

Sumner, Washington School District Boosts Literacy with Direct Instruction

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 or reduced lunch; another school has less than 10 percent free or reduced lunch.

Implementation

The Sumner School District has far-reaching goals. Its superintendent inspires its educators to follow the "Four E's: Excellent Instruction, Every Day, in Every Classroom, for Every Student."



DISTRICT INFORMATION



Name:

Sumner School District

Location:

Sumner, Washington

Grade:

K–3



Part of the district's new focus is on identifying the approximately 20 percent of students who are falling behind and looking at alternatives for grades K–3 intervention education to catch them up and keep them caught up. Direct Instruction (DI) curricula were identified as essential to ensuring success in the district's existing intervention system.

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 delivered in an easily accessible manner to struggling students. "There was just not enough time available, nor enough practice, to get them to grade level," she said. "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."

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 Direct Instruction reading programs: *Reading Mastery*® and *Corrective Reading*®.

"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," said Donohue. The district partnered with a McGraw Hill 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 come on site and assist them with their teaching skills," said Donohue.

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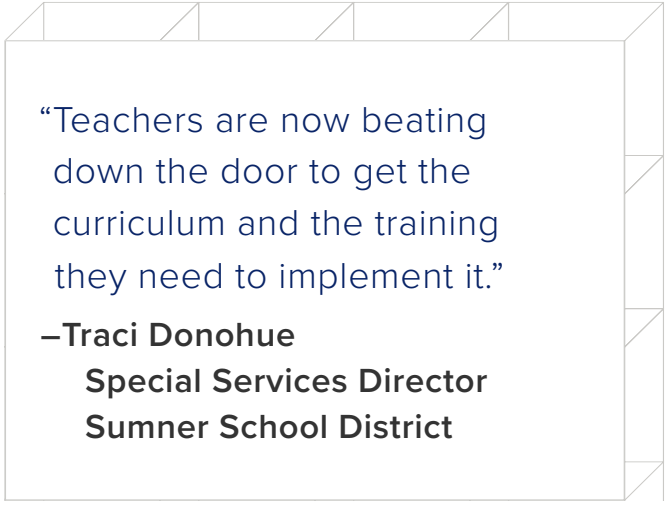
—Traci Donohue,
Special Services Director
Sumner School District

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,” said 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 professional development. 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,” said 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 said.

Sumner wants all of its students to become readers at an early age, including any students who benefit from additional support. “Our elementary schools and our self-contained classrooms are both expected to use *Reading Mastery*, and we have high expectations for the students,” said 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.”



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Results

Donohue saw 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 said.

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, and it’s created a strong network among them,” explained 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 curriculum for special-needs students and even look at post-secondary-school planning.

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–**Traci Donohue**
Special Services Director
Sumner School District

“Right now, the children’s ability to be ready for college and career is the number one priority for our district,” Donohue said. 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 said. “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 said.

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,” said 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.”



To learn more about McGraw Hill Direct Instruction programs, please visit: mheonline.com/directinstruction

