

Working Toward EXCELLENCE

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Three Schools That Succeed By Doing Whatever It Takes

“Professional learning community” is more than a buzzword in three small Alabama schools that are producing big results.

RECENTLY WE LISTENED to an online conversation among a group of expert teachers from around the United States. The subject of “professional learning communities” came up. One teacher protested: “We are so tired of hearing that phrase at our school. I wonder what the next buzzword will be?”

It’s a fact of life in public education that most fresh ideas—even very good ideas—will eventually be reduced to an acronym, watered down into a pale imitation of the original concept, “implemented” under duress, and then outwaited by veteran teachers who observe the *Law of TTWP* (“This Too Will Pass”).

As a result, most new approaches to teaching and learning end up on the trash heap of school reform history. And perhaps that will happen to “PLCs.” But we doubt it. At

least not in Alabama, anytime soon.

Across our state, many hundreds of schools have had the opportunity—through their own hard work—to experience what a true professional learning community looks and feels like. And for the faculties in many of these schools, there’s no going back to the old way of doing school business.

The tie that binds these otherwise diverse K-12 schools is the Alabama Reading Initiative. ARI and its close cousin, the Alabama Reading First Initiative, have helped teachers and schools make great leaps in reading instruction. Just as importantly, ARI has helped school faculties find a new way to think about teaching and learning.

“ARI is not just a program. It’s a mindset,” says Michelle Adams, an English teacher at Montevallo

High School. “It’s a way that teachers think and an expression of what they believe. I wouldn’t want to go to another high school that’s not an ARI school. I don’t want to be around professionals who don’t have the high expectations that we have.”

Montevallo High (p. 12) is one of three ARI and ARFI schools profiled in this issue of *Working Toward Excellence*, which we’ve titled “Whatever It Takes 2.” It’s the second installment in our now-annual look at schools around Alabama that are leading all students to higher levels of achievement. In every instance, these schools are reaching this most sought-after goal by transforming their own professional cultures.

“ARI opens the way for teachers to do what they desire most—make a difference in a child’s future.”

Continued on page 2.

ON THE WEB

Doing Whatever It Takes

In our first special issue on “Doing Whatever It Takes” (Fall 2005), we featured stories about Calcedaever Elementary and Buckhorn High. You’ll also find a summary of the cultural shifts necessary to develop a genuine professional learning community.

<http://snipurl.com/w4kc>

WHATEVER IT TAKES 2

Kinterbish Junior High: A story of school transformation in rural Alabama Page 3

Alba Elementary: In Bayou La Batre, the goal is 100 percent literacy Page 8

Montevallo High: A faculty learns to teach better together Page 12

Literary Enhancement strengthens high schoolers’ reading skills Page 14

THREE SCHOOLS THAT SUCCEED

Continued from page 1.

says ARI leader Katherine Mitchell, assistant state superintendent for reading. “And it opens the way for faculty to achieve community and unity in pursuit of their goals.”

Shared accountability builds community

How do ARI and ARFI promote the development of true professional learning communities? Simply put, they present teachers with challenging goals, give them common tools and support to reach those goals, and set into motion a process through which teachers discover that kids learn more when teachers accept joint responsibility for results.

ARI and ARFI are built on a cutting-edge professional development framework that includes a set of structured protocols to drive continuous school improvement. Schools gather data from many different sources, including regular classroom assessments, and then analyze that data in meetings to discover where students and teachers need more help. Those discoveries lead to collaborative problem-solving and next-step planning, drawing on the best research available.

Schools that flourish within this framework are led by a principal who leaves no doubt that student learning is the top priority in the school—a principal who is also a collaborator, a trust-builder, and an individual with a deep understanding of effective teaching practices (see p. 5).

Michelle Steiner, a second grade teacher at Alba Elementary in Bayou La Batre (p. 8), says that before her school went through the ARFI professional development experience, “there was no continuity between classes. Teachers used different methods and strategies to teach the same concepts. During ARFI training, we all got the same resources and strategies.

A unity began to develop across grade levels.”

Julie Salmons, Alba’s reading coach, says the growing unity has resulted in a willingness among faculty to share accountability for every student’s success. “Everyone is collectively responsible for the children and their achievement. You aren’t alone in your classroom. If someone can help you, then they do. We dig deeper to solve problems together.”

At Kinterbish Junior High in rural Sumter County (p. 3), part of the unity-building process came from regular faculty studies of important professional books—a common practice in ARI and ARFI schools. “Once we got into it,” says third grade teacher Debra Green, “we found ourselves...asking questions, making comments, and really learning from one another.”

The teamwork and camaraderie fostered by the book studies began to energize weekly grade-level meetings, lunchroom conversations, even encounters in the halls. “We’re always talking about progress and challenges,” says Kinterbish principal Sherita Williams. “That’s the environment we maintain—an environment of constant sharing, growing and learning together.”

A must-read book

In his co-authored book *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don’t Learn*, Richard DuFour says that the kinds of changes taking place at Montevallo, Alba, Kinterbish and many other Reading Initiative schools mark the emergence of a “stretch culture,” where teachers shift from a determination “to be as good as we have to be” to asking themselves and each other, “how good can we be?”

In the Fall 2005 issue of *Working Toward Excellence*, we summarized the cultural shifts necessary to develop a genuine learning community, as identified by DuFour and

his research colleagues. We’ve included a link to that issue on page 1.

