Case Study: Texas School District Chooses Pearson PASeries to Take the Guesswork Out of Student Preparation for State Assessments

School districts are under increasing pressure to deliver improvements on standardized test scores, and they are looking for tools that will help them accomplish that goal. For San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District in San Marcos, Texas, the solution was PASeries™ (Progress Assessment Series™) from Pearson Education.

San Marcos is a small city of 45,000, located midway between Austin and San Antonio in the heart of Texas. The school district has 7,090 students in nine schools, with a population that is 68 percent Hispanic and approximately 60 percent low-income. The district delivers consistently good performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) standards-based tests. However, Richard "Dale" Wiley, the district's director of Accountability and School Improvement, felt that more could be done to manage student progress and ensure improved performance.

PASeries is the first formative assessment product line designed to forecast student growth toward state performance standards. PASeries Reading and PASeries Mathematics use the scientific Lexile® scale for reading measurement and its new companion Quantile® scale for mathematics to evaluate student progress.

"PASeries has given us an independent and scientifically valid measure of students' reading and math aptitude," he said. "With the Lexile and Quantile measures we get, we can do two things. We can forecast with a high degree of accuracy how a student is going to perform on the TAKS test, and we can see what the student is lacking, so the teacher can remediate that student in the specific skills needed to be successful."

San Marcos administered its first PASeries assessments in November 2005 in fifth-grade math, a response to the district's concern about math performance on the state tests. Testing was then expanded to both reading and math at the four elementary, one intermediate and two junior high schools in December, at the semester's end.

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>
> - Richard "Dale" Wiley,
>   Director, Accountability
>   and School Improvement,
>   San Marcos, Texas

"Next year we plan to start the PASeries tests at the beginning of the school year so we can go through the entire series," said Wiley. "Because we understand the incredible potential for formative assessment using PASeries, we'll be adding PASeries Writing and PASeries Algebra I at the junior high and high school level."

Since PASeries assessments are administered online, teachers know immediately how their students have scored, and can then build a strategy for improving performance. "As soon as we get the Lexile measure, we know if a student is ready to pass the TAKS test," said Wiley. "The Lexile measure then helps us pair the student with text that will enable him or her to experience growth."

Susan Brown, principal at Hernandez Intermediate School, said her students have responded well to PASeries. "After taking a series of tests, the students were shown the printout of their scores on a line graph," she said. "We talked about the Lexile measures and what they meant for them. The students loved 'seeing' their growth." In fact, Brown said, some students, armed with the Lexile measures, were eager to retake the test at intervals to watch their scores increase on the graph.

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Whereas the emphasis before Lexiles was primarily on getting students to read more, teachers are now able to give them level-appropriate texts. "We know now to give the struggling kids texts that are only about 50 Lexiles above their range," said Wiley. "Kids always want to go with the easier books, but struggling readers won't get sufficient improvement from that to pass the TAKS test in the spring."

Quantile measures provide similar information, both for individual students and the class as a whole. "They will tell us if a student needs help with a specific concept, such as in probability or measurement," he observed. "But they also point to areas that the class as a whole needs to work on. If no one got the right answer on a test question, then they didn't understand that to the depth and complexity that they need to for the TAKS test. The teacher can make more informed decisions about instructional delivery in the classroom."

PASeries has given teachers and administrators a clearer snapshot of student performance, something that Wiley believes is sorely needed. "Teachers put their hearts and souls into instruction, which is why they're good teachers. They'll tell me, 'I just know in my heart that he's going to improve.' But feeling like a student is going to do well simply isn't enough. The critically necessary piece is to have hard data you can use to compare students' current performance to state passing standards, and then using the data to make informed decisions about classroom instruction that adequately meets students' identified areas of need. PASeries provides the data in a scientifically reliable way. It is incredibly valuable."

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