



SAY GOODBYE TO DRILL-AND-KILL TEACHING

AUTHENTIC READING AND WRITING EXPERIENCES ARE ENOUGH TO REACH STRUGGLING STUDENTS

By Eric Simpson

When leaders in Lewisville Independent School District in Texas saw the district's writing scores on STAAR — the Texas standardized tests introduced in 2011 — they panicked. They weren't alone. The response from many neighboring districts, and from some of Lewisville's own campuses, was a renewed commitment to summer and after-school drill-and-kill tutorials.

The term “drill-and-kill” is a fitting moniker. Some campuses extend the oppositional language further, naming their programs STAAR Boot Camp and STAAR Wars. It's each individual student against the test. And students, too often, are the losers.

After two years, Lewisville's scores stagnated. Frustration was high; teachers and students burned out. As the district's secondary literacy and language arts administrator, I knew we were at a turning point: Do we double-down on this testing practice, or do we try something completely different?

I worked with principals, department heads, and teachers to put together a comprehensive literacy improvement plan to address concerns while adhering to the district's core belief about student learning: *High-quality, research-based instruction is enough to turn the tide, and practice tests and drills should be abandoned.*

ASSESSING THE PROBLEM

Lewisville ISD is a large, suburban district in the Dallas-Forth Worth area, with nearly 53,000 students on 66 campuses. 30% of students qualify as economically disadvantaged, and 14% are English language learners (ELLs). With so many campuses working on the same problem, we were able to look closely at the effects of these practices.

Across the district, every campus tutorial, sometimes each tutor, had a different approach and lesson plan.

While examining campus data, we noticed something startling. When three campuses in particular used a released version of the STAAR test to benchmark students 2½ months before the spring state assessments, the average difference between the number of items answered correctly between the first week of February and the actual April test was only 2% — a difference of one question. It appeared that instruction stagnates in the two months leading up to the state assessment.

Upon closer examination, we learned that, in the middle schools where scores did not improve after benchmarking, students simply practiced the test format, with test fragments as their primary instructional resource. Across the district, every campus tutorial, sometimes each tutor, had a different approach and lesson plan.

The tutorial was an additional class prep for teachers and another class period at the end of a long day for students. Steady attendance was impossible to predict, and the entire process had a punitive feel. Many students had participated in required six- to nine-week tutorial sessions since the early days of middle school, and they found themselves failing state assessments again and again. Teachers reported that tutorials felt hopeless for pupil and instructor. These tutorials were not better than nothing. In many cases, we were afraid they were doing more harm than good.

Successful remediation must teach students how to connect their identities to the “secondary discourse” of the English classroom and not further alienate them from academia (Meeks & Austin, 2003). If we put students in a remediation for eight weeks, that's eight weeks where they are told, “You are not a part of the regular classroom. You're different from your peers — you're not good at this

reading and writing thing.”

The consensus across the district was that, despite the significant time and energy invested in these tutorials, students were not achieving more success on the tests. They were not more likely to read in their free time, nor were they building confidence about their English language arts abilities.

CHANGING COURSE

After an honest look at what we were doing and an extensive search for alternate paths, we decided to ground our new approach in these core assumptions:

- Intervention has to be responsive to student learning needs. It can't simply be a reaction to the format of state standardized assessments.
- Responsive intervention calls for teachers who have the tools and the flexibility to adapt to individual students' strengths and needs.
- Identity plays an important part in the lives of readers and writers; therefore, intervention must help struggling students build confidence as readers and writers.
- Intervention must increase time spent on quality writing and literacy instruction both in tutorials and in the regular classroom — not simply increasing time spent on test practice.
- Teachers must be supported with research-based resources and professional learning to strengthen best practice for struggling readers and writers.

We invited colleagues from the North Star of Texas Writing Project, the local National Writing Project site housed at the University of North Texas, to partner with us in developing the tools and the professional learning structures to build a more responsive intervention. They brought their deep knowledge of writing development and writing instruction, which we combined with research surrounding explicit instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2011), authentic literacy instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2000), primary and secondary domains (Meeks & Austin, 2003), and engagement theory (Schlechty, 2011).

Our goal was to invite student engagement focused on clear instructional goals. We wanted to establish replicable routines to build student confidence and encourage student conversation about integrated reading and writing experiences (Archer & Hughes, 2011). To achieve these learning conditions, we needed stable groups of students to work together for a predetermined length of time — three weeks — to remediate specific learning objectives.

The three-week period for these lessons is intentional: This brisk pace increases engagement, but also allows students to build positive momentum toward their goal (Archer & Hughes,



2011). We didn't want to target reading or writing in isolation. Instead, we provided a foundational literacy curriculum to engage the students in authentic reading and writing tasks that help them meet the demands of state accountability (Fountas & Pinnell, 2000). This is directly where our work with the North Star of Texas Writing Project came into play.

