

Schuyler takes leap forward in reading scores

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SCHUYLER - Schuyler elementary students seem to have turned the page on reading achievement in the last few years, significantly closing the gap with other students from across the state.

In 2010, Schuyler Elementary School third-graders scored 21 points below the statewide average reading score. A year later, third-graders registered scores 23 points higher, coming within two points of the statewide reading average score of 71.

"The teachers have done a phenomenal job (in helping students close the gap)," said Darli Jo Vrba, co-principal of Schuyler Elementary School.

Co-Principal Bill Comley attributed the school's success primarily to direct instruction training and coaching support elementary teachers have received through a program implemented three years ago.

Schuyler Public Schools launched the National Institute of Direct Instruction's program in 2009-10. The ongoing program included on-site teacher training and weekly data analysis and individual problem-solving conference calls aimed at boosting students' reading achievement.

The school board and administration's investment in direct instruction and teacher coaching really started to make a difference in achievement about two solid years after the program's launch, Comley said.

The Eugene, Ore.-based institute is the world's foremost direct instruction support provider.

Direct instruction, according to the institute, is a model for teaching that emphasizes well-developed and carefully planned lessons designed around small learning increments and clearly defined and prescribed teaching tasks.

"Teachers had to really buy into it," Vrba said. "Teachers now employ more direct instruction and kids have achieved more success."

The on-site training and the long-distance consulting sessions allow staff to make

changes in curriculum or offer assistance to individual students in mastering skills, Comley said.

In the three years of the program, the school has made a switch from two or three student reading groups taught by one teacher in a classroom to up to 10 or 12 groups that are shuffled among classrooms and teachers.

A classroom teacher today might have five reading groups each divided into high-, middle- and low-skill students who are then sent around to teachers for more direct instruction.

The elementary now has 95 reading groups among K-5 classes, Comley said.

Driving Schuyler's reading gains has been the progress made by the school's Hispanic students, who account for more than 90 percent of the approximately 800 K-5 students.

In 2009-10, just 39 percent of Hispanic third-graders met the state reading standard. Not a single student exceeded the reading standard. In 2010-11, 57 percent of third-grade Hispanic students met and 8 percent exceeded the standard.

Comley said overcoming the elementary school's diversity issues has played a role in the rising reading achievement.

"We had to get past making excuses (for low reading scores) and realize a kid is a kid. We don't see skin color ... we have to teach them all," said Comley, noting that students aren't split into English Language Learner groups for reading instruction. "A big reason for our success is we have gotten strong parental support."

Institute officials, citing Crete and Gering, say results in closing the reading achievement gap in Schuyler are consistent with other schools with large Hispanic populations that have implemented the direct instruction model.

Schuyler elementary students will take this year's statewide reading test in April.

Schuyler's 3-year-old elementary school near the corner of U.S. Highways 30 and 15 is currently made up of grades K-3 while an expansion project has been under way.

Fourth- and fifth-grade classes, about 250 students temporarily attending classes at the middle school, will move back to the elementary school when the first bell rings for the 2012-13 school year.