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English Learners and Special Education Students Raise State Test Scores in Union City, NJ

Union City School District

Lucy Soovajian, Supervisor for Academic Programs

10,000+ students Grades pre-K to 12

Study Island

**1% Asian/Pacific Islander
2% Caucasian
95% Hispanic
92% free/reduced lunch
42% ELLs
11% students w/ disabilities**

The Challenge:

Union City School District (UCSD) is an urban district in Union City, New Jersey, a small, densely populated city of 1.4 square miles and more than 80,000 people. Situated across the Hudson River from Manhattan, the low-income district was classified as an Abbott District until 2009, when the state funding formula changed. As an Abbott District, UCSD was one of more than 30 districts that received state aid to help remedy disparities between rich and poor districts and narrow the achievement gap.

"Although Union City is no longer referred to as an Abbott District, we still have a very large at-risk population," said Silvia Abbato, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "Ninety-two percent of our students are economically disadvantaged, 42 percent are English language learners [(ELLs)], and 11 percent have special needs."

Union City School District uses Study Island to provide standards-based instruction in math, reading, and writing, and to help students prepare for the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK). Since implementing the online education program in 2006, the urban district has seen marked improvement in the performance of student subgroups. From 2005 to 2008, limited English proficient (LEP) students and special education students significantly increased their test scores in both language arts and math.

How They Did It:

To meet students' diverse needs, Union City Schools began using Study Island in 2006 at Veterans' Memorial Elementary School and then quickly expanded it districtwide to all 14 schools. Study Island offers web-based instruction, practice, and assessments in math, reading, writing, science, and social studies. Built directly from state standards in each subject area, Study Island helps K–12 students master grade-level content and prepare for state assessments in a fun, engaging manner.

All UCSD students in grades K–8 work on Study Island on math, reading, and writing. In addition, students performing below grade level, ELL students, and students with disabilities work on Study Island at the high school level.

"Study Island makes it easy for teachers to differentiate instruction to meet students' needs," said Lucy Soovajian, supervisor for academic programs. "It supports our state standards beautifully, and it's a perfect fit with what we're doing in our district."

Students work on the program in school computer labs and in classroom centers. By combining self-paced instruction with games and rewards that reinforce student accomplishments, Study Island helps students take control of their learning and creates a culture of academic success.

"Study Island reinforces what's being taught in class, but it approaches it in a different way," said Abbato. "As students answer questions in Study Island, they're learning, but they feel like they're playing a video game. This promotes students' acquisition of skills, while making learning interactive and fun."

Study Island is also used as an intervention for students at all tiers of the district's Response to Intervention (RtI) program and for ELL students.

"Study Island has components in both English and Spanish, so if students have difficulty in English, they can review the material in their native language," said Abbato. "Then, once they grasp the concept in Spanish, it is introduced in English as well. It serves as a nice reinforcement for our ELL students."

Additionally, the district uses Study Island to provide targeted assistance to at-risk, ELL, and special education students as part of an after-school program.

With real-time reporting on student achievement, Study Island helps teachers quickly identify learning gaps as they relate to the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJ CCCS). With this data, teachers can differentiate instruction and provide targeted interventions to help students prepare for the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK). The data is also used by school principals and district administrators to monitor student performance.

"We like that we can drill down by student, by class, and by school," said Abbato. "Study Island clearly shows where students' strengths and weaknesses are, and we can also monitor usage at the district level to see how much each class and each school are using the program."

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>
> Lucy Soovajian, Supervisor for Academic Programs

Success:

From 2005–08, limited English proficient (LEP) students and special education students achieved significant gains on the NJ ASK. For example, in grades three, four, seven, and eight, LEP students increased their test scores by 20 percent in language arts and 15 percent in math, and special education students increased their scores by 15 percent in language arts and 10 percent in math. In 2009, New Jersey redesigned its state assessment, so scores cannot be compared to previous years.

"Study Island has been very successful in our district," said Abbato. "That's why we continue to use it year after year. Since we introduced Study Island, we've seen marked improvement in our student subgroups. The attainment of skills is now institutionalized at the lower grade levels. There has been substantial improvement in the middle grades, and we're now seeing improvement at the high school level as well."

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The Future:

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