Unlocking Potential: Shepherd's Path Toward Success

Nestled along the eastern edge of Texas, Shepherd is a small town that typically resides outside the limelight. However, in early 2020, Shepherd Independent School District became a prominent figure within the Texas Education Agency (TEA). This spotlight highlighted the district's struggle with student performance, which consistently lagged behind state standards during the STAAR assessment for five consecutive years.

Yet, behind these statistics lies a narrative of resilience and dedication. Even before the pandemic, students in this rural Texas community faced significant learning challenges. Shepherd, like many districts in Texas and across the nation, faced the challenge that *nearly 70% of their students struggled with reading gaps of one year or more. (M. Kealey, et. al, 2024)*.

Three years later, Shepherd has forged a remarkable narrative—one marked by triumphs amid setbacks, leading success with that tenacious Texas spirit. Looking to the future, Shepherd's educators remain steadfastly committed to their students, not only making grade-level gains but envisioning a future of accelerated learning and growth in reading.

How are they doing so? By closely monitoring their data and the quality of their curriculum, pairing technology to support educators in creating individualized reading instruction with MindPlay.

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Barriers to Success

In pursuit of success, a new Board of Managers was enlisted to revitalize the district and propel it past its previous setbacks.

Under the leadership of Superintendent, Justin Hewitt, and Director of Teaching and Learning, Tammie Hewitt, the district embarked on a journey of transformation. Hewitt's vision centered on empowering leaders to maximize their contributions and leverage technology to catapult success for students.

Before transformation could begin, Shepherd looked under the hood to identify what problems needed resolution. Numerous intervention programs had been implemented but placed undue pressure and work on teachers.

STAAR Reading Growth Using MindPlay

STAAR Scale Score Growth

Categories: <20 Hours of MindPlay, ≥20 Hours of MindPlay

n=443, p<0.0001
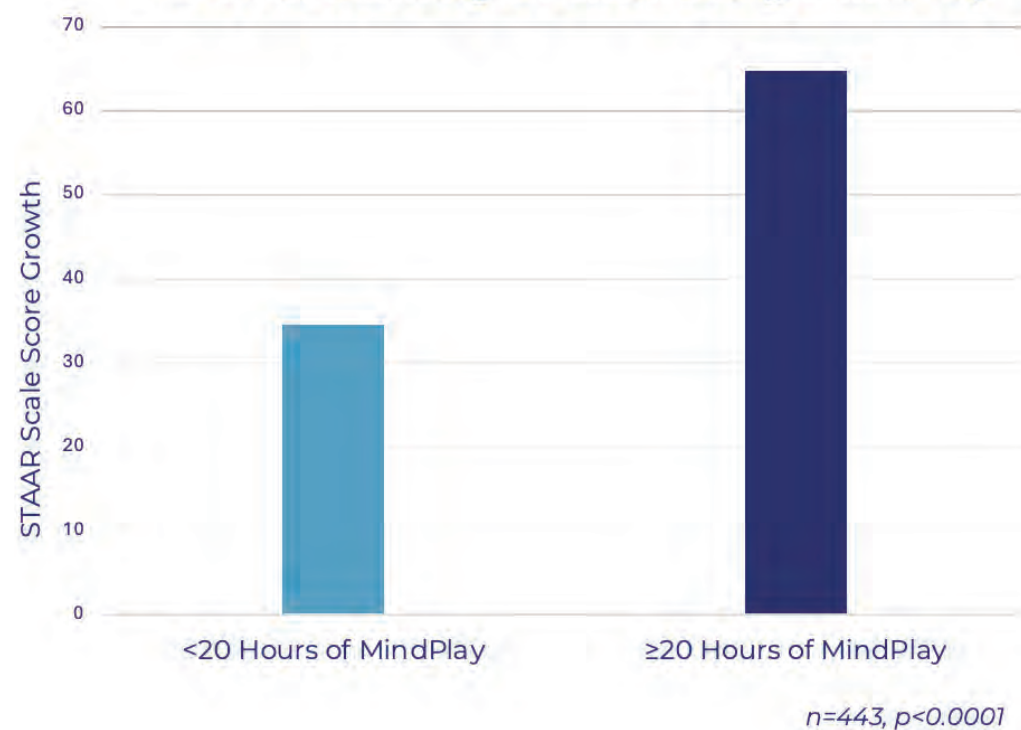
This situation is increasingly common in education today, requiring teachers to create individual lesson plans. However, this often results in a "one-size-fits-all" learning environment that leads to inefficient instructional time and fails to effectively meet each student's specific needs.

When describing the previous state and progress made, Hewitt expressed, *"When we came on board it was to help turnaround the academic side. We were struggling academically. I got to work building structures, monitoring intervention, identifying what was working and what was not so that we could get a grasp on improvement. Now, our teachers and students are feeling really confident with MindPlay Reading and are making really good gains." (T. Hewitt, 2024).*

In the latter half of the 2021/22 school year, Shepherd deployed MindPlay Reading Coach districtwide. When speaking with Shepherd Intermediate Principal Patricia Owens, they shared, *"Teachers are implementing MindPlay successfully, building their confidence knowing they don't have to worry about individualizing lessons for each student and being able to structure their small groups strategically by using MindPlay's Intervention and Error Reports." (P. Owens, 2024).*

As the educational landscape has changed, leaders today are embracing differentiated phonics instruction, noting that no two students learn at the same pace. Each campus has curated reading intervention blocks, with students expected to use MindPlay for a minimum of 20 minutes per day.

This investment in dedicated, individualized intervention has yielded remarkable results, with students experiencing significant progress and growth. Notably, among students who started below grade level according to STAAR, those who used MindPlay twenty hours or more showed more than twice the growth of other students (M. Kealey, et. al, 2024). While Shepherd places importance on STAAR mastery, they also recognize the value of acknowledging students who faced wider gaps and are diligently working toward meeting standard test proficiency. Celebrating each student's progress, regardless of their starting point, remains a fundamental aspect of Shepherd's educational approach.

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Principal Owens regularly celebrates usage and growth achievements in their weekly announcements and newsletters, commending students and teachers for their dedication and effort. This fosters engagement and encourages students to develop intrinsic motivation.

There is a pressing need to transition towards personalized instruction tailored to each student's unique requirements. In partnership with MindPlay, there's no question as to whether technology can serve in the same capacity as a reading tutor, tailoring instruction, activities, and commitment to mastery for Shepherd students.

Unlocking Insights: Strategies Learned from Shepherd's Journey

Through dedicated educators, principals, and administrators, the district is making significant improvements. By 2022, Hewitt shared, *"Regarding accountability, we're grateful to report that, thanks to our growth measure, aligned processes, and curriculum, 92% of our students in the district demonstrated progress." (T. Hewitt, 2024)*.

Looking ahead, Shepherd remains committed to sustaining this growth by continuously tracking student comprehension and leveraging innovative tools like MindPlay to support personalized learning journeys.

The district's unwavering dedication to data-driven decision-making, coupled with a commitment to innovative instructional strategies, sets a powerful precedent for educational excellence. As Shepherd embarks on the next phase of its journey, they are poised to build upon their achievements, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and succeed in an ever-evolving educational landscape.

References

- Kealey, M., PhD, Kanzlemar, S., & Brandon, M. (2024, April 17). From Reading Gaps to Growth: Leveraging MindPlay Reading Coach for Enhanced Performance on Texas STAAR Assessments [Research Brief].

- Santiago, D., & Brandon, M. (2024, April 5). Interview with Tammie Hewitt [Personal Interview].

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