IDEA Schools Get Students Future Ready With Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading

Overview

The first IDEA Academy was founded in Donna, Texas in 2001. Today, there are 79 schools in the IDEA network of tuition-free, Pre-K–12 public schools that serve 45,000 students across Texas Louisiana, and Florida (in 2021).

IDEA stands for “Individuals Dedicated to Excellence and Achievement,” which sums up the approach of the charter schools. All IDEA students are expected and encouraged to go to college, and in the 2017–18 school year, 100% of IDEA seniors were accepted to college.
In the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, IDEA schools serve 22 buildings and nearly 14,000 students, about 89% of whom are economically disadvantaged. The schools blend traditional instruction with personalized, cutting-edge technology to ensure all students perform at or above grade level. As part of this focus on student achievement and college readiness, IDEA schools use McGraw-Hill Education Direct Instruction (DI) products Reading Mastery in their K–2 classes and Corrective Reading in grades 3–5.

**Implementation**

IDEA schools have a unique expansion model wherein each campus begins as a PreK–1 and expands one grade level in each year that follows. For six years, Erica Matamoros was a campus leader at IDEA Academy in Brownsville, which successfully grew to full-scale as a PreK-5 campus. Today she is Vice President of Schools at IDEA.

Matamoros recalls when Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading were implemented in Brownsville back in 2011. Hilda Swanson, Principal of San Juan Academy, had used the programs in her work on an Indian reservation and saw impressive gains, so she related her experience to the CEO of IDEA. Today, all IDEA campuses use Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading.

“We had success with Reading Mastery from the start,” says Matamoros. “At the end of my first year, all our Kindergartners could read. Many were economically disadvantaged students who lacked language skills.

With Reading Mastery, we could give them a strong foundation to build on. And because we had so much data pouring in, we could identify every student who lacked skills as well as those who were ahead of the game. This allowed us to meet every students’ needs and our district goals.”

Hope Williams has been Principal of IDEA Judson Academy in San Antonio since 2015, and her school currently serves PreK–4. Williams says that she also saw gains very quickly after implementing Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading.

“When I first started as Principal of IDEA Judson Academy, many of the first-graders came in from other schools and were still at the Kindergarten level. Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading allowed us to instruct kids to mastery level without skipping past anything. Seeing them read after just a few months shows just how phenomenal the curriculum is.”

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Williams adds that Direct Instruction is particularly helpful for weeding out the common errors of first-year teachers and ensuring they know exactly what to do—and what not to do—to keep children on track for mastery.

“I can’t say enough about how Reading Mastery is structured. It is a great way to get new teachers on board with less planning. I walk in to observe a lesson and all the students are sitting up tall and answering together. There’s no way for the teacher to make a mistake.”

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VP of Schools

Matamoros agrees. “I can’t say enough about how Reading Mastery is structured,” she says. “It is a great way to get new teachers on board with less planning. They don’t have to ask themselves, ‘Will this lesson plan do? Does it meet my objectives?’ With Reading Mastery, I walk in to observe a lesson and all the students are sitting up tall and answering together. There’s no way for the teacher to make a mistake.”

Pamela Ray, Principal at IDEA Ewing Halsell Academy in San Antonio was new to Direct Instruction when she started in her role. Soon she was learning DI while coaching and managing teachers in the use of Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading. Ray comes from a science background, so she had confidence in
the credibility of the research-based programs. She really started to believe in them when she saw students leaving Kindergarten reading. And while, early on, some of the teachers were concerned about a lack of creativity in their instruction, Ray says they now come to IDEA knowing this is what they will use and how they do things. The programs’ components provide a solid base, and teachers are encouraged to add value through their own personal touches.

“Many of the teachers on campus were in their first years of teaching, and they were hungry for something to start with,” says Ray. “Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading give our teachers everything they need to differentiate, prioritize closing gaps, and build on achievement.”

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Ray notes that she has received a high level of support from McGraw-Hill Education during implementation. The Instructional Manager comes in to coach right along with her to ensure teachers understand what the data is telling them and how to change their approaches to meet student needs.

“The Professional Development support we’ve received has been targeted and individualized to the needs of our teachers,” she says. “We started with a new campus, new administration, new teachers, and we were quickly off to a strong start with Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading.”

Student Confidence
Maria Carmen-Sepulveda has been the Principal at the IDEA Mays Academy in San Antonio for three years. She had no experience with Direct Instruction when she started.

“When I first saw Direct Instruction in action, I got goosebumps,” she recalls. “The lessons seemed so unnatural, like the students were robots. Then I saw the children flourishing. My students are all doing fantastically well with Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading. No one is bored. No one is left behind.”
She recalls two students who immediately benefited from the shift to Direct Instruction. One was a kindergarten student and high achiever who quickly progressed to second grade reading, because he felt empowered to move ahead. The other was a student with autism who could make no eye contact. The repetitive structure of the lessons enabled him to join in and gain confidence. He also quickly showed progress.

Principal Carmen-Sepulveda also notes that 27% of her students are English language learners, and Direct Instruction allows them to feel included and confident in their language skills.

“As Reading Mastery is explicit about teaching language, so no one, including English language learners, feels left out. I’m so in love with it that I want to go back to the past and reteach some of the bilingual students I once had, so I could teach them the right way.”

