



Third-graders' success will decide their school's future

Creighton students make big strides but are still short of goal. Again.

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Like many third-graders at Creighton Elementary School in Phoenix, 9-year-old Oscar Medina thinks that if he doesn't pass the state's AIMS test, he won't get to go to fourth grade next year.

That's not true, his teacher assures him. What Oscar doesn't realize is that it's not fourth grade but the fate of his school that rests on his and his classmates' scores.

By federal standards, schools are required to make adequate yearly progress or face government intervention. For four years, Creighton hasn't met the standards under the No Child Left Behind law.

If enough of this year's third-graders don't do well on Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards, or AIMS, a fifth year without adequate progress calls for restructuring and possible state takeover and a new principal.

Rosemary Agneessens smiles wryly at the thought. It's a stressful job, with long hours.

She pores over spreadsheets of reading scores. Her students, who speak mostly Spanish, do fine in math because it doesn't require they read in English. Agneessens takes off her glasses, rubs her eyes and says, "I just want them to read. Not only for AIMS but because if they don't learn now, they may never catch up."

Almost three years ago, *The Arizona Republic* began chronicling the efforts of a group of children at Creighton as they began to learn to read.

Many started first grade without even knowing the alphabet. Now, nearing the end of third grade, they have made tremendous progress, with some kids jumping two grade levels in reading this year alone.

Still, the children don't read as well as they should by now. In December, about 25 percent of the 110 third-graders tested as proficient in reading.

Their struggles mirror those of children across Arizona, where 24 percent of fourth-graders are proficient in reading, compared with 31 percent nationally. There are other schools in Creighton's position, most of them in low-income areas.

There is a determined air about Creighton. Students in all other grades are poised to pass AIMS, based on ongoing assessments. Lynne Spiller, the district's director of research and evaluation, thinks the third-graders could possibly pass, just maybe, what with the school's new reading program and additional tutoring.

Testing starts April 9, though the results won't be available until after school lets out in May. Everyone, from district officials and the school board to the state superintendent of public instruction and federal government, will be waiting.

Oscar has been practicing for AIMS, reading to his mother every night at the kitchen table. "I'm ready," he says.

New language, big barrier

On third-grade teacher Emaretta Hines' desk is a copy of *How to Eat Fried Worms* by Thomas Rockwell. Her students aren't ready to read it for themselves yet, so she's reading it to them.

The majority of her students still are learning English. A few started the school year speaking no English at all. Now they're reading aloud and using sophisticated words in their writing, such as "awesome" and "discovered," copied carefully from a vocabulary list.

Eight-year-old Rosario Portillo has jumped two grade levels in reading, though she is still about a year behind where she should be for her age.

"That's significant growth," says Karen Tankersley, a reading consultant and Arizona State University West professor. If she and other students could show the same kind of growth next year, they would be right where they need to be in reading. Even better, if they went to summer school, they could be on grade level by the time they start fourth grade.

But Rosario and her classmates will take AIMS long before that, and the person scoring her test can't take into account that she moved here from Mexico in first grade.

State education officials expect children to learn English in one year, though most research shows that the English skills needed to perform well academically can take five to seven years to master.

Creighton's inability to make adequate yearly progress rests on its English-learners. The school is a first stop for many immigrants, with student turnover as high as 50 percent.

Creighton third-graders are in one of two programs: English immersion, where subjects are taught entirely in English; or dual-language, where students also receive instruction in Spanish.

In dual-language, Oscar has made up the ground he lost as he struggled to learn English because he gets half of his instruction in Spanish. He has jumped a grade level and a half in reading and now hovers just below grade level.

Arizona law doesn't allow bilingual education. However, schools can offer dual-language classes if students already are proficient in English. It took until third grade for Oscar and many of his classmates to get fluent enough in English to qualify. AIMS is in English.

Still, the strongest predictor of school success is a child's socioeconomic status, says Jeff MacSwan, associate professor of education at Arizona State University in Tempe and author of several reports on Arizona's English-learners.

Children with richer parents fare better in school than poor kids. At Creighton, 90 percent of students qualify for federal reduced-price and free meal programs.

