

High expectations, challenging instruction improve ELL achievement in Summit School District



The Challenge

Summit County in Colorado is home to numerous resort areas and ski towns—and an increasing number of seasonal workers from all over the world. As a result, Summit School District (SSD), which serves about 3,000 students, has experienced a similar increase in the number of its English-language learning students (ELLs). When SSD was chosen to participate in the state’s three-year initiative to narrow the achievement gap between ELLs and their English-speaking peers, the district turned to McREL for guidance in doing so in a systemic way that didn’t focus solely on state assessment performance.

Strategic Solution

The SSD curriculum was solid, but there was a lot of variance in the way it was taught—and teachers were unsure how to make it relevant to ELLs. McREL Lead Consultant Candy Hyatt worked with teachers to help them understand language acquisition, adapt McREL’s Classroom Instruction that Works (CITW), strategies for ELLs, implement them with consistency and fidelity, and communicate and articulate learning goals to all students more effectively.

Over time, said Hyatt, “I watched the shift in teachers’ thinking about who was sitting in front of them. They began to understand that they could deliver instruction at a very high level (to ELLs), as long as they provided the necessary scaffolds and supports.”

Results

After a year of comprehensive professional development, SSD Superintendent Millie Hamner said the district has made student learning the number-one priority, and a culture of high expectations has taken hold. State assessment data from 2007–2009 indicated the gap between white and minority students, as well as students living in poverty, is narrowing at all levels in both reading (by 6%) and mathematics (by 3%). At the high school level, reading scores have increased by an impressive 16 percent.

Next Steps

The district continues quarterly CITW trainings in each school and monitors implementation through regular classroom observations conducted by principals and central office administrators. With McREL’s assistance, Hamner said, the district is on its way to becoming the kind of school system it has “always aspired to be.”