By Joe Corcoran

Today, many schools are striving to tailor instruction to the needs of individual students and also extend learning beyond the classroom. The goal is a more student-centered approach that optimizes students’ face time with teachers, produces more meaningful homework and, of course, improves student performance. The flipped classroom model currently gaining the attention of educators appears to be a viable answer.

A Title I school extends reading lessons beyond the classroom walls for struggling students.
There are multiple flipped classroom models. Flipped—or reversed—instruction generally refers to a teaching model that uses some form of technology to deliver instruction at home and moves “homework” to the classroom where students can ask questions, receive guidance from their teacher, or work together on assignments based on what they learned outside the classroom.

The practice is relatively new, so not much research on it is available. However, in 2012 the Flipped Learning Network surveyed 453 teachers who have flipped their classrooms. Sixty-seven percent of the surveyed educators reported improved test scores and 80 percent reported improved student attitudes. An impressive 99 percent of respondents said that they would use the practice again. We decided to try it at my Title I school.

**Designing the Flip**

At Harriet Gifford Elementary School in Elgin, Illinois, 80 percent of the student population is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Forty-three percent of our students have limited English proficiency. Our reading scores were flat, which meant many students were struggling to develop the literacy skills adequate for learning in higher grades.

The school’s leadership team and I decided that increasing the focus on data and personalizing instruction were the keys to improving student reading skills.

At the center of every flipped model is a technology-based instructional tool. The most typical flipped classroom tool is online videos of teacher lectures, but since our building serves grades K-6, we thought that tool would not be appropriate, particularly for very young students. The building leadership team and I determined that we needed technology that was student-driven, yet provided the framework for teacher-directed instruction. It also had to be suited for multi-tiered instructional models and to support English-language learners.

We selected a reading software program called Lexia Reading and used Title I funds to purchase the software. Seven of our K-2 teachers are focusing their efforts on using the software for their struggling students. Since the program monitors students’ needs and progress, teachers use the assessment data from the work completed outside the classroom to identify and prioritize students for small-group or individual instruction.

For the higher grades, grades 4-6, we started a mobile technology initiative. A grant from Motorola Mobility (before their merger with Google) allowed us to acquire Motorola Xoom tablets. Seven teachers in those grades are now differentiating instruction for their students via the tablets. Each classroom has four tablets that the teachers use to deliver videos and project-based learning opportunities.

**Extending Instruction Beyond the Classroom**

The efficacy research on Lexia Reading shows that high-risk students in particular make significant gains when they use the software with consistency, so we wanted them to work on the software outside of the classroom. The program immediately assesses and diagnoses each child’s area of need in order to provide individualized instruction and scaffolding. So students learn reading skills before they even enter the classroom, allowing teachers to then broaden and deepen what has been learned. The embedded assessment of the program gives teachers the time to focus on instruction and interventions.

Because the reading software is Web-based, students have free access anytime, anywhere they have Internet service, and they can download the program from the vendor’s website onto their own computers. Therefore, the greatest obstacle to
using the technology effectively was our limitations in providing Title I students with adequate access to computers at home. Few of them had access to a personal computer and the Internet.

To resolve this issue, we orchestrated a comprehensive, community-based approach. We created a parent liaison position to focus on community outreach and nurture cooperation and positive partnerships with students’ families and local organizations. The parent liaison enlisted the assistance of the local YMCA and neighborhood library. Those two organizations provided students access to the program from their computers.

In addition, teachers opened the school’s computer lab three days a week at 7:30 a.m., with other students staying after school to work in the computer lab. These efforts were geared toward maximizing time on task and improving reading outcomes.

During her tenure, the parent liaison championed the integration of technology and curriculum at the school and district levels, including pilots that introduced tablet technology. As the building coordinator, she provided support, guidance, and professional development for teachers participating in the pilots, as well as helped to lead a districtwide initiative to integrate tablet computers into classroom instruction.

**Obtaining Parental Buy-In**

Our flipped classroom approach would not have worked if we had simply sent students home with log-in instructions for their parents. We needed parents to be active partners with our teaching staff in ensuring a consistent focus on learning at school and at home.

We also needed parents to understand the parameters of the program and that it was an instructional tool, not a game or “busy work.” To that end, we held mandatory parent meetings at the school at which we demonstrated the program and explained how the assessment data obtained from work completed outside the classroom was used to inform instruction within the classroom.

We formed a verbal contract that allowed parents to see how their support at home directly affected the personalized instruction that we could deliver in school. As part of the contract, we warned them that neither they nor students’ older siblings should complete the software’s tasks and activities. We needed an accurate assessment of each child’s abilities to maximize school and community resources. We encouraged parents to have students work on the software on the weekends and during holidays and summer breaks as well as during weekday evenings.

**Benefits of Flipping**

Our move to flip reading instruction and enlist the support of community organizations and students’ families is working. Illinois uses a growth model that establishes 100 as average growth, below 100 as negative growth, and above 100 as positive growth. Students at our school scored 104, two points higher than the state and district average of 102. We believe this gain can mostly be credited to our students’ use of Lexia; the students love it and ask for it by name.

In addition to expanding students’ opportunities for developing literacy skills and facilitating data-driven instruction, our school is reaping the benefits of increased and enriched involvement from parents and local institutions—the foundations for a great learning community.

Teachers appreciate the reporting features that deliver ready-made lessons for small-group instruction. By using this feature, teachers are better prepared and can share their experiences with each other, creating a collaborative approach to teaching and learning.

Of course, the greatest satisfaction for us lies in watching students blossom. As our struggling students take a more active role in their academic success, reading skills (as well as critical thinking skills) improve, and they become independent learners.

This new education model challenges our teachers to reflect on their practice and rethink how they reach their students. It is a catalyst for teachers, administrators, and students to change the way things have always been done. I am sure that more innovative, positive changes are just over the horizon.

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