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6 ways we improved literacy in our school

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There are unique challenges that come with being a large urban school district. High mobility rates, socioeconomic conditions, and sheer population size can all impact student success. But, there are also many rewarding and exceptional opportunities that come out of being a part of an urban district. In Chicago Public Schools (CPS), we have more than 370,000 students, requiring a delicate balance between resources and individualized learning.

As principal at [Richard Edwards Dual Language Fine and Performing Arts IB School](#) ^[1], I've had the fortunate opportunity to build relationships with thousands of students, each one bringing a unique sense of culture to our school community. More than 90 percent of our school's students come from low-income backgrounds, and 49 percent are English language learners. With this in mind, we've had to discover innovative ways to supplement our curriculum in both languages, Spanish and English, to ensure that every student is being supported.

Literacy is a core skill, but is also one that each student learns differently. Pacing and methodology each play a role in a student's learning journey. With that said, our school has worked diligently toward finding a way to ensure that each student is receiving what he or she needs to be successful, including the integration of literacy across the curriculum, bridging their oracy skills in both languages.

We haven't always had success in achieving this mission, but with a well-thought-out plan and a dedicated faculty, we were able to develop a system that ensures each student has the opportunity to gain the skills needed for success after graduation.

Here are six ways that CPS improved literacy in our school.

1. Dual-language support.

Our school is proud to be a dual-language school. Through this effort, students are exposed to inclusive learning opportunities and support when they need it most during language learning. We have removed language and cultural barriers by providing extra support for all of our learners. For example, dual-language immersion allows students to learn in their native language—while learning English, beginning in pre-school—10 percent of the instructional time. Gradually, their instruction is 50 percent of the time in both languages by grades four and five, resulting in a well-rounded and equitable literacy program in two languages.

2. Summer Bridge program.

Some of our students were below their grade reading level. To solve this, CPS implemented the Summer Bridge program. A portion of this program included the '[Achieve Intensive](#)' ^[2] learning

solution that provided our teachers with instruction tailored to summer learning. Thanks to their use of [Achieve3000](#) [3], we saw an amazing Lexile growth equivalent to one-fifth of a school year for students in grade three, and one-half of a school year for students in grades six and eight.

3. An integrated curriculum with a focus on literacy.

We ensure literacy is deeply integrated into each subject area because we truly believe in its power to give students access to valuable learning opportunities. When a skill is introduced in more than one class, it is easier for students to grasp and retain the information. In recent years we have seen a trend of implementing STEM across subject areas, so we applied the concept to literacy.

4. Providing teachers with tools to differentiate instruction.

Our teachers requested a literacy resource they could use to create differentiated lesson plans and track student success. We selected Achieve3000 due to its focus on blended learning and a commitment to helping students achieve lifelong success. At the beginning of implementing the program, a small number of students' Lexile measures were "meeting or exceeding" the proficiency ranges for college and career readiness. After implementation, our students began showing accelerated growth. At the close of the 2017-18 school year, 225 of our students who were exposed to the program were considered college and career ready, with an average Lexile gain of 185 Lexile points.

5. Social-emotional learning (SEL).

Our school implements a school-wide positive behavior intervention and support system. Teachers and staff engage students through social-emotional learning (SEL) techniques. SEL has become the foundation that our classrooms have been built on. Since implementation, we have seen increased student engagement. If student intervention is required, a structured plan is in place. Students learn how to improve their reading skills by owning their learning. They learned how to focus on areas that they needed to improve and dedicated more time to those activities using Achieve3000. Their self-esteem has boosted and every student's accomplishments were celebrated through activities that they selected, like breakfast with the principal, which also boosted self-esteem.

6. Emphasis on curiosity.

We strongly encourage curiosity among our students, and literacy provides opportunities for creativity through reading and writing. An environment of inspiring students to read what is appealing to them and to explore different topics and industries makes literacy fun. When students see learning as an engaging activity versus a challenge, true learning can begin.

There's an undeniable connection between strong reading and writing skills and future success. Whether our students are interested in pursuing careers in video-game design, engineering, teaching, acting, law enforcement, or any other area they feel passionate about, we want to equip them with the skills necessary to achieve their aspirations. We have a 100 percent graduation rate among our eighth-grade students, putting a statistic on the growth that we have achieved. The gains that we have seen since implementing a strong literacy program will be making a difference for years to come for each student who enters our school.

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[1] Richard Edwards Dual Language Fine and Performing Arts IB School: <https://edwardsib.org/>

[2] Achieve Intensive: <http://ww2.achieve3000.com/intensive-2018>

[3] Achieve3000: <http://www.achieve3000.com/>

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