



Case Study

From ELL to AP, Chicago's District 99 Boosts Learning for All Students



Paper is right at the center of the bullseye,
which is student learning.

— Gina Ziccardi, Associate Superintendent for Student Learning, District 99, IL

About District 99

Located just west of Chicago proper, Community High School District 99 (District 99 for short) includes the densely populated suburbs of Downers Grove and Woodridge, Illinois, as well as portions of five adjacent towns. The mission of this high-performing district is crystal clear—to provide an environment that is both caring and challenging, so that all students will become lifelong learners.


The district serves a diverse set of students. Many come from prosperous homes with a strong social structure that supports their education. At the same time, a large portion of the student body faces greater challenges. For example, there is a rapidly growing population of English-language learners (ELLs), and more than 20 percent of students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, the district refuses to draw lines when it comes to serving students. “We don’t divide our students into the haves and the have-nots,” adds Gina Ziccardi, Associate Superintendent for Student Learning. Rather, the district’s goal is to provide the support every student needs to succeed. The same spirit of inclusion informs administration and staff.

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The school has won accolades for its ability to serve both struggling and high-performing students. At its North High School, more than half the students are enrolled in advanced placement (AP) classes, and 44% have passed at least one AP exam. At Downers Grove South High School, the students, nearly three in 10 of whom are from economically disadvantaged homes, far outperform state averages in both math and reading proficiency, according to U.S. News & World Report.

District 99 at a glance

	Enrollment	English Learners	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged
	4,890	3.3%	24.1%

The Dilemma

Reaching students who can't take advantage of traditional extra help services

Though already a high-performing district, CSD 99 was determined to provide students the extra help they needed. However, the traditional after-school model was just not working for many students.

"Kids have sports. They work. They have all these extra commitments. So in terms of interventions, we were looking for a solution that would work on the student's time versus our time," says Ziccardi. "We needed something that was available 24/7."

Ziccardi also didn't think it was fair that some kids had private tutoring or extra support from family members in the home, while others were on their own. "We were looking for a solution that could really benefit all learners," says Ziccardi.

In their commitment to reach every student, the district even considered transporting teachers out into the community to serve students who could not attend extra help sessions on school grounds. But they lacked the resources to provide services at that scale. Teachers were already stretched thin, and private tutors in Chicagoland were prohibitively expensive.

Still, the district was determined to provide help where help was needed, whether students were high achievers in AP classes or struggling just to get by.



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The Solution

A 1:1 tutoring program that reaches every single student

The learning challenges created by COVID forced District 99 to become creative in meeting its long-term commitment to provide 1:1 learning experiences for any student who needed it. By chance, Ziccardi heard about Paper from a colleague who had successfully rolled out the solution in his district. When she began investigating Paper's platform, she realized that it was "in the center of the bullseye—which is student learning."

Paper provides learners with unlimited 24/7 homework help, writing feedback and study support at a predictable fixed cost. Specialized tutors deliver on-demand, 1:1 academic support in English, Spanish, Mandarin and French across more than 200 academic subject areas—so students can access expert extra help whenever and however they need it.

"Very often, learning interventions are targeted to a certain set of students that meet a certain set of criteria," says Ziccardi. By contrast, Paper was a single solution that could reach all students. "Paper could help everyone from AP students to English learners and special education students," she says.

"We know that students are busy. We know that families are busy," says Ziccardi, so 24/7 availability was "really what led us to Paper." Paper's commitment to the Socratic method was also critical, since it harmonized with the school's commitment both to care for and to challenge students.

Teachers are constantly encouraging students to "learn less helplessness and become more independent," says Marjorie Thomas, an English teacher and literacy coach at District 99. And Paper helped teachers reinforce that goal. "That's one of the things that I absolutely loved about using Paper," says Thomas.

Lisa Lichtman, an instructional coordinator specializing in technology, also singled out the Socratic approach of Paper's tutors. Paper provides "actual partnership in learning, not just someone who gives students the answer," says Lichtman.



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Results

A tool that serves everyone, from students and teachers to parents and administrators

Despite rolling out Paper in the middle of a pandemic, student adoption of the platform steadily grew because students recognized its value. “We have the data from the students saying how great Paper is and thanking their teachers for it,” says Lichtman

“The only complaint I’ve heard from students is that they would like the tutor to just give them the answer,” says Ziccardi. “As an educator, I think that’s a wonderful complaint.”

Thomas, who teaches English, was particularly enthusiastic about Paper’s writing and revision services. By making Paper a required element of writing assignments, she got “much, much better products. All the kids who used Paper at least once did very well.”



Once teachers started experiencing Paper, they were coming back to me saying, ‘Holy cow, wow, this is awesome.’

— Lisa Lichtman,
Instructional Coordinator,
District 99, IL

Learning Moments

5,759

Learning Moments

3,531

Sessions

2,228

Essays

1,834

Students Active

But Paper didn’t just help students turn in one good writing assignment. Students also gained a deeper understanding of the fact that writing is a multi-step process, Thomas says, and the sense that there is “a standard of excellence and that we’re all working toward it.”

Paper also got great reviews from teachers. “Once teachers started experiencing Paper, they were coming back to me saying, ‘Holy cow, wow, this is awesome,’” says Lichtman.

Results

Thomas was one such teacher. She particularly liked the fact that, by removing some of the hard work of marking up drafts of writing assignments, she had more time to spend one-on-one with students who were really struggling.

Parents were also quick to get on board once they saw the benefits. “Once math teachers told parents about Paper, they saw more engagement, increased learning and increased achievement,” says Lichtman. “I think the parents have been blown away by this resource.”

Likewise, school administrators were very pleased with the rollout. “I work with a lot of different providers,” says Ziccardi. “Paper goes that extra step. I think that’s really important and speaks to their commitment.”

What’s Next: Deepening Relationships Among Students, Teachers and Tutoring

Now that the initial rollout is complete, the district wants to expand Paper’s reach. While much of the activity on Paper was concentrated on writing and math, Ziccardi wants to expand adoption across all subjects.

To help achieve this, Ziccardi says the district is planning a bigger rollout in their second year, including requiring teachers to embed Paper in their syllabi.

Word of mouth among teachers is another factor that will lead to increased adoption across subjects. For example, instructional coaches have been critical in spreading the word, Lichtman says. And she expects more organic growth in the coming year because, as she puts it, “This product is amazing.”

PAPER

Paper partners with K-12 schools throughout the U.S. and Canada to give every student an equal opportunity to excel academically. Our educational support system (ESS) provides learners with unlimited 24/7 homework help, writing feedback, and study support at a predictable fixed cost. Paper's specialized tutors deliver on-demand, 1:1 academic support in four languages across more than 200 academic subject areas—so students always have access to expert extra help exactly when, where, and how they need it.

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