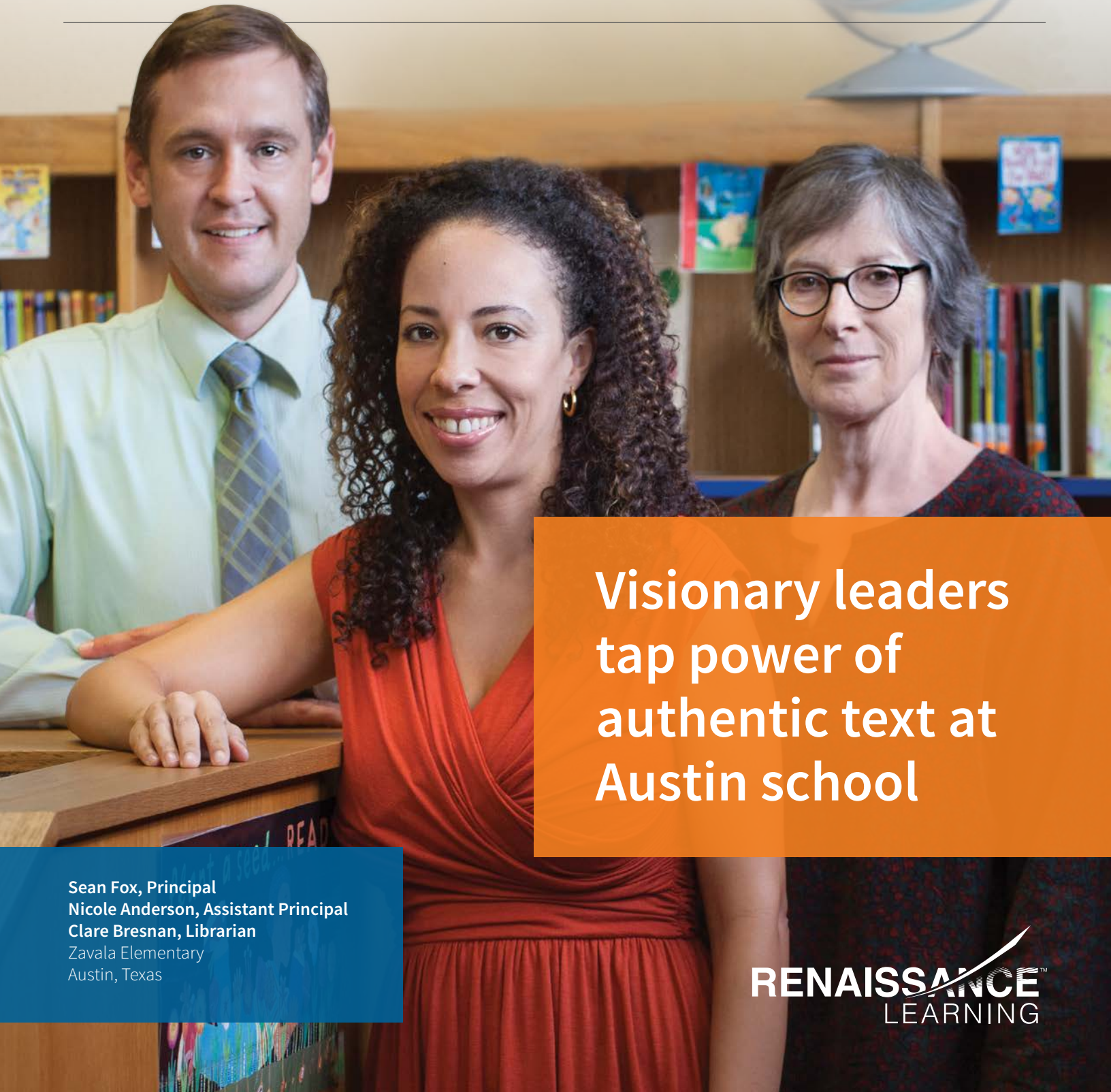


EXTRAORDINARY EDUCATORS

Celebrating America's Outstanding Teachers



Visionary leaders
tap power of
authentic text at
Austin school

Sean Fox, Principal
Nicole Anderson, Assistant Principal
Clare Bresnan, Librarian
Zavala Elementary
Austin, Texas

RENAISSANCE
LEARNING



Success is born when principal looks to authentic text and data

Not long after Principal Sean Fox arrived at Austin, Texas', Zavala Elementary in 2010, he started thinking that something just didn't feel right. He seldom noticed kids walking the halls with books in their hands. Instead they were reading primarily "manufactured literature" through test-prep passages. And he had a fantastic teaching team, but their motivation and love of teaching were in jeopardy. That reading spark was missing, and something big had to change—even if it meant completely redefining their approach to test preparation.