A new book by DuFour and his associates, *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, is a must read for principals and faculties who are serious about fully realizing the power of professional collaboration. The handbook can help educators close the gap between knowing and doing that so often stalls continuous school improvement. It includes tools to help schools assess their current reality and take purposeful steps to develop their capacity to function as PLCs. Find out more at: snipurl.com/learningdoing

The secrets of school success

The secrets of school success are best told not by us, but by the teachers, coaches and principals of the schools profiled in these pages.

Keep in mind that “back in the day,” none of these schools would be expected to bring most or all of their students up to state standards and beyond. They are schools where many students live in poverty. They are small schools with limited teaching staff and resources, in areas of the state where education is not thought to be highly valued.

They include one school—Alba Elementary—with a large population of English Language Learners and a sizeable group of immigrant parents who speak no English. Despite a direct hit from Hurricane Katrina last fall, Alba’s faculty and students actually improved upon their already impressive results during spring 2006 state testing.

Alba, Kinterbish and Montevallo are beginning to soar. In each of their stories, you will hear someone say, “We still have more work to do.” That’s OK with them: *They know how to do it.* They’re not waiting for the next buzzword or acronym. They’ve become professional learning communities for keeps. ❖

Working Toward Excellence



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Working Toward Excellence is a quarterly publication of the Alabama Best Practices Center. The Best Practices Center, located in Montgomery, works to identify and promote promising education practices, with an emphasis on staff development for teachers and administrators. It collaborates with existing organizations such as the State Department of Education, higher education, local school systems and schools, the regional inservice centers and others. It is facilitated by the A+ Education Foundation, with the generous support of BellSouth Foundation, Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, Microsoft Corporation, Wachovia Foundation, and the State of Alabama. For more information, call (334) 279-1886.

John Norton, *Editor*

A Story of School Transformation in Rural Alabama

BY JENNIFER PYRON

KINTERBUSH JUNIOR HIGH sits off U.S. Highway 80, about 10 miles from the Mississippi border, deep in Alabama's Black Belt region. Despite its name, the high-poverty school does not have a traditional junior high structure. A child who enters Kinterbush's pre-kindergarten program at age 4 can remain enrolled all the way through eighth grade.

The one-story red brick building, tucked among the tall pines of timber country, is worn and plain. But it's not the outside of the school we are here to see. It's what goes on inside, day after day, that is making an impressive difference in the lives of children in Sumter County.

"At this school, it's all about the children," says Sherita Williams, who assumed the role of principal in January 2006. "That's our motto. It's on every door and it's in the hearts and minds of every adult in this building. We can't know every challenge our children face outside these walls. So while they're here, we want them to experience success every day."

Judging from the high-poverty school's recent performance on the Alabama Reading and Math Test, these words are more than platitudes. In 2005, for example, every third-grader at Kinterbush who took the ARMT met or exceeded state reading standards. Compare that figure to the 2005 average for all Alabama third-graders (81 percent) and for Alabama third-graders living in poverty (73 percent), and you should be impressed.

The 2006 ARMT results reveal that Kinterbush continues to hold or build on its academic gains.

Summer/Fall 2006

Statewide, 84 percent of third- and fourth-graders met or exceeded state reading standards. At Kinterbush, third-graders beat that by 13 percentage points—97 percent of them met or exceeded the standards. The school's fourth-graders also had a strong showing, with 89 percent meeting or exceeding standards.

In math, 78 percent of Alabama's third- and fourth-graders met or exceeded standards. But at Kinterbush, 97 percent of third-grade students performed at that level, as did all of the fourth-graders.

While the school has a history of high expectations for teachers and students, it wasn't until Kinterbush joined the Alabama Reading First Initiative in 2002 that the true transformation began. Williams has inherited a culture of commitment and life-long learning put in place by Grace King, who served as principal for 10 years before moving to the Sumter County schools system office in January 2006.

The story of Kinterbush's metamorphosis is best told through the eyes of these two principals—both strong instructional leaders who have inspired and led a team of teachers dedicated to doing whatever it takes to succeed with all students.

Overcoming Struggles in the Black Belt

Kinterbush Junior High draws students from many nearby towns and rural settlements, including Kinterbush, Cuba, Livingston, Ward, Whitfield, York and Townsend Mission. Last year, Kinterbush served 262 children in grades PK-8. Thanks to its academic success, enrollment at the small school is steadily increasing.

Under the guidelines of the federal No Child Left Behind law, students in schools that consistently fail to make "Adequate Yearly Progress" may transfer to more successful nearby schools. Kinterbush, which earned the coveted AYP status of "clear" in both 2005 and 2006, has become a school of choice for students living throughout Sumter County and in portions of neighboring Choctaw County.

The demographics at Kinterbush mirror many schools in the region: 96 percent of the students are African American, and 92 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch, which is an indicator of poverty. Many similarly situated schools in Alabama might point to such statistics to explain why their students are not achieving at high levels. However, during her tenure as principal, Grace King made it clear to her faculty that Kinterbush was not a place where such excuses would be accepted.

