



# Education

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## Mini-Lessons Cultivate Big Improvements in Southern California District

BY PAIGE M. LEAVITT

Fontana Unified School District faces a challenge that is practically universal in American schools, especially as states prepare to meet testing guide-lines set forth in the recently enacted No Child Left Behind Act. It wants to improve its scores on state exams.

Three years ago, this district of 35 schools in Southern California singled out three of its lowest-ranking schools to participate in a program called Focus on Achievement. Through small, effective changes to their instructional approaches, those schools went from negative growth to well surpassing their goals. The district, which comprises a student population that is two-thirds Hispanic, is implementing a successful improvement approach to reach every student, regardless of race, class, or English language proficiency.

### ASSESSING THE SITUATION

“California has a pretty rigorous accountability system,” said Joe Deem, Fontana’s director of elementary education and education accountability. New state standards were enacted in the late 1990s, along with a government sanctions policy and a state program called IIUSP, or Immediate Intervention for Under-Performing Schools Program. Those schools that don’t meet state standards on the Academic Performance Index (API), a state-mandated program that measures overall performance, for three consecutive years experience heavy sanctions from the state. In 2000 Fontana had an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school facing possible sanctions.

**STANDARDS PLUS TEACHES STUDENTS NOT ONLY WHAT TO LEARN, BUT HOW TO LEARN USING THE ORIGINAL FOCUS ON ACHIEVEMENT PROGRAM**

*Learning Plus Associates was originally founded as the Fontana Educational Institute by the Fontana Unified School District in 2002 in order to produce and share Focus on Achievement lessons that teachers had written.*

Focus on Achievement is a strategic district program that emphasizes extra teacher coaching and standards-based instruction. The initiative is modeled after programs that originated in the Brazosport Independent School District in Texas to close the achievement gap among various student groups.

Deem explains the initiative as an enabler to let educators stay at their sites and work while the district provides support, which includes coaching and daily “mini-lessons” that involve 10 to 15 minutes of class time. “We declared that we were going to keep principals on site and teachers in the classroom,” Deem recounted. “We don’t pull teachers out for anything; we don’t pull principals for meetings during their workdays. ... And the methodology was that each day there would be a school focus, with lessons written to a state standard. And the whole school would focus on that objective—one in math and one in language arts—for the day.”

With a \$250,000 commitment from its board of education and a grant from the IIUSP program for undergoing voluntary sanctions, Fontana made the initial efforts to assist Randall Pepper Elementary, Alder Middle School, and Fontana High School. “We had a hard time finding the types of lessons they used in Texas, so we developed our own mini-lessons to state standards,” said Deem. “And all three of those schools turned around their growth from failing to meet target to extremely high, positive growth.”

He said, “The whole premise of the mini-lessons was built around Plan-Do-Check-Act [Instructional Cycle]. That’s our credo here. We plan for it, do it, check it, and then we act. And if you look at the mini-lesson concept, it’s the same thing. The lessons are planned for the teachers. They implement the lessons, so they do it. They check every Friday with a mini-assessment. And then we act on the data from there. So that’s embedded at all levels of implementing Focus on Achievement.”

### MAKING THE MINI-LESSONS

Teachers within the district were paid hourly to create mini-lessons that reflected state standards. A group of teachers-on-assignment (TOAs) collated, edited, and formatted the final versions. “In addition, the six TOAs were coaches and supported the implementation of Focus on Achievement at each school site,” said Deem. “We also worked with teachers on instructional strategies around those mini-lessons. That has proven quite effective, and we see that transfer over into the regular instruction.”

Initially, the mini-lessons involved one daily focus for an entire school. At Randall Pepper Elementary, school activities were aligned with that day’s focus. TOAs provided the district with teacher feedback from coaching sessions. Some concerns arose about incongruity; for instance, a mini-lesson would relate to multiplication although some

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students were just learning addition. “We’re trying to line up the mini-lessons with the curriculum and still keep that schoolwide focus,” said Deem. “And also, we’re looking to write lessons to some of our higher-level math courses. That is also a response to teacher input.”

With mini-lessons and curriculum materials aligned, teachers test content mastery each week. Students who do not master a standard or objective receive further instruction. “In the high school and the middle school, they have a separate class that revisits the concepts for the kids who didn’t master it the previous week,” said Deem. “One of our high schools did it after classes and during the day, because they wanted to make sure kids had the opportunity to get to their ‘reteach.’”

### GAUGING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

With only two years of testing since this program was initiated, Fontana has already seen significant improvement in test scores. An overall indicator of this success, as mentioned previously, is the Academic Performance Index. The API score, determined by the California Department of Education, includes results from the Stanford 9 norm-referenced assessment and the California Standards Test in English-Language Arts of the Standardized Testing and Reporting Program.

“The API is kind of complex,” said Deem. “They take the state results ... and then they group kids into five categories by performance. And you get growth points when you move kids from one category to another. So, if 40 percent of your kids are below the 20th percentile and the next year that number drops to 20 percent, then you get points toward this growth target that they set.”

