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District achieving success, one student at a time

by Dr. Debra Bowers

As educators, everything we do these days is data and research driven. Tests are standardized, achievement is measured and the numbers are recorded. The No Child left Behind (NCLB) legislation brings a host of new measurements that can be difficult for families to make sense of. As educators, working with children, we know that there so much more to the story than the numbers show.

We need multiple measures over time to tell the complete story of learning in St. Louis Park's public schools. Our demographics are changing. We have more students in poverty, as measured by students receiving free and reduced priced meals and more students in our program for English Language Learners (ELL), students for whom English is a second language and who have an incredibly broad range of educational backgrounds.

Recent Basic Skills Test (BST) results for 2005 shows that the percent passing in SLP remained flat, as it has for the state. (SLP 8th grade reading scores were 84% passing, with 85% for the state.)

Our ELL students met a recent target as measured by MCA math but failed to meet the target as measured by MCA reading. (In MCA reading, the target index was 63.98 and ELL scored 60.10)

The analysis does not allow a look at the performance of one group of students over time. It compares students with different demographic and educational conditions against one another, using one test in each content area. Further, ELL students who achieve language proficiency quickly transition out of the program and are no longer counted in the data. Thus, some of our most successful students, based on their individual growth over time, are not reported as successes for the BST results.

We have always focused on individual student achievement and multiple pathways to excellence and are continuing to do so with a variety of programs.

We're taking a new approach at the junior high this fall by adding a second English language arts class to the curriculum. Every single incoming seventh grade student will be assessed for proficiency level in reading using multiple measures, including our own NWEA scores, which do measure individual student growth over time. Students who do not need extra help with language arts may choose to study a world language. Students who need help to become proficient in reading, writing and speaking skills will participate in the new class, in addition to the regular seventh grade language arts class. Students need to solidify their language arts skills to do well in all subject areas, and that is why we're targeting these foundational skills.

Reading Week Seminar is another way we accelerate learning at the junior high level. It's an intensive five-day reading intervention program focusing on phonics for eighth grade students who are reading below grade level. It is in its third year of implementation, and we've been able to refine the program to achieve great results.

Cedar Manor elementary students learn reading strategies using social studies themes in Social Studies with a Twist. Early Birds, Read Naturally and Learning Academy are before and after-school classes for students in grade four through six to improve their skills in reading, writing and/or math. Children rapidly see the pay-off of doing extra work in the progress they make in reading and that's a very powerful outcome!

We use both "sheltered workshops" where students are pulled out of regular classrooms to work with an ELL teacher and blended models in which ELL teachers work within the regular classroom, coaching classroom teachers as well as ELL students.

These are just a few examples of the many ways we meet the unique needs of individual learners in our schools. We'll continue to hold all our students to high academic standards and will also measure individual student growth and success over time. We as educators, together with our greater community, seek to provide all students with the foundation they need to be successful adults.