"Success is a state of mind," she explains, in a quiet, confident voice that is rich with experience. "I've always told my faculty, 'We're the best school in the county. If there's an award to be won, we're going to win it. If someone's going to do something first, that's going to be us.' We've always tried to do things bigger and better than anyone else. The faculty and the kids respond to that, and everyone tries to do their best."

Prior to 2002, the school was making a concerted effort to improve literacy instruction, using programs like Accelerated Reader, Saxon Phonics, and STAR. But the results were disappointing: Reading scores on the 2002 Stanford 9 ranged from a high of 58th percentile in the seventh

Continued on page 4.

ON THE WEB

Alabama School Accountability Reports

For more information about state testing results for Kinterbush and other schools featured in this issue—or for any other public school in Alabama—visit the Alabama State Department of Education's Accountability Reporting System. Simply select the data you want to review from the pulldown menus.

<http://snipurl.com/8r13>

KINTERBISH JUNIOR HIGH

Continued from page 3.

grade to a low of 19th percentile in the fifth grade.

The state launched the Alabama Reading First Initiative in 2002 to assist teachers and principals in identifying and helping struggling readers in grades K-3. The federally funded program targets high-poverty Title I schools in systems where a large number of families are below the poverty level and a large number of students are scoring below grade level on state assessments.

Sumter County met the federal criteria. “The list of systems eligible for ARFI funds wasn’t exactly a list you wanted to be on because it meant you weren’t doing well,” recalls King. “But there we were.” Sumter County received ARFI funds in fall 2002. Kinterbish Junior High was chosen to join the program based on its prior efforts and commitment to student learning.

ARFI Spurs Changes

With the substantial extra support offered by the ARFI grant, Kinterbish embarked on a journey that changed teaching and learning. Everyone in the school began to live and breathe reading.

The school hired a full-time reading coach to model lessons for teachers and work with struggling readers. The teachers selected Open Court, a comprehensive research-based reading program, for grades K-3. The faculty attended the Alabama Reading Academy and Open Court training to learn proven strategies for teaching all children to read. They also learned how to administer DIBELS, a scientifically based reading assessment that allows teachers to track the progress of every student regularly throughout the school year and adjust instruction as needed.

By tapping the \$1,000 per teacher provided by ARFI for professional development, Kinterbish was able to bring Open Court consultants into the school to help them implement the program. Even so, during the first year of implementation, King did not have enough resources to provide all the intensive training her teachers needed. In the second year, ARFI expanded its support to schools by providing regional reading coaches and additional funds for outside trainers.

King and her faculty had weeklong visits from the regional coach on a monthly basis, during which the coach would model lessons, observe teaching, and provide feedback to teachers. Consultants from Open Court also began coming once a month to observe teachers using the program strategies and to review how to use those strategies most effectively.

This intensive professional development process was overwhelming for many teachers. First-grade teacher Betty Curtis is a 36-year veteran, with 28 of those years at Kinterbish. “The ARFI training was very difficult for me,” she says.

“So many of the strategies were things I’d never heard of before—charts, word mapping, graphic organizers. I was so used

to doing it the old way—not having small groups, not doing circle time on the carpet, not putting vocabulary words up or having word walls. “It was a challenge for me,” Curtis says. “It’s taken me several years to change my practice. And I’m still learning. I always will be.”

King’s calm demeanor changes when she reflects on her faculty’s journey during the last three years. Her eyes light up and a wide smile spreads across her face. “My greatest accomplishment is the way that these teachers have embraced the program.”

“In the beginning, it was very difficult for all of us,” she recalls. For most veteran teachers, the college training they’d received years ago was far from adequate in a school with many struggling readers. “It’s not easy to hear that you’ve been doing things the wrong way for your entire career.”

To meet the challenge, teachers routinely gave up their planning period to go over lessons with the reading coaches, then stayed after school to catch up on regular work. King recounts the reaction when the regional reading coach told a table full of teachers to remove the Open Court cards from their classroom walls because they were not displayed correctly. “And the teachers cried,” she laughs. “But they took down those cards and put them up the right way.”

Kinterbish has made rapid progress because “there are no egos here,” King says. “When the (Open Court) consultant comes in, takes over a lesson, and says ‘this is how you do it,’ the teachers stand back, grit their teeth, then step back in and do it the right way.”

The K-3 grades responded so well to Open Court, that King decided to expand the program to grades 4-6. “We didn’t have any money for formal training for them,” King explains, “but we had a great in-house resource: our reading coaches and our K-3 teachers.”

During the 2004-05 school year, teachers in grades 4-6 observed the K-3 teachers, modeled their lessons on what they saw, and set up their classrooms as their peers instructed. In 2005-06, King was able to earmark Title I money to provide structured professional development for the teachers in grades 4-6. The school plans to expand Open Court to grades 7 and 8 soon.

While King attributes the school’s success to the teachers, first full-time reading coach, has a somewhat different view. Hermania Little credits King’s leadership for setting Kinterbish on the road to higher achievement.

“During the ARFI training, Mrs. King didn’t let up,” says Little. “When we realized that Mrs. King wasn’t going to ask us to do anything that she wasn’t willing to do herself, we really started changing. She took over classes. She taught the lessons. She was willing to teach the entire reading block. You don’t find that in many schools.”

Triple Dipping

King and her faculty restructured the daily schedule at Kinterbish Junior High to devote as much time as possible to the Open Court program and ARFI instructional strategies. The reading block lasts from 7:45–10:45 a.m. every day. “Our reading block is sacred time,” says new principal Sherita Williams. “There are no interruptions.”

