



Intervention solution helps “at-risk” middle school students achieve measurable gains in reading



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Kimberly Pepper, Reading Specialist

Bethel Park is a suburb of Pittsburgh and widely considered one of the top school districts in the state of Pennsylvania. All schools routinely make annual yearly progress (AYP), and the area is home to a stable middle class community. Independence Middle School works with grade 7 and grade 8 students and is one of two middle schools in the district.

Like many schools, Independence Middle School had a population of “at-risk” students that school educators could not help using standard, time intensive remedial efforts. These students achieved 39% or less on the TerraNova test or were deemed Basic or Below Basic on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). Approximately 86% of these struggling students performed below grade level after a Cloze Paragraph assessment.

Looking for an intervention solution

Two reading specialists, Kimberly Pepper and Sonja Kubinec, were fiercely determined to find a new way to help these students. The reading specialists were specifically looking for a solution that would take their target population “back to basics” and rebuild critical foundation skills. “Just giving these struggling students comprehension lessons and drills was not enough,” says Kubinec. “These students lacked fluency in the foundation skills for a number of different reasons.”

Focus on:

Academy of READING®

Location:

- Bethel Park School District, a suburb of Pittsburgh, PA

School:

- Independence Middle School

Grades:

- 7 - 8

Number of Students:

- Approximately 800

Student Demographics:

- White: 95.8%
- Black: 1.5%
- Other: 2.7%

Website:

<http://www.bpsd.org>

Another key challenge was the need for highly individualized instruction. The profile of Independence Middle School's underachieving students was varied and included individuals with specific learning disabilities, autism, mental challenges, and emotional difficulties.

Serendipitously, Pepper attended a state-sponsored reading conference, where they were introduced to a proven reading intervention solution: specifically the Academy of READING. The strength of the Academy of READING is that it uses a consistent methodology and a dynamic intervention engine to build fluency in the foundation skills of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and oral sub-skills.

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Measurable gains

Kubinec and Pepper introduced the Academy of READING in 2004-05. A total of 93 students (47 7th graders and 46 8th graders) were involved in the initial implementation. Each student benefited from 30 minutes a day for three days a week of "time on task" in the program.

The Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test (SDRT) was used before and after training on the program to confirm learning outcomes. Students demonstrated average gains of 2.5 grade levels on the comprehension section of the SDRT. Students with 15 or more hours of time on task demonstrated average gains of 2.6 grade levels.

They were also able to compare the results of the grade 7 and grade 8 students with their grade 5 results. When the grade 7 students were in grade 5,

their average score on the PSSA was 1171. When students completed grade 7, their average score was 1215—a gain of 44 points.

The grade 8 class results were more dramatic. When these students were in grade 5, their average score on the PSSA was 1157. When these students finished grade 8 their average PSSA score had rocketed to 1281—a remarkable gain of 124 points.

Dramatic individual accomplishments

"The results far exceeded our hopes and expectations," reports an exuberant Pepper. She singles out two extraordinary personal triumphs. "One grade-seven student with dyslexia started with us at a 1st grade reading level. By the end of grade eight, he was reading at a grade five level: four grade level gains in two years. Another grade-seven student came to us with a Below Basic PSSA score. At the end of 8th grade she scored at an advanced level, exceeding the expectations outlined by state standards."

Lessons learned

On the strength of the 2004-05 gains, Kubinec and Pepper mirrored the implementation in 2005-06 year with nearly identical results. When asked about "lessons learned," Kubinec states emphatically: "The program works." She continues, "You hear stories from teachers that once students reach the 7th and 8th grade, they are probably beyond hope. That is definitely not the case and this program proves it."

She quietly adds, "Just don't give up on middle school children. With the right intervention solution, they can learn and come up to grade level."

About AutoSkill®

AutoSkill creates award-winning intervention solutions to help close the proficiency gap in K-12 schools. For over 15 years, its research-based programs have helped at-risk students to build fluency in the foundation skills of reading and math. The company's core products, Academy of READING and Academy of MATH, deliver rapid, permanent gains so students progress in their education and administrators meet AYP targets. For more information, go to www.autoskill.com.

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