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[Home](#) > [Success stories: Urban](#) > [KS: Elementary closes the achievement gap](#)

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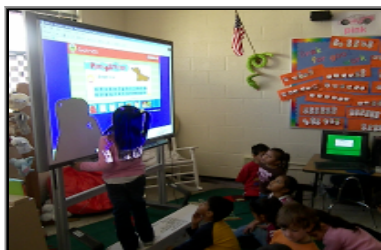
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KS: Elementary closes the achievement gap



Making it visual and making it fun fixes words and concepts in students' minds.

Summary: While language and income issues can be barriers to student success, this school's literacy frameworks (for all grade levels) provides teachers with a structure for developing students' aptitude in reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Through consistent professional development, data-driven decision making, and high expectations for all students, this school has closed the achievement gap for low income students and English language learners.

With a thriving beef packing industry and opportunities for agricultural work, Garden City, Kansas, a town of 36,000 tucked away in the southwestern section of the state, has seen its Hispanic population increase significantly over the past twenty years. In 2006, at Georgia Matthews Elementary School, a Title I school in the Garden City

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School District, of the 290 children in early childhood classes through fourth grade, 63 percent were Hispanic, over 60.7 percent of children received reduced or free lunch, and 50 percent did not count English as their first language.

Georgia Matthews students consistently exceed state standards and their No Child Left Behind targets as teachers work hard to see that language

and income issues aren't barriers to success. In January 2007, Georgia Matthews Elementary School received a Distinguished School Program award from the National Association of Title I State Directors for its efforts to close the achievement gap between students who are English Language Learners (ELL) or free/reduced lunch students and other students.

District characteristics
Name: Georgia Matthews Elementary
State: Kansas
Type: Small urban
Grades: Pre-k-4
Enrollment: 290
Students per teacher: 17

Enrollment characteristics
Economically disadvantaged: 60.7%
English language learners: 62.3%
Students with disabilities: n.a.
White: 28%
Black: 1.5%
Hispanic: 62.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander: n.a.
American Indian/Alaska Native: n.a.
Other: 7.64%
Source: Kansas State Department of Education

Creating a framework for success

According to Leigh Ann Roderick, the Garden City School District Literacy Coordinator, "the state's 1999 assessment of its literacy programs and No Child Left Behind mandates spurred the District to begin our own self-assessment of our literacy efforts. We then created literacy frameworks for all grade levels from kindergarten to high school to provide teachers with a structure for developing students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills." Core curricula for literacy and mathematics, the introduction of part-time literacy coaches in schools, and abundant opportunities for staff development also set the stage for improving test scores. District schools follow a five-year cycle of planning and assessment that keeps them on target.

Addressing language needs

To understand and address the needs of ELL students, Georgia Matthews teachers received training from the Sheltered Instruction Observation Program (SIOP) via Kansas State University. "This training gave our teachers a better understanding of how students with another base language learn, helped them realize that these students may not share our background of knowledge and experience, and gave them an opportunity to learn effective techniques for teaching ELL students. We don't want our students just to go through the motions of learning. We want them to comprehend what is being taught," says Carma Harman, Georgia Matthews Elementary School Principal.

In addition, two ESL/Title I Instructional Support Specialists work regularly with classroom teachers and several other teachers also hold ESL endorsements. Two of the school's paraprofessionals are fluent Spanish speakers who work on a regular basis with ELL students and also facilitate communication with parents whose English is limited.

Working at the group and individual level

Small class size (twenty-five students average), flexible student groupings, and a focus on individual students' needs contribute to Georgia Matthews Elementary School's success. By creating small groups of students within a class based on similar ability levels (on-level reading, accelerated reading, below level reading), as well as by special needs such as ELL or students with disabilities, teachers can address students at their own instructional levels with appropriate texts, activities, and exercises.

The availability of additional staff to work with students and teachers inside and outside the classroom ensures that each student's needs are met. Title I/ESL Instructional Support Teacher Donna Hadlock and Librarian Marjorie Studebaker, for example, work together as a team with kindergarten and first/second grade students and teachers. Title I/ESL and Instructional Support Teacher Kris Carr rotates among third and fourth grade classes and also works with a kindergarten class. Three paraprofessionals are on hand to "float" from class to class to lend a hand. "At any given moment in a classroom, there may be three staff members working with students in small groups or on an individual level and reinforcing various skills and concepts presented by the classroom teacher," says Studebaker.

