

Embodiment of a Common Core Curriculum Across Grade Levels in Alameda

Highlights

- Alameda Unified School District serves approximately 10,000 students living on Alameda Island and Bay Farm Island, areas east of San Francisco and adjacent to Oakland.
- The district’s student population is highly diverse; approximately 24 percent of students are English language learners.
- The district includes 10 elementary schools, two middle schools (and two alternative middle school programs), two comprehensive high schools, a continuing high school, an early college high school, and an adult school.
- Alameda and Encinal high schools have both made *U.S. News and World Report’s* list of best U.S. high schools in past years.
- AUSD began partnering with Inquiry By Design in 2009 on a middle school project. The partnership was then gradually expanded to grades 3 through 12 and further supported through ongoing professional development, including curriculum institutes and on-site coaching.
- Inquiry By Design professional developers are now training teacher leaders to facilitate peer learning labs and student work study sessions.

The Embodiment of Common Core

Inquiry By Design partnered with the Alameda Unified School District several years before the introduction of Common Core State Standards. But, according to Steven Fong, director of teaching and learning for AUSD, Inquiry By Design’s current curriculum and professional development embody what Common Core State Standards are all about.

“We’re expanding teachers’ views of what students can actually do. Inquiry By Design, along with other programs, is helping our students learn to think critically, handle complex texts, and write appropriately,” he said.

“Through the use of Inquiry By Design, we’re also helping teachers redefine their role in the classroom,” he said. “They’re moving more to the role of facilitator and away from the traditional ‘stand and deliver’ model.”

“We are continually striving to challenge our students,” said Andrew Lee, a middle school teacher and the school district’s liaison to Inquiry By Design. “Inquiry By Design’s curriculum and teaching approach change the dynamics of a classroom in very important ways. The focus gets shifted from finding a ‘right answer’ to thinking, talking through ideas, and analyzing information.”

Combining Curriculum with Ongoing Professional Development

When AUSD initially partnered with Inquiry By Design, the district used the company’s curriculum, coupled with professional development and learning labs, in grades 6 through 8. In each of the subsequent years, the district has added additional grades and units to the initiative. Inquiry By Design curriculum is now used by students in grades 3 through 12.

Currently, 17 schools are using Inquiry By Design resources. This year, Inquiry By Design is working with a cohort of 12 teachers across all grades to teach them how to train other teachers in best practices for using Inquiry By Design curriculum in the classroom. “Our goal is to have an internal Inquiry By Design resource in each of our schools,” said Lee.

The teachers selected for this initiative had successfully implemented Inquiry By Design curriculum in their own classrooms and were enthusiastic about sharing their knowledge and experience. “Teachers are highly influential in rallying energy for curriculum and instructional shifts,” said Lee. “Positive energy breeds positive energy.”

Lee, who has worked with Inquiry By Design since the partnership’s beginning, has seen huge strides in the teaching styles of those who have adopted the resources and inquiry-based teaching approaches.

“An inquiry-based teaching style definitely makes teaching more fun,” he said. “It also lightens the amount of planning required. But, you do have to be prepared for ‘in the moment’ discussions and questions.”

Lee said that Inquiry By Design has helped raise teachers’ expectations of students. “Teachers realize that it’s okay to let students struggle a bit.”

John Nolan, a 31-year veteran teacher, uses Inquiry By Design curriculum in his senior English classes, as well as his English language development class. “My students find the texts meaningful, relevant, and thought provoking. They provoke a lot of thinking and close reading.”

Nolan finds that his English learner students also respond positively to the texts. However, he notes that he does need to add more discussion and scaffolding in order to draw these students out and build their confidence through discussions and writing.

“The work is challenging for struggling readers, and teachers have to encourage students to keep working,” Lee said. “But, the process shows students that their teachers aren’t going to give up on them and that our job is to help get them unstuck. And, ultimately, they realize they can do it, which is a very good lesson.”

A Teaching Approach for the New World of Education

While the district has been recognized nationally for its outstanding high schools, AUSD administrators are not content to rest on laurels.

“This is one of the most challenging times in education,” said Barbara Adams, assistant superintendent. “It’s no longer teaching based on a single textbook. We view teaching with a different mindset now and use classroom materials in different ways. Too often, we haven’t trained professionals to teach in this new way and to effectively manage the change.

“Additionally, our population of students is changing fast and drastically. There is more diversity than ever before. You can’t take a homogenous approach to teaching and assume that it will work for every student in the same way.”

Adams concluded by stressing the importance of using teaching approaches to bring out the potential in every student. “Even if you’ve got 85 percent of your students working at or above grade level, that leaves 15 percent who are not. And that’s just not acceptable.”