"I realized how deeply we were entrenched in high-stakes testing and how we'd become so involved with getting results, we'd let go of the fundamental skills and enjoyment of reading authentic literature," Fox said. "Reading is supposed to be an exciting gateway to experiences and lifetime learning. We just knew we had to get kids back into real books and remind our staff why they loved teaching."

Connecting vision to accountability

As big as he dreamed, Fox was also grounded in reality. Because he knew he still had to get results, he looked to Accelerated Reader and STAR Reading as key components of the new reading approach. These programs provided the systematic means necessary to monitor reading progress and the effectiveness of independent reading.

So when Zavala students started reading every morning from 8:00 – 8:30, it wasn't just Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) time. It was kids reading books at their STAR Reading-identified ZPD to ensure comprehension,



"We just knew we had to get kids back into real books and remind our staff why they loved teaching."

Sean Fox
Principal
Zavala Elementary

with interactive, data-driven teacher involvement and conferencing. It was completely accountable and productive through Accelerated Reader quizzing and STAR reports. And equally important to Fox, his teachers, and his students, it was fun.

“AR just took off and everyone loved how it helped get kids to read on their own and enjoy it,” Fox said. “When kids read a lot, they tend to do well in all academic areas.”

Seeing big results in state testing data—and attitudes

Since implementing the changes about three years ago, Zavala has witnessed drastic improvement in the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) testing (see chart at right).

School-wide attitude toward reading also took a giant leap forward. In this school with 97 percent low socioeconomic status students, where books and reading models are hard to come by at home, it’s especially exciting for Fox and his team to see students change their tune. At the library, they have gone from a “Why am I here?” shrug to saying “I want to be here, what do you have for me?” Assistant Principal Nicole Anderson, an avid reader as a child, is beyond thrilled to see kids leaning over each other’s shoulders to find out what they’re reading.

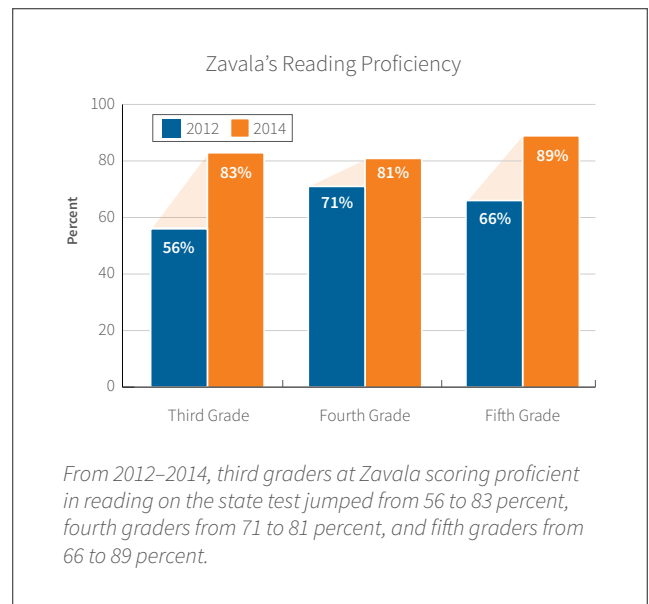
“Students now say, ‘Ms. Anderson, you should check this out’ or ‘Can we read this in book club?’” Anderson smiled. “These are kids across all demographics who have never perceived themselves as academically successful, seeking interaction with adults and peers about books.”

