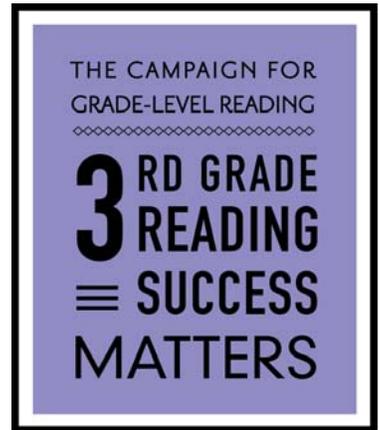


BRIGHT SPOTS

High Opportunity Schools



Rock Island Elementary, Rock Island, WA

Rock Island Elementary’s overarching rule — *Do not interfere with the learning or safety of others* — sets the expectation: in this school, children are learning all the time. This was not always true. In the isolated, agricultural community of Rock Island, low expectations accompanied low incomes for decades. The poverty hasn’t changed, but a rigorous, data-driven campaign of assessments and instructional strategies, coupled with high expectations, means that close to 78 percent of Rock Island’s third graders now meet or exceed reading standards — six points above the state average.

Change is a process

When an influx of Hispanic families prompted the school to find new instructional methods in the 1980s, reading achievement became their primary focus. “Reading is the foundation for everything,” says 4th grade teacher Carolee Case, a 27-year veteran at the school. Faculty members were surprised to learn that the methods for teaching ELL students were also effective with students from low-income families. Both lacked English-language vocabulary. Today, Rock Island’s Hispanic children typically score higher on reading tests than their Caucasian counterparts.

But Rock Island’s reading scores remained at rock bottom for a decade, until the school agreed to pilot the state’s incoming assessment test. The school’s existing reading curriculum would not have addressed state performance expectations, so the faculty switched to [Open Court](#) for the core language arts and English curriculum, building reading comprehension on a foundation of phonics and phonemic awareness.

WHO THEY ARE

217 students, K–4th

55% Hispanic, 41% White

82% FARM

\$8,086/district pupil

(\$8,377 state average)

94% of teachers have master’s degree or higher

10 years teaching on average

23 average class size

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

MSP Reading Scores:

3rd grade 77.8%

4th grade 72.5%

2010 Blue Ribbon School

CONTACT

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Carolee Case, 4th grade teacher

Only data-based strategies

Rock Island also implemented the [CORE](#) training model of school-wide literacy achievement, based on frequent assessment and multi-tier responses to the results. “CORE had over 40 years of data to prove that it increased student achievement,” says Case. “No way do we waste time on a learning strategy that can't be supported by positive data.” Pacing guides, organized by trimester, keep everyone on track. Since administrators, teachers, counselors and paraprofessionals all receive the training, each child can get help.

Teachers also learned the [GLAD method](#) of language acquisition and literacy, which helps teachers adapt state-mandated directives to meet the needs of specific children. The school surveys third and fourth graders weekly for phonics proficiency, with multiple responses to what they learn throughout the week, and tests students three times a year for reading proficiency. Following the [Response to Intervention](#) model for preventing academic failure, faculty members work with students before, during, and after school using data-based methods for identifying and addressing learning and behavioral problems.

“An office staff like bulldogs,” in Case’s words, keeps absenteeism low, but summer learning loss remains a concern. Despite pressure from the district to consolidate with schools 10 miles away, Rock Island operates a summer school for students who need support, and the PTO offers a reduced-price workbook that reviews skills and helps prepare students for the next grade.

Clearly teaching at Rock Island never stops. The staff is every inch a professional learning community despite a lack of training opportunities and a shortage of time. Rock Island doesn’t have late start or early release, “so we just come up with our own time to meet,” says Case. She collaborates with her teaching partner every day while their students go to library and PE, and they meet over lunch with the 3rd grade teachers weekly in an improvised form of vertical collaboration.

“We work with each other’s students all the time — mentoring, coaching, checking in,” says Case. “These are teachable moments. You can’t afford to let any of them go.”

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- **ELL vocabulary instruction for all students**
- **Open Court reading curriculum**
- **CORE training for school-wide literacy achievement**
- **GLAD method of language acquisition and literacy**
- **Response to Intervention for preventing academic failure**