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Sparking a Love for Science and Raising Scores in DeFuniak Springs, Florida

Walton County School District, DeFuniak Springs, Florida

Russell Hughes, Superintendent
Crystal Appel, Coordinator of Instructional Support Services

9,480 Students
Grades K to 12

Study Island

53% Free and Reduced Lunch
4% English language learners
11% Special education
12% Hispanic
77% Caucasian
6% African American

The Challenge:

When Russell Hughes became superintendent of Walton County School District (WCSD) in the fall of 2016, he immediately set to work to pull apart the student data from this assorted population and identify where the biggest growth opportunities were.

"Science, we knew was a challenge for us," remarked Mr. Hughes. "I knew this was an area we really needed to strengthen, we needed to build upon, and we needed to strategize with whatever we could."

Leaders at the district level devised a plan using their own curriculum as well as combining strategies provided by the Florida Department of Education to improve achievement in science. This allowed them to create a focused strategy for district turnaround, but it was with the addition of Study Island, Edmentum's K–12 practice and formative assessment program, in 2017 that everything started to take off.

"I said it several times with my staff," remembered Mr. Hughes. "We were losing; we weren't gaining. Our scores were down. The first year, we had to put something immediate in to stop it. And, at the point we stopped it, we were able to build on that foundation [with Study Island].

In 2016, Walton County School District in DeFuniak Springs, Florida, identified an opportunity to turn around the interest and performance of its students in science. By implementing Edmentum's Study Island in grades 3–8 beginning in the fall of 2017, educators began to explore unique ways to deliver standards-based practice and formative assessment to support whole-group, small-group, and individualized learning,

ultimately leading to significant growth on the Florida State Assessments.

How They Did It:

Around September of 2017, WCSD began its Study Island science implementation across grades 3–8. In Florida, students are assessed in science in grades 5 and 8, but the standards covered on each assessment are a culmination of the two previous grades and the current grade. For this reason, it was important that standards-based practice and assessment were available in grade levels prior to when students are formally assessed. Additionally, educators at WCSD also saw the value in investing in Study Island beyond the spring test preparation time.

“We saw that [in] our males and females across the board, when we trickle down into our specific subgroup data and our gender data, the spark for science may not have been there,” said Crystal Appel, coordinator of instructional support services at WCSD. “So, it was trying to reignite a spark that they’ll enjoy science, especially in the elementary level.”

The goals of sparking an interest in science and improving assessment scores culminated in a carefully constructed rollout plan led by Ms. Appel and her digital learning specialists. The plan included visiting every school and walking teachers through how to set up their account and how to get students up and running, while sharing examples of how Study Island can be used in the classroom.

“I’d start a PD [professional development] session, and I’d be like, ‘Oh, it’s really easy to use,’ and teachers would kind of look at me like, ‘Yeah, yeah, people say that about everything,’” commented Digital Learning Specialist Christine Petersen. “But, once they got in the program, it’s intuitive. They can take it and run with it. It’s clear.”

Very quickly, Ms. Peterson and Ms. Appel began to see WCSD teachers expanding their use of Study Island in different ways. Some teachers chose to schedule time in the computer lab so that all students could access Study Island for 30 minutes at once, while others would check out a cart of classroom devices for a 50-minute class period every two weeks. Many educators also opted to use Study Island in a small-group station, and still others began implementing the tool on a weekly basis as a whole-group instructional resource.

“We gave teachers the option of how they wanted to utilize the resource,” said Ms. Appel. “Some teachers used it to front-load information, and then some teachers were using it as a review after they taught the material as well.”

No matter what a given implementation looked like at WCSD, every teacher was encouraged to understand the robust data visualization and reporting capabilities that Study Island offered.

“We wanted to make sure that they were using the data to get a better understanding of their students and how they could support them within their classrooms,” reported Ms. Petersen. “We didn't want this to be a tool to where they just set the students on it and forgot it. We wanted it to be a meaningful integration within their classrooms.”

Study Island’s data dashboard, Sensei, offers time-on-task goal setting and standards-based data tools that educators were able to use to help develop individual student goals and track where students were demonstrating mastery. These insights also provided students with the ability to monitor their own progress and depth of knowledge within particular standards.

At the district level, Ms. Appel also finds herself regularly reviewing data in the form of Study Island usage reports. She can quickly see where buy-in is happening and guide her digital learning specialists to support specific WCSD schools—either by sharing best practices from other teachers’ successes or by expanding usage where there might be pockets of limited use.

“Once we see a great model school, we share what that school’s doing, and then usually you can see like a magnet—everybody else starts to follow that practice as well,” remarked Ms. Appel. “We always know what our plan of action is going to be—it’s trying to get everybody, all the administrators and schools on board. And, I think with Study Island, we saw out of all of our resources that they did quickly buy in.”

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> Russell Hughes,
> Superintendent

Success:

At the close of the 2017–18 school year, educators and students alike at WCSD reported positive results they attributed greatly to Study Island. Among the 13 elementary, middle, high, and k-12 schools that make up the district, 7 used Study Island with fidelity. Maude Saunders Elementary School increased their science FSA scores 13% and answered over 60,000 questions in Study Island over the course of the year. West DeFuniak Elementary School and Freeport Middle School had similar stories of success, each increasing science FSA scores by 10% and answering nearly 250,000 questions in Study Island combined. Walton Middle School increased science scores 5%, answered more than 140,000 questions in Study Island, and also leveraged Built Tests to create their own formative assessments for added practice. Finally, the district’s only K-12 school, Paxton School, increased scores 1% by answering just 16,500 questions in the program.

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Mr. Hughes went on to say, “The [Florida] Department of Education did come back; they identified our growth as well. They have used this as a success story around the state, as I understand, to show how intentional planning, prescriptive strategy, and the review of assessment data can make an impact on progress.”

Digging into that intentional planning, there are several key features and functionalities of Study Island that Ms. Appel and Ms. Petersen attribute to the successful implementation at WCSD. Central to that list of must-have features is standards alignment. All science teachers using Study Island have the ability to view specific Florida standards from any given grade, so a 5th grade or 8th grade teacher can identify focus standards from lower grades that would ultimately be assessed, and then easily build assignments for students that cover that material alongside on-grade topics.

“It was a great way for [teachers] to differentiate their instruction,” noted Ms. Appel. “They could see that if 80% of students are achieving 70% or above within this standard, it helped them with their

timing and pacing so that maybe they could move a little faster through that material because they noticed that other students may have needed more help or more time on another standard."

Educators cited the ability to access higher-level questions and utilize virtual labs as other key differentiators. Before Study Island, science teachers were limited by the resources found in their textbook—but no longer is that the case. Finally, game-mode for practice sessions quickly became another highly used feature.

"[Students] loved it because they enjoy having games built into it," said Ms. Appel. "A student can work on it and actually be rewarded for achieving a certain percentage, so they can have a little kind of mind break with a game activity. They loved that."

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The Future:

In reflecting and planning for the future, district leaders are challenging teachers to expand their current practices by asking questions such as: How can we modify? How can we develop that goal-setting even more deeply? How can we come up with a more systematic approach?

"Now that [teachers] have the basics down, some of them might be diving into the Test Builder feature to provide a little more variety for questions that students are exposed to," shared Ms. Petersen. "And, we want them to really understand that they have another tool now that they can pull questions from for their assessment beyond the assessment [preparation] that comes from their textbook."

Expanded understanding of functionality is an exciting prospect for Walton County School District's ongoing implementation. Additionally, leaders continue to put their focus on building engagement around the subject of science in general.

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