage point increase for students in grades 3–5. The goal for the MAP assessment was for 70 percent of students in grades 3–5 to meet or exceed the assessment's proficiency projection. For eValuate, the goal was a 30 percentage point increase in the number of proficient students between October and March. The reading goal for the state assessment was a 10 percent reduction in the number of nonproficient students.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS (Continued)

[3] This training is available through Kagan Publishing and Professional Development.

[4] The Clark County School District Instructional Framework is available at
http://tl.unlv.edu/sites/default/files/essentials_framework.pdf. According to district guidance, teachers are expected to meet these standards for all instruction.

[5] For each rubric component, observers note whether the component was *evident*, *not evident*, or *unable to be determined*. Details are as follows:

- The *curriculum* component focuses on whether (1) the learning objective is evident to students and (2) the learning objective is on target for grade-level standards.

- The *instructional practices* component focuses on (1) instructional practices (e.g., coaching, discussion, hands-on experiences, informal assessment, learning centers, lecture, modeling, presentation, providing directions/instructions, providing opportunities for practice, teacher-directed Q/A, testing, or none; (2) grouping format (e.g., whole group, small group, paired, individual); and (3) research-based instructional strategies (e.g., identifying similarities and differences, summarizing/note-taking, reinforcing effort/recognition, homework/practice, nonlinguistic representation, cooperative learning, setting objectives/providing feedback, generating/testing hypotheses, cues/questions/advance organizers).

- The *student learner* component focuses on (1) student actions (e.g., listening, reading, speaking, working with hands-on materials, writing); (2) instructional materials (e.g., computer software, content-specific manipulatives, hand-held technology, lab/activity sheet, overhead/board/flip chart, published print materials, real-world objects, student-created materials, textbook, video, websites, worksheets, or none); (3) level of student work (e.g., recalling information, understanding information, using information in a new way, breaking down information into parts, putting information together in a new way, and making judgments and justifying positions); and (4) level of class engagement (e.g., most students are actively engaged; well-managed students are willingly compliant, ritually engaged; dysfunctional [many students actively reject the assigned task or substitute another activity]).

- The *classroom environment* component focuses on evidence of (1) models or exemplars of student work that are posted, (2) classroom routines and procedures, (3) scoring rubrics that are displayed/provided, (4) students interacting with the classroom environment, and (5) students' work that is displayed.

- The *differentiated instruction* component includes (1) content, (2) process, (3) product, (4) learning environment, and (5) unable to determine.