SCHOOL:
Helen M. Smith Elementary
Clark County School District
Las Vegas, Nevada

FACTS:
- Ethnically diverse, Title 1 school
- Growing free/reduced lunch program
- 572 students
- 1 of 352 schools in Clark County
  School District, the fifth largest district
  in the country

NEED:
A comprehensive system for Response
to Intervention (RTI) that included
a more effective way to assess and
monitor reading progress, as well
as resources for data management
and reporting.

SOLUTION:
AIMSweb®, implemented 2006

RESULT:
Significant gains in student achievement;
improved data-based decision making;
increased staff collaboration among
grade levels.

Nevada Elementary School Students Take Achievement
to New Heights; School Earns Coveted Blue Ribbon
Status After Turning to AIMSweb for RTI

In an established neighborhood in
the Las Vegas valley, teachers and
administrators at Helen M. Smith
Elementary School, part of Clark County
School District, are taking students to
new heights in academic achievement.
Their goal is to overcome the odds in
this ethnically diverse, Title I school with
a growing free/reduced lunch population.
Serving PreK through grade 5, the Smith
Elementary faculty is committed to
helping all 572 students achieve to their
highest potential, and it shows: Students
consistently score above state averages,
and scores are on the rise.

“We're a small school, and our students
perform well. They call us the ‘jewel
of the desert,’” said Lory Hill, Smith
Elementary literacy specialist. She
credits AIMSweb®—Pearson’s web-
based assessment and data-management
system that enables teachers and
administrators to monitor student
progress, address deficiencies, and
recheck results quickly and often—with
playing a significant role in the
school’s success, particularly with
reading achievement.

Recently, Smith Elementary was one of
a select group across the nation, and
one of just two schools in Nevada, to
earn the coveted Blue Ribbon National
School designation from the U.S.
Department of Education. The award
recognizes schools that are either
academically superior or have made
dramatic gains in student achievement
and helped close the gap in achievement
among minority and disadvantaged

students. “A big part of winning the Blue
Ribbon was our work with AIMSweb,”
said Hill.

Four years ago, Hill, along with
the school psychologist, guidance
counselor, and a classroom teacher,
implemented AIMSweb as part of a
Response to Intervention (RTI) effort.
A comprehensive system, AIMSweb
serves as the framework for any RTI
implementation. It provides multiple
assessments designed to efficiently
benchmark and progress-monitor
basic academic skills in reading, writing,
and math for students in kindergarten
through grade 8.

Previously, Smith Elementary faculty had
made graphs by hand and managed data
manually, too. They had also used an
assessment tool for progress monitoring,
with limited success. “It was very difficult
to keep track of everything,” said Hill.

Today, their students are assessed three
times a year using AIMSweb’s universal
screening assessments to identify where
interventions are needed and to track all
students’ performance. “This gives us an
easy way to see where our students are
throughout the school year,” said Hill.

A key component of AIMSweb is a
method of monitoring student progress
through frequent, short assessments
of basic skills. Each assessment, called a
“probe,” takes one to eight minutes to
administer, and can be done individually
or in groups. “I really like the probes.
They’re an efficient way to measure
progress,” she said.
AIMSweb CASE STUDY

One of the assessments Hill uses is the Maze measure, a research-based multiple-choice task that students complete while reading silently. “It gives an accurate picture of every student’s reading ability,” she said. In addition, she finds the AIMSweb® writing and spelling measures useful.

Data at Our Fingertips

She and her colleagues enter assessment data into the AIMSweb system for analysis and reporting, and data are available to teachers at any time. Because AIMSweb is web-based, teachers can access it from school or home, a convenience Hill appreciates.

“We’re data-driven now, which is such an improvement,” she said. In the past, a teacher might have suspected that a student had learning difficulties, but lacked the tools to make an accurate evaluation, she explained. “Of course, we still use our good teacher instincts, but we don’t have to guess what’s going on—we have the data.”

Teachers across each grade level at Smith Elementary meet once a week to view and evaluate data to determine areas that need to be addressed. They also use the data when meeting with administrators to discuss classroom-level performance, or in parent conferences to talk about individual students. “Parents like seeing the data, and they’re often surprised by how much information we have about their child,” she said. “Because we have that information, we know what we need to do.”

In the past, data were much more difficult to come by. Teachers and administrators manually developed cut scores, and they aggregated norms to determine how their students were stacking up nationally. “Today, it’s all there, and we use the data any time we need to determine how to better meet a child’s needs,” she said.

Since implementation of AIMSweb, Hill has seen a surge in collaboration between the grade levels, she said. “The shift has been from, ‘This is my student’ to ‘This is our student.’ Our staff really cares about these kids, and we work collectively to help every student—the administration, the teachers, the aides—everyone. Now we have an effective way to come together for each child.”

Feeling Ownership Helps Students Grow

Hill also notes that students have experienced a shift in thinking about achievement. When shown individual assessment data, they feel ownership in the learning process. “They know where they are and where they need to be at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. They have control over their own performance.”

Hill recalled a student, challenged with learning disabilities and receiving special-education services who, like many students, was motivated by the AIMSweb graphs to reach his goals. His teacher said she would do cartwheels across the playground if he achieved them. “He knew exactly where he needed to be, and he worked so hard and met his goals. He gained both skills and confidence, and the cartwheels were a fun way to celebrate his success,” she said.

Another student seemed destined for special-education services at the beginning of the school year—a fourth grader who had difficulty even writing her name. Once she was on track with AIMSweb assessments and the right instruction and intervention, Hill said “she just blossomed.”

Hill says she sees success stories all the time. “We have teachers literally running into our rooms, saying, ‘Look where this kid ended up.’ Before, teachers worked hard, but they didn’t get that validation. Now they have the data to put kids on the right path and keep them achieving. This is precision teaching.”

After AIMSweb assessments illuminate where interventions are needed, teachers and administrators employ a variety of measures to address areas of concern. “We always start with good teaching, using best practices and differentiating instruction,” said Hill. In addition, they offer before- and after-school tutoring, where teachers typically donate their time. Teachers also supplement the curriculum with online solutions to give opportunities for repeated practice. And, they train aides and parent volunteers to work with students in the classroom.

Moving forward, Hill and her colleagues plan to expand their use of the array of reports available. They will also ensure that every faculty member is knowledgeable of all AIMSweb can do for their students. Smith Elementary is just one of 352 schools in Clark County School District, the fifth largest district in the country. Having just committed to five more years with AIMSweb, Clark County plans to build on its success across the district.

For more information on AIMSweb, visit AIMSweb.com

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