

Program helps Socorro students pass TAKS

Reading was never one of Jackie Vasquez's favorite subjects.

"I didn't know how to understand reading, and I didn't know if I was going to pass the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Test)," the seventh-grader at Socorro Middle School said. In class, "I was embarrassed and I didn't know what to say."

Officials of the Socorro Independent School District said several years ago that the district found itself searching for new ways to supplement existing curriculum to help hundreds of students, such as Vasquez, who are struggling with reading.



Josie Gutierrez, an eighth-grade student at Socorro Middle School, took part in a Read 180 class Wednesday at the Lower Valley School. Students in the Socorro district are preparing for the TAKS. (Rudy Gutierrez / El Paso Times)

"In the district we have programs for special education students and for gifted and talented students," said Sarah Venegas, instructional specialist with the SISD. "We've never really had anything for students who are struggling in subjects like reading, and we really needed something that would help us try to fill that gap."

Two years ago, the district spent thousands of dollars purchasing Scholastic's Read 180 program in an effort to help troubled readers and increase TAKS scores.

The curriculum calls for daily 90-minute reading classes, which rotate among instruction, reading and individualized computer assignments. Students who participate have to give up an elective while in the program.

After completing the Read 180 program last year, Vasquez, now 12, passed the TAKS and got over her shyness in the classroom, teacher Joyce Freddie said.



Joyce Freddie, left, a Read 180 teacher at Socorro Middle School, led her students in a lesson in a library classroom Wednesday. (Rudy Gutierrez / El Paso Times)

"This is a different type of class," Freddie said. "It actually targets kids who are having trouble with reading. When you are struggling with a subject, you are left behind and you continue to fall further and further behind. This program does not give them the opportunity to fall behind."

Students who fail the TAKS are placed in the program, officials said.

Socorro Middle School Principal David Peña said 80 percent of campus students in the Read 180 classes are now passing TAKS.

"It's been so successful that we have implemented some of the same strategies in all of our classrooms," Peña said.

The classes have helped Josie Gutierrez, 12, build confidence.

"Now I like to read to my parents and I help my cousin with his reading," the eighth-grader said. "He's 5 (years old), and he can already read at a second-grade level!"

Debra Carden, director of secondary instruction, said the district has seen substantial growth in vocabulary and reading skills since establishing the curriculum two years ago.

"We have done so well with the program that officials with (El Paso Independent School District) are considering using it," Carden said. "They have already visited some of our schools."