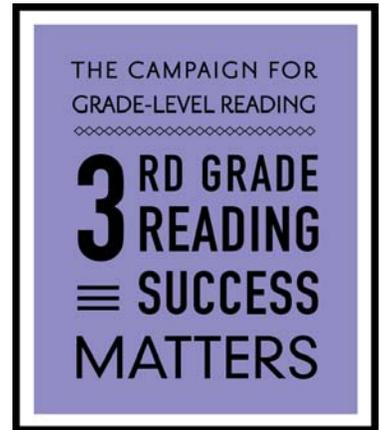


# BRIGHT SPOTS

High Opportunity Schools



## George Hall Elementary, Mobile, AL

After the State of Alabama took over historically underperforming George Hall Elementary in 2003, a hefty dose of Title 1 money supported a rigorous transformation process, complete with re-staffing and a new curriculum. “We have a real sense of urgency in our building,” says Principal Terri Tomlinson. “The work we do with our students in the lower grades is the foundation for their future.”

The transformation is working. In the seven years she has been with George Hall, Tomlinson has seen third- and fourth-grade reading scores go from rock bottom to 100 percent at grade level or higher on the state assessment test. In vocabulary, George Hall students are scoring at the sixth stanine on the Stanford Achievement Test, one full level above the national average.

### Vocabulary-building field trips

George Hall replaced its existing program with the [Reading Street](#) curriculum from Scott Foresman to gain a new emphasis on skill priorities, frequent monitoring and small group instruction. Recognizing that its inner-city students lacked the background knowledge to understand some basic vocabulary, the school took children on field trips — actual and virtual — and built on what they learned. The third grade visited a corn maze, for example, where they learned about growing corn, farming, farm animals — and the difference between *maze* and *maize*. To reinforce their learning, the children created digital photo stories, hall displays, and illustrated books to share with the entire school.

George Hall also uses [Accelerated Reader](#), a computer-based program that allows students to pace and quiz themselves, in the belief that teaching children to read for pleasure makes them lifelong readers. “Our students take real ownership of their reading,” says Tomlinson. “They all pitch in to help each other because they want their entire class to succeed.”

#### WHO THEY ARE

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539 students, K–5<sup>th</sup>

99% African American

99% FARM

\$8,417/district pupil

(\$8,395 state average)

40% of teachers have master’s degree  
or higher

15 years teaching on average

22 average class size

#### WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

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ARMT (Alabama Reading and  
Mathematics Test) Reading:

3<sup>rd</sup> grade 100%

4<sup>th</sup> grade 100%

2008 Blue Ribbon School

2009 Winner, Dispelling the Myth  
Award

#### CONTACT

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George Hall Elementary

Mobile, AL

Phone: (251) 221-1345

Terri Tomlinson, Principal

Over the three years of a state grant, George Hall was able to help teachers become skillful at teaching reading through [Reading First](#) methods to train them in the instructional steps, monitoring and evaluation techniques, and immediate remediation. Consistency remains key in teaching and evaluation, since “it’s important that we all have the same level of rigor.” Teachers use the [DIBELS](#) approach (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) to monitor progress in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

In 2009, George Hall staff voted unanimously to extend the school day by one hour, to an eight-hour day. The students made great gains, but loss of funding limited the experiment to one year. Currently, George Hall devotes an extra hour after school, three days each week, to interventions with the most at-risk students. The school averages 98% attendance.

## Shared leadership

Tomlinson attributes the positive atmosphere in her building to shared leadership and a no-blame ethic. Everyone who works at George Hall — teachers, support staff, custodians, lunch ladies — is invested in its success, and all are included in training and decision-making. Recently, all 55 staff members went on a scavenger hunt throughout Mobile, celebrating at the end with dinner.

Staff at each grade level collaborate during a weekly 50-minute planning period, and staff devote one day each month to job-embedded collaboration. “We do a lot of talking about what works and what doesn’t, but there’s no blame. The kids are what it’s all about. We just want to see what we can do to help the children.”

## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

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- Complete restaffing through “transformation” process
- Reading Street curriculum
- Accelerated Reader for shared accountability
- Reading First training for three years
- Extended day for 2009–2010 school year