

# Pilot program targets reading, math

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(Part 1 of 2 parts)

Gary Nelson thinks local but he never thinks small. A serial entrepreneur, he has always been interested in education. Twenty years ago, he was the driving force behind the creation of one of the first charter schools in California, Sonoma Charter School.

In its early days, charter school teachers used adaptive computer technology to differentiate instruction because Nelson has always been a big proponent of individually paced learning. “Whether a student needs help or is capable of going fast through the material, I loved the idea that every single student’s needs are addressed.”

Today, Nelson continues to be troubled by inequalities in educational outcomes. Knowing that achievement in third grade is a strong predictor of children’s later academic and life outcomes, he is concerned by the vast number of Sonoma’s elementary school students who are not proficient in English and math.

Last year, he marshaled some resources (financial and personnel) and his team launched the Grade Level Proficiency Project, designed at using technology and differentiated small group instruction to tackle the problem.

The initial success of the program in its test site at Dunbar Elementary School has been nothing less than astounding, according to Nelson. “GLPP is a game changer,” he said.

According to the GLPP team (using Common Core-aligned assessments built within the programs), after the first five months the number of Dunbar second-graders working at or above grade level in math increased from 0 percent to 88 percent, the number working within their grade level in reading increased from 17 percent to 45 percent.

Dunbar Principal Melanie Blake jumped at the chance to be the pilot site. “It is crucial that our students leave elementary school proficient so that going forward they can read to learn ... not still be learning to read,” said Blake.

In a nutshell, GLPP uses engaging software applications and state of the art hardware (iPads and Chromebooks) to allow students to work independently and at their own pace with the support of their teacher and an instructional aide.

Leading the program are retired district teachers Marian Rasmussen and Terry Roberts. A small group of investors bankrolled the first year of the GLPP, which was designed to provide “proof of concept.” GLPP was rolled out last winter into Dunbar’s math instruction and last April, into English language arts. Students at Sonoma Charter School and Sassarini Elementary School will begin with GLPP this week.

“We choose the two applications, Lexia Reading and Dreambox Math based on three criteria – they had to be engaging, work on a variety of devices and be aligned with the new Common Core State Standards,” explained Rasmussen.

“Time is right,” explained Nelson excitedly. “Kids have the affinity for this technology and today’s educational applications are compelling for both kids and teachers. Teaching this way fits the culture of the day.”

A recent visit to Dunbar found students thrilled to be spending at least 30 minutes a day on one of two computer programs. Students take their seats eagerly. They sit divided by cardboard “offices.” At each seat, a ziplock bag holds the student’s headphones, simple instructions and their name card. They flip the card over to its red side when they need help.

Even the littlest students must be able to grab, drag and drop items on the screen, not only for GLLP but also for the new annual assessments that replaced STAR testing. Those tests are administered entirely online, making typing a crucial 21st century skill for students as young as third grade. Typing has not been formally taught in Sonoma elementary schools for more than five years but that is about to change.

Students work at their own level and pace, and in the case of Lexia, earn badges for their progress. “I love earning badges,” said third-grader Victoria Magnani. “It is so much more fun than worksheets.” Damian Rameriz-Long added, “I wish we could do it even more. I also do it at home because I like it so much.”

Even students who are just learning English are both enjoying and showing great strides with Lexia. “When the teacher can’t work one-on-one with a student who speaks little to no English, the student might sit idle, unable to progress. With this program, the student is actively learning the entire time,” explained Roberts. On a recent visit to a Dunbar classroom, a young boy who spoke no English was successfully working on both Lexia and on the Spanish version of Dreambox.

If students are truly struggling, the program is prescriptive and it can recommend interventions. “But instead of most of a class being recommended for intervention just because they have fallen behind grade level, we can now target that help to the students who truly need it,” explained Blake. Nelson expects that GLPP can drastically minimize the need for costly remedial interventions throughout high school.

“I have found that my students are more engaged, better-behaved and more attentive using these programs,” said Renea Magnani who teaches a class of both second- and third-graders. All students stay in the classroom for GLPP, whether they have special learning needs, have been identified for the GATE (gifted and talented) program or are English-language learners.

Friday, Gary Nelson and the GLPP team talk about how the program is implemented and what’s next for the district.

# Math, reading program expanding

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Part 2 of 2

Sonoma schools are experimenting with a technology-based method of targeted classroom instruction aimed at making sure that all local students are proficient at reading and math by the end of third grade. Local philanthropist Gary Nelson joined forces with veteran teachers Marian Rasmussen and Terry Roberts to pilot the program at Dunbar Elementary School. This fall, thanks to financial support from the Sonoma Valley Education Foundation, students at two additional schools will begin using the computer programs that form the foundation of the Grade Level Proficiency Project.

The Grade Level Proficiency Project represents a sea change for teachers and as the first campus to pilot the program, Dunbar Elementary Principal Melanie Blake knew that getting her staff on board and excited about the project was going to be key to its success. She began by issuing each teacher an iPad mini.

Teachers had a few weeks to play around with the two central applications that the students would be using – Lexia Reading and Dreambox Math. After the launch, they noticed that the students were tremendously engaged when using the programs. But Blake found that her teachers were particularly excited about the same-day data they receive specific to each student based on his or her progress playing the games and doing the activities on the sites.

“You just can’t differentiate any better than this,” said teacher Megan Gauci. Lexia produces leveled spelling lists so Gauci’s classroom actually has several different spelling groups. The program can even produce homework, geared to each student’s level. Assessments like spelling tests and math tests are administered and scored via the program, which is a huge help to a busy classroom teacher. “We spend less time generating the data on how our kids are doing and more time analyzing trends and patterns,” said Gauci. “GLPP frees up classroom time for experiential learning and meaningful direct instruction,” added Rasmussen.

Central to the success of GLPP, are classrooms split into three groups. One group of students works at its own pace on the programs on devices under the supervision of the aide. One group receives direct instruction from the teacher, and one group works independently.

Adding an aide to every K-3 classroom is an expensive proposition but Blake said it is a crucial part of GLPP. “Until students are at grade level, it is almost impossible for even the most experienced teacher to successfully teach 25 students by themselves.”

The primary costs are those aides, the devices (Chromebooks, iPads or iPad minis) and the licensing of the two programs. Nelson estimates that the cost per school of GLPP implementation for first, second and third

grades is approximately \$200,000.

In addition to the extra hands provided by the aides, critical to the program's success has been having veteran educators Rasmussen and Roberts working alongside the classroom teachers.

After a year or two of training, teachers will be expected to lead the program in their classrooms on their own with an ongoing aide.

How can this program be expanded across the district? Right now, Rasmussen and Roberts spend two days a week at Sassarini Elementary, two days a week at Sonoma Charter School and one day at Dunbar. The tentative plan for next year would be one day at SCS, one day at Sassarini and the other three days at one or two new elementary school sites.

School Superintendent Louann Carlomagno has been impressed by Nelson's early results data. "We have spent countless hours determining the scalability of GLPP and we are excited that two additional schools are participating. It is a big undertaking but the initial results indicate that GLPP could be instrumental in helping us to meet our district wide goal of having all Sonoma students proficient at reading and math by the end of third grade."

"Educators lay awake at night wondering how we can get every single kid to thrive," said Nelson. "I think that technology can be the silver bullet to help us reduce the achievement gap."

