

At Phoenix school, reading, if not test scores, is its own reward

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Three years ago, *The Arizona Republic* launched a partnership with Creighton school in hopes of raising its students' reading scores. With the help of their teachers and tutors from the newspaper, the students made huge strides improving their reading scores.

But for all their work, the majority of the children still aren't reading at grade level.

Still, everyone involved says that the project was worth it, that you have to look beyond the data and into the classrooms. They shared their stories in the final days of school in May.

Showing big gains in a short time

"When I came to kindergarten, I didn't speak English, so I couldn't understand what the teacher was saying," says Juan Sotelo, now 10.

But he says he dreamed of learning to read, hugging books borrowed from the library to his chest.

He discovered that letters make sounds, and together those sounds make words, in first grade.

"It seems like a long time ago now," Juan says. "It was a lot of work. Sometimes I got tired."

Now at the end of third grade at Creighton Elementary School, Juan reads 94 words per minute. It's shy of the 120-word expectation for third-graders, but Juan is a confident reader and getting better all the time. He began the school year reading 57 words per minute.

Now he's in a top reading group working on comprehension, understanding what he reads.

The teacher talks about strategies for figuring out unfamiliar words, like "extension."

"You chunk it," Juan explains, drawing lines between parts of the word: ex/ten/sion.

"Ex, that's easy. Ten, like the number 10, and we know 'sion.' You look for parts that you know and put them all together. Ex-ten-sion. Extension."

He and his classmates celebrated the last day of school with pizza for lunch. This summer, Juan plans to sleep late, swim and read.

He's worried about next year: "In fourth grade, we are going to learn more things, and I think it will be a little bit harder."

"Of course it will," says 8-year-old Amanda Salameh, picking green peppers off her pizza. She sits next to Juan. "But you'll get to read more."

Juan loves to read, often two or three books at a time: "I learn a lot from reading."

Excelling, confident after a slow start

The area near Creighton Elementary School in Phoenix is a first stop for immigrants coming from Mexico. They stay with family or friends and then, when they are able to afford to buy a home, they move.

Jackeline Rodriguez was one who got away, moving to west Phoenix at the end of first grade and taking her potentially good state test scores with her. Now a third-grader at Sevilla Primary School in Phoenix, she's in a fourth-grade reading class.

In first grade at Creighton, Jackeline would gulp when asked to read aloud. It was hard enough learning to read and in a second language, but Jackeline also was painfully shy.

She would read so quietly that her teacher, Beatriz Webb, would lean forward to hear her.

There's no sign of that shyness now.

In her reading class at Sevilla, Jackeline laughs out loud at the antics of the main character in *Be a Perfect Person in Just Three Days* by Stephen Manes.

"I like reading because I like to know about what's in the books," the 9-year-old says.

Jackeline started third grade behind in reading, her reading teacher, Rhonda Anderson, says, but this kind of growth is not unusual with the school's Success for All program, which groups students by ability for reading instruction.

Jackeline does her homework religiously and reads for at least 20 minutes a day.

She sits at the kitchen table, where her mother can hear her read aloud.

Jackeline says it's good practice: "You can learn how to read better without getting stuck on words."

Working hard to help make a difference

On the last day of school, third-grade teacher Emaretta Hines told her students: "I am so proud of each and every one of you. Some of you have learned division. Some of you have learned to speak English. Some of you have started to read chapter books. How cool is that?"

The kids cheered.

This also is the end of the third year of Creighton Elementary School's partnership with *The Arizona Republic* to provide

tutors and other support in hopes of improving reading scores. The teachers applauded that effort.

"The kids have made amazing strides," says third-grade teacher Jessica Barrios.

Still, the children don't read as well as they should.

It wasn't from a lack of trying. These teachers work long hours - begging the principal to unlock the school gates on weekends, tutoring before and after school.

"We love these kids," first-grade teacher Beatriz Webb says. "It would be easier somewhere else, yes, but it's a challenge and it's exciting. I wonder, 'How am I going to make a difference for this child?'"

Second-grade teacher Jill Browne loved having tutors in her classroom, especially the men because some students don't have good male role models at home.

"The tutors were extra adults in their lives that they could count on and who care about them," she says.

Plenty of grown-ups at Creighton care.

Hines' students staggered out on the last day under the weight of backpacks stuffed with the contents of their desks.

She hugged each student, her eyes rimmed with tears, and called after them: "Be sure to read!"

Teaching kids, building a community

There's a stack of reading scores at her elbow, but Rosemary Agneessens, principal at Creighton Elementary School in Phoenix, is more concerned right now about the dangerous goings-on in the neighborhood.

"The drugs, the guns, the disregard for life - they see things that children shouldn't see," she says. "No child should have to live in that."

Her attendance boundaries are a tough place to grow up. One student died in a house fire. The dad of a fourth-grader was shot and killed.

She's arranged meetings between parents, city officials and police.

"It's not just about teaching and test scores. It's about building a community of support," Agneessens says.

This is her life's work.

As a Catholic sister, Agneessens taught at schools in the Green Bay Diocese in Wisconsin before going to Nicaragua to work with youth and women.

In 1984, as a pastoral minister in Texas, she taught social activism through the gospel: "It's pretty specific about being active in the community."

She left the sisterhood in 1987 and worked with a group on border issues in Texas, bringing water and sewer services to undeveloped areas.

She came to Phoenix in 1990 to work with Valley Interfaith Project, a non-profit that trains people to be active in their communities.

Agneessens has been principal at Creighton since 2000.

"It's about how do we give our kids who come from poverty and speak a different language the same opportunities as a child in north Scottsdale," she says. "The playing field will never be level, but can we give them the skills to compete?"

What's next for school?

- The 1-2-3 Read partnership with *The Arizona Republic* will continue, though it was planned for only three years. Company officials and tutors have seen the difference they make with children and want to stay, much to the delight of the principal and teachers.
- Starting next year, some teachers will teach the same students for two years running. For example, Jessica Barrios will teach second-grade and then third, staying with the same class. The practice smoothes the transition to the next grade and prevents lost instructional time as students adjust to a new teacher and rules.
- Teachers will continue a second year of a new reading program. Students receive 90 minutes of reading instruction in the morning and, in the afternoon, an extra 45 minutes of reading instruction, based on their ability level. Literacy coach Maryann DiRobbio says first- and second-graders are showing the most dramatic gains.

The same approach to teaching math resulted in significant gains. Sixty-four percent of third-graders passed the math portion of AIMS in 2005-06, up from 18 percent in 2003-04 and better than the statewide rate of 45 percent.

- Starting next year, the state will require that English-learners receive four hours a day of intensive English development, including oral language and vocabulary, nearly double the time most schools devote to it now.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne says, "It's to speed up the process of them becoming proficient in English, so they can begin learning in English."

Creighton has a good record in this area, with 42 percent of students proficient enough to pass an oral English test compared with the state rate of 20 percent.

- Teachers may begin the next year's curriculum after students take the AIMS to give them an additional six weeks of instruction in the new material before they take the test again the following year.