CA District Uses RTI to Boost Achievement for All

BY CHRISTINA A. SAMUELS
From *Education Week*

The 2004–05 school year didn't start off well for the Sanger Unified School District. The district, located east of Fresno, had entered its first year of "program improvement"—a gentler way of saying that Sanger was among the 98 lowest-performing districts in the state based on success criteria in the No Child Left Behind law.

The district had failed to make adequate yearly progress.

"We recognized we had some weak areas. We didn't recognize how profound they were, and that was a shock for us," said Marcus Johnson, superintendent of Sanger Unified since 2003.

The district has some children with high needs: Seventy-six percent are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and 24% are English-language learners. But in 2004, the system hadn't aligned its curriculum to state standards, had a fractured system of professional development, and had no real way to expand or sustain the random bursts of improvement that appeared in an individual school or classroom.

Now, six years later, the district's turnaround has been dramatic. In two years, it exited program improvement and racked up honors for academic achievement.

California measures its schools on an "academic performance index," an annual measure of test-score performance that starts at 200 and tops out at 1,000. The target is 800 points or more. In 2004, Sanger's API was 599 points. In 2010, it was 805.

One key piece of the district's success was committing to response to intervention. RTI is an instructional practice that involves identifying students with specific learning or behavioral weaknesses and then providing progressively intensive interventions to help them improve. In Sanger, response to intervention was not put in place solely to address lagging special education achievement; instead, the process was seen as a way of

---

Christina A. Samuels is a writer for Education Week. *Condensed, with permission, from* Education Week, *30 (March 2, 2011), S6-8. Copyright 2011 Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. For more information, visit www.edweek.org.*

improving education for the entire district, including students with disabilities.

Sanger's experience can help answer some questions that have swirled around RTI since its inclusion in the 2004 Individuals With Disabilities Education Act. The framework is described as a "general education initiative," but what does that look like in operation?

Diving In

The response-to-intervention framework can be implemented different ways, but there are some common elements. It requires that all students be evaluated and that those with identified academic weaknesses be given specific lessons or interventions that address those weaknesses. Students are monitored closely for their response to the interventions, and if they improve, the extra interventions are scaled back. The process is often represented as a pyramid, where all students are in the bottom tier, getting strong instruction, while the smaller groups of students who need extra help are represented in higher tiers.

Sanger considers RTI one leg of a tripod of interventions that it put into place after getting its poor academic ranking. The other two changes were the implementation of Explicit Direct Instruction and the creation of professional learning communities. The benefit of Explicit Direct Instruction's systematic approach is that all students in a particular grade are taught the same information, aligned closely to state standards.

Creating professional learning communities allowed teachers, administrators, and support staff to interact in a way they never had before, Johnson said. Teachers and school psychologists could get together, for instance, to share information about students who may need extra support.

The RTI process, along with other reform efforts, were rolled out in what is called a "loose-tight" model of leadership: All of the district's 13 schools were expected to adopt the changes, but the specifics were left up to each school.

Kimberly Salomonson, who provides support services to Sanger schools, remembers being worried that each school wouldn't be given specific steps to follow.

"What we realized was that it just wasn't going to be necessary," she said. The fact that schools were trying some different elements allowed the district to experiment with a broad set of resources. Principals and teachers were able to learn from their counterparts at other schools, Salomonson added.

How RTI Looks

Ketti Davis and the staff at Sanger's Lone Star Elementary describe how a struggling student might have been helped before the reform initiatives.

The teachers would recognize if a student was struggling and would try different activities to nudge the child into better achievement—but there was little coordination of that work. As a result, the school was not seeing the kinds of improvements that could boost it's performance overall.

"Behavioral issues would be mixed in with the academic," Davis said. Some teachers referred many students for special education evaluations; others referred few. And if a student was found ineligible for special education, there was no set plan for what to do next.

Under Lone Star's restructured process, students who need extra help may now work with the same teacher who provides special education services without being identified as a special education student. Regrouping students helps keep them from feeling embarrassed by labels, said special education teacher Leslie Hoffman.

"It's like a revolving door in my classroom. There's no stigma attached to that," she said.

But the process can be a juggling act between giving students extra interventions and making sure they're not missing other instruction that can leave them behind. The third tier of instruction can be individual instruction on a daily basis, but teachers try to make sure students aren't missing so much regular class time that they fall behind in other subjects.

"Do we want to move students out of standard instruction to give them remediation? That's not always the best program," said Anna Quintanilla, a psychologist at Lone Star. Explaining those needs to parents is an ongoing process, she said.

The role of school psychologists changed when response to intervention was introduced district wide. School psychologists often spend a lot of time evaluating students for special education. At Sanger, the psychologists see their work as much more expansive. They have the professional training to evaluate the mountains of data that an RTI process yields on each student, they say.

Mitchel Casados, a psychologist at Washington Academic Middle School, sees school psychology shifting in the direction of "more systems-level consulting and less individual service delivery" as a result of the district's move to RTI.

Before the reform process, "my role was a firefighter," Casados said, noting that he and other administrators processed discipline referrals all day long. "Teachers didn't get the sense that discipline was something they could address themselves," he said.

The middle school put in place a behavior-focused, tiered-intervention system, which cut down on students' acting out in classrooms. Students still get sent to the office for misbehaving, but the reduction

in referrals gives administrators time to leave the office and visit classrooms, Casados added.

The district credits RTI and other initiatives with its improved performance on state tests. In 2004–05, 35% of all students were proficient or above in English/language arts, and 44% were proficient or above in math. Last year, proficiency rates were 58% in English/language arts, and 67% in math.

Sanger also has seen improvement in special education. In 2004–05, the proficiency rate for that student group was 18.6% in English/language arts, and 23% in math. Last year, those rates rose to 36.5% and 48%, respectively.

Positive Results

Sanger officials still struggle with closing the achievement gap completely.

"If you exit students out of special education who can learn in a regular setting, we're left with the kids who have really intensive needs," said Matthew Navo, director of pupil services for the district. But keeping students in special education is expensive and doesn't serve those children well, he said.

The district credits the reform effort for reducing "encroachment," a term for when the district has to draw from general funds to pay for special programs. W. Richard Smith, Sanger's deputy superintendent, says that encroachment was reduced by $640,000 in the first three years of the initiative.

Sanger is working on how to incorporate RTI into a process for identifying students who possibly have learning disabilities. (The U.S. Department of Education has declared that RTI cannot be the only method a school uses to make such a determination, but it can be part of a comprehensive evaluation.)

This year, Sanger is piloting an identification process that includes RTI. District administrators want to avoid a situation where a student might be considered learning disabled in one school, but not in another, because of differing RTI practices. Eventually, some interventions, and the length of time that students spend in them, will look similar district wide, say central office staff.

District officials do say that RTI has cut down on special education referrals. "We're constantly problem-solving," said Elizabeth Dobrinen, an intervention teacher at Madison Elementary School. "If this program doesn't work, it doesn't mean we're on the way to special education. It might mean we haven't gotten quite the right thing for every kid," she added.

"Business as usual is not doing the job for our kids," Superintendent Johnson said. "We've created a support structure where it's harder for a child to fail than it is for them to succeed in our system." ■