

Close-Up #19

Improving Student Reading San Vicente Elementary School

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

San Vicente Elementary School's efforts to improve student reading performance are directly related to findings from effective schooling research. Using the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory' 1984 publication, *EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS*, San Vicente teachers and administrators identified the following findings as particularly appropriate to their work:

CLASSROOM-level research-based practices:

1.4 Instruction is clear and focused.

- Lesson activities are previewed; clear written and verbal directions are given; key points and instructions are repeated; student understanding is checked.
- Teachers select problems and other academic tasks that are well matched to lesson content so student success rate is high.

1.5 Learning progress is monitored closely.

- Routine assessment procedures make checking student progress easier; students hear results quickly; reports to students are simple and clear to help them understand and correct errors.
- Teachers use assessment results not only to evaluate students but also for instructional diagnosis and to find out if teaching methods are working.
- Attendance records and other methods are used to spot potential problems. Changes are made in instructional programs and school procedures to meet identified needs.
- Individual student records are established and updated periodically; group summaries are pulled from individual reports and reviewed over time to check for trends.

SCHOOL-level research-based practices:

2.10 Parents are invited to become involved.

- Parents help keep students involved in learning. Teachers let parents know that homework is important and give them tips on how to help student keep working.
- Parents and members of the community have various options for becoming involved in schooling, especially in ways that support the instructional program.

SITUATION

The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Public School System

Part of the fourteen-school Public School System of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), San Vicente Elementary School is located on the western Pacific island of Saipan. The CNMI is a commonwealth of the United States; its people are United States citizens who chose commonwealth status in 1975. The CNMI is located north of Guam, about 1,000 miles south of Japan and nearly 4,000 miles west of Honolulu. The CNMI is made up of a chain of 14 volcanic islands stretching over 375 miles from north to south. The capital of the CNMI is located on the island of Saipan. The CNMI Public School System serves 6,329 students in three high schools, one middle school, and ten elementary schools located on three islands.

The community of San Vicente is located in a rural part of Saipan and has a relatively stable population. The vast majority of residents are ethnically and culturally Chamorro, and speak Chamorro within their homes and at most community and public gatherings. There are growing numbers of residents from other parts of Micronesia (Federated States of Micronesia, Palau) and increasing numbers of nonresident workers employed in the booming tourist industry (Filipinos, Koreans, other Asian groups). San Vicente, like much of Saipan, is adjusting to the needs and pressures of multiple language groups, multiple cultures, and a variety of divergent lifestyles, although at this point the community remains predominantly Chamorro.

SAN VICENTE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

San Vicente's school population reflects the community's ethnic makeup with a total of 486, students of whom 97.6 percent, or 422, are Chamorros or other Pacific islanders (34 from other parts of Micronesia, 14 from the Philippines) and 5 Americans. Two administrators, 28 teachers and 15 teacher aides comprise the school staff. Currently there is no vice principal. Classes include grades K-6 and take place in several buildings.

While the culture and language of the majority of students and staff is Chamorro, a small but increasing number of students from Micronesia and the Philippines also bring their home language to the classroom and rely heavily on schooling for English language development. Classroom instruction and materials are in English, with the exception of those used in the Chamorro Language and Culture classes.

CONTEXT

San Vicente staff members view CNMI children as living in a world of change. They believe that it is the ultimate goal of education to prepare them for this rapidly changing world. To that

end, the ONWARD TO EXCELLENCE (OTE) school improvement process has become a schoolwide effort with the administrators, counselor, teachers, and teacher aides enthusiastically sharing their intellectual energies, pooling their time and resources for inservice sessions, data gathering, profiling, and defining goals.

San Vicente has used the OTE process since December 1988. A five-member OTE leadership team was formed at that time and guided the 1989 development of a profile of student performance in the areas of academic achievement, behavior and attitude. The team also conducted inservice for all staff. The entire teaching staff of the school was divided into three committees-- one for each profile area. Each committee was led by the members of the school improvement team. Leadership team members presented the OTE process to the staff. The task of each committee was to use all available materials and documents in order to produce a profile of San Vicente students' performance. The profile was the basis for the first improvement goal the school has adopted.

Examining all three profile areas confirmed the perception of San Vicente staff that a major emphasis on language development would benefit all students. San Vicente set as its first goal:

IMPROVING STUDENT READING PERFORMANCE. "By the end of the first year, students will show an average increase of three percentile points. At the end of five years, the students will show an average increase of 15 percentile points in reading as measured by the **CAT.**"

Language development is a high priority throughout the CNMI and with increasing numbers of students who are both non-Chamorro and non-English speaking, the emphasis on reading performance matches a systemwide priority.

