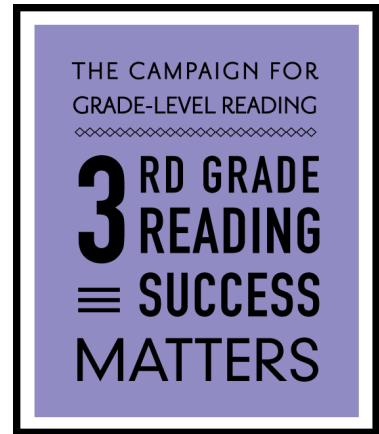


BRIGHT SPOTS

High Opportunity Schools



H.S. Thompson Learning Center, Dallas, TX

“You can have all the tools you want, but what really matters is good old-fashioned teaching,” says Kamalia Cotton, H.S. Thompson principal between 2005 and January 2011. Describing Thompson’s teachers as “pedagogical wizards,” she explains that they’re genuinely concerned with each child — not simply academic achievement but interests, hobbies, and troubles as well. “Children will perform well if they know you care,” says Cotton. The data back her up: 100 percent of her third- and fourth-graders achieved top scores on the 2010 Texas assessment test.

Continuous improvement, positive self-esteem

Cotton and her staff strive for continuous improvement, examining their practices each year for what is and is not working and what they can do better. An effort-based learning model, articulated by psychologist Lauren Resnick, inspires the school’s approach, emphasizing the link between effort (rather than aptitude) and achievement. The staff also uses Carol Dwick’s [Mindset](#) approach to help children replace self-defeating attitudes with encouraging self-talk.

Teaching staff and administration together function as a professional learning community, using Robert Marzano’s leadership principles. They enrich their strategies for reaching economically disadvantaged urban students with guidance from [What Is It About Me You Can’t Teach?](#) “We studied all the best practices and came up with our own little formula,” says Cotton.

That formula mixes data-based diagnostic testing, goal setting, teacher training, incentives, celebrations, and universal responsibility for learning. Every adult in the building — teachers, administrators, custodians, office and cafeteria staff — is responsible for student learning, as are the students themselves. “Everyone wants the students to do well,” says Cotton, who individually signs each report card.

WHO THEY ARE

299 students, Pre-K–6th

58% African American, 40% Hispanic

100% FARM

16 years average teaching experience

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

2010 TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) Reading:

3rd grade 100%

4th grade 100%

2010 Blue Ribbon School

CONTACT

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Kamalia Cotton, H.S. Thompson

principal, 2005–2011

[now principal of Ebby Halliday

Elementary, Dallas]

The staff at H.S. Thompson examines diagnostic data “every which way” — by individual student, gender, ethnicity, class, grade level, and the progress of student groups over years in the school. The school supplements the state-adopted [Journeys](#) reading curriculum, from Houghton Mifflin, with extensive reading and in-depth lessons. Cotton and the teachers read aloud to students daily, and each child is expected to read 25 books each year on his or her own. Additional supports include:

- [Measuring Up](#), to help students master essential skills.
- [KAMICO](#) data-based test preparation materials.
- [TAKS Toppers](#) Study Guides for remediation and enrichment.

Celebrating achievement

Cotton and her teachers celebrate student success with stickers, pencils, and “little things that don’t cost money,” like public acknowledgement. Every six weeks, Cotton treats a few students — those who have shown significant improvement as well as those on the honor roll — to lunch at a favorite restaurant. The class with the highest achievement might earn a popcorn or cotton candy party.

Truancy is not a problem at H.S. Thompson, located in a Dallas neighborhood where average family income is less than \$10,000 a year. The school is “the best place a child can be,” says Cotton. She and her staff wash their students’ clothing when necessary and replace outgrown uniforms with ones that fit properly. They shampoo and comb hair, and feed hungry students breakfast — whatever it takes to prepare each child for learning. Teachers give out their cell phone numbers to parents.

“We don’t focus too much on homework, because the home might not be the best,” says Cotton. “But we care about the children as if they were our own.”

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- [Journeys reading curriculum](#)
- [Effort-based learning model from Lauren Resnick](#)
- [Dwick’s Mindset approach, to encourage positive attitudes with a “growth mindset”](#)
- [Leadership capacity training](#)
- [Teaching strategies inspired by What Is It About Me You Can’t Teach?](#)
- [Measuring Up, to help students master essential skills](#)
- [KAMICO data-based test preparation materials](#)
- [TAKS Toppers Study Guides](#)