Keeping reading fun to build stamina

Along with founding book clubs (“just for fun, no assignments”), school librarian Clare Bresnan keeps finding ways to engage students in the new reading culture. She began bringing in authors to talk to students about the writing and illustration process—often resulting in the “huge deal” of kids getting a free hardcover book of their very own. And yes, incentives are offered, but they’re not toys. They’re meaningful experiences that these lower-income kids might not otherwise get, including a field trip to Circuit of the Americas and other local community outings of learning value.

In that vein, Fox and Anderson believe that reading at this age shouldn’t be about high pressure or worrying about state tests. So why are Accelerated Reader quizzes acceptable in the mix?

“When kids are reading a lot, and at their own level, AR quizzes are easy and successful for them,” Anderson



Read the Most
COAST to COAST™
over the years...

| NUMBER OF REGISTRANTS | NUMBERS OF QUIZZES TAKEN |
|--|---|
| 2012: 19,465 2013: 24,930 2014: 31,315 | 2012: 3,581,992 2013: 4,409,622 2014: 4,987,949 |

PRIZES AWARDED TO TEACHERS

| | | |
|----------|----------|----------|
| 2012: 35 | 2013: 62 | 2014: 71 |
|----------|----------|----------|

Save the date!

Our fourth-annual Read the Most from Coast to Coast is set for **Friday, February 27, 2015**. The event celebrates reading and gets students involved in something big. This year, we have an exciting new activity planned.

For more details or to register, visit www.renaissance.com/read-the-most/

Continued on page 11

Two Arizona teachers partner to instill widespread love of goals—and reading

As Charlotte Patterson Elementary third-grade teachers Michelle Hufford and Jason Hoppal listened to a Renaissance Learning representative speak about Accelerated Reader in 2010, they suddenly realized they could be doing so much more with the program.

The two put their heads together to create a classroom incentive program that recognized strengths in all readers, with weekly instead of the previous quarterly ceremonies. When Hufford's class word count nearly tripled within one quarter of implementing the new system, and class average Accelerated Reader test scores for both Hufford and Hoppal jumped from low 70s to high 80s within one school year, they knew they were onto something big.

“All of a sudden, our students didn't want to just reach their goals—they wanted to double them,” said Hoppal, who now teaches fourth grade in this Gilbert, Arizona, school. “Our new approach to AR has given us an avenue to build confidence in all of our readers, not just the high achievers. Whereas it used to be one-third of the class reading most of the words, now everyone is contributing.”

Honing an effective incentive program

Using incentives with Accelerated Reader wasn't new to Charlotte Patterson. Accelerated Reader had been in place since the school opened in 2008, with quarterly point goal celebrations that included recognition of high-word-count readers through a Millionaire's Club. But Hufford's and Hoppal's new incentives offered much more frequent and varied goals—including number of nonfiction books with quiz scores of 80 percent or higher, reading and testing



“All of a sudden, our students didn't want to just reach their goals—they wanted to double them.”

on a book per week, and many others. Hufford says struggling readers are now getting their names called right along with everyone else, and no one considers one recognition better than another.

“We've witnessed the budding reading confidence and growth of those who never thought they could do it,” Hufford said. “Once kids realize they really are good at something, they start to blossom rapidly.”

Hufford and Hoppal have found that students typically start by aiming for a goal within one particular area of strength. But when students see peers getting awards in other categories, they are often motivated to push out of their comfort zones and try longer books, nonfiction books, or other challenges. A growth in reading ability and interest is the natural by-product.

“Students may start their year wanting to earn prizes or recognition, but by year-end, they’ve fallen in love with reading and they have favorite authors and series,” Hufford said. “They’re not only more confident with reading, they’re more confident overall.”

Multiple tracks benefit from individualized data

STAR Reading is also an important component of reading success at Charlotte Patterson. One year after the school opened and stocked the library with new books all labeled for Accelerated Reader, STAR Reading was implemented to help gauge reading levels and growth of fiction and nonfiction comprehension. Charlotte Patterson Elementary was one of the first schools in Arizona to offer both the “Classic,” district-adopted curriculum and the Chandler Traditional Academy (CTA) with Saxon and Spalding materials to better meet diverse needs. They valued that Accelerated Reader and STAR Reading mirrored this individualized learning focus.

