

RESULTS

Focus on literacy leads to change

Columbus Park Preparatory Academy, Worcester, Mass.

By Joan Richardson

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It's 9:15 a.m. at Columbus Park Preparatory Academy in Worcester, Mass., time for the school's daily 60-minute literacy block for 1st graders. That means it's time for 10 adults to be deployed to work with them.

Two teachers, two instructional aides, two parents, two student teachers, the school's family liaison, and one CityWorker/Americorps volunteer. Every one of them has been trained in the same reading strategies and every one of them is expected to use those strategies with these 1st graders. Sometimes, an adult works with two students; sometimes, with six students. Students are grouped and re-grouped according to their abilities but no group is ever allowed to exceed six students.

The two adjacent 1st-grade rooms buzz with the sounds of youngsters reading and asking and answering questions. Ten adults and 52 children can make a lot of noise, even when they're reading.

First-grade teacher Edna Hanson sits on a small rug with six children of various hues arranged in front of her. Using small books, she deftly guides her young readers from one strategy to the next. She places a laminated chart of reading strategies on the rug in front of her. She points to the strategies on the chart as she directs them to use that strategy. They look at the pictures in their books. They frame key words with two fingers. They get their mouths ready to say the word.

Hanson moves on her hands and knees and peers directly in their faces as they chunk sounds and read sentences. They answer her questions. They re-tell the story. They read individually. They read in pairs. They read as a group.

Just a few feet away, instructional aide Helene Mahan uses exactly the same strategies with another group of 1st graders. Across the room, family liaison

Connie Torres works with two children whose first language is Spanish. Again, the same strategies. Next door, teacher Lynn Dalesio works with a group as does student teacher Christine Schabot. Once more, the same strategies over and over again.

Columbus Park is one of the six "positive deviant" schools and districts studied by NSDC this year with funding from the Kellogg Foundation. These schools and districts are achieving above-average results with students although they have the same access to resources as other schools and districts in their areas. In addition to standing out from others in their communities, these schools and districts also have practices that enable them to identify good practices internally and ensure that they are shared widely throughout their school or district, thereby enabling all teachers to perform at higher levels.

Columbus Park is a small school - about 370 students in its preschool to 6th grade - that draws about half of its student body from a nearby public housing project. About 80% of its students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch, making Columbus Park a Title I school. The enrollment is a nearly equal blend of white, black, Hispanic, and Asian-American students.

The school's radical approach to ensuring that its students become effective readers is one of its most significant changes in the last five years. To make these improvements, teachers studied data on student learning, researched strategies that would work best for their students, and then developed a system to implement the system they championed. Columbus Park's reading scores have since moved from the bottom tier of the district to the top, pulling even with elementary schools with more "suburban-like" populations.

"My challenge now is figuring how to get this into other schools in this district," said Supt. James Caradonio who recognizes that Columbus Park is a positive deviant in his district.

LOOKING INSIDE FOR ANSWERS

Columbus Park's literacy initiative grew out of the work of one of its cadres, small voluntary groupings of teachers that are the problem-solving mechanism in the school. Cadres are part of the Accelerated Schools model which Columbus Park has embraced to guide its work.

The Accelerated Schools inquiry process encourages teachers to examine their work, learn from it, and make needed improvements in their school. That is a process for identifying the positive deviance in the organization and learning how to amplify it. Each cadre meets once or twice a month and follows this process for their challenge area: identify a focus, brainstorm solutions, synthesize solutions and develop an action plan; pilot the solution;

evaluate and reassess. Although the staff identifies areas of challenge, their inquiry revolves around finding and amplifying successes within those areas.

In 1999, Columbus Park teachers resolved to tackle literacy after the literacy cadre's study of data revealed that their 1st graders were much lower than 1st graders at other schools.

First, teachers had to learn more about teaching reading. Principal Dolores Gribouski sent Hanson to a summer institute on literacy. She returned and led a course at Columbus Park for K-2 teachers.

Hanson worked with literacy specialists Donna Mastrovito and Marilyn McNickles to identify research-based strategies that have proven most effective with similar groups of students and then collected data to determine if they were equally effective with Columbus Park students or with a sub-population of students.

The cadre also lobbied for a different type of instructional time. From their research, the literacy cadre concluded that Columbus Park students would benefit most from close work with a teacher who could immediately build on their prior knowledge and experiences. "Teachers wanted to do one-on-one but knew they couldn't do that. But they thought we could try to get to very small groups for reading," said Gribouski.

Rather than begin with 1st graders, the cadre proposed an hour-long daily literacy block for kindergartners by reducing their rest time to only 15 minutes. To create small groups, two kindergarten teachers, several instructional aides, and two reading specialists leveled the students and began to work in small groups.

After one year, the results were clear: the incoming 1st graders were much stronger than in previous years.

When teachers realized that they had a winning strategy, the next step was to amplify that experience: teachers lobbied to introduce a 60-minute literacy block in 1st and 2nd grades. Hanson's training was blended with staff development provided by several other staff members and, within a few months, all teachers, all aides, preschool teachers, and relevant support staff had been trained in the literacy strategies.

By mid-year, that emphasis continued in 3rd and 4th grade where students have an hour of balanced literacy every day. Eventually, the literacy block was extended into 5th grade.

In order for the literacy block to function as teachers intended, the school had to be willing and able to flood the classrooms with adults and those adults had to be willing to commit to learning and using a specific set of

strategies. Combining consistent strategies with sufficient time to teach and small group instruction is what they believe is the winning combination.

*This article is adapted from Joan Richardson's book *From the Inside Out: Learning from the Positive Deviance in Your Organization*, which is now available in the [NSDC bookstore](http://store.nsd.org/): <http://store.nsd.org/>.*