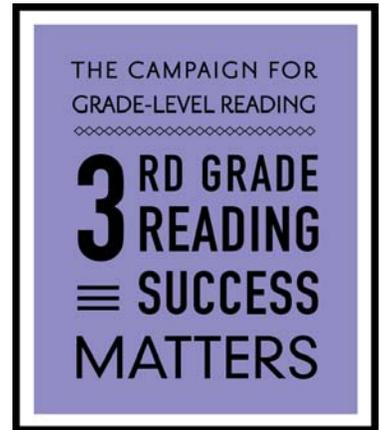


BRIGHT SPOTS

High Opportunity Schools



Synergy Charter Academy, Los Angeles, CA

Founder Meg Palisoc designed Synergy Charter Academy to prove that inner-city children could achieve and to demonstrate teaching methods that could succeed throughout the LA Unified school district. Located in the neighborhood that was the scene of riots in 1992, Synergy has a transient population with children at widely divergent skill levels. “We get results because we teach at every level,” says Palisoc.

Palisoc knew from experience that teaching an entire class at one grade level can widen the skill gap. “When you conduct the discourse just at higher levels, you can get students with brilliant oral skills who still can’t read.”

With weekly testing to pinpoint each student’s reading skills, teachers use what Palisoc calls the “sandwich approach,” highlighting reading comprehension with students at grade level and above, the foundational skills of phonemic awareness and phonics with students reading way below grade level, and fluency and vocabulary with students in the middle.

Relentless assessment

[Put Reading First](#) is the primary reading strategy, with its emphasis on five critical factors — phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Students in 2nd–5th grades also read at least one book each week at their independent reading level and quiz themselves in the computer lab through Scholastic Reading Counts. In addition, Synergy:

- Conducts Open Court unit assessments every six weeks.
- Assesses students’ reading comprehension every quarter using the [Scholastic Reading Inventory](#).
- Evaluates test results school-wide using the [Lexile framework](#), a measurement tool that matches students with appropriate books and other reading materials.

WHO THEY ARE

155 students, K–5th
86% Hispanic, 11% African American
83% FARM
\$6,624/pupil (\$7,358 w/federal monies)
(\$9,093 state average)
100% home language Spanish
35% ELL
7% Special Education
7 years average teaching experience
22 average class size

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

CST (California Standards Tests)
English Language Arts:
3rd grade 65%
4th grade 76%
897 API (Academic Performance Index)
2010 Blue Ribbon School

CONTACT

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Turnaround specialists

“We train our teachers to be turnaround specialists, using different strategies for each child,” says Palisoc. Most students come from families who speak no English at home. Synergy teachers all learn the [Total Physical Response](#) (TPR) approach, using hand motions, facial expressions, and a host of visual supports to enhance the spoken word. For example, all K–5th grades use the Open Court Sound Spelling Cards, pairing pictures with letters and spelling patterns.

Message envelopes go home every Tuesday with information for parents about books their child has read, quiz results, and other important news. The weekly homework sheet includes a color-coded behavioral component that serves as a visual accountability tool. Green means the child had a great day, yellow means there’s some cause for concern, and so on. All information sent home is in English and Spanish, and every meeting includes translation.

“Being Number One is not good enough”

Absenteeism is no longer the problem it was when the school opened in 2004. California uses an [Academic Performance Index](#) (API) to compare school improvement from year to year, rating each school on a scale from 200 to 1000. At its founding, Synergy’s 709 API made it the highest-achieving school in the neighborhood. Parents were overjoyed at being Number One, but seven out of 10 students still couldn’t read. “Our parents didn’t realize that their children were behind because no one had ever explained it to them. Now they understand the reason we set such high expectations.” The school’s 2010 API was 897.

“You hear about *Waiting for Superman*,” says Palisoc, “and how you need a longer school day and a longer school year. We are achieving great things in the traditional format, with the same hours and the same number of days as every other public school. We’re just strategic.”

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- Put Reading First strategies
- Frequent assessments using Open Court, SRI and Lexiles
- Total Physical Response approach pairing visuals with spoken word
- Open Court Sound Spelling Cards
- Color-coded behavioral indicators