The API is on a scale of 200 to 1,000, with 800 being the statewide growth target set by the governor. To score

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<b>Improvements in API Scores From 2000 to 2001</b>				
	2000 API Score	2001 API Target	2001 API Score	Margin of Growth
Citrus Elementary	475	491	559	<b>+84 points</b>
Live Oak Elementary	522	536	575	<b>+53 points</b>
Oleander Elementary	419	438	528	<b>+109 points</b>
Primrose Elementary	536	549	615	<b>+79 points</b>
Randall Pepper Elementary	429	448	539	<b>+110 points</b>
Redwood Elementary	453	470	485	<b>+32 points</b>
South Tamarind Elementary	505	520	572	<b>+67 points</b>
Tokay Elementary	510	525	583	<b>+73 points</b>
Alder Middle School	479	495	535	<b>+56 points</b>
Fontana Middle School	489	505	519	<b>+30 points</b>
Fontana High School	488	504	539	<b>+51 points</b>
Fontana Miller High School	509	524	526	<b>+17 points</b>

**Figure 1**

800, a school must average at or above grade level on its SAT9 scores. “It’s a very high standard. Few schools in the state have attained it,” said Deem.

The growth target for the next year is calculated by taking 5 percent of the distance between a school’s current API and the statewide performance target of 800. “Our goal is to exceed the state’s growth target,” said Deem. “For example, at the Focus on Achievement elementary school the growth target was something like 16 points. They grew 106 points [in the first year].”

From 2000 to 2001, all three schools again well exceeded their target growth (Figure 1). In 2000, with an API of 429, Randall Pepper Elementary had a target of 19 points’ growth for the next year. It improved by an impressive 106 points. With an API of 479, Alder Middle School had a goal to improve by 16 points by 2001; it improved by 42 points. In 2000, with an API of 488, Fontana High School also had a target of 16 points’ growth. The school improved by 44 points in 2001.

“There are several million people here in what we call the Inland Empire, which is Riverside and San Bernardino County, and [Randall Pepper Elementary] had the highest growth of any school in the whole Inland Empire,” said Deem. “Alder Middle School, which the year before did

not meet its growth target, went to 42 point growth [in the first year].”

The API is also calculated for subgroups of students in order to ascertain if the school meets a comparable improvement criterion. At Fontana’s Focus on Achievement schools:

- African-American students increased their API scores by 63 points;
- Hispanic/Latino students increased by 46 points;
- White/non-Hispanic increased by 45 points; and
- socio-economically disadvantaged students increased by 63 points.

These subgroup increases are extremely important because state funding is based on subgroup API scores. “Our English language learner population is about 35 percent, and those kids are doing quite well with this,” said Deem.

Fontana High School, with 3,500 students, had previously ranked last among the district’s high schools and ranked near the bottom of all state schools. The year after the Focus on Achievement initiative was established, the state set a target growth of 16 points. Not only did Fontana High improve by 44 points right out of the gate, but it also became the top-ranked high school in the district. “Fontana

### Improvements in School Ranking From 2000 to 2001

	2000 statewide rank	2000 similar schools rank	2001 statewide rank	2001 similar schools rank
Randall Pepper Elementary	1	1	2	5
Alder Middle School	1	1	2	4
Fontana High School	1	2	2	8

Figure 2

*By state standards, 10 is highest and 1 is lowest.*

High School went from negative 1 to plus 40,” Deem said. “And throughout the state, the way the API works, it seems to be much harder for a high school to meet its growth target. And Fontana obviously far exceeded its target growth.”

Encouraged by such results, these Focus on Achievement schools have room for further improvement. All schools that receive an API score are ranked in deciles by school type based on grade level of instruction: elementary, middle, and high. A rank of 10 is the highest and 1 is the lowest. Each decile in each school type contains 10 percent of all schools of that type. With few Fontana schools receiving an equal ranking to similar schools (similar in population, demographics, etc.) and none exceeding the rankings of similar schools, the district seeks continued improvement. As Figure 2 illustrates, part of the challenge is being ranked against increasingly better-performing schools as Fontana’s own scores improve. In response, the district is gradually expanding the Focus on Achievement initiative throughout the district to improve state test scores.

#### EXPANDING THE INITIATIVE

The Focus on Achievement initiative is in its third year of implementation. Nine additional schools joined the second year, and 12 schools are now participating. “We went from three schools to 12 schools in two years because schools are demanding it,” said Deem.

To select which schools would participate in the Focus on Achievement program, which means they receive TOAs and district support in addition to the materials, the district administration invited any school that wished to take part in the program to a meeting. A principal from every school showed up.

“Because we feel our schools would benefit from implementing this program, funding has been a major criteria. We have to have money to do this,” Deem said. “The site has to have money. So if a site can’t generate considerable money through grants or through their normal allotment, then they can’t do it because we can’t subsidize it. It’s a very expensive program.”

The success of the original three schools has made it easier for other schools to get grants. In addition to receiving IIUSP and High-Priority Schools Grants, Fontana schools have sought Federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRSD) grants to fund the Focus on Achievement initiative. In California, 65 such grants were awarded in 2001. “We wrote our CSRSD grants using Focus on Achievement as the basis for our improvement plans. As a result, five out of six applicants got their grants. So, approximately 6 percent of all the CSRSD grants given in California went to Fontana.”

Once a school gains funding, it receives a day of training, which is followed up by district support. “This year, through the grants that we received, we have a coordinator that has also visited every school for follow-up training,” said Deem. “And then on a daily basis, we have our TOAs in the classrooms coaching the teachers. There’s a lot of training loaded up front, and then it’s also available every day.”

The additional Focus on Achievement schools are also exceeding target growth. In fact, one school experienced the second-highest growth in the region, just behind Randall Pepper Elementary. Some of the schools have seen an improvement of 80 to 100 points on the API, which serves as an example to not just other California schools, but also any school seeking to improve standardized test scores. •