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Lamorinda School Districts Embrace Curriculum Change

By Sophie Braccini



Incoming Orinda Intermediate School students are greeted with high-fives at last week's WEB (Where Everyone Belongs) Day. Photo Andy Scheck

developing a common core set of standards that would help prepare all students for success in college and career. The purpose is to harmonize learning across the country and make sure the students will be ready to compete globally. The standards affect English language arts and mathematics.

Lafayette School District assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction Rachel Zinn says that the changes started in Lafayette seven years ago, well before the common core standards were adopted. "We have been researching best practices all over the country and implementing changes over the past seven years," she says. "A lot of the things we've been doing are aligned with the common core. It is about going deeply into reading and writing and math." She says that the district looked for strategies that showed results.

One study by Ellin Oliver Keene researched how adults navigated difficult texts. From her findings, seven strategies were created that can be taught to students to comprehend and navigate texts. "This is a lot of what the common core is about," says Zinn. After Lafayette identified the best practices, a significant investment was made to train its teachers and support class implementation.

"We have a math coach, Andy Schipper, who's been helping facilitate many meetings with grade level teams," she adds. The district also has a literacy coach who works with grade level teams and provides support for understanding the standards. "It comes with a price tag, but our community of parents and foundations is extremely generous," says Zinn. "We also took advantage of federal Title II funds."

In Moraga, the change started last year with modification of the math curriculum; and Orinda has set a strategic plan in place to gradually implement the required changes.

Moraga and Orinda are also working in grade level teams.

"The teachers worked in groups at each grade level with a teacher leader," explains Guinn. "Staff meetings were dedicated to common core topics, identifying standards, putting together lessons and sharing their assessments." Two years ago, her district provided information to teachers and began training.

"The standards are now an inch wide and a mile deep," says Guinn. "For example in math, the challenge comes from not only giving the correct answers to problems, but explaining why and how that answer was found."

Camino Pablo Elementary School third grade teacher Barbara Elliott, who will continue the implementation this year, says the children have loved the lessons. "It is more hands on and fun," she says. "With the new standard, we do not give the rules and results to the kids; they have to figure it out themselves. A lot of the activities are done in groups and they love it."

She believes that this method also allows students with different learning styles to come up with new ways to solve problems and that it improves children's capabilities to think critically.

This year the district continues to implement the math standard as well as English language arts. "With the new standards comes a different type of assessment," says Guinn. "The Star testing we know now will end in 2014 and will be replaced by the Smarter Balance Assessment."

She explains that those tests are designed to be taken online. There will still be some multiple choice tests, plus something called constructive response. "In the course of two days students in collaborative groups of up to four will work together on a topic, divide the research into the pieces, then each student will construct their own

response," she says. "This is much different than what students have been asked to do. They will also have to explain their reasoning and rationale."

This new testing requires investment in terms of equipment as well, and requires serious financial planning for each district. In Orinda, staff has been strategically setting priorities and looking at system-wide upgrades in technology in preparation for the change. Strategic planning is also being used in Orinda to train teachers and gradually implement the change in the curriculum.

"We began raising awareness last year," says Kathy Marshall, OUSD director of curriculum and instruction, "and have defined a road map for implementation over a three year period."

Orinda's school district has included a parent education component to its plan, so they know what is going on in the classroom and how to better support their children at home.

"Each year we assess our progress and make adjustments along the way," adds Marshall, who believes that the direction OUSD has been taking - building the foundation to support thinking critically, and supporting the teachers who are working together across the district - has prepared them well to embrace the new standards.

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