# Texas District Finds Formula to Bring Curriculum Content to Special Education Students and English Language Learners

Laredo Independent School District (LISD) is located along the Mexican border in Texas, and 99% of its 24,000-plus students are bi-lingual. Of these, over 35% have limited English proficiency (LEP). Among the district's 3,300 special education (SPED) students, the percentage with LEP is even greater. In addition, over 90% of the students attending the 21 elementary, four middle, and three high schools in the district qualify for Title I. Given these challenges, it is not surprising that many of LISD's students were not meeting state competency standards.

## THE PROBLEM
### New high-stakes tests up the ante

In 2003, Texas introduced its annual assessment program, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). For the past two years, school districts administered the test and received notification of the percentage of their students meeting standards set by the State Board of Education. This year, however, the stakes will be higher, because the number of grades and subjects covered by TAKS will increase and student performance will be tied to No Child Left Behind accountability standards. Persistent low ratings could mean state takeover of individual schools or a district.

While only 5% of Laredo ISD's SPED students met state standards on TAKS last year, Alma Rodriquez, Assistive Technology Coordinator for the LISD SPED department and a former student with learning disabilities herself, does not believe that the scores truly reflect student abilities. "How," she asks, "can students who can't read or speak English, and therefore have limited or no access to grade-level curriculum content, be expected to meet state proficiency standards?" To support her point, Alma notes that she has observed teachers using below-grade-level curriculum materials with middle and high school SPED students. "Imagine how demeaning and discouraging that must be for those students," she remarks. That's why Alma has been determined to find a way for SPED students to access curriculum at their intellectual and not their functional level.

## THE SOLUTION
### An initial pilot proves promising

In 2001, a better way of accessing curriculum content presented itself. Alma attended a demonstration of *Kurzweil 3000*—reading, writing, and learning software for struggling students—and immediately saw how the program could serve as a bridge to curriculum for SPED students. An opportunity soon arose to test the software with her nephew. Though a bright and alert first grader in the Laredo School District, he was unable to read or write and had fallen behind his classmates. An evaluation showed that her nephew qualified for Special Education, and at Alma's request, *Kurzweil 3000* was included in his Independent Education Plan (IEP). Over the next two years, Alma worked



Students using *Kurzweil 3000* in class.

with her nephew using *Kurzweil 3000*. By the end of third grade, he was reading and writing at grade level and no longer qualified for Special Education. Unfortunately, without the continued support of *Kurzweil 3000*, he started to fall behind again. "My nephew's experience taught me a lesson," recalls Alma. "It made me realize that *Kurzweil 3000* is not a tool just for SPED students, but should be available to any struggling reader." When *Kurzweil 3000* was reintroduced to her nephew, his grades again improved.

### Small successes pave the way

As news of Alma's nephew's success with *Kurzweil 3000* spread, several SPED teachers requested the program for individual students. Overall academic performance of these students improved as well. Encouraged by these successes, Alma convinced LISD to expand use of the software in its SPED curriculum.

Over the next two years, the district's five licenses increased to 20. "Then in 2004, faced with large numbers of SPED students who needed to significantly improve their TAKS scores," Alma recounts, "it became clear that something dramatic had to be done to give these students access to curriculum content." Between 2004 and 2005, LISD's *Kurzweil 3000* licenses grew to over 1,000. Licenses were purchased entirely with SPED

funds. "We were able to make *Kurzweil 3000* more widely available," remarks Alma, "by taking advantage of a new law that encourages schools to use Special Education funds to reduce referrals to Special Education."

Once purchased, *Kurzweil 3000* was loaded onto computers in science and social studies labs, as well as resource classrooms in all the middle and high schools. In addition, more than 600 SPED students were given access to *Kurzweil 3000* as part of their IEP.

## THE RESULTS
### Training spurs teacher interest

Not surprisingly, providing *Kurzweil 3000* training to teachers and students has recently taken up increasing amounts of Alma's time. Last year alone, she did over 90 trainings. Many were day-long Saturday classes. In addition, she delivered school-based *Kurzweil 3000* Foundations Workshops using training materials published by Kurzweil Educational Systems. Alma used incentives to entice teachers to attend the initial trainings. They received in-service credit and a stipend. This year, teachers who attend a set number of trainings will be able to purchase a laptop computer for a modest monthly sum.

The more training teachers get, Alma has found, the greater their interest in using *Kurzweil 3000* with all their students. They get excited that *Kurzweil 3000* can read text in both English or Spanish, and students can instantly access an online dictionary and thesaurus in either language. In fact, demand for the software among SPED and mainstream classroom teachers has been so strong that the district is piloting a program in three elementary schools where every classroom will have access to *Kurzweil 3000*.

### Collaboration facilitates implementation

"We've been very fortunate," Alma observes, "in having a close working relationship with our local Kurzweil Educational Systems representative. He's been very helpful in providing technical assistance, guidance on upgrades, and locating sources for digital materials."

Putting in place a system to scan and store electronic material has also been essential to LISD's successful *Kurzweil 3000* implementation. Currently, Alma has ten computers with scanners in her office, which her staff uses to scan print material into *Kurzweil 3000*. Alma also finds that for small jobs, most middle and high school students can scan their own materials.

Right now, Alma distributes *Kurzweil 3000* files on CDs, as there is not yet a central repository for scanned materials. The district, however, is planning to move from stand-alone computers to a networked system. Doing so will provide students and teachers with maximum flexibility in accessing *Kurzweil 3000,* as well as allow for more efficient storage and sharing of scanned materials.

### Planning ahead reaps rewards

Going forward, Alma plans to help teachers integrate *Kurzweil 3000* into their curriculum. She will also present to three newly-established district leadership teams responsible for maintaining instructional standards. She wants to make sure they understand the critical role that *Kurzweil 3000* plays in making curriculum accessible to all students. In addition, LISD plans to seek approval from state officials for students using *Kurzweil 3000* in the classroom to use it as an accommodation on TAKS.

Now that most SPED teachers and students, as well as 50% of classroom teachers, have been trained on *Kurzweil 3000*, Alma expects classroom grades and standardized test scores to improve. "Right now," Alma says proudly, "we've accomplished the most important task—getting teachers and students enthusiastic about *Kurzweil 3000* and opening the door to real learning for all our students." BP