Blue Valley School District

Kansas district extends growth measurement to the early grades, experiences measurable impact

Blue Valley, the fourth largest school district in Kansas, covers 91 square miles. More than 20,000 K – 12 students attend its 34 schools (five high schools, nine middle schools, and 20 elementary schools). Of the district's students, 8% qualify for free and reduced lunch and about 3% are English Language Learners. Blue Valley began using Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®) in 2005 in order to track students' academic growth over time and independent of grade level. Having experienced how MAP data helps inform student learning and professional development in older grades, in 2010 the district also decided to implement computer-adaptive MAP for Primary Grades (MPG) in all 20 elementary schools, starting in kindergarten.

Like their MAP-using counterparts, district teachers have discovered a core benefit of MPG data: it lets them identify each student's learning levels and skill gaps in order to quickly and precisely differentiate instruction—whether students are below, at, or above grade level. Blue Valley educators have found that MPG helps them set students on the right track early on, ensuring they enter the older grades with unparalleled growth and ready to take on the challenges of the Common Core Standards.

Challenge

Prior to using MPG, the district was using DIBELS with its youngest students. Educators were finding gaps in terms of data needs and also looking to add a math component to their assessment toolkit. Since the district was pleased with MAP testing in grades 2 – 8, Blue Valley made a decision to add MPG in K – 1. This provided educators with the math tool they needed, along with additional reporting and growth measurement functionalities. Former Director of Assessment and Research at Blue Valley School District, Elizabeth Parks, recalls that when MPG was first implemented, some educators didn't feel comfortable using computer-based assessments with the youngest Kindergarten students at the start of the year. Parks notes this soon changed, however. "Seeing the positive response from our students in the winter, we decided to add fall Kindergarten testing for all students the following year. It's been working well ever since."

> ***As an assessment director, what I value most is the research incorporated into the whole MAP system. Especially for our youngest students, MAP for Primary Grades data helps us more than any other tool with guiding grouping decisions. We have a wide variety of abilities in each class, yet our focus is on what each individual child needs. With MAP and MPG, we have a great deal of confidence in our decision making.***
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> Elizabeth Parks
> Former Director of Assessment and Research

Solution

Currently, the entire district uses MAP and MPG to help maximize academic growth and predict students' performance on high-stakes tests. While there is a single district assessment window, each school has the flexibility to use the data in the way that best supports its students and teachers. Parks explains: "As a district, we are very committed to the same things. We have a strategic plan that guides everything we do. But each of our schools also sets its own goals and has its own way of getting there. Our schools perform similarly, so we know the flexibility is paying off."

Students in second grade and above take MAP assessments in the fall and spring, though an optional winter MAP administration permits educators to provide additional support to students who need special attention. All K – 1 students take the adaptive MPG Survey with Goals assessment three times a year: fall, winter and spring.

In addition to tracking growth with MAP and MPG, Blue Valley educators also use the shorter MPG Skills Checklists (skill-specific mastery tests included within the MPG assessment suite) in between the growth assessments to keep tabs on foundational skill development. Some of Blue Valley's schools use these additional assessments as a benchmark for all students, while others use them specifically with those students who are in reading or math intervention programs.

"What's been particularly helpful at both the primary level and in the older grades is applying the instructional data," explains Parks. She says that teachers start with a review of class-wide performance in key goal areas (e.g. phonics), then generate a report of relevant skills that students need to target. "It's great that the skills are listed in the order in which you need to teach them. We can immediately see how to scale something back for a student who is scoring on the lower end, as well as anticipate where the higher performers are going. Seeing the skills vertically helps a lot."

Blue Valley educators also make the most of the grouping features in the reports to aid in differentiation. Parks shares, "Especially for our youngest students, MAP for Primary Grades data helps us more than any other tool with guiding grouping decisions. We don't do tracking, so we have a wide variety of abilities in each class, yet our focus is on what each individual child needs. With MAP and MPG, we have a great deal of confidence in our decision making."
Outside the classroom, the district offers professional development and a train-the-trainer model to support its use of MAP and MPG assessments—and to encourage leadership at every level. Best practices are discussed at monthly principal professional development meetings.

Afterwards, school leaders share tips and resources with teachers. The district's small instructional support staff provides guidance to the schools as well.

Blue Valley educators also use MAP and MPG data beyond the school walls. To engage parents with their child's learning targets and development over the summer, some schools send a letter with an attached MAP report home. Families find key areas for support and enrichment highlighted, which makes it easier to understand where to focus summertime efforts. Says Parks, "The parents really appreciate having that information."

Impact

Guiding Interventions

The MPG Skills Checklists have been particularly helpful for students receiving math interventions from paraprofessionals during pull-out sessions. The paraprofessionals start by looking at each student's growth scores from the latest adaptive assessment (MPG Survey with Goals), then use the short, targeted MPG Skills Checklists to probe deeper and determine which interventions show positive results.

Getting on Board with Common Core

MAP also played a part in Blue Valley's Common Core transition plan. "In the fall of 2012, we started using Common Core MAP and simultaneously switched to a new reading curriculum. MAP data helped us point out and address shortcomings in our new first grade curriculum materials," says Parks. Since MAP provides a grade-independent growth score for each student on the stable RIT scale (whether students are using the Common Core version or another version of the assessment), the district was able to maintain and rely on its growth data throughout the transition.

Measurable Impact on Kindergarten Performance

For Blue Valley, the impact of MAP and MPG has been both qualitative and quantitative. Parks shares some remarkable figures from the youngest students. She explains, "In Kindergarten, we have been using MPG for just 2 years, but the results are very consistent among schools—almost every school has shown an improvement." Over the past year, the percentage of Kindergarten students meeting mathematics and reading growth targets grew in a majority of the schools using MPG. Several schools made significant strides, experiencing as much as a 23% jump in the number of students meeting mathematics targets and a 20% jump in the number of students meeting reading targets.

Looking ahead, the Blue Valley team is staying focused on student growth and on making sure all students are on track with the Common Core Standards.