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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1996, Tornillo Elementary School was ranked around the 15th percentile in the state of Texas based on the scores of its students on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). By the spring of 1997, the school was ranked above the 75th percentile, and was receiving recognition for the unprecedented improvement. The Principal at the time attributes the improvement to the use of reading skills development software from **Lexia Learning Systems**, explaining that no other changes in staff or curriculum were made in the 1996/97 school year. In the second year, the school purchased computers that were not suited to running multimedia software, leaving half of the student body without access to the Lexia software. Test scores and the school ranking declined.

PROBLEM

Richard Lopez walked into school on September 4, 1995 knowing that his first principalship would prove to be challenging. Test scores the year before at Tornillo Elementary were not up to par; in fact, the school was at risk of being declared “Low Performing” by the Texas Education Agency. Worse, bilingual students were not performing well in English by the third or fourth grade; in a community with 98% Hispanic origins, Tornillo Elementary was almost a fully bilingual school. 96.5% of the school population in the hardscrabble, migrant farming community (located 35 miles outside El Paso) qualified for free federal lunches. This indicates a very high poverty level.

Fortunately, Richard understood the root of these problems. He believed that in order to improve academic achievement, and raise test scores, he had to find a way to help his students learn to read English. That would be the centerpiece of his program. This would enable the kind of fast progress necessary for the school to gain the resources needed to fulfill its responsibilities to its students. Richard was introduced to the solution the year before. The only requirements were to amass computers for the students, and to bring in the Lexia software he had seen while an Assistant Principal at O'Donnell in Fabens, TX. While the school had not tried the software, Richard was expectant that his plan would work.

THE PURCHASE PROCESS

Nothing happens quickly in schools. After 13 years of teaching and in administration, Richard knew that. He also knew that enough time had been lost. Fortunately, his Superintendent, Kelt Cooper, was ready to help. He allowed Richard to build a new computer lab and a library out of an old cafeteria, and he acquired 20 computers to equip the lab. They

were not the most up-to-date machines, but they ran, and Richard was pleased. All he needed was the software.

Before purchasing Lexia, it was vital to bring the teachers on board. Richard knew from experience that gaining the cooperation and support from teachers is essential for success. Rather than announcing his decision, he invited a colleague to come in and sell it for him. Richard called Bruce McComas, the principal of McComas and Associates, specialists in reading software based in El Paso, TX. He met Bruce the previous year when he demonstrated Lexia at O'Donnell Elementary. Richard believed that Bruce could convince his teachers that this was the right solution.

Bruce presented his Lexia system, a combination of software and printed materials from Lexia Learning Systems, Taylor Reading and Failure Free Reading. Over the course of fifteen years, Bruce searched for the best reading programs available, and these were the ones he had chosen. He knew they were effective; they had been used successfully in dozens of schools. When he presented the materials to the teachers and administrators of Tornillo Elementary, he convinced them too. With Mr. Cooper's support, Tornillo Elementary bought a Site License for **Lexia's Phonics Based Reading** and Taylor's Reading Plus, and a set of materials from Failure Free Reading. Richard's plan was becoming a reality.

THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

By April of his first year in Tornillo, the software was installed; yet, there was no change. His teachers, who had seen Jostens software in use for years without results, were not using Phonics Based Reading from Lexia, the first program in the series Tornillo had bought. Richard brought Bruce McComas back to lead a half-day training session for the teachers. The teachers had questions and concerns, and Bruce was able to address them. In addition, during the start of the '96-97 school year, Richard assigned Audrey Conklin, a teacher, to be manager of the computer lab. She was already a software enthusiast, and with her help, he was able to arrange for every child in the school to spend 30 minutes a day working on the software. Richard credits Audrey, along with the software, with the success of the program. "She believed in it, and worked with it," he says. "She made it work."

Deciding not to take advantage of Lexia's individualized assignment capabilities, Richard and Audrey had every student start out at the same point: Level 1, Unit 1 of Phonics Based Reading. This was done to give students the chance to learn how English sounded, and how to associate those sounds with letter combinations, before learning more advanced reading skills. Those who were ready would advance quickly. Those who were not would get extra practice in their weak areas provided by the automatic branching feature of the Lexia software. Test results after two months showed that they were right. Tornillo Elementary and its students were making progress.

THE RESULTS

During the '96-97 school year, the students of Tornillo Elementary took advantage of their opportunity. By the end of the first full year of using the Lexia system, students' reading scores were jumping – in some cases, the jump was to middle school and high school levels. Many

had finished Phonics Based Reading and moved onto Reading Plus. Their parents were excited and started providing support at home. With their encouragement, the middle school and the high school asked for the Lexia system for their own use (Lexia Learning Systems offers **Reading S.O.S. — Strategies for Older Students**, for remedial use in middle and high school.)

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was again administered. With individual performance evaluations tied to TAAS results, the state of Texas has created one of the most performance-driven feedback systems in public education. Richard was optimistic. He knew his kids were ready. In August 1997, he learned that Tornillo Elementary had achieved the coveted Recognized status based on their TAAS results. They ranked in the top 25% of schools in the state, placing them in the same category with the wealthy suburbs of Dallas and Houston. The overall test pass rate had climbed from 53% the year before to 75% for '96-97. Reading and math scores increased almost 30% in that year. It was the first time in their history that the students of Tornillo had demonstrated their potential, and their achievement, in such convincing fashion.

THE AFTERMATH

Tornillo Elementary's success with the Lexia and Taylor software was noticed. At a Region 19 meeting, Richard told his fellow Principals and their Superintendents about his results. He and Mr. Cooper invited others to come and visit Tornillo. They were impressed by the scores, and recognized the trend. They called Bruce McComas to get their own on-site demonstrations. Richard Lopez was invited by Mike Hinojosa, the Regional Superintendent, to give a presentation on his successes in Tornillo. He was also offered an opportunity to move on to the Sam Elizario Middle School where he implemented Reading S.O.S. from Lexia and saw positive results in his first year after only a half year of use. There, Richard assigned a reading teacher, Hilda Valdeas, to run the computer lab, and he credits her, along with the software, with the rapid success of the program. "A reading teacher is an even better leader than a classroom teacher," Richard explains. Among the students on the 7th and 8th grade campus that used the software, all moved up and none dropped. One particularly troubled student started the year reading at a third grade level, and caught up with his classmates before the end of the year.

THE FUTURE

Richard Lopez is back in an elementary school this year. He succeeded at Sam Elizario Middle School, but he also discovered that he preferred to work at the elementary level. What are his plans to improve academic performance at his new school, Montana Vista Elementary? "We hope to buy Lexia next year," he says. We don't have the money this year, but I've told everybody about the results and they really want to do it. I think we'll find the money. It's worth it."