

Elementary extends reading program to all grades

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A federal program designed to help the youngest students improve their reading skills has been adapted at Alexander Elementary School to benefit students from kindergarten through fifth grade.

The program, Reading First, is designed to help children become good readers by third grade. Research has shown that kindergarten through third grade are the most effective years for reading intervention.

Reading First uses reasearch-based methods and materials to help children who are not reading on-level. Most Reading First schools employ a kindergarten through third grade break-out program, giving students help in small group settings. However, Alexander, with 750 students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, uses it schoolwide for intervention for any student in need.

“It made sense to us after seeing it in the early grades and seeing what a difference it made,” said Jeff Cullum, pre-kindergarten through second grade principal.

The program funds a literacy specialist from whom teachers learn strategies and get tools that research shows are effective for children who live in high-poverty, low-achieving areas.

Every student has a 90-minute block of reading instruction every day. Intervention is based on each child s individual needs. Student progress is carefully monitored. If one strategy doesn t work on a particular student, new strategies are tried.

Cullum noticed improvement soon after the program began at Alexander in 2005.

“One of the biggest things is the continuity in the grade levels and in between the grades,” he said.

“Reading First has made a huge difference in our focus on reading and our delivery system to children,” said Nedra Zirkle, Alexander principal for third through fifth graders. “We are doing a much better job of meeting the needs of our kids. The professional development has made an amazing difference. It has created a great learning community among our teachers.”

She said teaching can be an isolating job. Teachers often spend most of their time alone with their students, but Reading First has allowed them the chance to work together and learn from one another. Zirkle said her teachers now often write their lessons and tests together, and that helps them brainstorm new ideas.

Cheryl Nostrant is Alexander s literacy specialist and sees the benefits of Reading First every day.

“We focus on the gathering of information on children and take the time to decide how to teach them,” she said. “We have the time and the money for professional development. We have money for technology. Reading First has enabled us to have the time to meet during the day and after the day to provide professional development for teachers.”

Even the youngest elementary students are ready for Internet learning in today s world, Nostrant said, and grant funds pay for online reading services.

“The kids love it, and it keeps their attention,” she said. “And the money has meant we can stay up-to-date in the 21st century.”

For two years, the school has employed part-time “teaching fellows” — certified teachers who are working toward graduate degrees at Ohio University s School of Education — to do reading intervention, and Cullum said it s been a big success.

“It has been a lot of work for our teachers, too,” Nostrant said. “The money and the material alone wouldn t have worked without having had a

dedicated, flexible, hard-working staff.”

She said even if some students aren't able to catch up to their grade level, the program still helps.

—We may not be able to eliminate the gap completely, but we're still pushing them to close the gap,” she said.

Nostrant hates to see the funding end but said everyone is trying to find creative ways to keep as much of the program in tact as possible.

—We know this works. This has been the best thing we've done,” Nostrant said.

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