Keeping it real and on-going

One of the most effective strategies for reaching ELL students is visualization of concepts and of vocabulary. Kris Carr, ESL and Instructional Support Teacher, notes, "You can't underemphasize the use of realia [objects used to illustrate words] in the classroom: A cowboy hat, a lasso, a saddle, for example, to make a visual connection with unfamiliar words and to help the student relate those words to some piece of knowledge that he or she already has. If students, and not just ELL students, can see the word in their minds and relate it to an image, they'll learn it forever. It also makes the learning process fun."

Fourth-grade teacher Carol Wethington confirms this observation: "I taught one of my ELL fourth graders the concept of 'cranky' by acting out what the word meant. Then, she asked me what 'khaki' meant. I took her into the hallway to see if we could find someone wearing that color. The student saw a parent with a crying baby there and said, "We may not have found the color 'khaki', but I think we found 'cranky.' That's the kind of moment that a teacher lives for."

Designated blocks of time are allocated to reading, writing, and mathematics, but literacy efforts permeate all aspects of the school day. Teachers integrate vocabulary, concepts, and mathematics into all subjects matters; the gym and art teachers also bring books and objects to class to facilitate literacy learning during their classes.

"Our students don't just see or hear a piece of information once," says third-grade teacher Robbyn Staats. "We build proficiency and understanding over time and in layers. One story theme forms the core of discussion, practice, and exercises over several weeks. The same process applies to mathematics. After my students learn one concept, they continue to drill and review it as I add new concepts."

Georgia Matthews Elementary School is also fortunate to have an excellent range of technology including laptop computers available to students for learning and practice. By third and fourth grade, students are reading poetry, stories, or plays online and also taking their state assessments online. Even the youngest students who are not yet readers are taught computer basics, such as how to turn on the computer and how to care for it.

Driving instruction with data

Teaching strategies at Georgia Matthews are research and data-driven. "Collecting data for the sake of data, however, isn't our goal", says Principal Harman. "Our teachers know how to analyze the data, interpret what it means, and how to take corrective action."

Students in all grades are pre-assessed with standardized tests to determine their appropriate reading grade level and then are re-assessed several times a year. Each week, students' progress is assessed and recorded with a system of running records. In a one-minute, timed session, students read part of the story that they've been working on during the week. Skills such as reading fluency, word connection, word order, and comprehension are checked. "We can see where students are, pinpoint any problems, and make any necessary adjustments in teaching strategies or in their group assignments," observes Title I/ESL Instructional Support Teacher Donna Hadlock. "Students also get a good sense of where they stand and what they need to do to improve."

Making time to plan ahead

While students attend art, writing, gym, or music class (the number of times and length per week depends upon grade level), teachers have scheduled planning time. During this time, they are also able to meet regularly with the instructional support specialists and part-time literacy coach to discuss students' progress, needs, and new strategies. "There is also a lot of important informal interaction and exchange of information among teachers. Teachers are also good at collaborating in the hallway and by email," notes Principal Harman.

Learning and celebrating together

Georgia Matthews Elementary School believes in celebrating its students' success. After third and fourth graders completed their state assessments tests during the first two weeks of April, the entire school took a trip to the Garden City Zoo. Of course, some literacy training took place there as students stalked the animals and learned about their names, diets, and habitats. But the main point was to celebrate the joy of learning and the end of testing by just having some fun. As Kris Carr says, "At our school, we're seeing, hearing, touching, and living literacy every day and in every way."

Lessons learned

- Data and research should drive instructional decisions. "Once you know how to analyze and interpret data, you can get a handle on what is really working with students and what is not," says fourth-grade teacher Carol Wethington. "As a teacher, you can't just stay in your comfort zone of instruction if it's not working for a student; you may have to get comfortable with

something else that will work.” The use of best practices derived from research plus the ability of teachers to adapt their instruction to students’ level of ability are important strategies for success.

- Don’t make assumptions about what your students know or don’t know, especially for those whose base language is not English. To be successful, the learning process has to start where students are, not where you think they are or where you expect they should be.
- Creating small groups of students in the classroom adds flexibility to the teaching environment. Small groups allow teachers, specialists, and support staff to work together to address students of different levels of achievement, as well as students with special needs, and to provide attention to individual students.
- Set high expectations for students’ behavior, homework, grades, and learning. Third-grade teacher Robbyn Staats notes: “No matter what a student’s background or home life, you need to express those high expectations to them. If you let them know that you expect them to succeed, they will.”
- Continuous staff development opportunities help staff help their students. Kris Carr notes, “The Garden City School District offers terrific staff development opportunities, almost more than you have time to fit into your schedule. If staff are interested in a topic, but can’t make the available in-service date, the District will arrange another time. We’re constantly learning about new ways to help our students succeed.” The part-time literacy coach provided by the district also organizes staff development at the school.

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Posted: May 15, 2007

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