

Union City School District: New Jersey

A Summary of:

UNION CITY INTERACTIVE MULTIMEDIA EDUCATION TRIAL: 1993 - 1995 Summary Report, April 1996, *CCT Reports*, Issue No. 3, by Margaret Honey and Andres Henriquez

THE UNION CITY STORY: Education Reform and Technology, Students' Performance on Standardized Tests, April 1998, *CCT Reports*, by Han-Hua Chang, Margaret Honey, Daniel Light, Babette Moeller, and Nancy Ross

Overview

This summary examines the results of two simultaneous initiatives undertaken in Union City School District, New Jersey. In 1989, Union City was declared a special-needs district and was threatened with a take-over by the state. In response, the school district developed a five-year improvement plan, which included comprehensive curriculum reform, cooperative learning and teacher teams. This plan attracted Bell Atlantic-New Jersey, which was looking for a site to test a project for bringing technology to schools and communities through telephone networks. In Fall 1993, Bell Atlantic initiated a pilot program at Christopher Columbus Middle School by supplying computers to the school and the homes of its seventh grade students and teachers. As the students advanced to high school, the company added support for participating teachers. The District later expanded the technology trial into a comprehensive school and

POPULATION

Union City, New Jersey, is the most densely populated city in the United States. Most of its 60,000 residents are immigrants from Cuba, and other Central and South America countries. The city has been classified as one of the 92 most impoverished communities in the United States, with 27.5 percent of its children below the poverty line. Union City School District serves approximately 9,000 students. Ninety-two percent of the students are Spanish-speaking. The pilot technology program served 135 seventh grade students and their families and 20 teachers at the Christopher Columbus Middle School, one of 11 schools in the district.

community-network covering all eleven schools in the district. The network, known as Union City Online, was funded by the National Science Foundation.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Between 1989 and 1997, the combination of new curriculum, teaching methods and the infusion of technology, resulted in a statistically significant:

- ♦ decrease in the student-mobility rate (from 44 percent in 1989 to 22 percent in 1995)
- ♦ improvement in standardized test scores for elementary school students (first grade students increased their scores by 45 percentile points in reading, 34 percentile points in writing, and 18 percentile points in math; fourth grade students increased their scores by 14 percentile points in writing)

- ◆ increase in test scores for middle school students (between 1992 and 1995 reading scores improved by 53.6 percent, writing scores by 42.9 percent, and math scores by 29 percent)

The pilot technology program helped to improve:

- ◆ communication among participants (teachers reported using the network to exchange ideas, plan joint projects, help substitutes maintain continuity, and communicate with students and parents; parents used the network to direct questions and comments to school staff)
- ◆ overall performance for students at the pilot technology school (more Columbus Middle School students qualified for the honors program and passed New Jersey's Early Warning Tests than students from other schools; intense and sustained access to technology had a particularly strong impact on writing skills)

"This unique institution of learning exemplifies the future school. The technology trial continues to have a major impact on students' accessibility to knowledge. It is truly a school without walls. Accessing the Internet permits the acquisition of global knowledge."

Robert Fazio, Columbus Middle School

In 1989, the state threatened to take over Union City schools because of a large number of deficiencies. In 1995, Union City students scored 27 percentile points above students in other special needs districts on the Early Warning Test. As a result of the comprehensive reforms, the New Jersey State Department of Education ended its monitoring procedures and fully certified the Union City School District.

Key Components

The reforms began in elementary grades and additional classrooms were added each year until all grade levels were affected. Similarly, the technology program was initiated with Bell Atlantic's donation of 44 computers to Columbus Middle School, with an additional 66 computers available for use by students and teachers. Currently, Union City is one of the most wired urban school districts in the country. The reforms relied on four major elements:

- ◆ comprehensive curriculum reform based on a whole language approach, geared toward cooperative learning, developed by teams of teachers, and designed to be phased in gradually
- ◆ major scheduling changes (blocks of time of 74 to 111 minutes replaced 37 minute periods and all "pull out" programs to provide remediation were eliminated)
- ◆ increased in-service training (the teachers at Columbus Middle School were trained in use of computers and network environments; this training was expanded to all school staff and parents, and is now offered community-wide)
- ◆ infusion of technology (by 1997, all 11 District schools were linked in a network of more than 2,000 personal computers in classrooms, teacher and student homes, computer labs and media centers)

Contributing Factors

Strong Collaboration among All Partners

The project involved collaboration among the schools, community members and Bell Atlantic. The Board of Education supplied funding for

multimedia needs and supported teacher training and time for teacher curriculum development meetings. Teachers were involved at every level of reform.

Parental Participation

A “Parent University,” created as part of the district-wide reform plans, offers a variety of services to parents, including math, science and computer classes, ESL classes, and parenting skills workshops.

Increased Funding

The budget for the Union City School District increased from \$37.8 million in 1989 to \$100 million in 1997. Much of this increase was a result of New Jersey’s Quality Education Act designed to eliminate some of the disparities between poorer and wealthier districts. A grant from the National Science Foundation, combined with additional funding from the state of New Jersey and the school district, enhanced the district’s technical infrastructure.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The impact of the enhanced technology was assessed by comparing test scores of students who had access to technology at home and at school with test scores of those who had access only at school. The impact of the educational reforms were evaluated by comparing student performance on standardized tests before and after the reforms were put in place. The impact of the reform on staff and parents was assessed through interviews.

EVALUATION FUNDING

Bell Atlantic-New Jersey Foundation, The Jerry Lee Foundation and the National Science Foundation.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

Union City, NJ.

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