

Bringing a Diverse Population Together at Passages Charter School

By Lucas McConnell



Diverse doesn't begin to describe [Passages Charter School](#) in Chicago, Illinois – the school has 428 students who speak more than 36 different languages. Karyn Keenan, a SMART Exemplary Educator and second-grade teacher, says the school's diversity doesn't end with the variety of languages spoken there.

"Eighty-nine percent of our students are on free or reduced-cost lunch [plans], and they range from non-English speakers to students who are proficient in English," Keenan says. "Our focus is on immigrant and refugee children, as well as neighborhood students."

Communicating what the students need to understand but knowing that many of them cannot speak English proficiently can be a daunting challenge for any teacher. But first-grade teacher Karla Bush says the [SMART Board interactive whiteboard](#) is helping her take on that challenge.

"When I feel I can't communicate something to my students in English, I love that I can model or use visual aids – like actually splitting something in half, for example," Bush says. "It's great for kinesthetic, hands-on learners. It's given me more tools to reach them."

New ways to explore lessons

These tools include new and more interactive ways of exploring lesson content, which ensures that English language learners get information in ways that helps these students understand the lessons and feel involved.

"We teach with the Core Knowledge® Curriculum, which is a relatively serious curriculum for first and second graders. We study both the Civil War, which includes Clara Barton's house, and immigration, which includes Ellis Island," Keenan says. "I have taken virtual tours to both those places through websites before, but being able to use a SMART Board and stay at the front of the classroom really helps me.

"I don't have to be hiding behind my computer. I can be right up front, like a virtual tour guide, leading the kids through those different places. It's awesome because we can't go to Clara Barton's house and we can't visit Ellis Island."

“Once I got my SMART Board installed and I could make visually appealing presentations, I was able to reach students who were so hard to get focused before. I was able to capture their attention, and they were so engaged by being able to touch the board and move content.”

Karla Bush, First-Grade Teacher, Passages Charter School, Chicago, Illinois

It also saves money on art classes.

“It’s like I was teaching in an archaic way before I had my SMART Board. I was actually drawing on a whiteboard and I thought, ‘Oh my gosh! An education really is at the mercy of how good of an artist your teacher is.’” Bush says. “But with the SMART Board, I type everything. I put it on a spreadsheet and I’m able to take computer-oriented material and use it. It felt like such a relief – I felt liberated.”

More than just lesson help

For Keenan and Bush, reaching their students means more than helping them understand lessons. They say the SMART Board interactive whiteboard helps English language learners develop social skills and practical knowledge.

“It gives students a social venue. The language [that] English language learners usually acquire first is conversational – it’s survival speech, like ‘It’s my turn’

or ‘Stop it,’” Bush says. “When I put them in that social setting of using the SMART Board to problem solve with a peer, it gives them the chance to use that language and to use those problem-solving skills.”

The SMART Board interactive whiteboard also helps students develop the skills they need in a technology-oriented world.

“One thing that our kids struggle with is that they don’t have a ton of technology at home, so it’s great to have an interactive tool at the front of the classroom where we can model how technology is used,” Keenan says.

Bush agrees that understanding and intuitively using technology helps her students engage in lessons and provides them with an increasingly necessary skill set.

“Once I got my SMART Board installed and I could make visually appealing presentations, I was able to reach students who were so hard to get focused before. I was able to capture their attention, and they were so engaged by being able to touch the board and move content,” Bush says. “It’s almost a survival skill now that technology is so prevalent in everyday life. It’s important to be taught.”

And at Passages Charter School, language *and* technology skills aren’t just being taught to English language learners – they are being enthusiastically embraced by them.



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