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Back to basics

Schenectady district's literacy plan builds from the ground up

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Every word starts with a letter, and every letter starts with a sound. So that's where the teachers and reading specialists in Schenectady City School District start too.

"OK, guys, let's review our sounds," Amy Haas, a reading teacher at Martin Luther King school said as she sat down with a small group of kindergartners last week.

Using an iPad, she flashed the students a drawing of a baseball player swinging a bat beside a large B. "What does B say?" she asked.

"Baaa..." the students blurted out, trying to beat their classmates to the answer. "Baaaaat."

"What does the pirate say, Savahna?" Haas asked one of the kindergartners.

Savahna Warner stood up from her little chair and with a wide arc of her arm made the shape of an especially rounded letter R.

"Arrrrrr..." she said, like a pirate.

As Haas and her charges started to draw out letters in pans full of salt — the activities change regularly to keep the kids' attention — a scene of organized chaos unfolded around them.

There are 21 students in Amber Hernandez's kindergarten class — one of six stops for Haas, a reading teacher who works from a classroom on wheels. The students are divided into six groups, so the teachers can focus on the students' specific needs. As Haas and Hernandez work with small groups, the rest of the class chip away at individual assignments with the help of a classroom aide.

Hernandez sat between two students, slowly paging through "I Want a Pet."

"This is a tricky book," she warned the students. "This is almost a first grade book."

But Zaria Altido breezed through the starter book, catching her one minor mistake all on her own: "I do not want a very big pet. I do not want a brown pet. I don't want a white pet," she read. "I do not want — I do want — a green pet. Ues, I do."

"I like how you went back and corrected yourself after you figured out that wasn't right," Hernandez said. "Highfive, that's awesome."

'WHAT WE MEAN'

A carefully planned logic undergirds the rhythms of literacy learning in Hernandez's class — and every kindergarten class across the district.

And there is good reason for the detailed plan: Just 19 percent of Schenectady's third graders were proficient readers in 2014 and only 15 percent of eighth graders that year were reading at grade level.

Schenectady school officials rolled out a new K-3 literacy plan districtwide last fall.

The plan emphasizes phonics development in the earliest grades and establishes a specific road map of where students' skills should be throughout the year. The plan also extends time students spend on reading and writing each day to 150 minutes — an extra 30 minutes.

"It makes clear for teachers that when we say teaching reading and teaching literacy this is what we mean," said Kerri Messler, the district's English language arts and library coordinator. "We wanted to standardize it and make it clear to our teachers."

Balancing different schools of thought for teaching literacy, the district developed a plan of deep focus on phonics and phonemic awareness in the earliest grades while still working to develop students' vocabulary and reading comprehension skills.

Messler said the district was using a "multi-sensory" approach for students.

"They say it, they write it and they hear it," Messler said.

Teachers incorporate class lessons and small group and individual instruction. They shift between styles of teaching reading — a class read aloud or independent readings, word study or writing practice.

The district also is using monitoring software that helps teachers assess how particular students are doing, school leaders assess how teachers are doing and district officials assess how schools are doing. The software, aimsweb, allows teachers to check if students have met targets — such as being able to use a certain letter — so they can craft specific interventions to address shortfalls.

District officials are working on developing a similar plan for fourth through sixth grades and hope to have it place by the start of next school year, Messler said.

'MAD WORDS'

Alexandria Noga's Van Corlaer third grade class is studying fairy tales and reading different versions of the Cinderella story. On Thursday, Noga read a version about African princesses to her students, who sat on a blue rug beneath three tall windows.

She peppered the students with questions after each page, engaging them in the plot and characters, asking them to predict what would come next and drawing comparisons to other Cinderella stories.

A few minutes earlier the students had practiced different types of letter pairings: digraphs — two letters that combine create one sound — and blends of two-letter sounds.

Working in pairs, the students sorted a variety of words.

"We aren't getting any digraphs," said Quajere Caldwell, staring at five or six words.

"Yeah, they are all blends," his partner, Nora Ciccone agreed.

But as the digraphs started to stack up — chew, cheer, thorn, shadow — the pair's optimism grew as well.

"We're about to get mad words!" Quajere said.





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Above: Martin Luther King Elementary School teacher Amy Haas works with Savahna Warner, teaching her how to read sentences in class on Wednesday. Alexx McGhee and Depaville Sierra Permaul are seen in background. Right: Haas shuffles words before her students pick the best word to put into a complete sentence during class.