Advocating for Struggly in a Title 1 District

Harris Elementary School in the Gilbert Public School District in Arizona is a Title I school with over 80% of the students receiving free or reduced meals and a significant number of English learners. Harris focuses on student growth and academic achievement. At the same time, their dedicated teaching staff does “Whatever it Takes” to ensure students’ overall success.

Tanya Dunlap is a 13-year veteran math specialist and coach working with kindergarten - 6th grade students. She believes that education is a path for students to change the cycle of poverty many of them face. Together, Tanya and the teachers she coaches use Struggly in their classrooms to infuse a growth mindset approach into mathematics teaching. With Struggly, students get to actively live in a growth mindset while deepening their mathematical understanding.

Embracing Struggle in the Classroom

Tanya and her teachers noted that the way they introduced Struggly to their students seemed key to the outcomes they saw. Sharing an introductory video of Dr. Boaler explaining the importance and value of struggle has an impact on her students.

“After a few weeks of working on Struggly, I walked into a 2nd-grade classroom and saw students having a tough time figuring something out. One of the students said, ‘This is tough, like Struggly. Our brains are growing!’ The other students agreed, and they kept on persevering through it!” Tanya says.

Students in an Active Role

One particularly unique aspect of Struggly tasks is the lack of instructions. Students are automatically placed into an active thinking role when they start to play their very first task, as they must explore the task to figure out how it works.

“Without directions for tasks in Struggly, students have to figure out what is required. They have to try, make mistakes, learn from them, and try again. Students learn that making mistakes is okay and part of learning. They build confidence and the ability to persevere each time they work on a task. The critical thinking and problem-solving skills the students develop will translate to success in other areas, including outside of the classroom,” Tanya explains.

Tanya notes that the lack of instructions is not only engaging for students, but it simultaneously reinforces a growth mindset and strengthens critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Some educators worry that this lack of instructions will leave students unsure of what to do, but Tanya explains, “I think adults are more concerned about no instructions than the students! For the most part, students are able to figure out what they are supposed to do without any instructions. I haven’t heard students complaining about a lack of instructions. In fact, having no instructions allows our ELL students to engage in Struggly like their English-speaking peers, which is fantastic!”
The Accessibility of Struggly

The accessibility of Struggly, along with the low-floor, high-ceiling nature of the tasks, makes it a great fit for students from a wide range of math backgrounds and previous math achievement. Over time, Tanya and her teachers saw the positive impact on their students in many ways—they were more willing to persist through challenge, less apprehensive of making mistakes when learning new material, and showing signs of a growth mindset in mathematics and beyond.

“Our students are more willing to take chances with their learning. Some students are less stressed or frustrated when they make mistakes as they know their brain is growing,” said Tanya.

One 3rd grade student shared, “I like Struggly because it helps me learn. It is fun and challenging, and I like to be challenged.”

Another 5th-grade student described, “I love Struggly because it teaches you a growth mindset. You learn all types of things like fractions, decimals, money, and patterns. It has a lot of different challenges that really make me think.”

From a Pilot to a District-Wide Use

The general success of the pilot of Struggly in Tanya’s school during the tail end of the 2022-2023 school year convinced her that Gilbert Unified School District should adopt Struggly more widely across their K-6 grades. So, Tanya set out to advocate for the adoption of Struggly at the district level.

She started by inviting her principal into the classrooms using Struggly to see the impact for himself. After witnessing Struggly in action during his walk-throughs and seeing what it could do for students, the principal was on board and in support of a wider Struggly adoption. Next, Tanya reached out to the district Title 1 Coordinator to advocate for the district-wide adoption of Struggly. Gilbert USD Schools expanded their Struggly license to 2,000 students across 55 teachers for the 2023-2024 school year.

Today, Tanya and the teachers she coaches use Struggly with all their students in grades 3 through 6. The students work on Struggly for at least 30 minutes, anywhere from 3 to 5 days a week. Both the students and the teachers love Struggly.

“Teachers and students look forward to Struggly time, knowing students' brains are growing mathematically!”

Tanya Dunlap

The experience of Tanya and the teachers and students in Gilbert USD is not unique! Here at Struggly, we regularly hear stories like this one, where the use of Struggly impacts not just student math learning but also their confidence, engagement, and growth mindset development.

If you are interested in learning more about how Struggly may be a good fit for your K-8 students, please email us at classroom@struggly.com or check out our website struggly.com