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As the VP of Schools at IDEA, Erica Matamoros knows that enthusiasm like that can have a huge impact on how students respond to Direct Instruction. She believes that even though Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading lessons are delivered explicitly, what teachers can bring to the table is joy and the affirmation that students can achieve higher results.

“Direct Instruction is repetitive: teachers say something and students answer back. But teachers who use a positive tone can help students get excited, help them gain confidence,” says Matamoros. “Teachers must also be proactive about identifying kids who are simply droning and hold them accountable.”

At IDEA Judson Academy, Principal Williams oversees data checks every Friday for this very reason. She and her teachers are looking for red flags that show a lack of mastery.

“We talk about which skills are weak and which are strong, and we continue to use decoding in the upper grades to close gaps that we identify,” says Williams. “Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading are pivotal for uncovering deficiencies and avoiding new ones. We can catch it if someone is coming in low, and we can push high performers further. Last year we had four Kindergartners test two years above normal, and they were able to skip a whole grade and still keep up with their peers.”
Results

Across the board, lower valley IDEA schools report amazing results using Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading.

“At IDEA schools, our mission is college for all,” says Principal Ray. “We want every student to get into and matriculate through college, so we backload to identify what we need to do to put them on that college-bound path. Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading provide the data we require to be able to monitor and pivot to meet our students’ needs.”

Student Growth at IDEA Campuses During the 2017–18 School Year

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Percent of On-Level Students at the Beginning of Year</th>
<th>Percent of On-Level Students at the End of Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IDEA Mays Academy, San Antonio</td>
<td>First and Third Grade</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDEA Judson Academy, San Antonio</td>
<td>PreK – Third Grade</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
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Having instruction informed by data resulted in impressive gains on the Ewing Halsell Academy campus. During the 2017–18 school year, 90% of PreK and Kindergarten students at the school finished at grade level or above, and 70% of first-graders entered second grade on track with their grade level.

Principal Carmen-Sepulveda saw equally strong growth at IDEA Mays Academy. During the 2017–18, Mays expanded its campus to include third-graders, many of whom were still reading on a Kindergarten level. In fact, at the beginning of the year, only 43% of third-graders were reading on grade level. By the end of the year, 73% were on grade level.

Third grade is an important year for Texas students, as it is the first year they will be required to do state testing. At the IDEA Judson Academy, this was a challenge. When it expanded to include third-graders, only 20% of them tested on or above grade level during the 2017–18 school year.

By the end of the year, 84% met their goals. And their reading skills helped them succeed in math as well: 78% scored above grade level on their state math exams.

That same year, first-grade students at Judson came in with just 22% at mastery level. By the end of the year, they were scoring at 87% on or above grade level.

“We saw a huge jump, and we attribute it to adding 90 minutes of decoding instruction to the regular reading classes,” says Principal Williams. “Fidelity to Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading has also been key. We teach the script with fidelity and then work hard to understand what the data is saying about our students’ progress. Our teachers are not afraid of reading the data to uncover which discrete skills students have or lack.”

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Matamoros notes that their goal for all lower valley IDEA campuses is for 90% of students to be on level or higher in reading, math and language. This year was the first time all the schools in her region met those goals. Matamoros also expresses pride in the achievements of students at IDEA Academy Brownsville where she was the Principal just two years ago.

“IDEA Academy Brownsville was the only IDEA school in Rio Grande Valley to meet its goals for state academic requirements in 2017–18,” she says, “I attribute that to a strong commitment to Direct Instruction and a strategic base that uses data to evaluate students to mastery.”

The Future

Carmen-Sepulveda says that San Antonio IDEA campuses will continue to use Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading, and she plans to complement them with collaboration and writing skills.

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“Collaboration helps students apply what they have learned and allows them to expand on a thought,” she says. “So, this will be an area of focus for us going forward.”
As their campuses grow, both Ray and Carmen-Sepulveda are focused on conducting parenting academies to show parents how and why IDEA academies teach using Direct Instruction. Their hope is that family classes will result in more support at home.

“Parents need to understand why we do what we do, so they can reinforce what students are learning,” says Carmen-Sepulveda. “For instance, when we teach students using Reading Mastery, we say, ‘get ready,’ and then we snap. Parents understand why we do this once they sit through a session. It really helps to have them on board.”

Williams is equally committed to continuing with Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading at her school.

“Now that our teachers understand what mastery looks and feels like, and they have students moving on to new levels of understanding, most will say that they would never go back,” says Williams.

“You have to trust that the curriculum and its processes will add value to the classroom,” says Ray. “Nothing else teaches fluency with such great success for every student. I have students with disabilities finishing at grade level, and I often wonder if that would have been their end-of-year story without Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading.”

About Reading Mastery

Reading Mastery is an evidence-based comprehensive English Language Arts program proven to raise reading performance for a wide range of students, including significantly at-risk populations, for over 35 years. More than 10,000 schools across the country use Reading Mastery to explicitly and systematically teach key foundational literacy skills and how to read, comprehend, and write narrative and informational text of increasing complexity while building oral language fluency skills.

About Corrective Reading

Corrective Reading provides intensive Direct Instruction-based reading intervention for students in Grades 3–12 who are reading below grade level. This Direct Instruction reading intervention program delivers tightly sequenced, carefully planned lessons that give struggling students the structure and practice necessary to become skilled, fluent readers and better learners.

To learn more about Reading Mastery, Corrective Reading or other McGraw-Hill Education Direct Instruction programs, visit: directinstruction.com