

Presentation to the House Republican Policy Committee

Honorable Stanley E. Saylor, Chairman

March 15, 2010

Permit me to begin by saying that the administrators, teachers and families of the Union City Area School District sincerely appreciate the opportunity your Committee has provided to us, a small, rural school district, to share with you how the addition of basic technology combined with a significant amount of evidenced based personal instruction and coaching has significantly improved the reading performance of our students. Following is a brief rendition of our journey from where we were and how we came to be where we are now.

Background Information:

Union City Area School District is located in Southern Erie and Northern Crawford counties. The total student population is 1,214 in grades Pre-K through 12. Our district is comprised of two buildings. The elementary building houses Pre-K through grade 5 students. Our middle/high school building is for students in grades 6-12. The poverty rate in our community is approximately 25%. Six out of ten students participate in the free and reduced lunch program. The population of students participating in special education is 28%. The school district is the largest employer in our area.

District Literacy Prior to Step By Step Learning:

Data:

The administration began looking at the progress students were making in the fall of 2005. It was determined that teachers, at least at the elementary level, really didn't have any data upon which to base their instructional decisions. They were using anecdotal records as well as observations to guide their knowledge of student growth and weakness. They based their instructional planning on these instincts. You could say that teachers were making an educational guess when trying to determine instructional needs. The only available data to which teachers had access were the end-of-the-year PSSA results. These results were telling us that there was stagnant growth occurring. Students were at a 30% proficiency level and this was not good enough. It was decided that in order to make progress we would have to find a method to track individual student performance throughout the school year.

Professional Development:

Professional development programs in prior years had been completed on a hit and miss basis. The district was utilizing Guided Reading and leveled books to teach reading. Instruction on skills and vocabulary was unorganized and the students were suffering. Student grades came from worksheets and papers that were gathered in portfolios to demonstrate progress. It was evident that a different method of instruction and assessment were needed. In prior years, professional development occurred at the beginning of the school year, the middle, and perhaps in the spring of the school year. These were usually one day workshops where a motivational speaker might have been utilized, an initiative

may have been started, or curriculum may have been mapped. The professional development usually occurred with no follow up instruction and no accountability for using the learning that had taken place.

Collaboration:

Students who were struggling prior to the RTII implementation were identified as either Title I students or Special Education students. These students were often pulled from regular instruction for extra services depending on their disability. The Interventionist or Specialist was often responsible for these students instruction and little collaboration occurred with the regular classroom teacher. In the Union City Area School District we were forced to hire instructional aides, reading and math specialists, and interventionists to provide our students additional assistance because the District was not seeing the gains in achievement that we needed.

Goals for Change:

Our number one goal for change was to dramatically increase student achievement in the area of reading. Teachers were working hard on guided reading strategies and using leveled books, however, students were not making enough progress. It was also realized that to make progress we had to determine where our students were struggling and we needed data to prove this. To make a positive change in your school, you need to create long term plans that require commitment and follow through. The District was in need of on-going professional development in the areas of how students learn to read, write and spell; as well as how to implement strategies to promote reading success.

We contacted PATTAN as well as the Intermediate Unit for recommendations regarding how this system could be established. They were unable to provide us the necessary information to move ahead at that time. Our closest PATTAN is located in Pittsburgh. The Intermediate Unit is located in Edinboro. Later, when these organizations were prepared to offer the Language Essentials Training (LETRS) as well as RTII, their programs were overviews and did not contain the required support we would need to be successful. Our Administration realized that to make the kind of change that we needed, we required on-site training, as well as modeling and coaching support to guide our implementation and continued progress. The District began looking at a variety of scientifically based programs and came across Step By Step Learning. The goals of the company seemed to fit the direction that we needed to proceed.

Funding Sources:

The funding for any program Union City Area School District would like to implement must come from state, federal, or grant dollars. As stated previously, our District operates on a limited budget with only 25% of our funding coming from local tax dollars. State and federal dollars that we receive fund 75% of our expenses. Any loss in funding, is a loss in programs for our teachers and our students.

Union City Area School District Implements RTII with assistance from SBSL:

Our District realized that we needed to adopt a new way to do business in the area of reading instruction. The program that we had in place was not effective and we needed significant student achievement. Step By Step Learning advertised that it had a Response to Instruction/Intervention Model that was very effective and we decided to take a closer look at what they were offering. The first step was to implement a way to measure student progress. We purchased a product called mClass to organize our data and began to utilize a tool called DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy

Skills) to progress monitor our students. The teachers participated in workshops conducted by SBSL to learn to utilize these tools. The staff from Step By Step was very helpful throughout this process. They could offer assistance on the types of products available for progress monitoring and then offered the assistance needed as we trained to utilize these tools.

