

IMPACT STUDY

Asbury Park School District, New Jersey

CHALLENGE: In 2014–2015, Asbury Park School District (APSD) had the highest per-pupil expenditure (\$33,000) and the lowest graduation rate (49%) in New Jersey.

SOLUTION: APSD and HMH developed an integrated solution including literacy and math intervention programs and professional learning designed to focus leaders, educators, and students on the goal of increasing student achievement.

RESULTS: From 2015–2017, the per-pupil expenditure was reduced by 3%, the graduation rate grew to 73%, and literacy intervention students demonstrated remarkable and rapid gains across all grade levels.

THE CHALLENGE

Asbury Park School District (APSD) needed an “educational renaissance” to address record low graduation rates, test scores, and morale. During the 2014–2015 school year, APSD had the highest per-pupil expenditure (\$33,000) and the lowest graduation rate (49%) in New Jersey. It had experienced several years of district-wide low literacy rates, with approximately 75% of students reading below grade level. District leaders were aware of the extensive research that demonstrated the difficulty of attaining literacy after third grade. After this point, there is a transition from narrative to informational text, increased demands of vocabulary, and less time available for independent and guided reading (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009).

THE SOLUTION

To overcome these challenges, APSD and HMH formed a partnership starting in the 2015–2016 school year to support APSD’s guiding action pillars to “rebuild, retool, and restore” the district. With the leadership of Dr. Lamont O. Repollet, former superintendent, a culture of high expectations was established. He set forth the vision of “hard hat nation,” leveraging both scientific research and the participation of everyone in the district to establish the foundation for future success. APSD and the HMH Professional Services team, including Math Solutions and the International Center for Leadership in Education® (ICLE) (both divisions of HMH), established project goals for literacy, math, and leadership:

- Schools will implement literacy interventions with a high level of fidelity and use data for differentiating instruction, refining instructional routines, and student conferencing.
- Leadership coaches will work with principals, Instructional Leadership Teams, and teachers to identify areas for growth, use data to drive instruction, and use effective instructional strategies.
- Math students will take academic risks, explain their reasoning, and develop productive perseverance to solve challenging problems.

QUICK FACTS



STAFF



K-12 STUDENTS



SCHOOLS

PROGRAMS: **READ 180®**, **SYSTEM 44®**, **iREAD®**, **MATH 180®**

SERVICES: **Program Implementation Services, Instructional and Leadership Coaching (ICLE, Math Solutions®), Technical Services**

SCHOOL YEAR: **2015–2016, 2016–2017**

THE RESULTS

Asbury Park School District is an inspiring story of commitment and success. Since 2014–2015, APSD has demonstrated dramatic gains in school and student outcomes. These gains testify to its commitment to changing its culture and overcoming its challenges with a surge in graduation rate; a sharp decline in students failing three or more courses; a tremendous reduction in student dropout rate; and an appreciable decrease in cost-per-pupil expenditure. Over the 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 school years, *READ 180* and *System 44* students made remarkable gains on the *Reading Inventory®* and the *Phonics Inventory®*. Improvements were also seen in school culture with the percentage of students who believed bullying was a problem decreasing from 57% in 2014–2015 to 49% in 2016–2017 and the percentage of teachers who had the resources needed to be an effective teacher increasing from 53% in 2014–2015 to 60% in 2016–2017.

PARTNERSHIP ELEMENTS

HMH works directly with districts to identify and implement the steps and strategies necessary to improve learning and achieve district goals. APSD and the HMH Professional Services team worked to co-develop and build capacity across the following five partnership elements.