Coupled with the fact that they are learning English, he says, "It does stand to reason that if these kids are working in both languages, they are going to trail behind a bit. A year is not a big deal. They're going to be able to catch up."

But maybe not in time to pass this year's AIMS test.

Getting ready for AIMS

In a sense, third-graders at Creighton, like kids their age across the state, have been preparing for AIMS since the start

of the school year. All children take the AIMS test for the first time in third-grade.

They've been pushed to read independently instead of relying on a reading buddy or a teacher as they did in second grade. They'll have to read on their own for AIMS and, by the fourth grade, they're expected to get as much information from textbooks as they do from their teachers.

Their teachers have taught them test-taking strategies, such as highlighting passages to pick out key ideas and what to do when they come across an unfamiliar word.

They use dictionaries now instead of asking their teachers how to spell a word or what it means. (Students can use dictionaries during AIMS.)

Third-graders are forced to grow up as scholars, getting little slack for forgotten homework or misplaced assignments. It's a time of great growth, with kids snapping up new words and concepts.

Oscar pulls his sweatshirt off over his head and tucks his white-collared uniform shirt back into his navy trousers. He and his seatmates are talking about the characters, setting and conflict of the book *Dogzilla* by Dav Pilkey. They'll likely be asked to do the same on AIMS. The test measures state standards in reading, writing and math.

One recent afternoon, third-graders worked on antonyms and synonyms during a new intervention started this year called "Reading Plus." All Creighton students get an extra 45 minutes of reading instruction, grouped by ability and in small classes.

Last year, the same approach to teaching math resulted in significant gains. Fifty-seven percent of Creighton third-graders passed the math portion of AIMS in 2004-05, up from 18 percent in 2003-04 and even better than the statewide rate of 43 percent.

By teaching in small groups, teachers can target instruction to each child's weakness. Children who catch on quickly can move up, from group to group, as their skills improve.

With their teachers doing everything to prepare them for AIMS and the rigors of fourth grade, Principal Agneessens turned to their parents for help.

In a series of meetings all year, she has met with parents in every grade level to talk about their children's progress.

"We're doing everything we can here at school," she told them in Spanish. If their children are to succeed, they must help them at home.

"This is serious," Agneessens said. "The success of your children depends on what you do at home."

Some parents cried.

Kids are reason to hope

Now Oscar reads to his mother after he finishes his homework. His classmate, Diego Covarrubias, reads to his big sister.

In Hines' class, Rosario and 8-year-old Melissa Viera stay after school to help Hines tidy the room. They like being at school so much, they're reluctant to leave.

Melissa reads aloud, "Where is the circle? The circle is over the square. Where is the oval? The oval fell off the triangle. Oops." The girls giggle.

The children's efforts are reason for hope. These third-graders entered kindergarten just as a wave of reading reforms were being integrated into classrooms, not only at their own school but also across the country.

The new reading program this year has meant an additional 45 minutes of instruction every day, and children get additional tutoring in the areas where they are weak.

And more third-graders this year were proficient enough in English to qualify for the school's dual-language program, and their reading has improved dramatically compared with the third-graders in English-immersion classes.

"I have the greatest hope that it will be enough," says Spiller, the district's research and evaluation director. She monitors students' progress through regular assessments.

Third-graders have shown progress since December, and she hopes it will be enough. At least 61 percent of third-graders must test proficient in reading or the school again won't meet its federal progress requirements.

If only they had a little more time, Spiller says, they would be sure to make it. About 70 percent of fourth-graders are on track to pass AIMS.

"Once they figure out the language, they shoot up," Spiller says.

Test time is growing near.

"The students know they have a big test coming up," says Jessica Barrios, Oscar's teacher in the dual-language program.

She has assured them that AIMS won't determine if they go to fourth-grade. But they have to pass AIMS to graduate from high school, so they may as well start now.

She has high expectations for her students, assigning them to reading groups named after colleges: New York University, Arizona State, University of California-Los Angeles.

Down the breezeway, Hines explains to her students that AIMS will measure what they know compared with what they are supposed to know. There is no reason to tell them what hinges on their scores.

They've worked hard all year. "Just do your very best," Hines tells them.