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Students start new year of reading

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On the first day of school, 8-year-old Obed Atienzo stands at the doorway to Jill Browne's classroom at Creighton Elementary School in Phoenix and squares his shoulders under his black backpack.

He breathes out hard and says softly to himself, "OK. Second grade."

Obed marches in, trailing his classmates, to find second grade very different from first grade. A revolving metal rack holds chapter books, like *Junie B. Jones and the Magic Treehouse* series, instead of storybooks that had only a few sentences and pictures on every page.

The words tacked to the walls are longer, with more syllables. And there is a new teacher, Browne, an art major who talks in funny voices when she reads aloud and draws pictures of new words they come across.

Now that the children know how to read, they'll be expected to become more fluent this year and understand what they are reading.

If children can't read by the time they start fourth grade, reading experts say, they'll probably never catch up. To help, *The Arizona Republic* launched a three-year partnership with Creighton to give students an extra boost.

The program, now entering its second year, provides grant money and tutors. *The Republic* also will chronicle the experiences of one class of children through the critical reading years: first, second and third grade.

Arizona's record for teaching its children to read is dismal. The state ranks poorly in most measures of literacy, with students from first grade to high school struggling to read at grade level.

Only 23 percent of Arizona's fourth-graders can read proficiently, compared with 30 percent nationally, according to the newly released Kids Count report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore.

Creighton's kids got off to a rocky start. Most of its students are poor, without shelves full of books at home or the life experiences most kids take for granted. Many start school speaking only Spanish and, even in their own language, their skills mirror those of toddlers.

Browne's students learned how to read last year by memorizing the alphabet and the sounds the letters make and sounding out words. Still, by state standards, only two were reading at grade level when the school year ended. An additional dozen of their classmates were right behind them, scoring high in the "emerging" category of a reading assessment. That left nine struggling readers at the year's end.

Clock is ticking

Browne knows that her new charges really have only this one more year to get truly good at reading. By third grade, children should have learning to read down pat and begin reading to learn, getting more information from textbooks and less from teachers.

The kids who fare the best early in the school year are the ones like Jose Melchor Lugo, 8, who went to summer school.

He and five classmates spent an hour a day with Browne for three weeks during the break.

Every day, he came in with something new to show Browne. On this day during the third week of summer school, it's a green car and red fire engine.

She says, "Every day, you have something different in your pocket."

He then reads aloud from *Do You Want Some Yams?*: "Do you want yams in a pot? No, I do not want yams in a pot."

Jose Melchor no longer follows along with his finger, underlining each word. He laughs at the funny parts.

"Wow! You did such a great job," Browne says. "Every so often you found a tricky word, but you did what really good readers do. You went back and read the sentence again to make sure it made sense."

Like all teachers, Browne will have to spend as many as six weeks reviewing what the children learned last year before she can barrel ahead with new material, especially in reading.

At the end of first grade, the children had just gotten the hang of reading. They were flying through books, with the thrill of that newfound discovery. Then, school ended, putting a sudden halt to their progress.

Since the early 1900s, researchers have studied the effects of summer vacation on student learning. The common finding is that students generally score better on tests at the beginning of the summer than at the end, and researchers estimate that children lose at least a month's worth of learning.

The long break hurts low-income students even more because they don't have the same access to books and high-quality summer programs. They can lose the equivalent of two months of instruction.

Summer can be a time of great learning and gathering of life experiences if children are going to chess club and zoo camp and taking family trips to camp in the woods, the beach and Disneyland, says Karen Tankersley, a reading consultant and former teacher, principal and superintendent.

But few kids at Creighton have those kinds of summers.

Many, like Obed, never leave their own neighborhoods, staying at home with older siblings while their parents work. Maria Vega, 7, went to Mexico. Oriana Lopez, 7, played at the park and public pool.

Tankersley compares students taking a summer break to an athlete who takes a few months off: "Obviously, your skills would get rusty during that time, and you have to start practicing again."

To combat that, Creighton runs on a modified year-round calendar so children are only out of school for eight weeks in the summer instead of almost three months. But a longer school year costs more money, so the majority of districts don't do it.

Despite having two years of school behind them, the first day can be overwhelming.

It's hard to say goodbye to summer to enter an unfamiliar world and meet a new teacher.

Christian Sadah's mother, Maryann Valencia, stayed awhile on the first day because he was so nervous.

Longing for home

"I want to go home," he whispers as the children line up to sharpen pencils.

She whispers back, "You can't go home yet. You have to learn."

By recess, Christian, 7, is fine, lining up under a sign on the classroom door that says, "Books are where my imagination goes to play."