Project consultants partnered with Lewisville ISD to develop a writing and literacy lesson framework for any school willing to commit to the revised remediation approach. This framework, called Finding True North: A Lesson Framework for Powerful Writing Instruction, integrates the widely recognized components of rich literacy instruction with a focus on helping students build confidence as they learn to write powerful narrative, expository, and persuasive essays. The framework (above) provides teachers with concrete demonstrations of powerful writing instruction — a framework that they were encouraged to adopt as a basis for classroom instruction.

In short, this intervention is two-tiered: support for students who are becoming powerful readers and writers and support for teachers who are developing more responsive and more focused instructional strategies.

Professional support for teachers was key. Any teacher conducting an outside tutorial participated in a two-day workshop led by project consultants who modeled the tutorial instruction for participants. Teachers wrote side by side with the facilitators to understand the work their students would be doing.

We also built in reflection time. After the tutorials, and after the initial scores came back from the state, we met with representatives from each campus to have a half-day debrief to discuss what went well and plan what revisions the North Star of Texas Writing Project would make for the spring.

One campus in particular — a 9th-grade center with no retesters to tutor — agreed to go a step further: Teachers would forgo after-school or in-class pullouts and use the Finding True North lessons in classroom instruction. They spent Monday through Thursday on the lessons and used Fridays for a differentiated combination of sustained silent reading and individual conferences.

They carried out this work the three weeks before the state test — a time other campuses traditionally spent focusing on practice tests. Not only did the 9th-grade center avoid benchmark or practice tests, they did absolutely no multiple-choice work. Their students didn't even see a released copy of the test before the actual testing date.

Although we were not suggesting such a radical departure for all campuses, it was our long-term goal that other campuses would alter their instruction based on the two-day professional development workshop. Our main selling point to principals and teachers alike was that this intervention was going to be so strong that the learning process would make the participant a better teacher. The lessons and the work students do in the tutorials would be so gratifying that teachers would want their classrooms to look more like the tutorials: writing workshops.

THE ROLE OF CHOICE

Two years into the process, the workshop model is growing throughout the middle and high school levels. Four of the district's high schools use the North Star of Texas Writing Project experience as classroom instruction, and all seven high schools use the workshop as primary intervention with struggling readers and writers.

All 15 middle schools use North Star of Texas Writing Project mini-units for a combination of classroom and accelerated instruction. More than 90% of 7th-, 9th-, and 10th-grade teachers have participated in the project partnership and attended the two-day professional learning experience.

The two-day workshops and the reflection sessions to revise the work have continued through two full years, and our workshop instruction has become a point of pride in the district. Three secondary campuses, one middle school, and two high schools have formed deeper, job-embedded, professional learning partnerships with North Star of Texas Writing Project. They've committed to frequent professional learning community (PLC) meetings with the intent of changing classroom instruction to follow the ideals put forth in the writing tutorial lessons. These teacher teams have grown beyond the original district professional learning opportunities and are actively making their own learning plan.

Campuses that have delved into this work yielded above-average growth for the students struggling most in reading and writing, as well as students transitioning between on-level and advanced performances. Over the past two years, results of students in the district tutorial program show sustained improvement over fellow retesters, and all without practice tests or drill-and-kill approaches.

This tutorial and classroom instruction work grew from our experience with North Star of Texas Writing Project as a quality summer remediation program. In summer 2013, 25 students volunteered to work on their writing process for two weeks. Early results were positive, but the number of students was so small it was difficult to get reliable data to say conclusively one way or another.

That changed with the district's 2014 writing camp. Five of the seven high school campuses met with students at the end of the spring, called parents, and were able to encourage 140 students to register for the camp. After two weeks, the number of students hovered at the 100 range. This was all voluntary — none of the students were required to attend.

All programs, tutorials, writing camps, and teacher professional development revolved around choice. We appealed to individual teacher teams and principals to join this work. Because we allowed campuses to join at their own pace, buy-in not only increased, but also sustained.

Campuses brought the tutorial program and the summer camps to students and parents to illustrate how the experiences differed from previous remediation offerings. During the tutorials, camps, and classroom instruction, teachers celebrated student work.

The final day of most programs was a celebration where students could invite teachers and family members to attend a gathering and read some of the writing they produced. Because we built so much choice and identity connections into the programs, tutorial attendance — both after-school and in summer — has never been higher.

