



Building Literacy Skills for a Broad Range of English Learners

Washoe County School District, Reno, Nevada

Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP®)
and Words Their Way®

Demographics

- › Mixed urban/rural district
- › 63,300 students
- › 41% free and reduced lunch
- › 54% white
- › 33% Hispanic
- › 7% Asian
- › 18% EL

Challenge

According to Diana Walker, secondary EL program coordinator in the Washoe County School District, the district needed to meet the varying needs of different EL groups in order to build academic vocabulary and bring struggling students to grade level as quickly as possible.

Students in the first group, “long-term ELs,” have received most of their education in the U.S., many of them in Washoe County, but still struggle with residual second language acquisition challenges and literacy skills in English. This group often has gaps in Tier 1 (basic vocabulary) words. Students in the “short-term EL” group, who have been in the U.S. for less than five years, are divided into two subgroups, students with a strong academic background in their native language and those without such a background. All short-term ELs are acquiring English as an additional language and require instruction in English language development, but students who come in with a limited academic background also often require additional literacy and content support.

Implementation

“What I really appreciate about Words Their Way® is that it provides a directed approach for the short-term group, plus backfill and some very specific skills for the long-term group,” said Ms. Walker about the district’s use of Words Their Way®. Teachers are using the diagnostic assessments to analyze learning gaps and place students at their correct developmental level.

Washoe County began its professional development program with optional word study training for groups of EL teachers. After three years, a Words Their Way® trainer came on board and the training became more formal. Now a year-long professional development plan begins before school starts, organized around the sequence of word study steps and any implementation challenges.

Teachers are required to attend 15 hours of training and can opt to attend an additional 15 hours for in-service credit. Coaching is then available during monthly training sessions, after site visits, and on request. Some schools have site-based coaches, and others use district implementation specialists.

“The mandatory training builds the basics and the vocabulary,” said Ms. Walker. “Then teachers need time to work through the bumps with structured support. Some teachers need help placing students in the right group, and some need help organizing daily tasks.”

Every EL high school and middle school teacher now has a copy of *Words Their Way®: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary and Spelling Instruction*, and each school has a set of *Words Their Way®: Word Sorts for Within Word Pattern Spellers*. The EL department purchased Pearson SIOP® (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) texts to guide the training of instructional coaches, who provide day-to-day support in content area teaching. SIOP® complements Words Their Way® by giving teachers a highly structured model that helps EL students learn academic concepts and a new language at the same time.

Ms. Walker works with 40 EL high-school teachers, and their response to the program has been positive. “Words Their Way® offers great flexibility,” she said. “Teachers are using it with classes of about ten students with a wide range of skills and providing appropriate instruction to every student.” Teachers appreciate that Words Their Way® combines teacher-directed and student-centered learning and includes discussion and oral language. “Students come to generalizations about words through carefully scaffolded teacher talk, which improves academic language while teaching content,” said Ms. Walker.

Results

Cristal Cisneros, SIOP® implementation specialist at Dilworth S.T.E.M. Academy, coaches middle-school teachers in the district. “Teachers like that Words Their Way® is a real word study curriculum, not just a cut and paste or sorting activity, that shows you where every student is in their development,” said Ms. Cisneros. “You start from there and follow a road map that teaches word study very systematically.”

Student feedback has also been very positive. Comments have ranged from “I didn’t realize that all those strange words in English have rules and patterns” to “Now I know how to break down words, and it’s easier to understand.” According to Ms. Cisneros, “It’s amazing to see 8th graders get so excited. Students are identifying patterns and applying them in other contexts, and that means they’re integrating what they’ve learned into a wider literacy-based context.”

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— Cristal Cisneros, SIOP® Implementation Specialist, Dilworth S.T.E.M. Academy

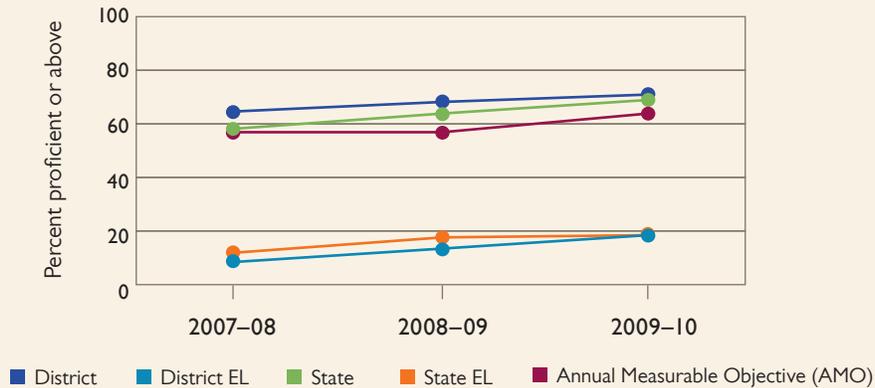
Words Their Way® is helping students in the short-term group build their word knowledge and language structure skills and students in the long-term group expand their academic vocabulary and fill in gaps in their language skills. “Year one was all about changing instruction, but we’re seeing the impact on student scores in year two, with significant growth across the board, especially in the spelling inventory,” said Ms. Walker. “And we’ve noticed that our student subgroups do better in schools that implement Words Their Way® with a high degree of fidelity.”

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The district plans to ensure that all the Words Their Way® steps are in place, including structured teacher support, accountability, and a two-to-three year plan. Writing samples and MAP (Measures of Academic Progress), an adaptive online assessment of achievement data, will be added to the implementation.

District ELs Match State ELs in Reading Proficiency



Percentage of students in Grades 6–8 rated proficient or above in reading on the Criterion Reference Test