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Let's Talk Education: CUSD is helping all students reach their potential

By Dr. John Roach

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In Garrison Keillor's fictional town of Lake Wobegon, "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

In reality, people's strengths and skills differ widely, as do their learning abilities. Here at Carlsbad Unified, we meet students at their academic level and provide targeted programs that help them reach their potential.

GATE Programs

Our District's Advanced Learner Education curriculum is designed to meet the needs of our approximately 2,500 Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) learners whose special talents are nurtured. Using an identification process that adheres to state GATE criteria, we offer programs to students identified by overall intellectual ability – exhibiting exceptional intellectual development; and specific academic ability – high-functioning in language arts or mathematics.

GATE students flourish within the district's differentiated curriculum model. Differentiation occurs in content (what is presented), process (how it is presented) and product (how it is assessed). Students receive the advanced component of their grade level's curriculum.

In elementary school, advanced learners participate in groupings for language arts and math in their classroom. They pursue complex assignments that require independent and collaborative thinking. Middle school GATE students are encouraged to take part in specific honors classes that require more depth and complexity than the standard curriculum. High school students are served by an honors and advanced placement (AP) program.

GATE children hone problem-solving skills at a young age. As one third-grader explains, "When something is hard at first, I look at the problem and really read it carefully. Then I understand it."

Intervention Programs

Diverse intervention programs take place at all CUSD sites, which tailor remedial programs to their student population and rely on different funding sources (such as Title I). Programs take a variety of forms, from before- and after-school individual tutoring to in- or out-of-class group tutoring. Some programs, such as "Everyone a Reader" at elementary schools and "Read 180" at middle schools, are focused on the all-important skills of reading and comprehension. Others help students in a variety of subjects.

The programs have a ripple effect of benefits. Last year for example, Calavera Hills Middle School student Ashley Wang helped fellow student Manny Martinez get up to speed academically through the school's peer-to-peer after-school tutoring program. In turn, a newly confident Manny shared his talents by serving as an aide in a class of students with severe special needs.

Poinsettia Principal Steve Ahle says, "We intervene at an early point and tailor programs to the needs of our students to help each child be successful and to meet District and State standards. Sites use a combination of programs that teach basic skills. Here at Poinsettia, we have a Homework Lab that helps second-through-fifth-graders in many areas and a Reading Academy designed to build literacy in first- and second-graders. We also have an 'English in a Flash' computerized program that is specifically aimed at English Language Learner (ELL) students, but also utilized by English-speaking students to build vocabulary."

Is it working? Ahle proudly notes, "Our ELL students increased their API scores eight points this year!"

Lake Wobegon may consider all of its fictitious kids to be above average. To me as a lifelong educator, the best way to approach education is to think of each child not in terms of average or typical, but as unique.

EDITOR'S NOTE: On Oct. 12, Superintendent John Roach tendered his resignation from the Carlsbad Unified School District, effective June 30, 2012. Roach, who has served as superintendent since 2004, said he's retiring.

The school board accepted Dr. Roach's resignation.

