

La Joya Independent School District

Challenge

The La Joya Independent School District (La Joya ISD) in La Joya, Texas has more than 27,000 students, all of whom are from economically disadvantaged families, 97 percent of whom have limited English proficiency. A variety of circumstances created a challenging situation with early childhood education in the district.

- Head Start schools were overcrowded, as were the district's 95 preschool classrooms and 110 kindergarten classrooms
- Pre-K programming was limited to half day, despite parent demands for full-day offerings
- The district's early childhood program was in its infancy, lacking a broad understanding of best practices in early childhood programs
- No professional learning was in place for preschool teachers on creating language-rich environments or demonstrating language acquisition techniques

A shift in school board leadership made the early childhood program an immediate priority. State funds became available to support 95 early childhood (pre-kindergarten and kindergarten) classrooms to transition into a full-day program for a one-year period. The quick ramp-up for the expanded program created an additional challenge.



Solution

In 2006, McAllen ISD, a neighboring district, invited La Joya ISD to participate in a Texas Early Education Model (TEEM) blended classroom program grant. The components of TEEM included online eCIRCLE professional development courses co-developed by Teachscape and the Children's Learning Institute at the University of Texas, Houston, and year-long mentoring for early childhood teachers.

When Dr. Isaias C. Rodriguez, then the district's Early Childhood grant coordinator, saw the courses, he and La Joya ISD's federal programs director secured enough funds for the participation of La Joya ISD's 19 full-day pre-kindergarten teachers. La Joya also added one Head Start and one childcare center to the project bringing the participant count to 21 teachers. Dr. Rodriguez received training to become the on-site mentor for the project participants. The professional development program progressed so well in the first year that the state decided La Joya ISD could lead the TEEM project on its own.

The school board was so pleased with the results from the 19 classrooms that it decided to make all pre-kindergarten classrooms full day in 2007–08. In addition, the district partnered with a second Head Start program and five more childcare centers. Dr. Rodriguez would now be able to scale his professional development services to all 97 full-day classrooms.

These new participants were funded through a \$250,000 TEEM school readiness grant from the University of Texas, Houston and matching district funds to provide five mentors, as well as Teachscape's Early Childhood Program of Study and Early Childhood Series online studies for all pre-K teachers. "We wanted to mirror what the original 21 teachers experienced in TEEM, right up to the stipend," said Dr. Rodriguez who became the mentors' advisor.

In the 2008–09 school year, La Joya expanded its program to include kindergarten teachers, as well as new Head Start programs and childcare centers, bringing the total to 229 instructors, 4,400 early childhood students, eight Head Start programs, nine childcare centers, and nine mentors. In addition to advising the mentors, Dr. Rodriguez paid monthly visits to all teachers to encourage them and monitor progress.



We saw that the research and strategies were so applicable to our children, we felt we had to get all of our teachers involved and participating. The opportunity to be challenged and succeed was too good to pass up."

Dr. Isaias C. Rodriguez,
TEEM Project Director,
La Joya Independent School District

Benefits

“Teachers are definitely more informed of the latest early childhood research, which is provided through Teachscape,” said Dr. Rodriguez. “They are applying the research to classroom instruction and are witnessing modeled activities’ effectiveness.” Other benefits that La Joya has experienced include the following:

- Teachscape’s research and courses have given Dr. Rodriguez and the mentors the expertise to create their own extension activities for a five-day summer conference used to train pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers
- Teachscape’s videos have increased teachers’ confidence in dealing with classroom structure and management, as well as implementing activities that help develop children’s cognitive abilities and phonological awareness
- Teachers have on-the-job support such as when mentors model new instruction practices and assess mentees’ lessons during classroom visits
- Professional development became research-driven and interactive
- The district covers 226 square miles, so mentors take advantage of being able to access Teachscape activities online

Program Results

The 2007–08 school year showed significant improvements on district assessments. In particular, students’ average assessment ratings jumped from having knowledge of about five letters at the beginning of the year to having knowledge of all 26 letters by the end of the year. Similar improvements were made in vocabulary gains. These outcomes have so excited local educators that the last four childcare centers in the area are on a waiting list for the program.

Demographics

- Number of Elementary Schools: 21
- Program Participants: 229 educators
- Children being served:
 - 1,900 Pre-Kindergarten Students,
 - 2,230 Kindergarten Students, and
 - 400 Childcare and Head Start Students



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