During the reading block, the hallways, which are decorated with student writing assignments and artwork, are silent. Students work in small groups with peers and with teachers. Young readers sit in a circle and read as a group, then individually.

Older students learn to analyze written passages, looking for clues and discussing problems. They also share “wonderings”—open-ended questions like “what might have happened after the story ended?”

These and other comprehension strategies like vocabulary building are part of Kinterbish's all-out effort to make certain students cannot only read the words on the page but gather the meaning behind them.

If parents come to school, they have to wait until the block is over to visit. If a teacher is absent, the reading block is not left to a substitute. Instead, the absent teacher's students are divided among the other grade-level classrooms so that no time is wasted.

As the "new kid on the block," Williams was amazed and pleased to see how seriously the teachers and students at Kinterbish take the dedicated reading time. "A lot of times when you go into a new situation, it has been painted to be something that it's not. I can't say that here," she says.

"Every wonderful thing I was told about this school is really what I see happening. During my time here, I have never gone down to the K-3 wing during the reading block and not seen teachers actively engaged in instruction. It's the same way in the fourth through sixth grades."

Like teachers at all ARFI schools, faculty members at Kinterbish constantly monitor their students' progress. The school uses the Texas Primary Reading Indicator (TPRI), the Open Court diagnostic assessments, and impromptu in-class reading assessments to make sure students are on track for success. The DIBELS assessment is now required in all Alabama schools with primary grades. DIBELS, which stands for "Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills," is administered quarterly, and reaching DIBELS "benchmarks" has become an important goal for both students and parents.

"The significance of DIBELS is so easy to explain to parents," says Little. "We tell them they need to work with them every night. DIBELS really shines a light on an individual student's areas of need. That lets

us know which way to go with that student so we can set realistic goals."

Struggling readers often receive a "triple dip" of reading during the day. They spend 30 minutes in small groups with their teachers and 30 minutes working with one of the reading coaches. A reading intervention teacher also holds classes for struggling readers three days a week. And any free moment a teacher has will likely be spent in one-on-one instruction with struggling readers.

"Last year, I had a student from New Orleans who came in after (Hurricane) Katrina," says third-grade teacher Debra Green. "His reading level was very low. After he saw how other students were constantly reading, he wanted to start reading to me. So I devoted a lot of one-on-one time to him. Finally, he began to read to other students and then to the whole class. More and more, he would take every moment to become a better reader. When he came in, he could read 20 words per minute. Now he's reading 80. One-on-one instruction really makes a difference."

Kinterbish's commitment to reading success is definitely paying off. In May of 2006, the percentage of students at benchmark in kindergarten and first-grade classes ranged from the high 70s to 100 percent. Curtis credits King's strong leadership and the ARFI program for the literacy gains. "The difference in my teaching practice and in my students' learning is amazing. Several years ago, I'd always have five or six children who were not reading at grade level. But this year, all my students are at benchmark. Each year it gets better and better."

Celebrating Success

An important part of the culture at Kinterbish is the celebration of every small success. A large bulletin board outside the office displays the pictures and accomplishments of

Continued on page 6.

EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERS

Research by the Southern Regional Education Board on the relationship between principal leadership and student learning suggests today's effective school leaders must have the skills and commitment to:

- Create a focused mission to improve student achievement and a vision of the elements of school, curriculum and instructional practices that make higher achievement possible.
- Set high expectations for all students to learn high-level content.
- Recognize and encourage implementation of good instructional practices that motivate and increase student achievement.
- Create a school organization where faculty and staff understand that every student counts and where every student has the support of a caring adult.
- Use data to initiate and continue improvement in school and classroom practices and student achievement.
- Keep everyone informed and focused on student achievement.
- Make parents partners in their student's education and create a structure for parent and educator collaboration.
- Understand the change process and have the leadership and facilitation skills to manage it effectively.
- Understand how adults learn and know how to advance meaningful change through quality sustained professional development that benefits students.
- Use and organize time in innovative ways to meet the goals and objectives of school improvement.
- Acquire and use resources wisely.
- Obtain support from the central office and from community and parent leaders for their school improvement agenda.
- Continuously learn and seek out colleagues who keep them abreast of new research and proven practices.

School leaders who do not demonstrate these characteristics, the researchers say, are unlikely to succeed in today's performance-driven educational environment.

Source: Bottoms, G., & O'Neill, K., *Preparing A New Breed of School Principals: It's Time for Action* (Southern Regional Education Board, 2001).

KINTERBISH JUNIOR HIGH

Continued from page 5.

every child in the school. From “Most Improved Reader” to “Best Writing,” every child is recognized for his or her accomplishments, large and small.

“Of course we celebrate when a child benchmarks, but it’s more than that,” says King. “We celebrate when one of our special needs students reads 10 words. We celebrate when a child moves from reading 30 words to 50 words, even if she doesn’t benchmark. All children are recognized for reading achievement.”

The school’s success with reading is slowly spreading across the curriculum. “We are always concerned about reading and math. Even though our results are good, we can always do better,” says King.

