

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

EDUCATION: Vocabulary lessons boost learning



KURT MILLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Connor Ulate, 8, gives his third-grade teacher Tonna Dagenhart, thumbs up sign when he understands a vocabulary word at Moreno Valley's Hendrick Ranch Elementary School on Friday, Nov. 1. The campus and Armada Elementary School saw academic improvement among African-American students in the Project Moving Forward program to teach vocabulary. They are only schools using it in Southern California, district officials say.

BY DAYNA STRAEHLEY
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Fast-paced, high-energy vocabulary lessons are credited with improving the test scores of black and low-income students at two Moreno Valley schools.

These students often lag behind other groups in academic achievement. And creators of the federally funded Project Moving Forward believe they found the biggest reason: students' vocabularies aren't big enough.

Teachers at two campuses, Hendrick Ranch and Armada elementary schools, have been trained in what the program calls the Rule of 3 or RAP system. RAP stands for rehearse, analyze and produce. In the program, students learn 10 words each morning.

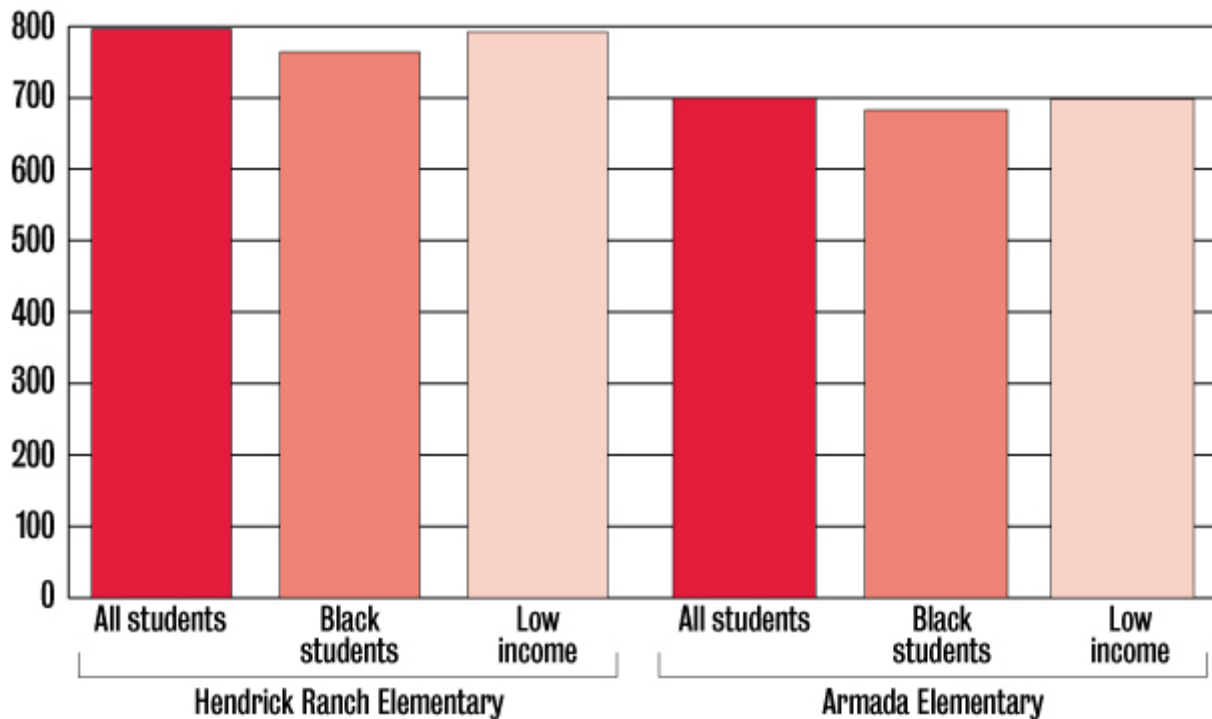
“I think it helps our education by knowing more words and what they mean,” Hendrick Ranch fifth-grader Josephine Valdez said.

