



Diverse District Sees Dramatic Improvements in SPED, ELL, and Struggling Learners After Adopting Learning Upgrade

Differentiated math and ELA curriculum incorporates animations, music, and games to engage students

Sweetwater Union High School District is a district rich in diversity with a student population speaking a variety of languages including Arabic, Cantonese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, English, among others. Serving 42,000 students in grades 7-12, a majority of the students are Hispanic with approximately half of students speaking a language other than English at home. With many students struggling to grasp concepts in mathematics, the Sweetwater SPED team started its search to find a tool bridging the gap between middle school and high school math to ensure struggling students, including English language learners (ELLs) and students with IEPs, would enter high school prepared for future math courses.



The Director of Special Education, Ron Lopez, tasked Christine Fax-Huckaby, Sweetwater Special Education academic support teacher for the district, with conducting research on tools that would move the needle for its students, specifically in math. She aimed to find an engaging digital math curriculum that would fit well with the districts 1:1 iPad initiative, create consistency across the math curriculum for SPED students, offer differentiated learning options and, “withstand pushback and show it’s

Sweetwater Union High School District Student Data Breakdown

42,000 students in grades 7-12

20% of Sweetwater students are Spanish speaking

Approximately half of students speak a language other than English at home

worth” by providing solid data on student improvement and mastery of math skills.”

After traveling to nearby schools to gain insight on what they were using, she discovered Learning Upgrade. She witnessed students singing, speaking aloud, and truly engaged with the online curriculum.

“Not one teacher had a bad thing to say about it,” said Fax-Huckaby. “Incorporating music, color, dance – I don’t care how old you are or what ability level you’re at, I’m all over it. Students respond to Learning Upgrade like no other program we’ve ever seen. They work independently while having fun. What could be better than that?”

A Digital Curriculum For Everyone

From the most severely disabled student to a struggling learner in a traditional classroom, Learning Upgrade is designed to challenge all students at their own level and offers something for everyone including songs, quizzes, and a variety of lessons in different languages. With Learning Upgrade, students don’t move forward in the program unless they display mastery.

Learning Upgrade provides differentiated instruction through engaging content including songs, videos, and exciting games. The curriculum is fully aligned with the Common Core State Standards, and allows students to practice until they grasp and fully understand each concept. Students are awarded bronze certificates to commemorate completing a program, and gold certificates when they achieve 95% mastery in each concept.



“Incorporate music, color, dance – I don’t care how old you are or what ability level you’re at, I’m all over it.”

–Christine Fax-Huckaby

Sweetwater Special Education Academic Support Teacher

Special Ed Usage by the Numbers

Numbers based on the 2015/16 school year

370 Student Users

24,186 – Total number of lessons completed

20.8 – Average number of hours spent on Learning Upgrade

Sweetwater implemented Learning Upgrade’s Math Upgrade program for SPED students in 2011 with an extremely smooth implementation process. Students simply log in and start working. The digital natives catch on to the lessons and work through them easily without much direction. For teachers, not much professional development on the program is required. The self-paced and individually focused nature of Learning Upgrade doesn’t need a lot of planning.

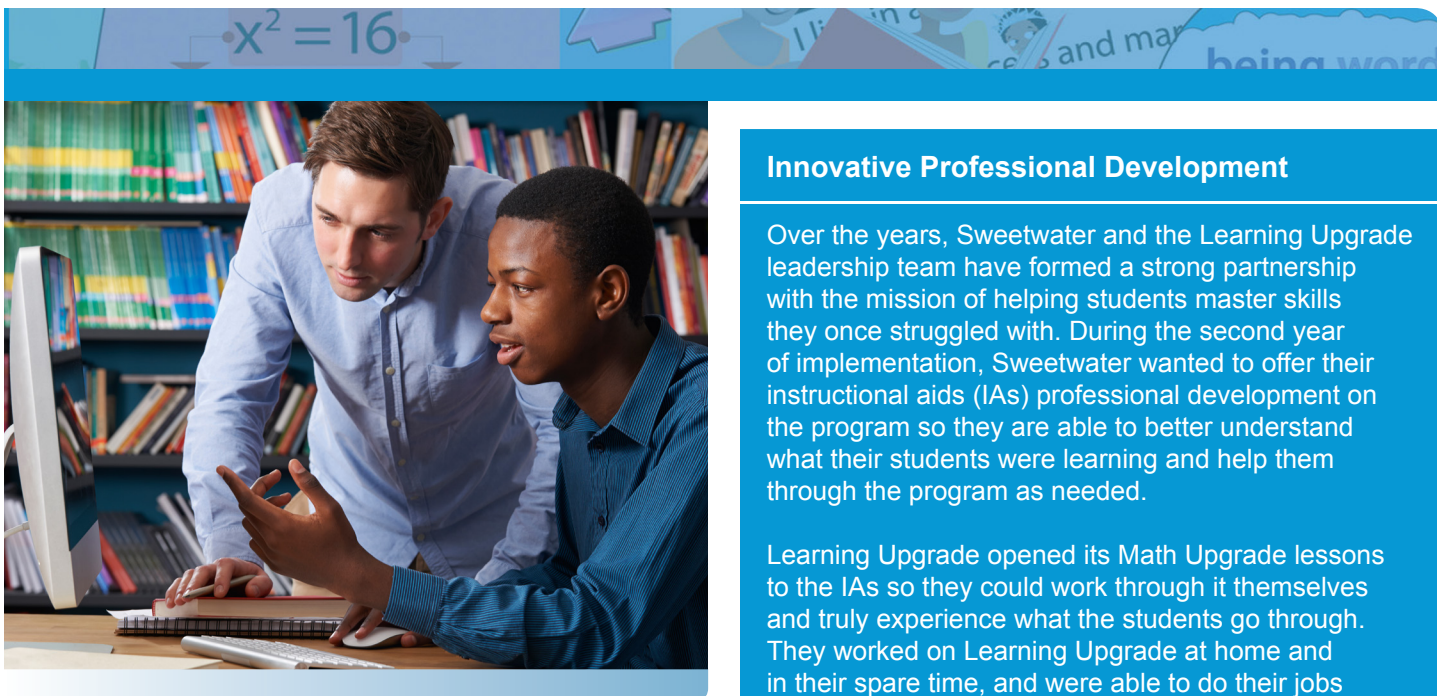
In the early implementation stages, the Learning Upgrade team traveled to Sweetwater to provide teachers professional development on the program. Teachers were able to see how Learning Upgrade can be used for whole class instruction through the use of their interactive whiteboard or panel. Learning Upgrade saves teachers valuable time in building lessons so they’re able to focus on student needs more closely.