Later, the children learn classroom procedures. Browne tells them, " 'Procedures' is a big word for the right thing to do."

She tells them how to sharpen their pencils, when it's all right to be out of their chairs, and where the hall pass hangs, one for boys, one for girls.

"Does anyone have to go to the bathroom right now?" Browne asks, and eight hands shoot into the air: "I thought you might."

Every child's name is on a construction-paper traffic light. Green is good. A yellow light means you have to stand against the wall at recess. Red means two days on the wall and, the ultimate punishment, Browne calls your mom.

The rules: Be a good listener. Raise your hand. Respect your classmates. No put-downs. Browne explains: "What if I call you a pickle head? Is that nice?"

"No," Irvin says. "You have to say you're sorry."

In first grade, the children worked together, most often in small groups, says Becky Bernard, who has been a teacher for 28 years, all but two spent in second grade, and who has taught at Tempe's Broadmor School for 23. Now the pressure is on to prove themselves, she says: "As an individual, you have to begin to show what you can do."

Second grade is tougher than first because children are asked to sit in their seats longer. There is less "center work," moving from activity to activity at different tables. And the pace is faster, Bernard says: "The expectations are a little more demanding."

More than reading, they also will learn about government and weather.

In math, they'll add two- and three-digit numbers, learning what is now called "regrouping," a concept parents will remember as "carrying" and "borrowing."

They will face their first spelling tests and take their first national standardized exam.

But this is also the year that many children discover the joy of reading for pleasure, tattered copies of *Harry Potter* series books or *Little House in the Prairie* tucked in their backpacks.

They'll study butterflies and draw as their teacher reads aloud from *Junie B. Jones and the Stupid, Smelly Bus*.

"Sometimes," Browne assures her students on the first day of school, "we'll play games and have lots of fun."

"Yes!" says Obed, punching his fist into the air. He thinks he's going to like second grade.

On the fourth day of school, the children sit cross-legged on the floor as Browne turns the pages of *Goodnight, Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown.

"This is a really good book for wondering," Browne says. "What are you wondering?"

Irvin raises his hand: "I'm wondering if the rabbit is really real."

Browne was wondering that, too.

"Do you think he's scared to go to sleep?" Browne asks. Then, she tells them a secret: She's afraid of the dark. She leaves on a light at night.

"You never know if there might be something under the bed or in the closet," she says.

The children nod. Irvin confides, "When I was little, I was afraid of the dark."

Some of Browne's students are bound to struggle this year, especially with reading. Experts call it the "second-grade reading stumble."

In first grade, Tankersley says, children rely heavily on decoding skills (sounding it out) that don't always work as texts get more complex. They also get clues from the pictures in books.

In second grade, they'll learn new strategies for figuring out words and how to get meaning from words, not pictures.

This year, Browne says, the children will tackle more difficult words and more complex sentence structure. They'll get lots of practice and build up in their brains a bank of words that appear often in print.

She is testing them now, having them read from a list of 100 high-frequency words that most children learn in first grade. No one knows them all, and they'll need to know another 100 to 200 by year's end.

They'll talk a lot about what they read to improve comprehension and build vocabulary, Browne says. She tells the children, "That's why good readers read books more than once."

The children will read a lot: silently, aloud, on their own, with a partner, with the teacher and with parents.

They'll learn more about how words work: the "Super Silent E," three-letter blends and vowel teams, like "ai" in train and "ea" in read. And they'll go to recess and lunch at 10:50 a.m., 20 minutes later than last year, so they'll have time to write in their journals first.

It's the kind of more rigorous work second-graders can expect, Bernard says. "It's work that demands more attention on their part and less work that seems like play."

Those who struggle will work with a new reading specialist.

"They can't go on to more complex things if they don't have the basics," Tankersley says.

They also can't afford to miss a single day of school. "Struggling readers need to be there every day, that's all there is to it," Bernard says. "They need all the practice they can get."

This year is the bridge between first grade and third grade. The children started first grade with only the most rudimentary knowledge of letters and the sounds they make. By third grade, they will be expected to really read or fall behind, maybe forever.

Browne knows her job is to recapture what her students lost over the summer and then get them poised to take the annual Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards for the first time in third grade.

This spring, only 58 percent of Creighton's third-graders passed the reading portion of the test, compared with 72 percent statewide.

Browne stands by the rack of chapter books and holds up *Stuart Little*. She promises, "We will get you to where you can read these books before you go to third grade."

Maria Vega hugs three *Junie B. Jones* books to her chest, smiling. She is counting on her new teacher: "I'm going to read these books."

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