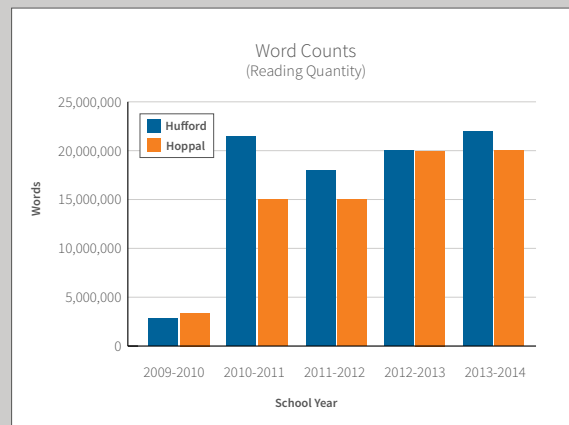
“AR and STAR are a good fit for both “Classic” and CTA learning tracks, because they not only encourage students in each track to become avid readers but also provide appropriate levels of challenge for each student,” said Principal Sarah Stephens. “I’ve seen teachers use AR to pair struggling students together so they can practice oral fluency at the same reading level and also to ensure that students are reading a variety of genres.” STAR assessments pinpoint reading baselines, drive book selection, and identify which students need immediate interventions or challenges.

Hufford performs STAR testing on select students multiple times per quarter—and all of her students at winter break—to monitor improvement. “Typically, at this point, everyone demonstrates growth and some show evidence of tremendous growth, which is a great confidence boost,” she said.

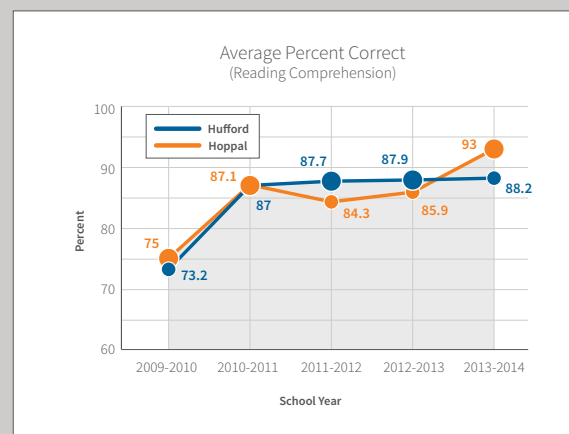
Going beyond incentives and rewards

Whether they’re on the “Classic” or CTA track, it’s clear that these students are on the right track. Data (see graphics at right) shows that reading participation and growth are thriving in a school that has also flourished, from 400 students in 2008 to nearly 1,000 in 2014. And it’s not just because of the rewards.

“While everyone loves prizes, we believe that our students enjoy the recognition and the pride that they feel more,” Hoppal said. “This year, student rewards are simply recognition at our weekly award ceremonies and knowing that they earned a donation toward the Chandler Care Center. They’re still reading.” ■



Halfway through the 2009–2010 school year, Hufford and Hoppal honed their AR incentives to focus on all students. The result was a sharp increase in reading quantity, as all students—not just the strongest one-third—were reading far more.



The new incentives also led to a significant increase in reading comprehension, as shown in average percent correct data for each class.



Growth mindset a way of life at Kentucky Distinguished School

“We’re just days away from midterm when you must be halfway to your AR goals, so where are you?” called out Principal Ginger Hollowell to all students assembled in the gym of Kentucky’s Concord Elementary School. She then pointed to various students for their individual answers.

“I need 10 total, and I have 5.8,” one student replied confidently as he stood, then added, “and I’m at 92 percent accuracy.”

This wasn’t a Concord fifth grader rattling off his point goals and percentages, but a first grader. That depth of awareness at such a young age may surprise some—including one parent responding to a weekly school e-newsletter asking about Accelerated Reader goals.

“This parent wrote back with a ‘Ha ha, my first grader wouldn’t know about goals,’” Hollowell recalls. “But all Concord students know their AR goals, instructional reading level, ZPD, percentage of goals met, and how to track everything with their agenda books.”

Students—and parents—are trained from the start

Concord’s intentional growth mindset relies on data all day, every day, to drive instruction—backed by administration, teachers, students, and parents. Although this Kentucky Distinguished School has been a top performer in the state for years, with the majority of students at or above benchmark, no one is resting on laurels.

