

Programs Give Extra Support to Students who Fall Behind
by Howard Crouse, Superintendent

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Indian Prairie is taking several steps to provide greater opportunities for all of our students to meet state standards in reading and math. We have reviewed what we are doing and what we can do and are prepared to take bold action to achieve this goal. We will increase our focus on students who have not been successful, providing additional instruction time with clearly defined objectives to address students individually.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has provided an impetus to ensure that all of our students meet state standards. The Illinois State Board of Education has been working diligently to create an Assessment Framework that specifically states what every child is expected to know at each grade level. Our curriculum teams have used this framework to align our curriculum with the state's framework, identifying strengths and weaknesses and filling the gaps.

It is particularly crucial that academic progress at the secondary level includes additional support in reading and math for those who need it. We have several programs already in place, but need to take several steps to be more effective.

For those students who have had significant reading problems at the secondary level, we have two delivery models at work. In the middle schools, our Strategic Reading program is set up for individual and small groups of students. Reading specialists meet with students who are failing to meet state standards in small classes. Students give up one period of their exploratory options to participate. The Strategic Reading class uses the best methods of our literacy framework, adjusted to the individual needs of the students in the class. This provides students with additional daily instruction in a highly critical area.

At the high school level, struggling readers are enrolled in a Reading Workshop. This class has a similar focus to Strategic Reading, but a different design. Our reading staff provides not only reading instruction, but also support for reading assignments in other courses. Some of the work is individualized skill and habit development, often using technology for support.

The reading support model has worked well. Even parents who were initially hesitant to put their son or daughter into a special class have been overwhelmingly supportive once the student begins. Much of the student's success is dependent on his or her own motivation, which simply emphasizes one of our critical messages for the year: The relationship between student and teacher has far greater impact on student achievement than we often realize. Our reading staff is doing a great job making those students in their classes feel valued and successful.

We are using the successes we have achieved in reading to help foster similar programs in math. Our middle schools are reviewing how they can provide at least two more days of math instruction each week for the students who are struggling. We are making this a priority in the student's schedule. Some of the delivery model will look similar to that of Strategic Reading, but other parts may differ slightly, reflecting the nature of the content area. As we experiment with different models, we will review how much our students can handle within their day. For students who are in need of support in both reading and math, their day may be dramatically different from their peers. However, if this is a priority, we must provide the time.

Administrators are proposing to the Board of Education that high school math graduation requirements be increased from two years to three years, beginning with the class entering high school next fall. More than 80 percent of our students take at least three years, most to meet college entrance requirements. But those students who do not take a third year of math may never be exposed to the state learning expectations required to pass the PSAE.

Therefore, we are not only revising the graduation requirement, but we are also renovating the curriculum for the classes most often taken by struggling math students. By doing so, we can be certain that all students have been exposed to the high school state learning standards by their junior year.

These opportunities are part of both the building and district improvement plans. We must meet the expectations of NCLB. Offering these courses provides another option for students who are at risk.

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