Communication and Culture Begins with Leadership

The “educational renaissance” in APSD began with a collaborative commitment to make improving student achievement the district’s highest priority. At ICLE’s Model Schools Conference in 2015, a team of APSD faculty was inspired by the success of other districts to develop a community-wide action plan. It was paramount that APSD leadership clearly communicated this priority and plan across all schools to maximize the potential for success. Beginning in 2015–2016, HMH helped building-level leadership teams focus on day-to-day actions through a short-cycle planning process (“20 Day Plans”). Instructional Leadership Teams were established to implement focused strategies to lead the school transformation processes, implement best practices to support a district-wide literacy focus, and put student relationships and data at the center of instructional decision making. The teams worked together to formalize ICLE’s Collaborative Instructional Review (CIR) process and align their definitions and measures of rigorous learning, relevant instruction, and student engagement. They prepared leadership with appropriate strategies and tools to support successful implementation of the literacy interventions in their buildings.

As culture begins with leadership, APSD and the HMH Professional Services team worked to develop a culture of high expectations, trust, collaboration, and shared decision making across the district that would result in school facilities that were clean, safe, and centered on student learning. Further, the teams worked to ensure that faculty and staff were energized and focused with high morale and high expectations of each other and all students. Instructional Leadership Teams at each school supported professional discourse focused on student learning. Building-level leaders reflected a common district-wide understanding of rigorous learning supported by relevant instruction and strong student-adult relationships.



District-Wide Focus on Literacy

After communicating the priority of improving student achievement and aligning the district culture to support this priority, APSD made literacy its initial focus and conducted an assessment of every program in use in the district—what was working, and what wasn’t. In response to this assessment, *iRead* was implemented in Grades K–2 and *READ 180* and *System 44* in Grades 3–12. The *Reading Inventory* and *Phonics Inventory* were used for screening and progress monitoring.

HMH worked closely with APSD to ensure that all schools across the district implemented literacy interventions with a high level of fidelity. They helped teachers to develop lesson plans that used data for differentiating instructional decisions, scaffolds and instructional routine placement, and student conferencing. HMH provided support for screening and placement; Getting Started professional learning sessions; monthly morning meetings for all program and non-intervention teachers; monthly in-classroom coaching to set goals and track progress for selected metrics; monthly leadership data talks; and bi-monthly instructional focus groups.



Job-Embedded Professional Learning

During the 2016–2017 school year, HMH and ICLE provided a total of 175 days of coaching support to teachers and leaders. The HMH team supported teachers in implementing interventions, maintaining high levels of fidelity, using data to make differentiated instructional decisions, and maintaining active Data Notebooks. Expert HMH Consultants provided job-embedded professional learning, program-dependent instructional leadership and data support, and project management days. Every educator in the district received 90 minutes of professional learning eight times a year that was targeted to individual teacher needs and focused solely on raising student achievement.



Data-Driven Decision Making

ICLE partnered with APSD to visit all of the district’s schools to identify the strengths and weaknesses of classroom instruction and make decisions on how to bring about needed classroom and school improvements. An ICLE consultant visited 10 classes in each school to measure the levels of rigor, relevance, and learner engagement and to identify the instructional strategies employed to promote student learning. The data gathered at each campus was utilized to assist district and school leaders and campus teams in developing highly effective school improvement plans. The resulting report also guided discourse on the direction for professional learning in the district.

APSD was provided additional support by Technical Services, a division of HMH, to ensure that students and teachers were able to efficiently access the software and data reporting functions. Technical Services’ work with APSD first focused on delivering a reliable system of rostering for both Core and Intervention programs. Consistent access and usage is the obvious precursor to success, and this work enabled quality data reporting for the district. The effective and efficient support delivered throughout the school year directly influenced the district to request Technical Services to develop a digital citizenship and technology curriculum to support its effort over the next year to bolster its technology environment. By building a trusted and continuing partnership, HMH’s work under the TechAdvise program allows HMH to consult with APSD on its needs and vision, share ideas in open discussions, develop custom solutions, and then meet those needs with high fidelity.



Community Engagement

APSD recognized the importance of rebuilding trust and pride in the district in the eyes of the entire community and took steps to re-engage families. The district opened a new Parent Center in April 2015 that offers adult literacy, ESL, and GED classes and holds regular parent sessions to connect with the community. The Parent Center allows the district’s parent liaisons to better meet the needs of their students’ families, including ESL classes, social service programs, and computer education. APSD has also effectively leveraged social media to keep parents involved, as parents may work two or three jobs and not have the time or resources to dedicate to traditional parent organizations.