Students enrolled in some of the districts’ special education programs engage with Learning Upgrade on a daily basis. “These are often non-diploma bound students with severe to moderate learning disabilities,” said Fax-Huckaby. “The songs, bright colors, and active tasks get students out of their seats and moving which helps with engagement, and boosts their confidence in learning. We quickly discovered that whomever uses this program on a regular basis sees growth.”

In just a few months, Sweetwater noticed a dramatic improvement in math test scores for ELL, SPED, and students in the traditional classroom. Sweetwater aimed to expand their success with the program by adopting English Upgrade, a widely known tool to help push ELLs towards reclassification and ensure mastery in English concepts. Today, Learning Upgrade is widely used throughout Sweetwater middle school general education, all SPED, and with ELL students. “We offered it to students who needed a boost in reading and/or math. They took advantage of it, and we saw a clear difference,” said Fax-Huckaby.

Blakeslee Detisch, Sweetwater SPED teacher, Montgomery Middle School Teacher of the Year, and San Diego County Teacher of the Year Candidate in 2015, implemented Learning Upgrade in her class to support struggling readers and saw tremendous growth in their decoding skills which lead to increased test scores and improved reading levels.





Innovative Professional Development

Over the years, Sweetwater and the Learning Upgrade leadership team have formed a strong partnership with the mission of helping students master skills they once struggled with. During the second year of implementation, Sweetwater wanted to offer their instructional aids (IAs) professional development on the program so they are able to better understand what their students were learning and help them through the program as needed.

Learning Upgrade opened its Math Upgrade lessons to the IAs so they could work through it themselves and truly experience what the students go through. They worked on Learning Upgrade at home and in their spare time, and were able to do their jobs more effectively and efficiently after completing the programs themselves. "A better educated group of IAs will trickle down into higher performing students. After the training, our IAs felt more respected and appreciated, which warms my heart," said Fax-Huckaby.

"Sitting in IEP meetings, I was so excited to share my student's success stories using amazing colored coded graphs, which showed improvement. I saw the face of the parents light up when they visually saw their child's growth in reading."

—Blakeslee Detisch
Sweetwater SPED Teacher

Detisch was so impressed with the program she used it as intervention with her own daughter who is a struggling reader. "In the beginning my daughter knew a hand full of vowel sounds and 6 out of 100 sight words. After using the program, she now knows 100% of her vowel sounds and 80 sight words," said Detisch. "She is continuing to work on mastering her comprehension skills and has seen a huge improvement not only in her overall reading skills, but her confidence in academics overall."

Student Improvement: "The Proof is in the Pudding"

Learning Upgrade users within Sweetwater appreciate the program's transparency from the student's perspective. Students never have to wonder, "Am I doing this right?" or "Am I getting better?" with Learning Upgrade. Upon logging in, individual progress is prominently featured on the home screen so each student can see how far they've come and what is left to accomplish in order to achieve a gold certificate.

Not only does Learning Upgrade show tangible growth, but the data and reporting features offer objective data that's used to

keep up and track progress on students with IEP's. Teachers have the ability to easily communicate with parents on their child's progress in math and reading through letters home, certificates showing mastery, and meeting goals while on a timeline.

Fax-Huckaby compares the engagement level of Learning Upgrade to watching TV, or music videos. "It's what they're used to seeing outside of school, and Learning Upgrade knows how to speak to their users. The tactics stick with students and support what we as educators are working on with each individual child."

Sweetwater students often say they get the Learning Upgrade songs and catchy jingles stuck in their heads during the day. Fax-Huckaby responds with, "That's what the program is supposed to do!"

"Fun, engaging, positive, colorful, interactive; the list goes on when describing Learning Upgrade. They throw as many fun, catchy phrases in each lesson as possible, because it's what the students remember," said Fax-Huckaby. "All it takes is one time seeing Learning Upgrade in action to believe it works. The proof is in the pudding, it works and we have the numbers and stats to prove it."

