

SIPPS Teacher Spotlight: Donna Carrington-Shelley, Primary Support Teacher

By Rachel Solis | Categories: SIPPS, Teacher Spotlight, Thought Leadership

Collaborative Classroom is honored to spotlight California educator Donna Carrington-Shelley for her dedication to nurturing the heads and hearts of her students.

In this interview with Rachel Solis, Donna shares her one-year journey implementing the K-12 SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) program during a school year that was anything but normal. With over 30 years of teaching experience, Donna reflects on what SIPPS has done for her as a practitioner and for her students in becoming confident, independent readers and learners. (Caution: get a tissue ready!)

Tell us a little about yourself, your school and district, and the students that you serve.

I have been teaching for 31 years, with most of that time spent in elementary. Interestingly, I received my single subject teaching credential in Social Studies, thinking I might teach high school history or go to law school.

Currently I am a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA), more specifically a Primary Support Teacher (PST) at Westminster School District located in Orange County, California.

As a PST, I work with K-2 students on foundational skills at Finley Elementary School. We are a Title 1 public magnet school with approximately 400 students, primarily students who are learning English as a second language.

What is the most rewarding part of being an educator for you?

My mom says “my rewards are my children’s successes.” I’ve always taken that to heart, and I feel my students’ successes. There’s nothing you can feel as a teacher that is as great as when a student discovers or achieves their potential. When they say, “Look at me. I can do it. I’m a reader.”—it’s an indescribable feeling!

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My principal recently contacted me about two of my most struggling students. They had told her that I taught them to read and they were really good readers now. I witnessed them going from not knowing letter sounds to experiencing success in reading a story fluently. [She wells up, understandably.] We have a long way to go but to know they feel so good, so empowered, and so successful when they read a story and can do it fluently—there’s *nothing* better!

How long have you been implementing *SIPPS*? Tell us a little about your *SIPPS* journey and implementation.

I received the *SIPPS* program right before the pandemic caused schools to shut down. I’d been using Results and BPST [from the California Reading & Literature Project] previously and was looking for the “how” instead of having to pull it all together myself.

While researching something that aligned with our district’s professional learning, I came across John Shefelbine’s research and work in the *SIPPS* program. I appreciated not having to piece things together. I was trained in balanced literacy and guided reading, so I felt like after 31 years, I needed to start over and focus my efforts on better understanding foundational skills and *how* to teach them. From that point, I went onto the Collaborative Classroom website [via the Learning Portal trial] and thought, “This is a match!”

After tons of research on the Science of Reading, I shared all of this information with my principal, who in turn shared it out in a larger conversation. The district listened to us, and we came together with many other sites that were starting to implement *SIPPS* as well.

Our team of PSTs began to use the program to collaborate and learn together. It’s one thing to get training—that’s one and done! But with all the supports offered at Collaborative Classroom, I can go a little deeper, ask questions, and even reach out to [Collaborative Classroom managers of educational partnerships] Rachel or Emily. As a team of PSTs, we can watch lesson videos on the Learning Portal, read blogs together, etc.

The “as needed” learning options supported me because my implementation and this school year have *not* been traditional! I didn’t feel alone. I had a team now.

What do you appreciate about *SIPPS*?

So much! From the student side, it meets them at their point of need. It’s systematic. They know the routines. They’re not having to second-guess what we’re doing today, and that’s huge for the kids. Because we’re looking at small chunks of their learning, they’re feeling successful.

There’s nothing more frustrating to a student than when something is so beyond their learning, they cannot attain it and might not even try. With *SIPPS*, students are set up to be able to do what you’re asking them to do, and there’s immediate feedback with corrective routines for me as needed.

From the teacher’s side, *SIPPS* is not “one-and-done” professional development—I learn as I use it. When I’m ready for the next steps in deepening my implementation and understanding, I have an arsenal of resources: our California *SIPPS* support group; the larger *SIPPS* pilot group that joined across California; blogs from Collaborative Classroom; the *Teacher Learning System* in the Learning Portal; or even QR codes in the lessons themselves.

I truly appreciated it, as part of a group, or at my pace, or as needed. Sometimes I had to sit and mull it over. It’s improving my practice, and I’m getting to a deeper level of implementation with it.

What have you noticed about your students’ learning and engagement?

I see their confidence going up and their engagement goes up. They feel they’re being successful. It’s a positive experience for them. We’re focused on their mastery, their progress, what they need to work on. Students feel successful in the lessons themselves because

we're modeling and giving them corrective feedback. No guessing!

How has *SIPPS* affected or changed your own teaching and learning during remote and/or in-person instruction?

Ha! I thought I was a researcher and a reader before. *SIPPS* has really helped me to do more.

All the virtual resources have been fabulous—it's now wide open as to when I want to be learning and doing things. *SIPPS* has helped with collaboration in our PLNs [professional learning networks], and with the resources online I can use them anytime and teach remotely.

When schools shut down, I didn't have some of my binders. I had the Collaborative Classroom Learning Portal and it gave me options, so I could use my document camera or the *SIPPS* online assessment to help me give placement assessments and start my groups. I could use the QR codes, or the videos. I could share the link to the books or in SeeSaw. I was able to fine-tune what we were doing and meet students' needs.

What experiences or resources have been most instrumental in getting you and your colleagues to feel confident and competent in teaching *SIPPS*?

All 13 of us Primary Support Teachers from across the district attended Collaborative Classroom's *SIPPS* summer [virtual] training experience. The other experience that was powerful and bonding was the California *SIPPS* pilot that we participated in most recently.

Being able to use the reminders within *SIPPS* lessons to stop and check your practice—the Instructional Self-Checks that come up as I am teaching—brings me back and reminds me to stay focused on quality implementation. Those self-checks give me the questions to think about ("Is this child ready to go on?" "Be assessed?") and then plan accordingly based on that information.

My professional background has taught me to think in terms of *plan, teach, reflect, apply* and this has been my mantra as I'm implementing *SIPPS* using the resources that are embedded in the program. I ask myself: "Did I set the child up for success? Did I overly scaffold?" Kids come to school wanting to learn! It's my job to keep that feeling alive.

What advice or insights would you share with an educator who is new to *SIPPS*?

I think it's helpful to understand what the Science of Reading is. It helps you to understand what the foundational skills are and how they should be taught and assessed based on what the research tells us. It leads naturally to *SIPPS*, and it is how to teach.

For new teachers, I would suggest using the *Teacher Learning System*. Watch the videos there on how to administer the placement assessment or analyze data, and I'd certainly recommend watching a video of a lesson taught and follow along with a lesson as you observe.

Also join the Collaborative Classroom Facebook group and the *SIPPS* Facebook page. Attend the professional learning opportunities that are offered in the email newsletters and on Collaborative Classroom's website. All the materials and lessons are there to support you.