

The graphic features a target symbol on the left, consisting of three concentric circles in a dark red color. To the right of the target, the words "targeted support" are written in a large, elegant, black cursive script. The word "targeted" is positioned above "support", and the two words are partially overlaid by the target symbol's circles.

targeted support

The Levels of Support model brings students at this school targeted interventions and school connectedness support, based on individual need.

Heritage Oak has continuously achieved a high level of academic success as measured by the California Standards Test. However, after examining student testing data in depth, staff discovered a large achievement gap between the overall school population, socio-economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities.

As our staff team – made up of the principal, reading resource teacher, special education teachers and classroom teachers from all grade levels – looked at the data, a sense of urgency hit home when we faced the reality that subgroups of students were not learning at the same level as the school population as a whole.

In maintaining fidelity to Heritage Oak's mission for engaging all students in meaningful learning and achieving academic success, staff adopted a Levels of Support model. Under this model, all students, including special education and economically

disadvantaged students, receive targeted interventions and school connectedness support, based on each student's specific needs.

Our professional learning community promotes student engagement, results and academic success. This development as a learning community illuminated the need for the staff to provide students with targeted interventions that directly affect their academic success. These opportunities needed to be added to the regular curricular activities.

In order to promote academic success and for all learners, staff asked two essential questions of the professional learning community: What will we do if students do not learn? What systematic process is in place to provide additional time and support for students who are experiencing difficulty?

Staff acknowledged that targeted interventions for struggling learners needed to

By Gabe Simon

happen both during and outside of the school day if true academic success was going to be achieved by all. We determined that a focus on students in significant subgroups, before- and after-school interventions, reorganization of support services for at-risk students through our Learning Center, and inclusion opportunities for students with disabilities were all pieces of the achievement puzzle that needed to be put into place. Our anticipated outcomes for the students within the targeted subgroups were improved academic performance and increased school connectedness.

Connecting with students

After a careful analysis of demographic and subgroup achievement data, each teacher identified up to five students who were socio-economically disadvantaged. Using strategies from the book “Connecting with Students” (Mendler, 2001), teachers committed to creating personal connections with each focus student. These interactions included casual conversations, eating lunch together, connecting instruction with students’ interests, and deepening lines of personal communication.

Dialogue updating administration about these interactions occurred monthly through interactive journals. Teachers also received professional development on building resiliency with students. Once relationships between teachers and students developed, we found that students became more engaged in academics.

Academic interventions

Students who scored below proficiency on the California Standards Test and various district assessments were identified during collaborative grade-level conferences. Based on this identification, students were enrolled in before- and after-school programs and/or pull-out and push-in Learning Center interventions.

Parent permission was secured for before- and after-school support, and the regular school day was extended by at least one hour for these students. These programs include Math Masters, Reading Club, Reading Rocks, and Husky Academy.

Each class occurs two to three times a

week for most of the school year. Grade-level teams meet frequently with specialists and administration to re-examine student needs and to ensure that all students who need support receive it.

Math Masters and Reading Club use a computer-based program called Study Island, a spiral review of grade-level standards. If students have not mastered key building block concepts needed to achieve mastery,



the computer program automatically ensures that they work on the foundational skills first.

Students in grades 2 and 3 who are below grade level in phonemic awareness, decoding, and/or oral fluency are eligible for Reading Rocks. These second- and third-grade students are mentored by responsible and inspiring students in grades 4 and 5. Each student is paired with one or two mentors who listen to them read books, answer questions, and support them in taking Accelerated Reader comprehension tests.

Looking toward the future

In Husky Academy, students in grades 4 and 5 engage in a weekly discussion about college, explore information about possible careers, set personal and academic goals, tour a local university, or work on developing life skills. Extending the school day provides students more time to engage in meaningful activities that would not be possible in the regular school day.

Administration met with the reading resource specialist to examine current practices and align Learning Center content and instruction with classroom practices. This alignment requires teachers in grade-level teams to work more closely with the reading resource specialist and other specialists. Teachers provide the Learning Center with a specific scope and sequence of the standards being taught concurrently in the classroom.

This ensures that the designated students receive more targeted instruction.

Over the past nine years, full inclusion has been an ongoing level of support at Heritage Oak. Students with disabilities make up one of the significant subgroups who have been consistently below grade level standards. These students are serviced through Speech and Language support, Resource, and/or Special Day Class. Each student’s program is driven by an Individualized Education Plan. Rather than being isolated in contained classrooms, students in special education are included as members of the general education classroom community.

The special education staff is made up of seven highly qualified educators who work collaboratively with general education teachers. Nine instructional assistants provide support for special education students in the mainstreamed classroom by helping to deliver additional instruction, clarifying concepts and guiding practice. They also provide behavioral support for students in

need. Scheduled small-group or one-on-one instruction is provided by the special education staff. Having these students included in the general education classroom ensures that they receive the same standards-based instruction as their grade-level peers.

Results of our practices

Strategic interventions have had a significant impact on Heritage Oak's state test scores, leading to recognition as a 2010 California Distinguished School. Over 70 percent of students who attended before- and after-school interventions increased their scores on the annual California Standards Test, with many moving up entire proficiency levels. Additionally, all students in Reading Rocks met their trimester reading goals, and more than 85 percent experienced gains in their instructional reading levels as measured by an Accelerated Reader computer-based assessment.

The implementation of a block schedule allows students not meeting standards to receive both direct core instruction from

their classroom teacher and targeted interventions in the Learning Center. Due to the increased time spent working on grade-level standards, more students than ever have moved into the Proficient and Advanced levels of achievement on the California Standards Test. Heritage Oak's API scores reflect

Due to Heritage Oak's inclusion model, students with disabilities scored in the top 1 percent of all schools in the state, resulting in an API subgroup score of 837.

the staff's devotion to time spent teaching content that is directly aligned to standards.

Due to Heritage Oak's inclusion model, students with disabilities scored in the top 1 percent of all schools in the state, resulting in an API subgroup score of 837. Sixty-six percent of students with disabilities scored

Proficient or Advanced on the CST in English-language arts, an increase of 9 percent. Furthermore, 86 percent of these students scored Proficient or Advanced in math, up by 7 percent.

In addition to the academic impact of inclusion, all students reap academic and social benefits due to ongoing interactions between students of diverse abilities. General education students have evolved as powerful mentors to students with disabilities. The full inclusion philosophy nurtures and develops social experiences and life skills for all students at Heritage Oak.

Student engagement and academic gains

Through teachers' improved connections with focus students, the most significant achievement occurred. The connections built with students who had not consistently been targeted in the past led to increased classroom engagement. This increased engagement subsequently promoted academic success.

The achievement gap between socio-economically disadvantaged students and the general school population narrowed from 25 percent to 4 percent on the CST due to this level of support. In comparison with the state and district, Heritage Oak's academic performance, as measured by the 2009 API growth score, was formidable.

Not only does the Levels of Support model at Heritage Oak fuel outstanding academic success, it also provides a flexible network of resources that teachers can use to address the academic and social needs of all future students. ■

References

Mendler, Allen N. (2001). *Connecting With Students*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Gabe Simon is the new principal of Creekview Ranch Middle School in Dry Creek Joint ESD, Placer County. For the previous six years he was principal of Heritage Oak Elementary School in the same district. Substantial contributions were made to this article by the Heritage Oak Distinguished School Application Committee.

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