

## Case Study

# Closing the Reading Gap at Gilmer County Charter Schools

**REWARDS®**

Short-Term Reading  
Intervention for  
Grades 4–12

*The REWARDS program helps students in Gilmer County Georgia Charter Schools move beyond the confines of poverty and low achievement*

## THE CHALLENGE

# Overcoming Years of Reading Failure

Gilmer County, Georgia, at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains, is a rural community of 28,000 people. The school system serves 4,168 students in seven schools. More than two-thirds of students are on free or reduced lunch. Barriers to student success include the community's low expectations in educational achievement (a quarter of Gilmer County adults lack a high school diploma), recent budget cuts of 70 percent, and families living below the poverty level.

Six years ago, many students with disabilities (SWD) entering high school at Gilmer County Charter School System (GCCSS) were reading at the pre-primer to second-grade level, and many failed to master basic reading skills sufficiently to graduate. Administration was also concerned that too many general education students were reading below grade level. Focusing on these challenges and determined to turn things around, the district set new goals to increase graduation rates for special populations: special education students and ELLs (students who had often given up hope and were sitting in classes looking at textbooks that overwhelmed them).



*Diane Vautrot of Gilmer County Charter School System works with groups of students using REWARDS to help improve literacy.*

## A TRUE CHAMPION OF LITERACY MAKES AN IMPACT

Dr. Diane Vautrot, Gilmer County Charter School System special education coordinator, and her colleagues were resolute in their drive to help these two groups of students improve academically and master literacy skills, despite their tough environment and low expectations. Known in the district and throughout the county as the local literacy champion, Vautrot (and literacy teachers in the district) works tirelessly with children who previously had grown accustomed to falling behind academically.



*Diane Vautrot*

"Before REWARDS®, too many students had honestly given up," Vautrot said. "They came to school for socialization or to be fed, but most had no hope of graduating."

## THE SOLUTION

# REWARDS: Short-Term Intervention, Long-Term Results

In response to the district's challenge to increase graduation rates, administrators at GCCSS collaborated with the Graduate First Dropout Prevention program and North Central Georgia Learning Resource System (GLRS) to implement a reading remediation initiative. As Vautrot explained, educators at Gilmer County learned about Voyager Sopris Learning's *REWARDS*, a reading intervention program for grades 4–12, and were drawn to its proven success in helping students who experienced years of failure learn to read, which improves their chances at a better life.

*"We saw remarkable results very quickly. Students who previously had made only minimal advances in reading levels were gaining two, three, four and even seven years reading levels in a single year."*

"In conjunction with intensive individualized interventions and a staff of teachers and administrators that would simply not accept failure as an option, our students are succeeding with the *REWARDS* program," Vautrot said. "After years of failure trying to learn to read with phonics and sight words, students are building the confidence to try again—and it's working."

The past five years, she shared, has seen a dramatic change in attitude for students and educators. "The *REWARDS* program has increased reading grade levels across the board and given students the skills they need to succeed."

With the high school reporting rapid grade-level growth, *REWARDS* was soon implemented in both middle schools and now is taught by every special education literacy

teacher and ESOL teacher in GCCSS's two middle schools and the high school. "This year, we implemented the *REWARDS Plus* science program in seventh grade and have found it to be a perfect way to merge teaching science vocabulary and state content standards while reinforcing the program's reading strategies."

Furthermore, the district plans to soon implement the program in fifth- and seventh-grade general education classes to bring all students up to grade-level performance.

### ENGAGEMENT IMPROVES ALONG WITH READING COMPREHENSION

Vautrot said student engagement has skyrocketed since *REWARDS* was implemented. Because the lessons are completed together in small groups and the skills are achievable, students become willing to participate very quickly. Students are not only learning to read, the generational cycle of illiteracy in the community is being altered.



*Student achievement at GCCSS has improved dramatically. "These kids have discovered they have the skills to read their core content textbooks and to write effectively," Vautrot said.*

## GILMER COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL SWD GRADUATION RATES USING *REWARDS*

SCHOOL YEAR

40  
% PASSED  
BEFORE  
*REWARDS*

2012–2013

86.1  
% PASSED  
AFTER  
*REWARDS*

2015–2016

## THE RESULTS

# New Skills, Confidence, and Rising Graduation Rates

In the past four years, the Gilmer County High School SWD graduation rate has increased from 40 percent in the 2012–2013 school year to 86.1 percent in the 2015–2016 school year. But increasing graduation rates are just a part of the program's success. Students who had given up on learning are now experiencing success, often for the very first time.



*"After REWARDS, students are graduating with their class and going on to post-secondary training and education."*

Vautrot and her colleagues are thrilled with the increased achievement levels at Gilmer County. "Without a sound, proven remediation instructional program like *REWARDS*, our students would not be dramatically increasing their skills and our graduation rate would not have jumped more than 46 percentage points over the last four years," Vautrot said. "We are proud, but mostly we're happy to impact the lives of our students in this way."

The success in Gilmer County has not gone unnoticed. GCCSS officials were asked to present at the state Graduate First Dropout Prevention conference and recently at the GA DOE IDEAS conference for special education teachers, as well as the Georgia Council for Administrators of Special Education, where they shared testimonials from students whose lives were changed when they learned to read.

"The presentations were heartwarming and sent a message that poverty is not a barrier that can't be overcome," Vautrot said. "Successful reading intervention at the middle and high school level is not only possible, it's desperately needed and life changing."

Graduation rates aren't the only noticeable results. Vautrot described how student confidence levels and self-esteem continue to increase with their newfound achievements. As one successful participant, Tyler, said: "After being in a functional life skills class in middle school, I was moved to all regular classes in high school." Tyler graduated with his class and is attending welding school. "Like other students we've seen, Tyler never would have dreamed about attending school after high school had he not participated in *REWARDS*," Vautrot said.