“In the past few years, our math scores have suffered a bit because we’ve placed so much emphasis on reading. Last year, we introduced the New Century Lab, which provides a diagnostic assessment of each student’s math abilities, and the Accelerated Math Lab. Students in grades 1-8 visit both labs daily. We’ve seen some good progress.”

The newly released 2006 ARMT scores validate King’s optimism, at least in the early grades.

Ninety percent of third-graders reached the highest performance level in math—Level IV—up from 37 percent in 2005. The change was even more dramatic in grade four, where 86 percent reached Level IV, compared to only 17 percent the year before.

Day-to-day learning at Kinterbish doesn’t stop with the students. King made it a point to push her teachers to become life-long learners, introducing the concept of school-wide book studies. The faculty started with *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* by Richard F. Allington and then tackled *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* by Michael Gurian. Chapters were assigned weekly and discussed in small groups.

“At first, I wasn’t excited about the idea of having book studies in the afternoon when you’re already tired from teaching,” says Debra Green. “But once we got into it, we found ourselves being just like the students in our classrooms—asking questions, making comments, and really learning from one another. The books studies promoted the idea that we are a professional learning group, and reinforced the idea that we need to continue to learn so our children will succeed.”

The teamwork and camaraderie

fostered by the book studies translates into positive energy at weekly grade-level meetings, where lesson plans are reviewed, strategies shared and concerns addressed. The teachers examine student data and talk about what’s working and what’s not.

And these conversations aren’t confined to staff meetings, Williams says. “We talk about progress and challenges as we come out of the lunchroom (or) pass each other in the hall. Children stop me on their way to P.E. to tell me they benchmarked (in reading) or how many words they’re reading now. That’s the environment we maintain—an environment of constant sharing, growing and learning together.”

Passing the Torch

So why did Grace King, a principal at the top of her game in a school that is moving closer and closer toward its goal of 100% literacy, decide to leave? It’s a question King gets asked a lot, and she has a solid answer.

“It was not an easy decision to leave. It would have been easy to coast out the rest of my career here. The teachers are on the ball; they get everything done. We were comfortable with each other. But I really feel like Kinterbish needs a fresh pair of eyes.”

Kinterbish Junior High

Alabama Reading and Math Test Three-Year Performance Trends

	2004 Reading				2005 Reading				2006 Reading			
Level	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV
Grade 3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	0	29	71	0	3	17	80
Grade 4	0	24	62	13	0	17	50	33	0	11	30	59
	2004 Math				2005 Math				2006 Math			
Level	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV
Grade 3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	14	49	37	3	0	7	90
Grade 4	0	24	36	40	0	33	50	17	0	0	14	86

Percent of students in each category. Numbers may not total 100 due to rounding.

Note: Students at Level 3 have met academic content standards; students at Level 4 exceed the standards.

Source: Alabama State Department of Education

2006 Alabama Reading and Math Test

Students Scoring “Proficient” (Levels III + IV) Kinterbish and State of Alabama

	Reading			Math		
	Kinterbish	All Alabama students	Alabama students in poverty*	Kinterbish	All Alabama students	Alabama students in poverty*
Grade 3	97%	84%	77%	97%	78%	70%
Grade 4	89%	84%	77%	100%	78%	70%

* Students eligible for free/reduced lunch. At Kinterbish, 92% of students are in this category.
Source: Alabama State Department of Education

“It’s like when you look around your house and you think everything is fine. But then someone comes in and says, ‘What’s that smell?’ Someone else needs to come into our house. We’re at a good place, but someone new can really take it to the next level.”

That someone new turned out to be Sherita Williams. With a degree in reading and prior experience teaching in an Alabama Reading Initiative school in Demopolis, she came to Kinterbish with the knowledge and skills to pick up the reins and lead the school forward.

Williams is excited to be a part of Kinterbish. She says she has learned a lot from King, who is close by in the district office, serving as the school improvement specialist. But Williams is looking forward to settling in and establishing her own leadership style.

“Mrs. King and I have built a relationship where she doesn’t tell me everything. She’s letting me find out a lot of things on my own, which is very important. Everyone and everything is a blank slate. I can form my own opinions and determine what courses of action need to be taken.

“The faculty often looks to me to be Mrs. King, but I’m not. We have very different styles of leadership.

The teachers were more dependent on her because they knew she would handle certain things for them. And they knew Mrs. King knew what she was doing. They’re not so sure about me yet! But I know that I have the same goal as she did: success for all students at this school.”

Kinterbish has more work to do to meet King and Williams’ shared goal. The 2006 ARMT results show that the school’s performance—in both reading and math—is much stronger in the elementary grades than in the upper grades. In fact, reading scores actually declined somewhat between 2005 and 2006 in grades six and eight, and they showed little improvement in grade seven.

Williams expects those numbers to improve as teachers in the later grades fully integrate the comprehensive reading program into their classrooms, and better-prepared students move up through the grade levels. There are already encouraging signs: the percentage of fourth- and fifth-graders scoring at the highest level on ARMT-reading nearly doubled for 2006.

Today, Kinterbish is the reading model for the entire Sumter County school system, says Hermania Little, the school’s first reading coach, and now reading coordinator for the dis-

trict. “Every K–3 school in the district is using Open Court; they’re trying the reading block. They’re saying ‘if Kinterbish can do it, then we can too!’”