APSD also created a College and Career Readiness Institute, which helps students identify their career interests and establishes paid summer internship opportunities as well as informational seminars. The Institute offers students the skills they need to be productive citizens, finding relevant jobs, mentoring and internship opportunities, and college transition support.

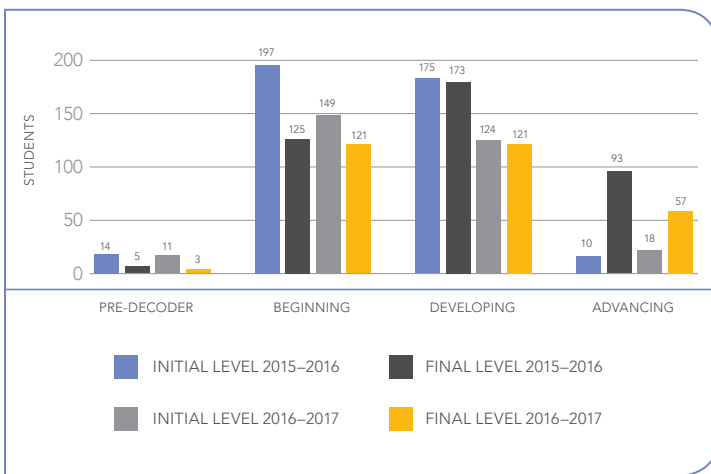
“As we continue the comprehensive instructional and leadership partnership with HMH, the Asbury Park School District is making steady, incremental gains. With a strategic focus initially on leadership and literacy, student performance is increasing, and students are accessing literacy on grade level and beyond. All staff (principals, teachers, teacher assistants, secretaries, custodial engineers, security officers, cafeteria workers) take on and lead conversations around innovative ways to engage students through rigorous and relevant activities that support the district’s motto of Illuminating the Path to Building a Brighter Future.”

—SANCHA K. GRAY, SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS, ASBURY PARK SCHOOL DISTRICT, NJ

THE RESULTS

In 2016–2017, APSD was named an intervention district of excellence by HMH for its implementation of HMH reading programs and best practices that resulted in literacy gains at every grade level. Graduation rates soared from 49% in 2014 to 73% in 2016, the dropout rate fell by 50%, and the course failure rate dropped 27 percentage points. By 2017, 90% of teachers agreed that their day-to-day actions were aligned to the district superintendent’s mission of “Building a Brighter Future,” 86% agreed that the district has high expectations for all students, and 80% agreed that active community involvement was encouraged across the district. The partnership’s success was further validated when the district won the Innovate NJ honor awarded by the Department of Education, praising APSD for innovation in its schools.

GRAPH 1 Total System 44 students by initial and final decoding level (2015–2017)



