



# STRIKING it RICH in READING

**HOW ONE RURAL DISTRICT IS USING TARGETED INTERVENTION TO SUCCESSFULLY REDUCE REFERRALS TO SPECIAL ED AND PROMOTE INCLUSIONARY INSTRUCTION FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS.**

**A**long the San Marcos River in central Texas lies a small community called Luling, best known for its barbeque, watermelons, oil pump jacks, and now its student reading achievement.

Historically, the Luling Independent School District has struggled to improve reading scores on the state's high-stakes assessment, lower retention rates and reduce referrals to special education. But, soon after Luling ISD began a district-wide push using programs from Voyager Expanded Learning to provide targeted reading intervention for low-performing students, teachers and administrators began to see a positive effect on student performance.

By Shannan Walsh



From left to right: Nicole Schuelke teaches a Voyager Passport lesson to kindergartners Carla Partida, Victor Jimenez, and Bliss Barabas at Rosenwald Primary School in Luling, Texas.

Originally, the literacy initiative was borne out of two issues, according to Barbara Price, assistant superintendent of curriculum and assessment: First, Luling ISD did not have intervention defined in its reading program and had nothing formal in place; and second, the district was under a growth plan directed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to increase student proficiency and reduce referrals to special education.

“We began working on the *Reading First* grant and looked for something that would work well with our core reading program, and Voyager was recommended to us,” says Price.

Through the *Reading First* grant, Luling purchased not just one Voyager program, but three—Voyager Passport™, Extended Day and TimeWarp™ Plus—

for kindergarten through third grade in the district’s three elementary schools. Using funding from the Texas Intensive Reading Instruction Initiative, the district also purchased Voyager Passport for fourth and fifth grades.

### Early Intervention Reduces Special Ed Referrals

The district uses Voyager Passport both for early intervention in kindergarten and to provide more intensive targeted instruction for children who continue to struggle with reading in the elementary grades. The results have been dramatic. In the first year of implementation, 90 percent of kindergartners in Voyager Passport ended the year emerging or on track, and this year’s group is making

positive strides.

“They showed a lot of success real quickly,” says Debora Ribble, district kindergarten and first-grade reading coach.

Special education referrals are also down this year from previous years for kindergarten and first grade, notes Ribble. “I think that the Voyager curriculum and our use of it as a means of intervention have given us options we didn’t have before,” she says. “We had only one referral in kindergarten and two in first grade, which is significantly lower than previous years.”

### Intensive Intervention Promotes Inclusion

In the elementary grades, Luling implements the reading intervention program with Tier 2 and Tier 3 students,

It's very exciting to see these kids succeeding, especially since there were doubts they would at the beginning of the year.

— Debora Ribble,  
Kindergarten and First-grade Reading Coach, Luling ISD

including special education students. For example, first-graders with severe disabilities participate in Voyager Passport Level A (kindergarten) for 30 minutes a day. Many of these children have shown growth, even though they may be mentally disabled or autistic.

“These students are doing amazingly well with modifications,” says Ribble.

Since the district implemented Voyager Passport, special education referrals in second and third grade have also been reduced from two or three each year to none. What's more, by this January, many students already in special education were moved out of Tier 3 into Tier 2 and are holding their own in the classroom.

“It's very exciting to see these kids succeeding, especially since there were doubts they would at the beginning of the year,” Ribble says, enthusiastically.

After school, Luling's most at-risk students in first through third grade receive an additional 45 minutes of intensive reading intervention using Voyager's Extended Day program.

The program provides yet another opportunity for struggling students to catch up to their peers before a referral to special education is made. Educators were drawn to the Extended Day curriculum because it still touches on phonemic awareness and phonics, while also addressing comprehension and reading fluency.

“These are our most at-risk kids and we wanted to give them something different to do at the end of the day,” says Ribble. “Now we have something to help us.”

### Ease-of-Use Ensures Quality Instruction

Luling's teachers are excited about not only the positive results they've seen from students, but also how easy the Voyager programs are to implement.

“The materials are all there and the programs are easy to follow,” Ribble says.

Teachers also like Voyager's online reporting system, VPORT™, because it allows them to monitor student progress, modify instruction and review reports at both the student and classroom level.

“Now we feel more secure and have the data to back us up,” says Kimberly Navejar, second- and third-grade reading coach for the district.

### Educators Celebrate Year-End Outcomes

Luling students recently took the 2006 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), and scores are already dramatically improved as a result of the district's reading intervention initiative. (In 2004, before the district implemented Voyager, the pass rate actually decreased in the third grade, leaving much room for improvement.) In 2005, 73 percent of third-grade students passed the TAKS; this year, 82 percent of third-graders achieved proficiency on the assessment.

“The teachers were very excited to get their results and they really believe in Voyager Passport,” says Navejar. She notes that even though many of the students in Voyager Passport passed the TAKS, they are continuing to receive reading intervention through the end of the school year to maintain a higher level of achievement. ▽