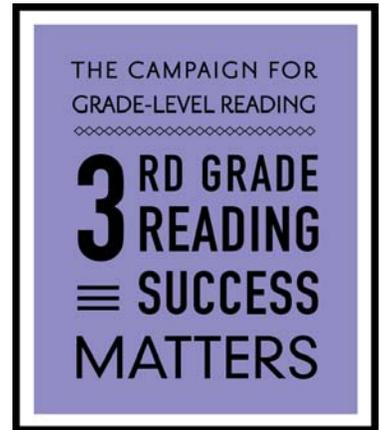


BRIGHT SPOTS

High Opportunity Schools



North Godwin Elementary, Grand Rapids, MI

“I call this place *paradise*,” says North Godwin Elementary Principal Mary Lang, justifiably proud that her school proves low-income students can achieve at high levels. A veteran teacher and reading specialist, she has been at North Godwin for just one year, but watched from the sidelines as two previous principals transformed the building into a spirited, disciplined, and highly collaborative place to work and learn. “We’re very clear about expectations. We set them sky-high, and have fun reaching them.”

“Excellence or nothing”

The school has a history of innovation, but it lacked focus until the arrival of Principal Arelis Diaz in 2000. Diaz and her successor Bill Fetterhoff built a culture based on the [FISH! philosophy](#) of workplace management that links excellence with fun and intense collaboration with a belief that playing together strengthens relationships, improves communication, and builds capacity. Located in a suburb of Grand Rapids that is rife with unemployment, North Godwin also became highly selective in hiring.

The [Storytown](#) reading curriculum, from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt School Publishers, along with the highly structured Lucy Calkins Writing program, was adopted last year to provide consistency from kindergarten through sixth grade. Students set reading goals, quiz themselves and hold each other accountable with the computer-based [Accelerated Reader](#) program. Lang’s goal is 90% participation in Accelerated Reader each week, and she makes sure everyone in the building knows how everyone else is doing. Teachers review results with their own classes, celebrating achievements and encouraging teamwork to help kids who are behind.

“If Joey needs help, another child might offer to read to him,” explains Lang. “They’re a team.”

WHO THEY ARE

442 K–4th
71% FARM
42.5% Hispanic
11% African American
34% Caucasian
175 ELL
28 average class size

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

2010 MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program):
3rd grade reading 94%
4th grade reading 93%
Grade “A” by Michigan Department of Education
2010 Winner, Dispelling the Myth Award

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So are the teachers, who are all trained in the [PLC process](#) for professional learning communities. The school board is trained as well. Other collaborative structures include:

- A language arts focus team in each grade that outlines in writing the instructional goals for each marking period and shares them with the principal.
- One hour each month for building-wide collaboration.
- Two hours each month — thanks to early release — devoted to district-wide vertical collaboration.

Decoding before comprehension

North Godwin tests students at the beginning, middle, and end of each year using the [DIBELS](#) approach (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) to identify skill levels in five key areas — phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Lang and her teachers know that if students have a solid foundation in phonics and phonemic awareness by the end of first grade, they'll do fine in third grade reading; otherwise they fall apart.

“We thought at first it was a comprehension issue, but it turns out to be more about decoding. If a student has to spend all of his or her time decoding words, there's no time left for reading.”

Based on DIBELS results, the school puts children into groups that work with teams of teachers for 15 days on the appropriate skill level. Once children pass the test in one skill, they move on to the next in the sequence.

“Our staff are wonderful,” says Lang. “Each staff member is excellent, but even that's not enough. You have to have all the grade levels working together.”

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- **Storytown reading curriculum for K–6th**
- **Lucy Calkins Writing program**
- **Computer-based Accelerated Reader for school-wide accountability**
- **Language Arts Focus teams at each grade**
- **DIBELS approach to skills measurement**