Nothing could make King more proud. “We stood the storm because we wanted to get it right,” King says firmly. “We asked the teachers to change their practice, and they did. We asked them to change a little bit more, and they did. They are concerned about providing the best instruction they can provide. They know we are supposed to be the best we can be for the children we serve.” ❖

Down on Bayou La Batre, 100 Percent Literacy is the Goal

BY JENNIFER PYRON

IN A WEATHER-BEATEN portable classroom at Peter F. Alba Elementary, a small group of first graders sits around a short-legged table, faces shiny with excitement and anticipation as they show off their story books. Taking turns, they read aloud the tale of a courageous boy who bravely leads a group of friends into a haunted house.

An African American girl with pigtails and a shy smile begins the story, then a Vietnamese boy sitting to her left continues, concentrating on pronouncing each English word properly. Next, a Hispanic child takes over, reading confidently and smiling when he's reached the end of his page. A white girl finishes the story, emphatically announcing "The End."

Courage is a familiar story at Alba Elementary and in surrounding Bayou La Batre, a community of 2,000 located just west of Mobile Bay. This small fishing town, just 13 feet above sea level, has seen its share of trials—most notably the continuing struggles of the marine industry and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Many businesses are still closed. Others survive in temporary trailers. Church congregations meet in tents along the roadside. Disaster-relief organizations still operate stations throughout the town. But the people of Bayou La Batre are moving forward with grit and determination.

At Alba Elementary, teachers and students are not just moving forward, they're racing toward a goal—100 percent literacy. Three years ago, Principal Lisa Williams and her faculty made the commitment to join the Alabama Reading First Initiative. That decision has truly transformed the school.

Through many hours of demanding professional development, teachers have learned how to constantly monitor the progress of their young readers, to make decisions driven by data not guesswork, and to come out of their classrooms and collaborate at levels few would have imagined possible just a few years ago. This school community has found the courage to do it all, and remarkable gains in student achievement has been its reward.

Resilient Community, Resilient Students

When asked to describe Alba Elementary's population, Williams says that "without a doubt, these students are the most resilient children I've ever seen." For the most part they are children who live in poverty. Ninety percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. Nearly half are minorities and 30 percent are English language learners.

Alba's racial composition is far from the Alabama norm. One-third of the 450 students are Asian—primarily Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian. In most cases, these students are first generation Americans, the children of immigrants who came to Mobile Bay to work in the fishing industry. In the summer, many students of all races work on the boats with their parents, and this work ethic is evident in the classroom.

"This community has an unbelievable work ethic," explains Williams. "As a result, behavior is never an issue here. Children know their parents expect them to behave and succeed. For many of our ESL students, this education is an opportunity their parents did not have. For a great number of our other students, it's a generational issue. Their parents went to this school and expect their children to honor its traditions."

The resiliency of the students and their families is exemplified in their responses to Hurricane Katrina. Many families were displaced by Katrina's winds and waves and are still living in temporary housing. "But I never hear complaints or excuses," marvels Williams. "Our school was closed for two weeks after the hurricane. On the first day back, only about 20 students were absent. Everyone was in class, presentable and ready to work."

During a tour of the school, Williams makes apologies for the state of the campus, which has withstood torrential rains, high winds, and rising flood waters over the years. The four first-grade classrooms are located in portable buildings, and they flooded during Katrina. The students have changed locations three

times this year while repairs were made.

"Don't let anyone ever use poor physical conditions and bad layout as an excuse for poor performance," Williams says with her hands on her hips. "If we can succeed on this spread-out campus in these old buildings, anyone can!"

High Expectations, High Level of Instruction

The principal's convictions and determination are evident all over the school, and her teachers credit her energy and drive for their success. Williams, however, is happy to give the Alabama Reading First Initiative all the credit. "ARFI was the catalyst for everything we do here to improve teaching and learning—the data meetings, the double dipping, the collaboration. Finally, we have the tools to do what we've always known we could do!"

When Williams found out that Alba Elementary School was eligible for ARFI, she set out to convince her teachers that this was the opportunity of a lifetime. "I began by telling the faculty about the national reading crisis. I wanted to make sure they understood that professional development in reading is a national need, not just a personal need. And I told them how excited I was, because we're going to be in a better position to meet this crisis head on, with unprecedented funding, unprecedented support, and the knowledge and skills to teach every single one of our students to read at grade level or above."

Alba Elementary began the new work with two advantages—high expectations and strong leadership. "In order to succeed, first and foremost, you must believe in your

students,” Williams says. “Our confidence in our children is so strong that it is clear to them. And then the teachers must believe in themselves.”

Williams embraces the role of instructional leader, says first grade teacher Belinda Bates. “She sets the expectations for us and helps us understand how we’re going to reach our goals. She’s very explicit with her expectations without being a drill sergeant. She gives us the liberty to explore and collaborate.” We are free to approach her and get her feedback on any issue. We have access to her at all times.”

After some careful study, the Alba faculty chose Open Court as the research-based reading program they would use in grades K–3. All teachers went through ARFI and open court training in the summer of 2002.

“The ongoing training and support really brought the self efficacy we needed,” says Williams. “The Open Court program is wonderful. The teachers can trust it and believe in it, but they still maintain their professional autonomy. It is a program that has teachers follow a specific routine, but they aren’t robots. They are still teaching children.”

