Sumner, Washington School District
Boosts Literacy with Direct Instruction

Name
Sumner School District

Location
Sumner, Washington

Grades
K–3

Overview

Recognized as one of the premier districts in the Tacoma, Washington area, the Sumner School District focuses on creating a learning environment where academic success is the standard for each child and where students, teachers, and administrators have the tools they need to guide each child to peak performance. The district’s eight elementary schools, three middle schools, and two comprehensive high schools employ 500 certificated professionals and serve a growing population of nearly 9,000 students.

Around 15 percent of the district’s students are Hispanic, and five percent come from different multiracial backgrounds. Overall, Sumner is less diverse than other nearby districts. Its challenge lies in its disparate school populations. Two of the district’s schools serve up to 60 percent of the students on free/reduced lunch; another school has less than 10 percent free/reduced lunch.
Implementation

The Sumner School District has far-reaching goals. Its newer superintendent inspires its educators to follow the “Four E’s”: Excellent Instruction, Every Day, in Every Classroom, for Every Student. Part of this new focus is on identifying the approximately 20 percent of students who are falling behind, and looking at alternatives for grade K–3 intervention education to catch them up and keep them caught up. Direct Instruction (DI) curricula were identified as essential to filling in the existing intervention system in the district.

Sumner’s educators found that in many cases, their core programs weren’t reaching beginning readers or helping them keep up with their peers. Traci Donohue, Special Services Director for Sumner, was one of the leaders tapped to ensure that reading instruction was being delivered in a way struggling students could easily access. “There was just not enough time available, nor enough practice, to get them to grade level … Students were getting further and further behind, and we knew that if the progress wasn’t accelerated soon, we were never going to make headway.”

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Donohue had been on a five-year journey to implement Direct Instruction. To get struggling students back on track, the district chose two McGraw-Hill Education Direct Instruction reading programs: Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading.

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“The bigger steps we took were in the realm of training and ongoing coaching, to ensure we could implement the programs with fidelity, and constantly adjusting our teaching skills,” says Donohue. The district partnered with a McGraw-Hill Education representative to set up initial training and schedule a pre-implementation Summer Institute to train teachers in both Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading starting at the kindergarten level. Some teachers attended the annual National Direct Instruction conference to gain additional professional learning.

After two or three educators at each of Sumner’s schools were proficient with the DI programs, the district asked those teachers to evaluate progress and determine how to provide additional help with the lessons. “We designated certain teachers and administrators to become deep experts at one DI specialty, and we also did a “ride-along” with teachers to work through the learning curve. Now, we are continuously updating the list of teachers who need training, and we have a coach available to help as many classified staff as possible to come on site and assist them with their teaching skills,” says Donohue.
Reaction

That first year, only a handful of teachers used the new DI programs. After the third full year of implementation, the district has full participation, especially among teachers with a higher proportion of low-performing students. “Teachers are now beating down the door to get the curriculum and the training they need to implement it,” says Donohue. Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading now fully complement the core reading programs in the district’s elementary and middle schools.

Professional development, which enhances instructional quality, is a strong focus at Sumner. “We have a tiered system for PD—anybody who touches the curriculum needs to have sufficient training, and a professional will coach and observe the instructors to help them make decisions and improve their instruction,” says Donohue. Teachers collaborate to share best practices for students who require Tier 3 support. “We bring together individuals from the different buildings to allow them to network and grow and build each other up professionally,” Donohue says.

Sumner wants all of its students to become readers at an early age, including those with moderate and severe disabilities. “Our elementary schools and our self-contained classrooms are both expected to use Reading Mastery, and we have high expectations for the students,” says Donohue. “… It’s critical that we do everything we can in those early years to get them as far along as we can. The DI programs fit well with the new initiatives and the value the district has placed on literacy.”

Results

Donohue has seen an increase in student confidence and achievement with Direct Instruction. “In general, it gives them predictability. They understand the routines, they know what to expect, and they see success. They say, ‘It is easy, and I can do this.’ It’s helped both the kids and the confidence level of the teachers,” she says.

Direct Instruction has enhanced the quality of special education in Sumner’s schools. “Our self-contained Special Education teachers are more intentional and have the right tools they need to teach literacy. It’s created a common ground whereby they can talk about where their kids are at, and it’s created a strong network among them,” explains Donohue. “… We are constantly asking ourselves whether we’re closing the gap and accelerating learning—are we allowing them to get closer to grade level, or is there something more we can do?” Over time, the district plans to adjust its

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curriculum for special-needs students and even look at post-secondary-school planning.

“Right now, the children’s ability to be ready for college and career is the Number One priority for our district,” Donohue says. Getting them college- and career-ready starts with great literacy instruction—the reading, writing, speaking, and listening.”

Donohue feels that the best aspects of Direct Instruction programs are their explicit, intentional instruction and systematic delivery. “DI programs are the best thing for struggling learners that we’ve seen,” she says. “They provide structure for teachers and support for teachers. I haven’t seen anything else that can meet the needs of struggling students [as well] as the Direct Instruction curriculum does. It truly meets the needs of all students ... It meets them where they are to accelerate the pace of their learning,” she says.

The Future

Future plans include observing teachers frequently, reminding them about what they learned in training, and giving them positive feedback. “You really need to keep the momentum going after the first and second years,” says Donohue. “We constantly think, ‘How do we bring teachers into the DI fold, keep the teachers going, and make them better and better at what they do?’” The Sumner School District is also working out a way to document the results gained from implementing the Direct Instruction programs, including a systematic means of collecting and reporting on data.

DI programs are helping Sumner make a difference in the lives and futures of its students. As Donohue puts it, “... We’re contributing to having high expectations early on, so students can pick from a multitude of occupations. Their doors are wide open, because we’re providing quality instruction from the beginning.”

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