



A Measure of Reading Success

Reading to the Core

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Carmen Rodriguez

Analyst

Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment
Fresno Unified School District

Driving Toward Common Core State Standards Compliance

- **Client:** Fresno Unified School District in Fresno, California
- **Contact:** Carmen Rodriguez, Analyst, Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment
- **Questar Product:** *Degrees of Reading Power*®
- **Questar/Client History:** Client since 1999
- **Product Use:**
 - 1999–2013: Districtwide 2–12 reading comprehension assessment delivered via paper/pencil for special education students
 - 2014–2015: piloted through Questar’s online assessment system to 350 third and fourth graders and high school students in two intervention classes in 2014–2015
 - 2015–Present: Districtwide 2–12 online administration
- **Students:** More than 73,000

Implementing measures to support the district's goal of equity and access

The Fresno Unified School District serves more than 73,000 students — about 30 percent of whom are English language learners and more than 85 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced price meals. To address the obstacles of poverty and the language barrier to students' postsecondary success, the district has developed new practices and policies in recent years to [“ensure that students are given equal opportunity to graduate and be in a position of having the greatest number of postsecondary choices from the widest array of options.”](#)

The District's first formal equity and access initiative, begun during the 2008–2009 school year, was called Project 980/340. An in-depth analysis of student data revealed that 980 high school students and 340 middle school students who performed at proficient or advanced levels on state standards tests had GPAs lower than 2.0. Identifying these potential high performers helped school leaders uncover individual obstacles and provide the resources needed to stay on track to graduate.

After using this and other equity and access programs to lay the foundation for improvement, Fresno Unified, turned its attention to achieving its goal of bringing the district full compliance with Common Core State Standards (CCSS) during the 2014–2015 school year.

This is where Questar Assessment's *Degrees of Reading Power*® (DRP®) entered the picture.

To help achieve Common Core reading standards, the district identified Questar Assessment's *Degrees of Reading Power*® (DRP®) as a literacy assessment solution that offered a fresh, next-generation approach, accurately measuring students' reading comprehension levels of increasingly complex texts and improves their overall “read to learn” abilities.

Achieving on-grade-level reading comprehension goals

Degrees of Reading Power® stood out as a modified cloze system in a sea of more conventional assessment solutions. “Most comprehensive tests require students to read a passage and then answer questions that gauge their understanding of the text,” explained Carmen Rodriguez, an analyst in the office of research, evaluation, and assessment for Fresno Unified School District. “With DRP, students are assessed as they read — not afterward — by filling in blanks and choosing words as they read.”

Initially, Fresno Unified used the paper/pencil version of DRP with high school students in intervention classes. Teachers then generated data reports in real time — using the DRP Scale recognized as a valid measure of text complexity by independent researchers for the Common Core State Standards initiative — to provide measures of student reading ability and text difficulty in a single metric. These reports gave teachers meaningful insights into their own students' reading abilities and instructional needs, as well as a view of the trajectory of their progress.

After success in these intervention classes, the school district began in January 2014 to broaden DRP's application by piloting the online version of the assessment with about 350 third and fourth graders and high school students in two intervention classes. Ms. Rodriguez cited the intuitive look and feel of the online test that proved easy to use even for students who lacked basic computer proficiency skills among the reasons for this pilot's success. "But what's really cool about the program," said Ms. Rodriguez, "is that it raises a red flag when students are not able to comprehend at their grade level, enabling teachers to perform additional diagnostic testing and make well-informed instructional decisions."

Increasing equity and access through *Degrees of Reading Power*[®]

The expectations for the all-district roll out of *Degrees of Reading Power*[®] in the 2014–2015 academic year were fully realized. The implementation was timed to coincide with the district's first year of full Common Core State Standard implementation. The district's educators set their literacy baseline with the DRP results, and now use the product to measure reading comprehension levels and monitor literacy growth to demonstrate their students' real progress toward college and career readiness.