System 44

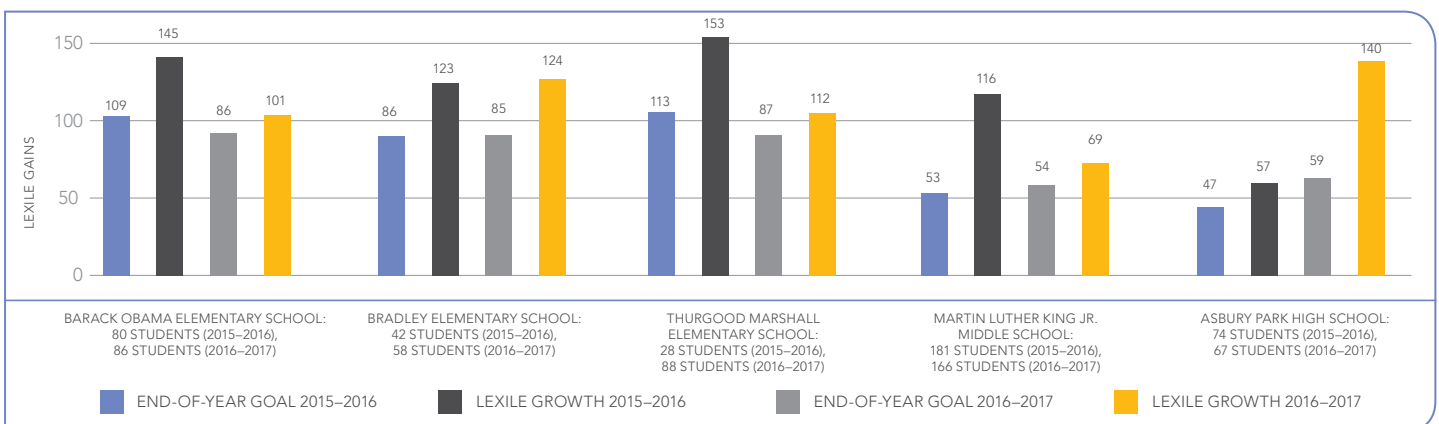
The analysis of *System 44* students included 396 students during the 2015–2016 school year and 302 students during the 2016–2017 school year. In both school years, *System 44* students demonstrated growth, moving through the stages of decoding from pre-decoders and beginning decoders to developing decoders and advancing decoders. See graphs 1 and 2 for a representation of *System 44* students’ growth in decoding.

In 2015–2016, 77% of *System 44* students demonstrated improved accuracy on the *Phonics Inventory* with an average gain of 5 points, and 56% of students achieved a 4+ point gain in fluency with an average gain of 5 points. In 2016–2017, 79% of students demonstrated improved accuracy with an average gain of 6 points, and 42% of students achieved a 4+ point gain in fluency with an average gain of 3 points.

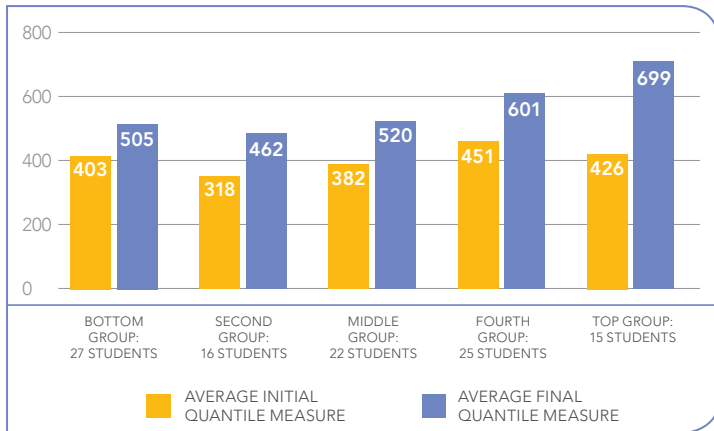
READ 180

The analysis of *READ 180* students included 405 students during the 2015–2016 school year and 465 students during the 2016–2017 school year. In 2015–2016, 88% of *READ 180* students demonstrated a Lexile® gain over the school year, and 68% of students met their end of year growth goal. In 2016–2017, 81% of *READ 180* students demonstrated a Lexile gain, and 62% of students met their end-of-year growth goal. See Graphs 3 and 4 for Lexile gain and the end-of-year growth goals by school.

GRAPH 2 End-of-year goal and mean change in Lexile growth by school (2015–2017)



GRAPH 3 Quantile growth relative to *MATH 180* topics completed (2016–2017)



MATH 180

Students who used *MATH 180* consistently benefited more than those students who used the program less frequently. Graph 3 shows the growth in Quantile® measure for students divided into groups based on the number of *MATH 180* topics completed. The 27 students in the bottom group completed an average of 2.9 topics and had an average growth in Quantile measure from 403Q to 505Q (102Q). The 15 students in the top group completed an average of 13.9 topics and had an average growth in Quantile measure from 426Q to 699Q (273Q). Overall, the more math topics students learned and completed in *MATH 180*, the higher their quantile measures grew, exceedingly so for the group that completed the most.