Teacher preparation programs do not always provide enough in the study of evidence based reading strategies. Step By Step has provided professional development on an on-going basis for our staff as well as coaching support that is all hands on, and occurs often times, in the individual’s classroom. The experts from Step By Step have assisted our teachers in gathering data, analyzing it, and targeting the areas of need. These are the steps that need to be taken to improve student achievement.

Step By Step began working in the District in the fall of 2005 and we gave a baseline assessment for the first time in the spring, 2006. The following results have been obtained:

School Year	Kindergarten	First Grade
Spring 2006 Baseline	63% Benchmarked	55% Benchmarked
End of 2006-2007 school year	89% Benchmarked	74% Benchmarked
End of 2007-2008 school year	93% Benchmarked	87% Benchmarked
End of 2008-2009 school year	92% Benchmarked	82% Benchmarked

RTII Process now in place:

- All students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade are screened with mCLASS: DIBELS in the fall, winter, and spring. Student’s scores are then analyzed and monitored. Students who fall into an “intensive” category continue to be monitored every week. Students who fall at the “strategic” level are monitored every two weeks, and “benchmark” students are monitored once per month. This screening identifies students who are in need of a diagnostic assessment. This year (09-10) was the first year we expanded the program to include students in grades 3, 4, and 5.
- Professional development has been on-going, intermediate teachers participated last summer (2009), in Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS). This training was designed to increase teachers’ understanding of how students learn to read, write, and spell; and how to implement proven instructional strategies to promote reading success.
- Core Instruction is provided to all students in the class. It is also provided during a small group, differentiated instruction period. The content is delivered using systematic and explicit instruction strategies. Using the data and analyzing student needs leads to the flexible grouping of students. Students who are struggling and in need of “strategic” support are provided an additional 30 minutes of reading intervention. This intervention is based on the specific needs of the individual child. If the data derived determines the child is in need of intensive support, that child receives an additional 60 minutes of “intensive” support.
- The teachers have learned, through our professional development with SBSL, that continuing to progress monitor students, plan for informal diagnostics, create “watch, move up, and maintain lists” is critical to guide our students in their development of their literacy skills. Grade level teams consisting of classroom teachers, specialists, Learning Support teachers, and the Building Principal are important to ensure our students continue to make the progress that we have been seeing.

How Step By Step Continues to Meet the Needs of UCASD Teachers:

- The staff from Step By Step continues to research scientifically based programs and brings that knowledge and expertise to our staff and classrooms. Our whole encounter with SBSL has been a positive experience over a time period of several years. They are dedicated, caring individuals, who have become a part of our District team. As our teachers continue to refine their teaching skills, SBSL has been a true partner in our success. They are available to assist with questions, monitor our progress, and make suggestions when we have experienced difficulties.
- As stated previously, our data (assessment scores) continue to prove that the strategies we are learning to implement are working. It is our hope to continue to take the training that has been provided and continue to work with additional faculty to provide these learning opportunities for our students district wide. Teachers in grades PreK-2 have been through enough training and had enough support to sustain their progress. Our teachers in grades 3-5 have been through the initial steps and are now experiencing coaching and modeling. This will assist them in the application of their knowledge of research based strategies in the classroom. In other words, they will learn to put the strategies to use.
- This past school year, UCASD was identified as having a middle school in “Improvement II” due to a lack of progress in reading in the subgroup of special education. We know that we are in need of professional development in literacy instruction, and at the middle school level, we also realize that the Response to Instruction/Intervention model will allow us to make a positive change as well.
- The following are the number of Special Education referrals that we have seen over previous years:
 - 2006-2007: 27
 - 2007-2008: 21
 - 2008-2009: 14
 - 2009-2010: 15

We believe that often times, in many Districts (not ours alone), students are referred to Special Education because they are curriculum deprived, not because they have a learning disability.

It is our hope that with continued State and Federal funding we will be able to maintain our relationship with Step By Step learning. They have been a true partner in providing what our teachers need to know in the science of the teaching of reading. This partnership, if continued, will assist our teachers in identifying and providing the instruction that is needed at all levels of literacy development.

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