But that kind of drive takes strong initiative, and Hollowell and her team lead the charge by laying the groundwork early. Hollowell and Concord’s Librarian Ann Fendley engage and educate parents about Accelerated Reader starting with kindergarten back-to-school night. Through a library tour, Fendley explains how shelves represent book level, defines ZPD, and points out where to find the right book label. She also introduces them to arbookfinder.com so they identify proper books at public libraries.

“If you’re training parents and kids on AR and STAR right away, then as students advance grades, they make that desired gain in growth because they’ve practiced appropriately,” Hollowell said.

“The data speaks to us daily. We’re not figuring things out by happenstance, but by really looking at diagnostics.”

Ginger Hollowell
Principal
Concord Elementary School

Data is a daily touchstone


Constant data evaluation pinpoints student needs—before they ask. Hollowell keeps two monitors on her desk, one with her email and one with Renaissance Place so she can watch the metrics, from engaged reading time per day to the ratio of fiction to nonfiction. Before observing a teacher, Hollowell pulls up the class’s recent STAR Reading assessment data and compares it to last year’s numbers.

At conferences, teachers use the Student Instructional Planning Report and Diagnostic Report to show parents what instructional readiness looks like, and what they can do at home to reinforce their child’s learning. “The data speaks to us daily,” Hollowell said. “We’re not figuring things out by happenstance, but by really looking at diagnostics. There are countless examples of changes we’ve made as a result.” These include the following:

- **More testing support**
A Diagnostic Report in early September showed that 30 kindergarteners hadn’t taken AR tests. With kindergarten critical for teaching reading practice, Hollowell asked an assistant to help complete testing. A week later, all but three of the tests were complete.
- **Less unnecessary instruction**
Hollowell asked her second-grade team to bring their next five-day lesson plans to a professional learning communities meeting. The Standards Report identified already-mastered standards they would be wasting their time on. “We changed plans accordingly.”
- **Greater library access**
When diagnostics indicated that certain fifth-grade classes may be struggling to get sufficient reading practice, the library schedule was tweaked. Those fifth-graders came to the library at the end of kindergarten classes so Fendley could help them while an aid finished with the kindergarteners.
- **More effective RTI**
Because Concord uses STAR to track anyone below the 25th percentile, there are four or five students in the room for intervention, rather than 10. Each uses different software and curriculum based on specific needs, and STAR results guide each lesson.

Schools that observe Concord’s highly systematic, prescriptive approach can feel overwhelmed at first. But Hollowell advises to take it one idea at a time, hire staff who follow the data but also use expert judgment to question it, and always be open to changes.

“We’re already wondering if we’ve put too much focus on nonfiction,” said Hollowell, noting that students take teachers literally. “I’m going to tell kids to read nonfiction, but it’s very acceptable to bring home fiction, too. We don’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater.” ■




CONCORD ELEMENTARY’S


TOOLS

FOR PARENTS AND STUDENTS
TO BOOST RESULTS


Home Connect for every parent
All Concord parents are signed up for Home Connect and taught to monitor progress from home computers. Parents become so adept at understanding STAR diagnostic and growth data that one parent was able to articulate a sudden regression in her child and prompt a follow-up assessment.



Reading necklaces for book choice
While Fendley tracks each student’s ZPD in her system, she also has another visual prompt; kids wear a necklace to the library with their ZPD, as well as user name and password.



AR Tickets
K–2 students must also bring in an “AR Ticket” before quizzing. This ticket, signed by a parent to acknowledge the child has read the book and is quiz-ready, is another home-to-school connection.



Social media for educators—

Are you in?

Should all teachers be using social media to enhance their work as educators? What about administrators?

If you’ve ever wondered where you fit into the social media picture or what you may be missing, now’s your chance to find out. Take our quick poll aimed at learning which of you are active on social media and how. The poll is open until December 11 at bit.ly/rensurvey.

We look forward to sharing the results with you in a future issue and on our social channels!





