

Desert Sands Unified School District—Van Buren Elementary School

Comprehensive leadership in action

Challenge

Seventy-six percent of the students are English Language Learners, and the California Department of Education designated 91% of the students as socio-economically disadvantaged. In spite of the difficult situations faced by many of Van Buren's students, the school improved 222 API points (518 API to 740 API) between 2002 and 2007. This is remarkable when compared to the statewide growth of 59 API points over the same period. Their ELL students' API is 734 which is 44 points above the state average for all ELL students. Van Buren's Comparative Schools Rank jumped from a one to an eight between 2002 and 2007.

Solution

Van Buren focused on excellent teaching of their core Language Arts program and incorporated the Step up to Writing program in every classroom. These strategies helped them to increase their 4th grade writing scores. An aggressive, tiered intervention program is also now in place where struggling students get added support within classrooms as well as after school. The after school program "expects" rather than invites identified students to attend. Students who don't attend may just get a home visit from the principal!

Standards Plus was part of Van Buren's early academic success. However, continually focused on an increase in student success, the staff wanted to boost the learning of their ELL students. They participated in additional training to learn to adapt instruction to ensure that their ELL learners had access to the core curriculum and mastered grade level standards.

Ms. Nurani credits the use of the Standards Plus program as one of several strategies that helped Van Buren to exceed the No Child Left Behind achievement targets. Meeting the federal targets in Language Arts and Mathematics for the last two years is no small feat for a school with Van Buren's demographics, where 90% of the student population is eligible for free lunch and 80% are English Language Learners.

With regards to staff development, Nurani states, "I simply won't consider short-term trainings or workshops because they don't have the impact we've been able to make here. Impact is about ongoing practices that work. Teachers need time to learn what's most effective, see good practices through effective modeling, and have time to discuss and refine good practices."

Results

Students in this small Indio school have made surprising year-to-year gains on state tests after the school's principal, Eileen Nurani, "made it a big point with everyone that we are working to support proficiency for everyone." In addition to other strategies, Standards Plus was implemented in all 14 classrooms.

An additional by-product of Standards Plus is the embedded test taking strategies that students learn in their daily Standards Plus lessons. Ms. Nurani states, "We don't use a week or two before the standardized testing window to teach students test taking strategies. Students learn test taking strategies in the Standards Plus lessons."

