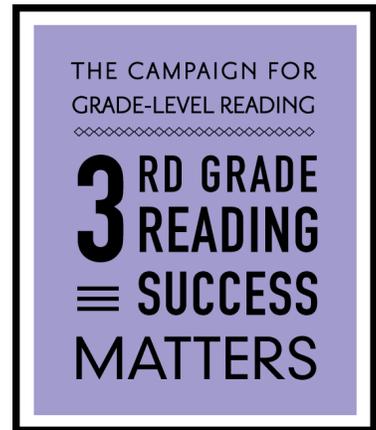


BRIGHT SPOTS

Quality Teaching



Growing Readers Initiative, Central Falls School District, RI

Christine Alves remembers how teachers in the Central Falls School District first reacted to the reading approach developed at The Learning Community, a charter school in the city. Her audience was definitely skeptical, fueled by misperceptions about charter schools themselves. Undaunted, Alves patiently listened to their concerns, answered questions and then demonstrated the method in a kindergarten classroom. She sat with the children on the rug, showing them how to read a pattern book — short, repetitive sentences that use pictures as word clues — and then sent them off to read on their own. Alves circulated among the brand new readers, offering help and encouragement. The observing teachers moved among the students, too, and the beaming kindergarteners eagerly read to them. “Oh my gosh!” exclaimed the classroom’s teacher. “It’s working! I can’t believe my kids are reading!”

A rare partnership

Central Falls may be the poorest city in Rhode Island, but its youngest readers are not falling behind like children in many of America’s urban public schools challenged by poverty. That’s because The Growing Readers Initiative, a unique teacher-to-teacher partnership between The Learning Community and the School District, is dedicated to proving that poverty need not be a barrier to student achievement.

When Superintendent Frances Gallo came to Central Falls in 2007, many district students were not hitting their benchmarks on the national Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), but The Learning Community was showing impressive results, despite serving the same population with the same challenges in classrooms of similar size. Gallo arranged observation days for district staff and then began discussions over how the public elementary schools could work with the charter to adopt instructional practices developed there.

WHO THEY ARE

The Growing Readers Initiative is a partnership between:

- The Learning Community, a charter school, and
- Central Falls School District.

Among the school district’s 1,400 students:

- 81% qualify for Free and Reduced-Price Meals.
- 11% are English Language Learners.
- 72% are Hispanic.
- 25% are white.
- 2% are multiracial.

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Teacher-to-teacher collaboration

The Initiative is not so much a new curricular program as a shift in how teachers work together, how data are used and how extra support is targeted. The partners believe that the basic unit of change is not the state, the district or the school, but the classroom.

Four times each year, instructional coaches from The Learning Community spend a week observing Central Falls teachers as they use strategies and lesson plans fine-tuned in grade-specific professional-development sessions. These “embedded” coaching sessions, followed by debriefing conversations, provide feedback that teachers can immediately put into practice. The experience of deep reflection and open sharing among teachers has nurtured a culture where “innovations and additions flow freely in both directions,” says Gallo.

Student progress is assessed quarterly against DRA benchmarks. The data tell teachers who is on track, who is struggling and what extra help is needed. The analysis informs the makeup of small Guided Reading Groups that teachers convene in their classroom and identifies students who need support from reading specialists. Each school also has a “Reading Safety Net” — small reading groups run by specialists, in addition to classroom instruction — for students who fall below the benchmarks. Readers move into and out of the groups as needed.

Dramatic improvement in months

During the Growing Readers pilot program, launched in four kindergarten classrooms during 2008–09, student scores on the DRA jumped dramatically — from 45 percent reading at or above their benchmarks in September to 86 percent in June. The following year, when the Initiative expanded to all 40 K–2 classrooms in the District’s four elementary schools, the 35 percent reading at or above benchmarks in September grew to 65 percent by June. In 2010–11, 60 percent of K–2 children, most of whom had already been Growing Readers, started at grade level. The number at grade level reached 75 percent by June.

Eager and confident

The Growing Readers approach asks students as well as teachers to participate and share ideas. Alves has watched Central Falls students progress from uncertain to knowledgeable readers. “They used to slouch in their seats and hope not to be called on,” she observes, “but now they’re eager to discuss favorite books and authors.”

Gallo is a regular visitor to district classrooms and has seen even bigger effects. Most of the K–2 students are reading at grade level now, and the success of Growing Readers has spread across classrooms and subjects from math to music. “The children are sitting up straighter because they’re more confident,” she notes. “When you walk into a school where there’s a lot of learning going on, it’s a happy place thanks to the continued hard work of our teachers and students.”

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

Students reading at or above DRA benchmark:

- 2008–09, 45% in Sept. to 86% in June (pilot: 4 Kindergarten classrooms).
- 2009–10, 35% in Sept. to 65% in June (district wide: 40 classrooms, K-2).
- 2010–11, 60% in Sept. to 75% in June (district wide: 40 classrooms, K-2).

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

The Growing Readers Initiative uses:

- Data on student achievement, gathered by quarterly testing, to inform instruction.
- Embedded coaching that responds to teacher needs and requests.
- Targeted professional development based on classroom experience.
- Lesson plans developed at The Learning Community and based on the Reading Workshop curriculum.
- Teacher-to-teacher sharing, planning and collaboration.
- Support from reading specialists and a “Safety Net” Reading Group to quickly catch readers falling behind.