The Moreno Valley Unified School District campuses are the only two in Southern California to use the lessons, which began in 2012-13. Black students made up almost 15 percent of Hendrick Ranch students who took state tests in spring. Armada had about 17 percent.

Hover over the chart to view interactive content.

MOVING UP: The Project Moving Forward program is credited with helping African-American students and others improve in Moreno Valley schools. The chart shows how the Academic Performance Index has improved for two groups since 2012. The API ranges from 200 to 1,000 with a statewide goal of 800 or more. Most students at both schools are from low-income families.

Academic Performance Index results



SOURCE: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Each school’s Academic Performance Index jumped a whopping 51 points in 2013 for African-American students. Both schools also raised their overall API. Armada saw a 14-point boost to 700, while Hendrick Ranch climbed 17 points to 796. The API, based on state standardized test scores, ranges from 200 to 1,000 with 800 as the statewide goal.

Hendrick Ranch Principal Joan Warburg said teachers at both her school and Armada say the multi-sensory lessons are students' favorite time of the day.

"They don't realize they're learning," Warburg said. "They're having fun with it."

Fifth-grader Adolfo Sandoval said the lessons are fun.

"Sometimes you raise your hand and you try to say a synonym but other people take it away from you," Adolfo said. "It's kind of like a battle for the words."

One recent day at Hendrick Ranch, third-grade teacher Tonna Dagenhart was using the program's methods.

"The word is 'physical,'" she called out. "Thumbs up if you've ever heard it."

Most students raised their hands. She called on one, who defined "physical" as something that you do. Then another mentioned the earth's physical features.

Many words in English have multiple meanings, said Linda Navarrette, director of Project Moving Forward from the Teacher Education Department at National University, which has campuses across the nation. For instance, "jam" can mean a traffic jam, paper jam, the jellied fruit spread on bread or a dance, she said.

Students learning English as a second language or students growing up in poverty may know one or two meanings of a word. But when they try to read a book, they get confused when the word has another meaning.

Navarrette said the vocabulary program was created to help English learners. It also has helped African-American students even more as well as all students, she said.

Hispanic students also improved in both reading and math, with many students moving from far below basic levels to proficiency in both subjects, the district said.

English-learners at the two schools all improved at least one level on the California English Language Development Test and 51 percent improved two or more levels in one year, Navarrette said.

VOCABULARY GAP

The project was funded by a \$1.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education for teaching strategies that close the achievement gap between white and middle class students and their African-American, Latino and low-income peers.

The program also is used at several schools in Northern California, in Chicago and in Iowa and Florida, Navarrette said.

"We found that the No. 1 thing that improves the achievement gap is vocabulary," she said.

Students growing up with working-class parents typically hear about 500 words a month. Children of professional parents hear about 1,100 words a month, Navarrette said.

At Armada, more than 97 percent of students live in poverty, and the poverty rate is more than 92 percent at Hendrick Ranch.

Back in the Hendrick Ranch third-grade classroom, students spend one minute each telling a partner sitting next them about the word “physical.” Then Dagenhart calls for their attention and they move on to another word and repeat the process. They also write each vocabulary word in a workbook.

Then they analyze the word, deciding that “physical” is an adjective that can be made into an adverb by adding “ly.” They spell the word and one student leads the class in a rousing cheer for each word as they all stand.

“Give me a ‘P!’” as they thrust one arm in the air. “Give me an ‘H!’” as they thrust the other arm. Students will also “produce” the meaning of the word by drawing a picture or writing a sentence with that word and sharing their pictures or sentences with their partner, Navarrette said.

In teacher Marci Carver’s kindergarten class, students only knew one meaning for the word “skip,” as in skipping down the sidewalk. She pointed to pictures of people skipping on the overhead projector, then pointed to a number sequence, “1234_6789.”

That showed them the word has another meaning – skipping a number.

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