

# Pre-teaching Model, Research-based Strategies a **Winning** Combination



By Vicki Urquhart

For many school leaders, paying unexpected visits to classrooms is a risky venture; you never know what you're going to see. But Terry Wilhelm finds herself eagerly anticipating her visits to 9<sup>th</sup>- and 10<sup>th</sup>-grade classrooms at Jurupa Valley High School (JVHS) in Mira Loma, California, precisely because she does know what she's going to see—engaged students and effective teachers. As Director of Educational Leadership Services in the Riverside County Office of Education, she has worked with the school's staff and administration on school improvement efforts for about four years, and recently, she's found exciting changes, especially in students' attitudes. "I am so impressed at the level of student engagement in the language arts and Algebra I classes that I'm sending others to see how JVHS is implementing change," said Wilhelm. While other schools' "support classes" are struggling to have an impact, Jurupa's are working.

More than half of Jurupa's 2,300 students qualify for free and reduced priced lunch, and English-language learners (ELLs) comprise about 24 percent of the student population. After being placed on sanctions, moving up, and then moving down again, the school has experienced two years of continuous improvement,

and this year will be the third. "I attribute the improvement to concentrating on one thing—instructional practice," said Principal Ilsa Garza-Gonzalez. "Basically, the only thing we work at is the ... strategies in *Classroom Instruction that Works* (CITW), and the impact instruction has on kids."

Jurupa also is in its second year of using an innovative pre-teaching model. In this model, the core-class teacher also teaches a smaller class for students who are working below grade level. Teachers give added emphasis to the CITW strategies, which are used schoolwide. For example, students in a pre-teaching class might work in cooperative learning groups on "similarities and differences" using several types of graphic organizers.

In another classroom, Wilhelm observed teachers giving instant corrective feedback to students who were working on Algebra I problems on their own whiteboards. "It knocked our socks off to see teachers. . . saying 'careless mistake' or 'yep, you got it,'" said Wilhelm. When students were missing an essential part of a new skill, teachers stopped and quickly revisited that skill. "It was the best checking for understanding I've ever seen by using several different CITW strategies," she said.

The students say that the classes, and the direct instruction of vocabulary terms they receive during them, have helped them with the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). For example, a question on last year's test was this: *If you were the mayor of a city, what criteria would you establish for giving someone the key to the city?* All the students said knowing the word "criteria" helped them answer the question.

"We're very excited about the culture change; many of our teachers and students have a new way of thinking," said Garza-Gonzalez. With limited funds during the first year of sanctions, JVHS relied on staff members who were well versed in certain strategies to present them to the entire staff.

The following year, they took the CITW emphasis to a new level by conducting 485 informal drop-in visits, specifically looking for the use of the strategies. After spending 3–5 minutes in a classroom, they checked off strategies they saw in action on a half-page form that listed all the strategies. They left a carbon copy for the teacher and kept a copy as informal data. This approach proved to be a good conversation

starter; teachers began stopping by Garza-Gonzalez' office to discuss what the strategy looks like. This year, the half sheet grew to a full sheet with examples for teachers' reference.

### Success starts with strong leadership and flexibility

Wilhelm points to Garza-Gonzalez' leadership and the work of the two academic coaches, one focusing on language arts and one on mathematics, as important factors in the school's success. Last year, Garza-Gonzalez participated in the first year of McREL's Balanced Leadership professional development and, as she leads change at JVHS, she is paying attention to the 21 leadership responsibilities, specifically maintaining a high level of visibility; constantly monitoring and evaluating; and having a deep knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. "When you walk around the school with her, she describes everything that is going on," said Wilhelm.

"It is hard work, but the research is true," said Garza-Gonzalez. Even with data that showed a pre-teach approach would help students, she had to convince doubtful teachers that establishing a new schedule and starting pre-teaching courses was the way to go. "It required a lot of thinking outside of the box and changing the way we 'normally' did things," said Garza-Gonzalez. Results from the latest California Standards Tests (CST) show progress: Of the ELLs who went through the program, 46 percent improved, and students receiving special education services improved 25 percent.

On the surface, JVHS looks like a traditional school with a traditional daily schedule, but what you don't see is the flexibility of the teachers and administration. "I emphasize that the master schedule is an instructional tool, driven by student needs. If we have different needs in the second semester, I change the schedule, and teachers might be teaching differently to different kids." Students who

previously scored at 90 percent or more on standardized tests and who are making Cs or above in class, for example, will be scheduled for honors classes.

A short-term goal is to move out of sanctions, but even that has had its positive effects, Garza-Gonzalez said. The first year, it was a motivator because staff knew they had to make some changes. Now, there are programs in place that they would not have otherwise received. And, there is that factor of student engagement that Wilhelm and others can't help but notice. Teachers and administration will continue to pay attention to Adequate Yearly Progress, Academic Performance Index, and results of the CAHSEE, but not at the expense of the daily progress they are making.

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