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Math and reading program sees success at Dunbar

Pilot program expands to include two other schools

Sarah C. Phelps

On a recent Tuesday afternoon at Dunbar Elementary School, Karen O'Hara's second/third multi-grade class sat quietly, absorbed in various lessons, from mathematics to language arts, on individual mini-iPads. O'Hara and her aide, Celia Calderon-Ponce, roamed the room, helping the occasional struggling student or pulling particular students aside to work with them one-on-one. These iPad learning sessions, now happening regularly at Dunbar, are part of the Grade Level Proficiency Project (GLPP), a three-year pilot program designed to get students up to grade-level proficiency in math and reading by third grade.

Mrs. O'Hara rang a bell, signalling it was time to wrap the lessons up and a wave of groans rolled over the class. This is one of the many good signs that the GLPP is successfully working at Dunbar. Developed by veteran educators Terry Roberts and Marian Rasmussen, this is the second year Dunbar has participated in the pilot program, and it is already seeing great results.

Statistics for September 2014 to January 2015 show that the number of second grade students working within grade level in reading rose from eight percent to 31 percent. In third grade, students working within grade level or above increased from 16 to 33 percent. In math, second graders working one grade level below dropped from 91 percent to nine percent. Third graders working below grade level dropped from 98 to 57 percent.

First grade students began the GLPP pilot in November 2014. After one and a half months, first graders working two grades below level in reading dropped from 26 percent to zero. In math, first graders working one grade below dropped from 83 percent to two percent. Fourteen percent of the students are now working one grade level above.

"Our main goal the first year was to reduce spread of grade levels of those who were behind; we were trying to narrow it down," said Dunbar Principal Melanie Blake. After the implementation of GLPP, Blake said she is seeing two big trends. First, students are gaining twice as much ground in less time. Second, the sooner GLPP is introduced, the faster the grade level gap is closed. "We're seeing pretty impressive gains. The goal was to catch them before they fall and the data is bearing that out."

Blake said Dunbar is experimenting with an introductory program at the Kindergarten level to give kids exposure there, and she has hopes for an intervention-type program for the older fourth and fifth grades.

Two other schools in the district, Sassarini and the Sonoma Charter School, have also begun the GLPP pilot this year and coaching at all three schools is ongoing.

In a nutshell, the way GLPP works is this: The iPads contain two types of educational software, the game-like Dreambox Math, and Lexia Reading. Students get a chance to use Lexia for 60 minutes and Dreambox for 90 minutes throughout the week. The programs are adaptive, particularly Dreambox, meaning that as the student gets questions right or wrong, the software adapts to the appropriate level or reviews what might be lacking. All students get their own accounts and progress reports are fed to a teacher's "dashboard." With these reports, the teacher can see at which grade level a student is trending, where they might be struggling (with the use of the silent "e," for example), or where they are excelling. O'Hara said she finds the reports very useful during parent-teacher conferences and also uses these reports to help her choose students for more one-on-one work. In the same classroom O'Hara has students who are struggling far below grade level in reading and students who are reading one or two levels above their grades. "In those same 20 minutes, we can be reaching all those kids' needs, which is nearly impossible in a group lesson," she said.

One of the challenges facing GLPP adoption, however, is getting the funding to invest in the technology, staff support and training. On top of investing in iPads and licensing the educational software, the addition of instructional aides to each classroom can be costly, but Rasmussen said they are an integral part of a successful program. Aides are needed in each classroom to lend a hand so teachers can provide individualized attention to struggling students during GLPP sessions. This year, aides were trained to use the iPads and software in advance, becoming teammates for the teachers when it was their turn to learn the software in the classroom, cutting down on extra work for teachers. Right now Roberts and Rasmussen split their time between the three pilot schools to provide in-classroom support and training. After two years of training, teachers will be expected to lead the program on their own with an ongoing aide.

Initially, Roberts and Rasmussen sought out private funding. Generous donations from Nelson Family of Companies and the Sonoma Teaching Project helped get the program off the ground. This year, Dunbar has support from the SVUSD and the Sonoma Valley Education Foundation (plus private donors). The Rotary Club of Glen Ellen-Kenwood has been instrumental in donating mini-iPads to the Kindergarten program.

The long-term hope is to have SVUSD take over the program and expand it. Rasmussen and Roberts have also been surveying parents about technology access at home. Both Dreambox and Lexia can be logged into from a home computer, iPad or smartphone. In the future, this could lead to homework assignments using the software.

O'Hara said overall she finds parents generally receptive. "It's a new technology, but I think the [report] visuals are nice for parents. This is the way of the 21st century and I'm glad it's here."