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Inland Empire district charts its own course to success

Corona-Norco Unified gives teachers the freedom to experiment instead of prescribed lesson plans, boosting scores and graduation rates in the heavily Latino, low-income district.

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The third-graders struggled to keep pace. And their teachers at Parkridge Elementary School in Corona wanted to know why.

The teachers met after school recently and delved into sheets of data and reading comprehension test questions. They quickly found the reason: Their students could predict events in a story but only a third of them could infer how an incident would affect the story's outcome.

The five teachers developed plans to aggressively target the lackluster skill. And on Friday, 85% of the students passed the test.

"We were successful," said Patty Evalle, one of the teachers. "The hard work that we put in really paid off."

The commitment to student achievement is common in the Corona-Norco Unified School District. The Riverside County school system has garnered attention and honors for its steady gains in state and college entrance test scores, its above-average graduation rates and the academic ascent of its minority, low-income and special education students.

Most recently, the 53,400-student district was named a finalist for the Broad Prize for Urban Education, which honors academic excellence in largely minority and low-income districts across the nation.

As the 10th-largest system in the state, Corona-Norco appears to have mostly avoided the pitfalls common to similar districts with diverse student populations and budget constraints. About half the students are Latino and are mostly low-income. The district's \$371-million budget has been cut by \$140 million since 2007-08.

"Many school districts use their demographics and rate of poverty as a justification for low performance by their students," said Arun Ramanathan, executive director of Education Trust-West, a nonprofit advocacy group. "It's encouraging to see Corona-Norco posting such great performance despite that."

Teachers, parents and administrators attribute the district's strength to strong relationships that may only receive lip service elsewhere.

It is most apparent in the lack of strife between the district and its unions. In 2010, teachers and administrators took a 5% pay cut to avoid teacher layoffs. Teachers, who meet weekly to discuss strategies and tweak lesson plans, are given freedom to experiment in the classroom and are active in developing curriculum.

Various student and parent advocacy groups offer support on the 49 campuses.

Across the board, students have made dramatic gains in state test scores in recent years. The district has an above-average Academic Performance Index rating of 815 and a 92% graduation rate. The system is narrowing the gap between white and Asian students and their African American and Latino peers. These groups, according to the Education Trust-West, have made among the greatest gains in the number of students scoring at or above grade level in English and math in the state between 2003 and 2010.

The system aims to bridge that achievement gap early. One tool is a dual-language immersion program.

Beginning in kindergarten, these classes are largely split between those still learning English and native English speakers. Instruction is 90% in Spanish and 10% in English in kindergarten, a proportion that will shift to 50-50 by fourth grade.

The program continues into middle school and high school, with certain classes conducted solely in Spanish.

On a recent morning at Garretson Elementary School, where about a third of the 1,000 students speak little to no English, kindergartners sat cross-legged as teacher Maribel Segundo called on them to finish the sentence "*La mariposa toma nectar en...*" "The butterfly drinks nectar from..."

She called on Mallory and Pedro, Armando and Gavin. Each gave an answer in Spanish.

One girl, her blond hair in a ponytail, raised her hand, seemingly eager to answer.

"Si, Jordan," the teacher said.

"*Maestra, puedo tomar agua?*" she asked, then frowned after the teacher quickly said no to a water break. By design, the district stays away from prescriptive lesson plans, allowing teachers and administrators at individual schools to develop their own strategies to reach the same goal — higher student achievement.

The idea is to increase the connection between instructors and what they teach, creating more accountability within the ranks, said Colleen Hawkins, director of curriculum and instruction.

"We don't go buy something and impose it on them," she said. "They are invested in it and created it. They own it and own the results."

That freedom and time for collaboration allows teachers to reach students in their own way, said Evalle, the third-grade teacher. "We can be who we are as teachers."

Students also are encouraged to get involved in their education. Senior Saraiyah Hatter felt a divide between the Latino and black students at Santiago High School and set out to help close it.

As president of the Black Student Union, the 18-year-old reached out to the Latino group on campus and held an event with the club to promote togetherness.

"We talked about how gang violence has separated us, but how we have to strive for something greater — together," said Hatter, who plans to attend UCLA in the fall.

The support from teachers and administrators at the school has allowed other programs to take root. The Black Student Union created a tutoring program for all students. A parent group on campus, initially focused on assisting the school's black population, has branched out to helping all students. The parents, many of whom no longer have students at the school, mentor students, monitor grades and celebrate students' success.

When Hatter's brother attended Santiago in 2005, the average African American student had a 2.3 grade-point average. As of last quarter, that has risen to a 3.0 average.

"That's saying that the average African American at Santiago High School is now eligible to apply to a UC," she said. "That is amazing to even say."

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