



AT-RISK STUDENTS THRIVE, RETENTIONS DIMINISH WITH LEXIA'S INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL

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- Pamela Rosenberg, Director of Psychological Services (*retired 2009*)
Bridgeport Public Schools, Bridgeport, Conn.

Profile

Located in the largest city in Connecticut, the Bridgeport Public Schools serve almost 21,000 students in grades K–12. More than 95 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and approximately 40 percent of students speak a language other than English at home.

Challenge

Among the common challenges that school districts face are preventing retention (in which students are held back a year) and providing effective early intervention and targeted support to meet students’ needs. In 2008, based on a review of scholarly research and an analysis of district data, Pamela Rosenberg, Director of Psychological Services, and her colleagues set out to examine one of the underlying reasons why students in Bridgeport Public Schools were retained. Were the retentions purely for academic reasons, or were there other contributing factors? What could be done to help the students?

The team focused on kindergarteners’ social-emotional development as a factor contributing to retention. They found that kindergarten students are often retained for behavioral or developmental issues, rather than academic performance alone. With that information, the team began to investigate the use of measurable interventions to prevent retentions and build resiliency in young children.

The concept of resiliency in children is based on the theory that children who fare well in school despite stress and adversity in their lives are considered resilient. Recent studies have stated that positive, protective factors such as a supportive family environment; a community support system; and a child’s personal attributes such as temperament, intelligence, personality, and other positive behavior traits, can buffer the negative effects of daily stress (e.g. chronic poverty, parental alcoholism) and severe stressors (e.g. war, high-crime neighborhoods) that many young children experience.

Rosenberg led an effort in Bridgeport to promote resiliency in young children and to improve their social and emotional health. The program included academic activities that helped to improve self esteem, self control, initiative, and relationships with others, as well as academic performance. The program was delivered to the whole class through intervention, and included behavior plans for individual children.

Solution

“With academics playing a major factor in most retentions, we believed that the way to help students was to deliver an academic piece that was different than the year before—not just another year of the same approach,” said Rosenberg. “We were already in the process of working through the challenges of RTI (Response to Intervention) and were focusing on tools for early intervention, however, we didn’t have a tool that was easy to implement. Given the challenge of our workloads, we knew that a direct instruction tool was not going to be the answer.”

The team examined the district resources and realized that, although class sizes were above the state average, Bridgeport had an infrastructure and classroom computer resources that are in many cases superior to more affluent schools. The group decided that a computer-assisted tool would be the best solution.

During the team’s research, a member of the psychology department learned about Lexia Learning Systems. After evaluating the program, the team agreed that *Lexia Reading* fit the criteria for an easy-to-implement, technology-based program that would support core instruction.

Implementation

Bridgeport, like many other districts, has a pre-referral team that identifies students who may have academic or behavioral challenges. The team, comprising social workers, psychologists, classroom teachers, special education teachers, guidance counselors, and literacy and math specialists, provides students with a range of accommodations and modifications to the instructional setting before referring them for special education assessment.

The team incorporated *Lexia Reading* as an intervention, which was used with the targeted group of pre-referral students during school assistance time. One team member volunteered to be the Lexia case manager. He received in-depth training on the program from the Lexia staff and then trained the rest of the pre-referral team.

“Our goal was to get as many students on the program as possible,” said Rosenberg.

Bridgeport purchased 12 Lexia Flexi-licenses, allowing them to use 12 concurrent “seats” to accommodate students. These licenses are available at any time and allow Bridgeport to incorporate Lexia during the school day, out-of-school time, or even at home.

“We developed a schedule to maximize the seats during the school day,” Rosenberg continued. “We were able to accommodate 150 students with 12 seats and were quickly able to get everyone up and running by Thanksgiving.”

Results

Students quickly took to the engaging activities on *Lexia Reading*. After implementing the program in late November, students completed an average of 96 activities by the end of May.

“We were absolutely thrilled,” said Rosenberg. “We found that 82 percent of our kindergarteners had finished *Lexia Early Reading* (designed for pre-K through first grade) and were already working on *Lexia Primary Reading* (designed for pre-K through third grade) by the end of May.”

Time-on Task for Students with Behavioral Issues

The Bridgeport pre-referral team found that children who had been perceived as having behavior problems were among the most engaged by the Lexia activities.

“For many students, the fact that the Lexia activities were not teacher-directed provided a better alternative,” said Rosenberg. “Children spent more time on the activities and were on-task the entire time. Teachers were floored by that! The kids that were perceived by teachers to have behavior problems completed more activities than any other group. And when we examined the assessment data, they were the group that demonstrated the greatest increases in resiliency.”

Building Confidence and Self-Esteem

Lexia’s individualized reading skills instruction and practice helps students work confidently, privately, and at their own pace. As students move through the activities, Lexia provides feedback, “celebration screens,” and progress charts to help each student monitor their progress towards their goals. Lexia’s age-appropriate content and interface make the experience relevant and rewarding for every student, no matter the skill-level. Students work independently so they can work without feeling self-conscious about other students hearing their responses or seeing their skill-level.

“Lexia created a safe environment for our students to learn,” said Rosenberg. “The time-on-task and the academic progress of our most challenged students indicate that Lexia gave them a comfort-zone in which they could thrive.”

Opportunities for Paraprofessionals to Contribute

Paraprofessionals also embraced *Lexia Reading* enthusiastically. While resources and opportunities for paraprofessionals to support instruction are sometimes limited, *Lexia Reading* provided an excellent opportunity for them to provide hands-on support and contribute to Bridgeport’s strategy for the Connecticut Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI).

“Our paraprofessionals were extremely motivated to participate and assist,” said Rosenberg. “They were trained by our team’s Lexia case manager, and then trained other paraprofessionals themselves.

“They were able to use the data from Lexia and download the teaching instruction to help them to intervene on an individual basis. Enabling our paraprofessionals to do this on a regular basis helped us to double our efforts on the state’s SRBI.”

A Critical Component of RTI

Lexia became an important aspect of Bridgeport’s RTI program, as Lexia assessment data helped determine which children needed intervention and which targeted skills needed to be taught.

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Based on its success with the kindergarten pre-referral program, Bridgeport now plans to expand its use of Lexia to serve approximately 25 percent of the school population in kindergarten through grade three as one of the first interventions for students.

The district plans to have kindergarten students continue to use the program 3–5 times per week for 20 minutes, while students in grades one through three will use the program for 30 minutes per day.

Significant Academic and Personal Growth

Using the DRA (Developmental Reading Assessment), Bridgeport students in the pre-referral program went from a score of 1.49 in November to a score of 3.06 in May. In addition, the district reports that many kindergarteners were able to increase their DRA to a first-grade level by the end of the year.

Bridgeport also used the Devereaux scale to measure resiliency gains with the program and reported a 38 percent increase in students' resiliency, and an 18 percent improvement in the number of students who no longer displayed At-Risk characteristics.

Conclusion

"Lexia provides a research-based approach to support students," said Rosenberg. "It is not merely 'play' on the computer; rather, it provides a unique and engaging opportunity for students to learn. In fact, many students may be more open to learning with Lexia than with any other method of instruction.

"The psychology of reinforcement that is utilized throughout the program, and the way in which the Lexia program reinforces student learning and informs the case manager make this a truly unique resource. Lexia doesn't pretend to be the teacher, but instead provides the data and supporting materials to help target instruction extremely effectively."