Big change stems from “pockets of excellence” at California school

Every fall at back-to-school night for California’s Newport Heights Elementary, third-grade teacher John Daffron has a mission: to find two parents to volunteer for an hour every day during math time. Their presence is critical in an environment of controlled chaos—abuzz with students constantly on the move to work their Accelerated Math practice problems, consult with Daffron on problems missed, and work with peers or the parent at the back table. It’s noise and activity that Daffron knows is academically healthy and necessary.

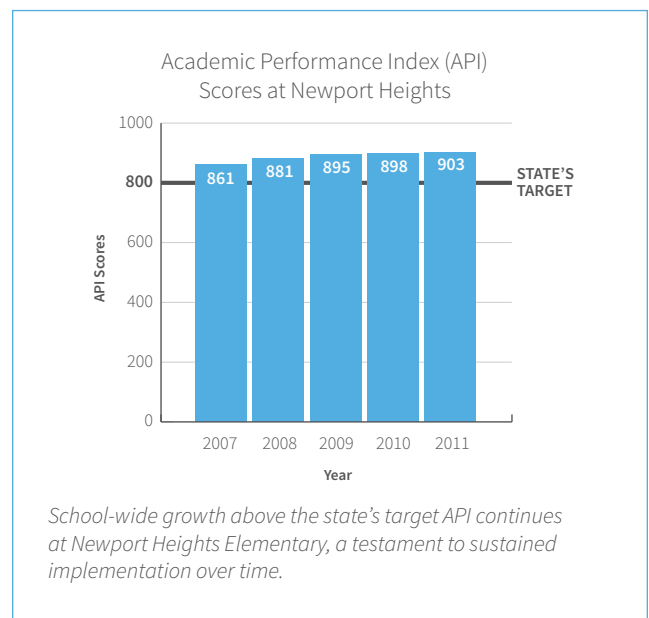
Achieving perfect proficiency

“I’m a disciplinarian who likes organization, but you have to let go of some of that,” said Daffron, who balances the bustle with a rote system of flow and go-to red folders for assignments. “If you can wade through the frenzy and have parents help with concepts or questions while you work one-on-one with your students daily, then AM runs like a machine and kids can really advance.”

They certainly can. For three consecutive years, 100 percent of Daffron’s students scored proficient or advanced in math on the California Standards Test (CST), with several even earning perfect scores. His classrooms were not stacked nor homogeneous with high-performing students; each offered a full spectrum of learners in a school where an average 25–30 percent of typical students fall short of proficiency levels.

Sustained achievement school-wide

But overall student performance is also getting astoundingly better all the time at Newport. Since implementing Accelerated Math, Accelerated Reader, STAR Math, and STAR Reading in grades K–6 about 10 years ago, Academic Performance Index (API) scores have steadily increased beyond the state’s target level. In the last five years, that growth has only continued (see chart) . Newport Heights School District’s Director of Elementary Education



Kurt Suhr, who saw API increase by 89 points in seven years and led the Renaissance Learning rollout while principal of Newport Heights Elementary, said the programs were central to school technology and growth goals.

“Growth spikes can suggest an especially strong year of kids here or there, but steady growth year after year showed we were on the right path and really making a difference with these programs,” Suhr said. “Anything new takes time and a comprehensive plan and budget for what it looks like on day one and what it will look like down the road. Huge results don’t happen immediately.”

The power of true differentiation

Immediate feedback for students, on the other hand, is not only possible, but a daily reality at Newport Heights. Suhr said the initial implementation of Accelerated Math and STAR Math technology was prompted by their ability to offer instant data on student progress and performance—something not readily attainable when trying to hand-correct assignments and manually enter data. The school looked to Accelerated Math and STAR Math to overcome lost teaching time, with the ancillary benefit of building intrinsic motivation.

“I’ve never seen a better program than AM for giving kids the individualized practice and immediate feedback that keeps them pushing beyond the pace of regular curriculum, or that meets their targeted needs at a lower grade level to shore up their skills,” said Suhr, who had previously used Accelerated Math as a classroom teacher.

Witnessing that immediate feedback and the power of differentiation gets every one of his parent volunteers touting Accelerated Math, says Daffron. By just one month into the school year, each of Daffron’s students has a prescriptive math program through STAR Math diagnostic testing and is off and running with a tailored library of Accelerated Math objectives. Daffron says Newport Heights has used Accelerated Math’s flexibility to custom-create a library that emphasizes state and Common Core standards and includes not just third-grade objectives, but also several grades below and above. Regardless of student needs, all necessary objective levels are right there for convenient and longitudinal access.

