

# School District Uses Influencer Training™ to Improve Student Performance



## INDUSTRY: EDUCATION

### ABOUT NEBO SCHOOL DISTRICT

Nebo School District is a public school district in Utah County, Utah, operating 40 schools that serve more than 30,000 students. The district's mission is to provide each student with quality instruction, learning opportunities, and educational environments which inspire classroom success, personal excellence, and responsible citizenship.

### THE CHALLENGE

J. Lynn Jones is a VitalSmarts veteran. An elementary school principal for sixteen years, he became a certified trainer in Crucial Conversations® and used those tools to help his school boost achievement. When he was promoted to director at the Nebo School District in central Utah, he added a certification in Crucial Confrontations®. He taught both courses to most of his six-hundred person staff and also offered them to other administrators, teachers, and support staff in his district.

But his biggest challenge in his expanded role was a persistent one. He was responsible for special education in the district and focused particularly on the special education teachers in its twenty-seven elementary schools. These are the instructors who give extra help to mainstreamed students with learning disabilities. And they didn't have a history or culture of being accountable to progress their students.

"We had a number of veteran teachers who never had high expectations, and the kids never performed well. The teachers used the excuse that 'these kids have disabilities,'" he said. "In the end, we weren't seeing good instruction and we weren't seeing good results."

Of about sixty teachers, Jones was comfortable with only five or six of their results. But because he was not a career special educator, he lacked immediate credibility to shake things up by himself.

About the same time he came to this realization, he added another VitalSmarts certification to his credentials: Influencer Training™.

### THE TRAINING COURSE

"The timing was perfect," he remembers. "I was incredibly motivated to take on this big challenge of achieving consistency among our teachers to improve the literacy rates."

Armed with the tools he learned in Influencer, Jones first sought to bring a few allies on board who would have credibility with the teachers. He identified six opinion leaders among his teachers whom others would listen to. He invited them to



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be part of a special team to help boost performance among their peers. Rather than tell the opinion leaders what to do, he first trained them in Influencer.

Then he asked them to collaborate on determining “vital behaviors” that should be encouraged among the district’s special education teachers—in other words, crucial actions that if taken consistently would lead to the desired outcomes. They identified three vital behaviors:

- Regularly test and record literacy scores.
- Establish and repeat a daily routine that contains five literacy components.
- Hold each other accountable.

“We made the decision we weren’t going to require specific materials, but rather, require the teachers to do certain things,” Jones said. “It was exciting for the teachers to see they could have a different curriculum than their peers, but still do the same vital behaviors.”

After identifying the vital behaviors, the team asked themselves, “*WE* understand the value of these behaviors, now how do we persuade the other teachers to get on board?” Jones and the opinion leaders used the Six Sources of Influence™ outlined in Influencer Training to guide their action plan.

## THE RESULTS

Jones put out the word to all the special education teachers that this team was putting together a voluntary improvement project. “It was an invitation, not an expectation, to participate,” he said.

Sixteen teachers joined the six opinion leaders for the first academic year in the project. Among other steps, they participated in:

- Monthly meetings to share success stories.
- Quarterly events to receive training on the tools and routines that were being encouraged.

- Regular classroom visits by master teachers from the project team to offer feedback.
- Small prizes and incentives for using the vital behaviors.

Excitement built as the participating teachers saw progress in their students. They naturally shared their enthusiasm with fellow special education teachers. The next year, an additional twenty-seven teachers volunteered to join the program, and “that’s when it really exploded,” Jones said.

For example, he got a phone call from a teacher who had initially been resistant to the new program. She told him, “I’ve never had progress like this in twenty-five years of teaching. Thank you so much for giving me tools that lead to my students’ progression.”

That teacher doubled the number of her students who progressed one grade level during the course of the year.

By using the Influencer model to change teaching methods, the special education program was able to release increasing numbers of previously underperforming students back to regular schooling. Even after graduating the program’s top performers, the remaining special education students maintained their average scores on standardized tests.

In two years, the number of students released into the regular school system nearly doubled:

Year	Number of students released into regular school system
2009	244
2010	305
2011	462

Because of the program’s success, Jones eventually changed it from voluntary to required participation. He called a meeting of all the teachers

and likened the project to a new medicine that had been successful in clinical trials. He told them, “It’s working so well, we can’t allow you not to do it anymore. You need to adopt these vital behaviors; that’s the expectation.”

By this time, more than two-thirds of the teachers were already on board.

“When a teacher is surrounded by forty-nine others who are already doing this, that’s pretty powerful social motivation,” Jones said.

The Influencer program was so successful within special education that the district is now piloting it to boost literacy rates in the rest of the student population.

At a pilot elementary school, fifty-five fifth-graders scored well below average on their literacy evaluation. Their teachers embraced the new literacy program, welcoming visits and feedback from the master teachers, and adopting the other vital behaviors. By the time those students started sixth grade the following year, the number of students below average was down to seven—an 87 percent reduction in students’ literacy scores measuring below average.

Jones credits Influencer for the success of the program.

“I’m so enthusiastic about this training because it’s changed my life,” he said. “It gave me a chance to influence others in a positive way. I love the title Influencer because that’s what it does. It’s perfect for leaders like me because I can impact the lives of hundreds of people.”

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE:

- Doubled the number of special education students released into the regular school system.
- The Influencer program is now being used across the entire district to boost literacy rates. Pilot results show an 87% reduction in scores measuring below average.

**About Influencer Training™**—Create rapid and sustainable behavior change in your organization with Influencer Training. Equip participants with a step-by-step approach for becoming exponentially more successful at changing their own and others’ behavior. This training infuses classroom time with original video clips of modern-day change agents who have solved some of the world’s most complex business and societal problems. The Influencer course delivers an award-winning, proven model for changing behavior by applying Six Sources of Influence™ to solve your most persistent problems.

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