The teachers worked hard to learn the intricate program and immediately began to see differences throughout the school. “This program gives us a systematic way to teach the skills children need to be successful in reading and in other areas,” says Julie Salmons, Alba’s full-time reading coach. “It ensures that the teachers cover the five critical components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency.”

The level of instruction at Alba Elementary is “intense,” to quote several of the teachers. The daily schedule includes a two-hour reading block in the morning, a separate 30-minute language arts period, and another 45-minute intervention period in the afternoon. Students are

divided into reading groups based on levels of progress. The groups are very fluid so that students can move in and out as their needs change.

Each teacher in a grade takes a small group, so a student may have one teacher for his “homeroom” teacher and another for his reading group leader. Within the block is a 45-minute workshop, during which the reading group leader can work one-on-one or in even smaller groups to tailor instruction even further.

This schedule ensures that at least three or four professionals “teach” every student each day—and those three or four professionals know each child’s needs in detail. They can then work together as a team to discuss what works and to come up with solutions to challenges and problems.

After the first year of implementation, it became apparent that the ARFI framework was going to have a tremendous impact on student success. The school expanded the Open Court program to the fourth and fifth grades and implemented every aspect of ARFI that didn’t need additional funding: the reading block, the intervention period, teacher collaboration, and grade-level data meetings to examine student progress and plan next steps.

The students at Alba are now in the third year of Open Court. “I think it’s given all of us—student and teachers—a little more energy,” says Steiner. “The first year was incredibly tough. The second year was a little bit better because the students knew more of the material and the teachers had more practice. And this year, we feel like we can take it even further. It’s exciting.”

“Our methods may be intense but we know they’re working,” says Williams. One piece of evidence: In May, 85 percent of K–3 students reached their end-of-year BIEBELS benchmarks.

We’re never going to arrive at a

Continued on page 10.

HOW ALBA ELEMENTARY USES MARZANO’S NINE STRATEGIES

Teachers at Alba Elementary School incorporate nine research-based instructional strategies, based on the work of Robert Marzano, that are most likely to improve student achievement across all content areas and grade levels.

Identifying Similarities and Differences

Teaching students to recognize the similar and dissimilar characteristics of a concept allows them to analyze complex problems in a simpler way. Teachers can directly present similarities and differences and then engage students in discussion or inquiry. For deeper understanding, Alba’s teachers have students explore similarities and differences on their own.

Summarizing and Note Taking

To effectively incorporate these two skills into instruction, Alba’s teachers ask students to read a passage or concept, reflect on the key points, and then write the essential information in their own words. Teachers carefully monitor note taking—research shows that simply writing down the concepts verbatim is ineffective. Allowing students time to process the information and translate it into their own words improves learning.

Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition

Teachers at Alba Elementary use this strategy daily by praising students’ efforts constantly and recognizing even the smallest successes. When students learn the connection between effort and achievement, they will want to work harder to achieve more.

Homework and Practice

Research shows that homework is a very effective way to for students to test their ability to recall what they’ve learned in the classroom. Some caveats: the amount of homework assigned should vary by grade level, and parents should be discouraged from heavy participation. Teachers should give feedback on homework to reinforce learning and validate its importance.

Nonlinguistic Representations

According to research, knowledge is stored in two forms: linguistic and visual. The more students use both forms in the classroom, the more opportunity they have to achieve. This is especially true for ESL students, who rely on visual learning to make connections with unfamiliar words and concepts.

Cooperative Learning

The two-hour reading block at Alba Elementary is based on this instructional strategy. Research shows that organizing students into small groups with common characteristics has a positive effect on overall learning. Teachers should keep in mind the core components of cooperative learning: positive interdependence, group processing, appropriate use of social skills, face-to-face interaction, and individual and group accountability.

Setting Objectives and Providing Feedback

At Alba Elementary, teachers routinely set small personal goals for each student based on the students’ individual needs. This provides students with a direction for their learning. Teachers should give students feedback about their progress. This positive reinforcement generally produces positive results in student learning.

Generating and Testing Hypotheses

Research shows that teachers can deepen student learning by asking them to make predictions and clearly explain their answers. This strengthens the higher-level critical thinking skills that are so crucial to student success.

Cues, Questions, and Organizers

These three tools help students use what they already know about a topic to deepen their learning. Research shows that cues, questions, and organizers are most effective when introduced before students learn a specific concept. Teachers should vary the type of organizer they use. For example, tell a story, create an outline, or introduce a graphic image of the concept. ❖

Source: Adapted from *Classroom Instruction That Works* by R. J. Marzano, D. J. Pickering, and J. E. Pollock, 2001, Alexandria, VA: <http://snipurl.com/Marzano9>

ALBA ELEMENTARY

Continued from page 9.

stopping point because we always have new students, new challenges. This is just the way we'll do instruction from here on out."

Beyond Reading Improvement

Mathematics is not a lonely stepchild at Alba Elementary. Teachers in every grade use an explicit direct instruction model based on the nine research-based strategies introduced in Robert Marzano's book, *Classroom Instruction That Works* (see page 9). The teacher begins by teaching the concept explicitly, then the class practices the concept together, and finally the students work independently. All along the way, teachers check for accuracy and progress to make sure that every child in the classroom understands the concept.