Teacher investment and impact

Daffron, who is routinely asked for the secrets to his ongoing success, says that those who are not getting desired results with Accelerated Math may need to devote more classroom time to the program or be more vigilant when it comes to students’ mistakes. Through his quick but daily face-to-face conferences, he gets kids back on track for problems they missed, or he assigns extra practice assignments targeted to trouble objectives for student-parent work.

Continued on page 10

Q&A with a Renaissance Coach

Sara Jennings, Renaissance coach since 2007, takes some time out to reflect on her years of training educators to use Renaissance programs effectively and gain deeper insight into their student data.



What is the greatest reward of being a coach?

The training we provide ultimately affects instructional decisions educators make. Knowing that my guidance and support help educators all over the country is a big reward for me.

Do you receive ongoing training and updates?

Absolutely. Coaches have to be up to speed on new information that affects our customers—before they ask us about it. We read daily updates and attend biweekly focus groups to process what’s new, learn innovative approaches to delivery, and learn about new education initiatives. We also attend two annual “academies” for additional training.

Have you ever witnessed a major turn-around stemming from one or more coaching sessions?

Yes! My favorite memories are of schools that are willing to turn a corner and change old habits. One district I worked with in Indiana had implemented AR for years but were putting too much emphasis on points, which was really causing issues for struggling and unmotivated readers. After a year of following our suggestions and best practices, their data completely turned around—for all readers! The students were not only reading a lot, they were comprehending and paying attention to what they were reading.

What surprises people the most about your job?

People are surprised to hear how many hours of training we deliver each school year. During 2013, the 22 coaches in our department delivered 8,159 hours of training to over 53,508 educators, not including one-on-one sessions. Our flexibility surprises people too. We work to accommodate every school’s schedule, so we deliver training before school, during school, after school, and even in the wee hours of the morning when we work with teachers in other countries.

“It’s powerful to know every student’s exact strengths and weaknesses, and I never have to wonder how they’ll do on a midterm test,” Daffron said. “It’s also been interesting to see that in reading for information through all of these AM math questions, my students get noticeably stronger in their overall nonfiction reading comprehension.”

Although Accelerated Math alerts test readiness with every five objectives a student masters, Daffron suggests that many kids may benefit from testing on just one objective at a time. Even his stronger performers tend to do better when isolating the skill they are mastering. Daffron also says that if one particular objective slows everyone down, resulting in a “log jam” of students stuck at the same point, it’s best to postpone or offer a classroom lesson on that objective to keep kids moving along versus requiring mastery.

Classroom and school-wide monitoring

Daffron continually tracks the number of objectives mastered, something that Suhr said is also closely monitored by administration. The school-wide Summary Report shows whether students are mastering the expected objectives across the board—and if not, identified students receive intervention support so that everyone successfully contributes to objective completion, not just high performers.

“We noticed a straight correlation between the number of AM objectives mastered within a class and the classrooms with the highest performance on our state tests and internal district measures,” Suhr said. “Some classes mastered 7,000 objectives in a year, and those with half of that or less didn’t perform half as well.”

Ripple effect

Reaching school-wide success with Accelerated Math starts with “pockets of excellence,” Suhr’s moniker for key teachers, like Daffron, who are especially passionate about the program and get results that trigger a ripple effect. Although it’s an initial budget challenge, Suhr recommends starting with an on-site teacher on special assignment—a point person to provide ongoing support all day, every day, as opposed to isolated training. As the program grows, other teachers become experts who help absorb that role. But most importantly, these campus experts facilitate discussions in grade-level teams and professional learning communities, and the excitement becomes contagious. “Start small, provide support and training, put things in the hands of the teachers who want it, and let them run with it as leaders,” Suhr said. “Ultimately, the data will undeniably speak for itself.” ■

What Kids Are Reading report now an interactive experience

It’s never been more tempting to crack open our yearly report summarizing the book-reading habits of students in American Schools. And by “crack open,” we mean dive into the data and truly explore it.