San Vicente staff decided to concentrate first on reading improvement and to develop a thorough and detailed prescription to address the reading needs of students. Staff identified a number of research-based practices and agreed to begin with several that would focus attention on reading and involve parents and community members in supporting increased reading both in school and at home. Evidence of strong community support took several forms. The school improvement leadership team addressed parents at a PTA meeting to get their input on the goal. Deciding that the development of a research-based prescription should involve the whole staff, the principal requested community assistance for whole-day meetings. Several local business leaders provided funding for the use of conference facilities, while the Public School System supported closing the school to assure uninterrupted time for staff to work together. The result is a strong and very detailed prescription that will guide reading improvement for a five-year period.

After reviewing effective schooling research in their goal area, San Vicente staff members selected two strategies for initial implementation: uninterrupted sustained silent reading (USSR), and the planning and development of mini-libraries in each classroom. These strategies were selected to focus the entire school's attention on reading as pleasure--as something valued by all. Both strategies were expected to increase student awareness of the importance of reading and to promote reading for the joy it can bring throughout life. Parents and community members were involved in the implementation of both strategies.

STRATEGY: UNINTERRUPTED

SUSTAINED SILENT READING

Staff viewed USSR was viewed as a strategy which could be implemented almost immediately without additional professional development and without substantial cost. They decided that all students and staff members would be expected to take part. Beginning in March 1990, implementation of a schoolwide, uninterrupted silent sustained reading period began. With staff concurrence, a daily time period was scheduled, the bell schedule was revised, and teachers, other staff, and students were encouraged to bring in their own reading materials. Parents were informed through communication from the acting principal and through an "OTE Night" session and process overview. In order to monitor implementation, the leadership team developed a monitoring form and decided to begin with daily checks and feedback. After the initial weeks, monitoring was deliberately random, with regular progress reports to keep awareness of the degree of implementation high. USSR was, and continues to be, expected in all classrooms and instructional areas, office and administrative areas, custodial areas, the library and computer room. Parents have reported that their children ask for books at home, and some have instituted USSR at home.

STRATEGY: CLASSROOM MINI-LIBRARIES

The second strategy required considerable work on the part of the staff, students, parents, and the community. Funds to purchase mini-libraries were not readily available, but there was a strong commitment to put this strategy in place. With the help of many parents and community members, San Vicente staff and students conducted food sales and other fundraising activities throughout the spring of 1990. More than \$20,000 was raised, and selection and ordering of books is underway. To provide immediate access to reading materials, San Vicente also decided to disperse some of the centrally housed library collection to individual classrooms. Inservice on setting up and using learning centers followed. An early observation by parents noted increases in the amount of reading students do at home, as well as increased requests for books and other reading materials.

Both strategies have achieved their purpose--to begin San Vicente's reading improvement with activities in which everyone could participate, and to provide success in the initial activities of the implementation plan.

Instructional Strategies: Professional Development to Improve Reading Instruction

The next major focus for San Vicente has been professional development in support of improved reading instruction.

Building from within is a major part of San Vicente's reading improvement efforts. Members of the OTE Leadership Team, with the support and encouragement of the principal, have identified areas for professional development and have sought to utilize the talents and experience of the staff to provide internal professional development. During the 1989-90 school year a variety of activities were undertaken through bimonthly Teacher Enrichment Workshops:

- Two days of intensive work sessions organized by the OTE leadership team and facilitated by the principal and team members to create a reading improvement prescription through:
 - Review of effective schooling research
 - Discussion and agreement on practices to put into place
 - Determination of tasks and responsibilities
 - Development of preliminary timelines

- An OTE leadership team teacher presentation on organizing and managing USSR
- A session on developing reading learning centers
- A session on Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills presented by staff
- A session on peer teaching to improve reading, followed by a session on using a teacher-developed form for monitoring peer teaching
- Several enrichment sessions focused on use and display of student data, including sessions on using test results and graphing student progress.

Several professional development activities have included other resource people:

- The National Diffusion Network coordinator for the CNMI presented an overview of reading programs and continues to work with staff to bring NDN project staff to the CNMI (i.e. Alpha Phonics training for all kindergarten teachers).
- Three sessions on cooperative team learning in reading were held.
- San Vicente has entered into a partnership with Northern Marianas College to implement Writing to Read in the primary grades. The instructor and computer are being supplied by the college, while San Vicente provides the space and the students. The college instructor is also providing professional development training for primary teachers and aides.
- Early in the 1990-91 school year, one of the CNMI's OTE trainers from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Center for the Advancement of Pacific Education (CAPE) staff, began professional development training focused on classroom assessment. The first session dealt with assessing higher-order thinking skills and using classroom questions that prompt higher-order thinking.

Other planned activities include:

- A new staff orientation session planned and delivered by the leadership team focusing on San Vicente's school improvement goal, the school improvement process, and their role in the process
- An annual San Vicente Book Festival
- Student and staff involvement in book selection and purchasing for expansion of classroom minilibraries