The passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act—which mandates that by 2014 all children attending public schools must score as proficient or above in reading and math on standardized state tests—generated strong reactions from educators across the nation, including the staff at Clay County Middle School, where I serve as assistant principal. Discussions among staff produced such statements as, “This is impossible. Surely, this will go away before 2014.”

It is 2008, NCLB and its mandates remain, and our school is one of many middle schools not meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) benchmarks. In an effort to improve our test scores on the West Virginia Educational Standards Test, we now offer supplemental educational services (SES)—tutoring in reading and math outside the school day. Other schools struggling to meet AYP may find inspiration in our story.

SES: The First Year
Each year, per NCLB requirements, parents of low-income students have the option to enroll their children in SES and may choose any qualifying provider that serves their area. Once parents inform the school of their choice, the school works with the provider(s) to begin services. Our school first notified parents of SES availability in 2005-2006. Parents wanted a provider who would hire teachers from Clay County Middle School and offer services at the school. West Virginia’s Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) III was the only provider that met both requirements. RESAs are multicounty service agencies established by the state legislature in 1972 to provide high-quality programs and services to county school systems. Region III serves Clay and three other counties.

All SES participants chose RESA III, which hired four teachers as tutors. They worked with Debbie Brown, the agency’s director of special education, to analyze students’ recent test scores and develop individual student instructional plans. The students met in grade-level groups two evenings per week for a six-week period, during which time they participated in whole-group lessons reinforcing basic skills in reading and math.

While some students worked on lessons, tutors pulled other students aside to address specific weaknesses.

Prior to taking the state test in May, the students met in grade-level groups for a one-week review of basic skills and test-taking strategies. Unfortunately, when the 2006 test results arrived, our school failed to meet AYP measures for students with disabilities in math. Analysis of the scores revealed that 57 of 84 students with disabilities in math met the benchmark—two shy of the number that would have achieved AYP.

Recruiting Students for SES
The 2006-2007 school year brought a new principal, assistant principal, and literacy/curriculum facilitator to Clay County Middle School. As the new assistant principal, one of my top priorities was to increase participation in SES by offering it to all children who qualified for either free or reduced-cost lunch. To recruit participants, I first invited each student with special needs to my office for an individual conference to review test scores and to discuss how SES could help. I next invited low-income students who had scored below mastery on reading or math, or both, on the state test.

But when the test scores arrived in August 2007, I learned that we again had missed AYP by a margin of two students of 75 with disabilities in math. Over a three-year period, from 2004 to 2007, students with disabilities in math had demonstrated growth in all test areas, but not enough to meet the AYP benchmarks.

Changing the Program
The school’s improvement team—including a representative from RESA III, the county’s Title I director, the assistant superintendent of schools, the county’s special education director, a parent, and the school’s administrative team—met in October 2007 and reviewed data provided by Brown. They showed that the SES program was working, but it was not yielding the desired results for the deficient subgroup.
We decided that extending the time for students to participate in the SES program should help them to master more information. We also decided to try a new format suggested by Beverly Nichols, the county’s special education director. “I believe that consistency and long-term exposure are keys to success for students with special needs,” she said. “These students need frequent, smaller doses of information to master it.”

For the 2007-2008 school year, 60 participating students were assigned to groups based on their skill deficiencies. The groups met one evening per week from November to May, with each student rotating through a reading lesson, a math lesson, a writing lesson, and a concentrated skills lesson. Those who had participated before enjoyed the new format. A sixth-grade reading teacher, serving as an SES tutor, shared a conversation with two students. One said, “Well, you know times flies when you’re having fun,” to which the other added, “I like it better this year. I like meeting one night and moving from one teacher to another.”

The tutors were also pleased. One of them reported, “The students seem to enjoy themselves, and I know that I am enjoying myself.” Principal Joe Paxton was pleased with the number of participants, as well as the tutors’ dedication and enthusiasm. According to Paxton, “We have an engaged group of teachers who genuinely care about the students and want to see them succeed. When I ask students about SES, they always have a positive response and often smile. We even have some students asking to be invited to participate.”

Unexpected Outcomes
Although the goal of SES is to improve West Virginia Educational Standards Test scores and make AYP, informal observations yield some unexpected outcomes of student participation. Some of the participants’ classroom teachers report that their overall academic performance in the classroom is improving. In addition, some students who have had discipline issues are behaving more appropriately than before their participation.

We also are seeing evidence of parent support. As an example, one of our SES tutors shares a great story. One of the student participants had informed her that he would have to drop out of SES for a few months because he made the school wrestling team. The following day, the wrestling coach showed her a note from the boy’s mother:

Dear Coach,
Randy will not be at wrestling practice on Tuesdays because he has after-school tutoring and he can’t miss that.
Mrs. Smith

Academics trump sports! I have waited 20 years for this moment, and this parent.

Future Plans
We plan to review our state test scores when they come in in late August. If we made AYP, we will use the same SES format and increase our recruitment efforts. If we didn’t make AYP, we will analyze the scores to identify deficiencies, revise SES, and brainstorm other efforts to assist our students. We believe that our students can make AYP, and we will provide whatever they need to make it happen.

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