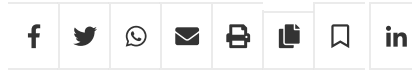


Aiding student achievement a focus of San Mateo-Foster City School District

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Sep 15, 2022



Through deep data analysis and a focus on equity, San Mateo-Foster City School District officials are looking to improve student achievement among its most underserved pupils.

Preliminary data is out from the 2021-22 California Assessment of Student Progress and Performance, the state's standardized testing program. Combined with internal data and a root cause analysis, officials are zeroing in on three key areas they believe will address the core of what may be holding back students, particularly those from underserved groups: early literacy, preschool access and systemic interventions.



Given that students do not take CAASPP assessments until the end of the third grade, Superintendent Diego Ochoa said the district opted to begin internal testing in the 2021-22 school year. That data shows about a fourth of kindergarten students are not learning to read at grade level, which could likely lead to years of delayed learning.

The trend correlates with CAASPP scores in English language arts and math regardless of the grade level. And scores were even worse among socioeconomically disadvantaged students, especially those who did not attend preschool, according to a district review of data from internal test data of kindergarten through second grade students who were enrolled in the 2019 school year.

Of students who did not come from disadvantaged backgrounds, 9% were not reading at grade level compared to about 22% of disadvantaged students who attended preschool and 69% of disadvantaged students with no preschool experience.

“It’s easy to say we’re going to take our CAASPP data this year and draw some analysis. It’s quite another thing to say we’re going to go back five years,” Trustee Shara Watkins said. “I appreciate that this is a much deeper analysis than it could have been so we can have meaningful conversations about what’s both going well and what we could improve.”

Major gaps also exist among students by race. Nearly 58% of white students perform above the state standard for English language arts while Hispanic students perform about 43% below the standard on average.

To disrupt these trends, district officials are taking steps identified in the district's recently adopted Strategic Plan and adjusting them based on the recent data. For instance, officials are looking to double the number of students enrolled in preschool, an initiative already being supported by the state, by accessing greater state funding, reviewing facilities for spaces where classrooms can be added and hiring additional staff including counselors who can focus on building relationships with the community.

In addressing early literacy, the district intends to bring on more foundational literacy teachers who would work on special assignment and initiate districtwide data collection, which would allow teachers to adjust their work plans to better cater to student needs and support teachers through professional development plans.

The district is also doubling down on its support programs by adopting the Footsteps2Brilliance program this February, which helps students develop their listening skills and the ST Math program in the 2021-22 school year. Ochoa also noted the district has seen strong improvements after implementing Math Boost, a tutoring program that provided an hour of instruction three days a week for four weeks to students who were not meeting math standards.

"It's not about celebrating or not celebrating. It's about looking at your data and challenging yourself to do better," Ochoa said. "I'm happy about this. I'm really happy, but, next year, I want to see guys get even better."

Trustees largely lauded staff's work to develop data informed approaches for reducing achievement gaps. Trustee Noelia Corzo said district staff has her full support after noting her concern that many students who are born in the country into households where English is not used often leave the district still being categorized as English Language Learners.

Reflecting on her time as a student at San Francisco State University, Corzo also detailed how beneficial the university's preschool program was for her and her son.

Watkins and Trustee Ken Chin also threw their support behind preschool expansion with Chin saying the program has sometimes been treated as the "ugly stepchild."

"We have a real opportunity here and I feel like it would be really absolutely incredible for us to enhance our pre-K program," Chin said.

During their discussion, trustees also reflected on their decision to consolidate sixth grade math into one course for all students, doing away with an acceleration option for fifth graders. Months later, trustees adopted a three-pathway math program that allows for students to accelerate in middle school.

Chin said he knows of friends who have left the district following the board's decision, some for reasons unrelated to the math program. But Chin and Corzo also pushed back on how the process became politicized, particularly by people without connections to the district and city officials.



Board President Alison Proctor, who voted against the initial sixth grade math program change, said she initially felt the process was rushed but got behind the program once the decision to make the shift was made. Now, she said she's happy to see the plan produce positive results.

“Decisions don't always come easily,” Proctor said. “We're not going to always agree on the same things but when we put students first and all students first we succeed.”

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