This year’s report on nationwide student reading habits reflects data from just a few months back. And, for the first time, teachers can access the data directly on Learnalytics, our interactive website devoted to sharing and exploring what students know, what they like, and how they learn.

What Kids Are Reading data on the Learnalytics site allows you to:

- **Search for popular books** by grade, gender, ATOS level, interest level, and more
- **View the most widely read book titles** by state
- **See top nonfiction books**, and compare fiction to nonfiction reading across school years
- **Compare** “new favorites” to “modern classics”

Each data set features beautiful visuals and interactivity, so you can explore, drill in, and make connections to your students and their reading habits and preferences. This will give teachers great ideas for book titles to get students reading more. Teachers will also expand their understanding of what reading material resonates with the kids they work with and guide every day.

Take your first dive into the data in the world’s largest reading database at www.learnalytics.com/wkar/.



Zavala, continued from page 3

said. “We used to hear complaints about test prep being difficult, because that reading stamina wasn’t there. Now that students read books all day long, they think it’s no big deal to take tests, including the state ones—and our scores are showing their confidence.”

How did Zavala get from there to here?

Support and trust from the top

Fox feels fortunate to work for Austin ISD, a district that values the unique character of each school and community and trusts in his ideas and decisions, as long as they’re accountable. This kind of support is critical to making innovative changes, Fox says. The increasing STAAR scores have been all the reassurance the district needs to say, “Keep those ideas going.”

Staff and teacher cohesiveness

Involving teachers directly in the innovations has made all the difference. Buy-in started with an “AR Research Team” comprised of key teachers as school leaders. An “AR Committee” of teachers continues to meet every two weeks to discuss program ideas and changes, and an “Instructional Leadership Team” including Fox, Anderson, and Bresnan, meets weekly to review progress and work through new goals or variables. “Earning trust makes everyone more patient with grandiose plans.” Fox said.

Systematic monitoring of progress

Zavala teachers review weekly class summary reports in AR and perform data analyses on any students with red intervention triangles by their names. Student conferences are set up to promptly address struggles. Weekly, Fox and Anderson also collect reports from the teachers and email shout-outs for everything from the number of nonfiction books read to the percentage of tests passed. This hands-on approach lets Fox and Anderson celebrate students and hold them accountable.

“I’ll stop a student and say, ‘Hey, you told your teacher you didn’t take a quiz because you’re reading a novel, so what book are you reading?’” Anderson said. “It lets them know we’re paying attention right along with their teachers.”

Parent education

Parents are pulled in at the start of each year with a brochure about Accelerated Reader expectations, which they must sign to confirm awareness. Bresnan also offers tips on putting arbookfinder.com on cell phones to identify suitable books outside of the school library, and she provides parent library cards they can use after school to choose books for their children.

Open minds

Bresnan acknowledges that in her previous school, she’d been hesitant about Accelerated Reader because it seemed overwhelming. But once she saw it could transform and



“We want reading to be not a challenge or even a subject, but as life-essential, constant, and time-worthy as breathing,” Bresnan said.

empower students and make reading track-able—versus fruitlessly circulating unread books—she was 100 percent behind it. In the process, she discovered that her own knowledge of book leveling skyrocketed with the program. Ordering books also became much easier.

Persistence

No program works right away, Fox acknowledges, and starting small—such as adding dedicated daily reading time—is critical to buy-in and success. But the real biggie is to be persistent, even in the face of naysayers.

“You can make anything work if you’re innovative enough and you don’t give up—and it’s worth it,” Fox said. “Our jobs have become so much more rewarding. Our goal is for these kids to become truly well-rounded and to never stop reading or learning, because that’s how they—and we as their educators—truly succeed in the long run.” ■

We hope you enjoyed this issue! We’re always on the lookout for the latest success stories. If you have one to share, email us at successtories@renaissance.com.

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Celebrating America's Outstanding Teachers

Renaissance Learning™

2911 Peach Street
Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494

TOLL FREE: (800) 338-4204
Toll-free Fax: (877) 280-7642
Web: www.renaissance.com
Email: answers@renlearn.com

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Visionary
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Zavala Elementary
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