

An Agent of change: How Getting Teacher Buy-in Can Improve Results for Reading Intervention

By Leslie J. Thompson

Ann Keelan is not afraid to rock the boat. Last year, the Reading Coach at Palm Tree Elementary School in Palmdale, CA, took it upon herself to develop a system that would apply Voyager Passport™ as a reading intervention solution for English Language Learners and struggling readers in grades K-6, without taking time away from the core reading block. But that wasn't nearly as difficult as getting her paraprofessionals to try a new instructional model different from anything they've previously known.

"One of the things that I focused on was making sure we had buy-in from all parties," explains Keelan, who introduced the scheduling system last fall. The intervention initiative was built around the state mandate that elementary schools provide at least 30 minutes of English Language Development for non-English speaking students.

"When the district purchased the [Voyager] program, I thought this was the perfect way to kill two birds with one stone," says Keelan. "We could intervene with the students who were struggling in a systematic way with a proven program, and we could also meet the needs of English

Language Learners, [as well as] those students at the mastery level."

To accomplish this, paraprofessionals work with small groups of struggling readers during the 30-minute period that ELL students receive specialized instruction. Students who are reading proficiently do on-level extensions or receive accelerated instruction. In addition, ELL students in the primary grades get an additional dose of reading intervention with Voyager Passport during a separate pull-out time.

Notes Keelan, "The paraprofessionals that administer the program had previously used interventions that were focused [only] on grades 1 and 2, and were one-on-one or in very small groups. They had to get out of their comfort zone and work with larger groups of six to eight students, and with older kids who have more complicated issues."

Small Group Instruction Yields Big Results

For paraprofessionals with little formal teaching experience, the new intervention model was a big adjustment, but it offered significant benefits.

Says Keelan, "Having instructional aides go to each grade level for 30 minutes means that the groups that are getting Voyager can remain small, and that we can level groups within a grade. I used the Voyager benchmarks and the *Reading First* and California standards to assess the students. Then, I leveled them from that data, so there would be a



high group, a lower group, et cetera.”

The results of the first-year implementation were very positive, as students who previously performed significantly below grade level made dramatic gains.

“Our students started off very low, so while they weren’t on track according to the benchmark assessments, they have in many cases more than tripled their initial score,” explains Keelan. “For example, in first grade, at the first benchmark for the nonsense word fluency measure, we started at a 11.4 average and went up to 36.9” by the second benchmark, she says.

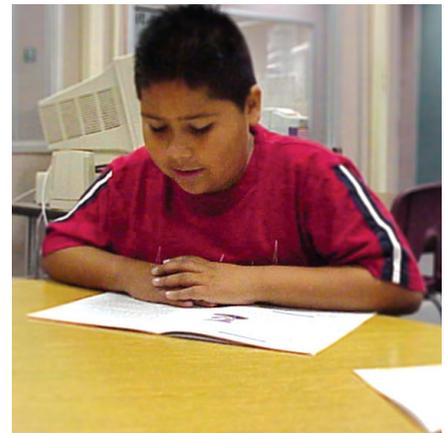
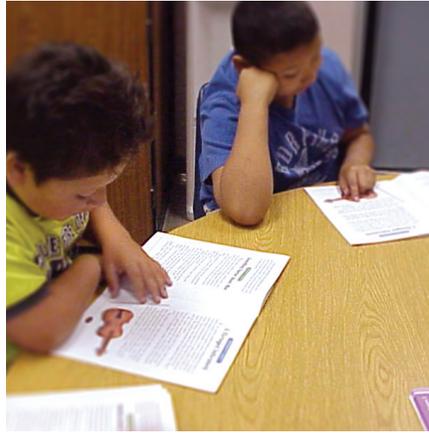
Although students did not hit the goal of 50 at Benchmark 2, they continued the strong growth trajectory and actually surpassed the goal by the end of the year. In all grades, the student average mirrored or exceeded the expected growth angle between the three benchmarks, significantly closing the achievement gap.

Parent Feedback Helps Boost Morale

To ensure the program’s continued success, Keelan focused on improving communication between teachers, as well as with parents of struggling students.

“We created a progress report that is completed by the Voyager teacher. A copy goes to the homeroom teacher, a copy goes to the parent, and we keep a copy,” she explains. “There is space for parent comments, and getting these back, it was really gratifying to read [comments like], ‘I’m so glad my son is in your program. Thank you for working with him.’”

The progress monitoring reports and parent feedback were especially motivating for the paraprofessionals, who generally only get to spend brief periods with their students.



This page (clockwise from top left): Palm Tree Elementary School third-graders Frank Benitez and Mizael Tena, Gabriela Leal, and Jesse Gonzales build their literacy skills with the Voyager Passport reading intervention program. Opposite page: Reading Coach Ann Keelan.

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This year, Keelan says, she plans to do more staff development with the paraprofessionals to manage any issues before they become problems. She is also planning a kick-off meeting with parents whose children are in the Voyager program to make sure they understand the intervention initiative and can support their children at home.

One Person Can Make a Difference

At the end of the day, the only way any intervention program can succeed is by having someone who really cares

that it works, says Keelan, acknowledging that she played this role at Palm Tree Elementary.

“For teachers, it was one more thing. The aides figured, this is what we’re doing this year. And, the principal is very busy,” she says. “You need somebody who is motivated to make it work and is constantly looking to solve the problems that come up. If you don’t want to make it work, those problems can be excuses. Now, I feel like we’ve had some good results, and I feel like we’ll have even better results this year.” ❧

▶▶ COMING IN WINTER 2007: The upcoming issue of *Voyager Connection* will highlight the success that educators in the Palmdale School District have had in reducing referrals to special education and improving outcomes for special needs students through effective reading intervention.