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

As of July 2015, six testing cycles of data show that campuses working with North Star of Texas Writing Project have higher student growth than nonparticipating campuses. The campus that has worked the longest in PLCs with the project — and is also one of the most economically disadvantaged in the district — continues to outpace all other campuses in student growth for first-time test takers.

We began the work with December 2013 retesters, but we only had buy-in from a little over half of the high school campuses. Still, the results were inspiring.

- English I retesters scored 6% above the district retesting average in reading and same as district on writing.
- English II retesters scored 7% above the district average in reading and 6% above the district average in writing.

- The most promising results came from the two campuses using the tutorial workshop as classroom instruction.
- Hebron 9th-Grade Center, which conducted no tutorials or pullouts and gave no practice tests, had the highest freshman reading scores in the district.
- Lewisville High School Killough, which has the second-most economically disadvantaged population (56.8%) and was first to use North Star of Texas Writing Project in monthly PLCs, had the highest sophomore reading scores in the district.

Word spread, and by spring 2014, more teacher teams asked to be part of the writing project, including seven of 15 middle schools. Again, initial results were promising:

- Two campuses chose to use the writing project as their classroom instruction and abandoned tutorials. Both campuses showed modest gains (3% to 5%) over spring 2014.
- Five campuses scored 4.08% above district average in reading growth as compared to the same students' 2013 reading test.
- The tutorial scored 5% above district average in writing achievement as compared to the previous year.

The summer writing camp was also successful. The July 2014 retest showed:

- English II retesters met passing standard at 4% higher than district average.
- English II retesters' essay scores rose by 4%.
- English I retesters scored 37 (out of 7,153) points higher on the scale score.
- English I retesters scored 3% above average on the essay.

ELL students benefitted the most. In English II, ELL students scored 12% higher than the district average for all retesters and 2% above all retesters in English I.

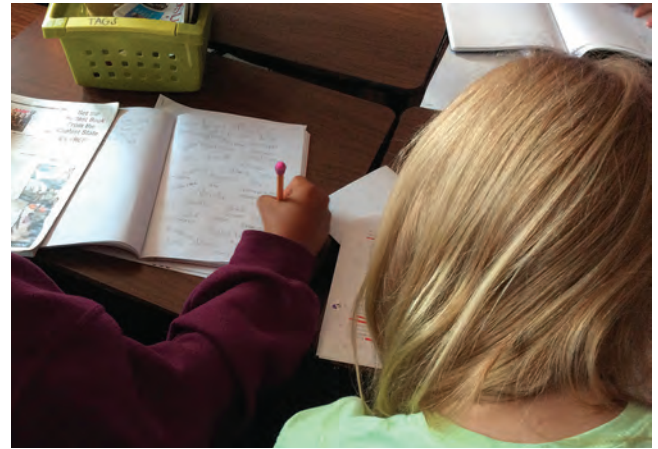
In the December 2014 retest, more students across the district participated in the tutorial, and the program continued to use the Finding True North lessons. Retesters continued to show improvement:

- 76% of English I students met standard, beating the district nontutorial average by 21.7%.
- 62% of English II students met standard, beating the district's nontutorial average by 2.5%.

For the 2014-15 school year, all 15 middle schools used the North Star of Texas Writing Project tutorial program and expanded the instruction into the classroom. The district maintained the growth from 2014 in students meeting state standard and grew by 6% in advanced writing performance.

As workshop instruction and sustained silent reading spread across the middle schools, students' reading levels are also on the rise. The average 6th grader gained 0.91 on his or her reading level in 2012, but gained 1.26 in 2015. The average reading level for 7th-grade students rose from 0.81 in 2012 to 1.06 in 2015.

By spring 2015, the district's retesting situation had improved drastically. In April 2014, 750 students needed to retest in English I, but in April 2015, only 273 students needed re-



One core assumption is that intervention must help struggling students build confidence as readers and writers.

testing. English II also dropped from 473 retesters in 2014 to just 240 in 2015. First-time English I testers maintained the previous year's growth and gained 6% in students achieving advanced status. English II gained 2% in met standard and another 4% in advanced scores.

MOVING FORWARD

We believe this work will continue to empower teachers to dedicate full class time to high-quality literacy instruction as well as serve as a model for future instructional improvement.

We've seen the power of collaborative, workshop-based experiences on student achievement and realize that districts can choose to abandon the standardized, test-prep drill-and-kill model. Authentic reading and writing experiences are enough to reach struggling students.

Perhaps most important, we've learned that quality accelerated instruction programs enrich both student and teacher. Teachers learn more about the students in their classrooms, and students learn more about themselves as readers and writers.

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Eric Simpson (simpsonel@lisd.net) is the secondary literacy and language arts administrator for the Lewisville Independent School District in Lewisville, Texas. ■