School and District Culture

HMH and APSD used surveys (WE Learn™, WE Teach™, and WE Lead™) developed by the Successful Practices Network (a non-profit organization associated with ICLE) to track APSD’s progress toward improving the culture of the district. From 2014–2015 to 2016–2017, the district made progress in measures of respect and appreciation among teachers and students:

- The percentage of teachers who felt that the mission statement of the district promotes high expectations increased from 72% in 2014–2015 to 86% in 2016–2017.
- The percentage of teachers who felt that the staff respects students increased from 80% in 2014–2015 to 87% in 2016–2017.
- The percentage of students who know their reading level increased from 73% in 2014–2015 to 81% in 2016–2017.
- The percentage of teachers who are aware of their students’ interests outside of school increased from 84% in 2014–2015 to 90% in 2016–2017.
- The percentage of teachers who felt that they are expected to do interdisciplinary planning and projects increased from 63% in 2014–2015 to 74% in 2016–2017.
- The percentage of teachers who agreed that “bullying is a problem at this school” decreased from 57% in 2014–2015 to 49% in 2016–2017.

CONCLUSION

During the 2015–2016 school year, Asbury Park School District began collaborating with HMH, ICLE, and Math Solutions to address the dire performance challenges facing its schools and students. Within a year of the partnership, APSD began to thrive and achieve its primary goal of improving student achievement. Grounded in a change of culture and communication of high expectations and trust by the leadership, APSD experienced unprecedented achievement in literacy through a comprehensive district-wide focus on literacy, job-embedded professional development, data-driven decision making, and community-wide engagement. Partnership elements co-developed with HMH played critical roles in helping APSD to rebuild and thrive so quickly. For the superintendent, the intentional change in culture and communication district-wide drove APSD’s success, while for teachers and administrators, it was the consistent coaching and support provided by the HMH Professional Services team. Teachers have been able to shift from a deficit model of instruction to engaging their students on grade level and working to get them to the next level. As APSD and HMH move forward with their successful partnership, they will build upon APSD’s unrelenting commitment and remarkable achievements and seek to engage an even larger response from the community.

REFERENCES

Sanacore, J. and Palumbo, A. (2009). Understanding the fourth-grade slump: Our point of view. *The Educational Forum*, 73, 67–74.

APPENDIX

District Characteristics

Asbury Park School District (APSD) serves 1,962 students in grades PreK–12. Teachers average 16.8 years of experience, and the student/teacher ratio is 8:1. APSD believes in the importance of early education for disadvantaged children—64% of students in the district are classified as economically disadvantaged—and has invested in an early childhood development program for 3- and 4-year-old children. APSD students come from diverse backgrounds—9% of students are English language learners—so the district provides bilingual education and programs for these students and their families. The district seeks to engage families and the community through the Alternate Learning Center and Evening School for adults. Students with disabilities comprise 20% of the student population, and APSD makes it a priority to ensure that no students will be prevented from receiving a fair and appropriate education.

The APSD mission is to provide “all students with a comprehensive and progressive education where everyone possesses the skills and character to succeed in a diverse, evolving global society.” In an effort to “build a brighter future” and “rebuild, retool, and restore” Asbury Park, the district developed a new strategic focus working toward the following goals:

- Develop a high-performing organization by examining the organizational structure, policies, and procedures for efficient school operations and consistent leadership.
- Complete a district-wide curriculum review to ensure all district-approved academic courses have curricula that is aligned to Common Core State Standards and in compliance with the Quality Single Accountability Continuum (QSAC).
- Assess educational programs and student learning to ensure schools are creating the optimal learning environments for all students.
- Collaborate with Asbury Park stakeholders in the educational process by engaging parents, community, and business leaders.

THE HMH RESEARCH MISSION STATEMENT

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt® (HMH®) is committed to developing innovative educational programs and professional services that are grounded in learning science evidence and efficacy. We collaborate with school districts and third-party research organizations to conduct research that provides information to help improve educational outcomes for students, teachers, and leaders at the classroom, school, and district levels. We believe strongly in a mixed-methods approach to our research, an approach that provides meaningful and contextualized information and results.