"We teach our state math standards explicitly," explains Williams. "We assess what students have learned. Based on the assessments, we either re-teach the concept or we move forward. It's as simple and logical as that."

Science and social studies also get a fair share of attention. While the daily schedule for 4th and 5th grades mirrors that of K-3—with a two-hour reading block and workshop period—students are now shifting their focus from fluency to comprehension, incorporating a lot of expository reading passages that link with science and social studies standards. The upper grades also have designated periods for science, social studies and math.

"Our primary goal remains to teach these kids excellent reading skills," says Strong, "but we incorporate social studies and science into our reading time. In Mobile County, our students take (regular district-wide tests) in social studies and science. We have to cover the state standards."

Data-Driven Decision Making

Once teachers began to implement the strategies they'd learned,

Williams organized monthly grade-level data meetings, which she believes are critically important to continuous improvement. "We come together quite frequently and everyone is involved—classroom teachers, ESL teachers, reading teachers and reading coaches. The exchange of knowledge that goes on between the teachers is so important."

"We get things done in those data meetings," says fourth grade teacher Mary Strong. "One Friday, we identified a challenge in vocabulary. On Monday, signs with vocabulary words were up everywhere—hallways, bathrooms, over water fountains. We do whatever it takes to address the needs of our students."

Williams leads every data meeting. If the teachers determine that they've tried everything they know how to do and a child is still struggling, then they begin to consider outside factors or the need for additional professional development.

"If a student is falling behind, Mrs. Williams wants to know why," says Gini Allen, a third grade teacher. "She doesn't accept any excuses, not even problems in their home life. Then we collaborate on ideas to help that student succeed."

"Very early on, my teachers learned that I will not accept outside factors as an excuse for why a child

is struggling at school," explains Williams. "Regardless of what is going on outside of school, we still have an ethical obligation to meet the needs of the student. It is imperative that we look of factors that are out of our control and find a way to move forward using factors we do control."

ELL Challenges

"Because 30% of our students are English language learners, all of our teachers consider themselves ELL teachers," says Williams.

Through the monthly data meeting process, the faculty identified an urgent need to learn more about how to succeed with the school's large ELL population. "We realized we all needed to become more proficient in strategies that will benefit that group of students. We've learned that those strategies are also very effective with struggling readers and other students."

The school applied for and received a grant to implement the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model, which offers research-based practices boost the achievement of ELL students. The SIOP model, Williams says, is not an "add on" program but a framework that can be woven into a school's instructional program. (Learn more at <http://www.siopinstitute.net>).

Alba Elementary School												
Alabama Reading and Math Test Three-Year Performance Trends												
	2004 Reading				2005 Reading				2006 Reading			
Level	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV
Grade 3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1	10	53	35	0	10	36	55
Grade 4	6	29	41	25	1	10	35	54	0	10	40	50
	2004 Math				2005 Math				2006 Math			
Level	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV
Grade 3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5	19	30	46	0	5	22	73
Grade 4	12	22	26	41	2	15	33	50	0	12	36	52

Percent of students in each category. Numbers may not total 100 due to rounding.
 Note: Students at Level 3 have met academic content standards; students at Level 4 exceed the standards.
 Source: Alabama State Department of Education

Belinda Bates says SIOP training helped the faculty understand what it's like to be an English language learner. "One of our tasks in the training was to describe our vacation without using the letters R or L," she recalls. "Not only are you trying to decide how to describe where you went and what you did, you have to think very carefully to find the right words. It's just one example of how challenging the classroom is for ELL students."

"It was challenging for me at first to have ELL students in the classroom," says Gini Allen. "But I've learned to stress to them how wonderful it is to have the talent of reading and writing two languages. It's something I wish I could do! We try to help them see that it's not an obstacle, it's a gift."

The school has two ELL teachers on staff who provide a lot of support to the faculty as a whole. There are also two translators available to teachers and students, which helps greatly with parent meetings.

"I get the greatest satisfaction and thrill when I watch my ELL students unlock a word," says second grade teacher Michelle Steiner. "Their excitement and motivation when they realize they can do it is wonderful. They gain such confidence in themselves."

When Teachers Collaborate, Students Benefit

Steiner believes one of the greatest results of implementing the Open Court program has been the unity and collaboration it has fostered among the Alba faculty.

"Before ARFI, there was no continuity between classes. Teachers used different methods and strategies to teach the same concepts. During ARFI training, we all got the same resources and strategies. A unity began to develop across grade levels. Everyone was on the same page doing the same thing, so if you had a question you could go to another teacher at your grade level and collaborate."

Julie Salmons notes that this collegiality has led to a shared accountability for every student's success. "Everyone is collectively responsible for the children and their achievement," she says. "You aren't alone in your classroom. If someone can help you, then they do. We dig deeper to solve problems."

First grade teachers Bates and Watson embody this idea of professional collegiality. In an interview, their conversation is relaxed, and they often finish each other's sentences. They convey a sense of mutual respect. Says Bates, "At our grade level, we're not four separate first grade teachers. We're together in this. The profes-

sionalism and closeness that I feel with the other teachers gives me confidence in my own practice."

"There is such a collegiality here," says principal Williams. "The teachers here are energetic. They are fun and positive. But they are very serious when it comes to their jobs. This is the strongest group of teachers I have ever seen."

Evaluating Success and Looking for More

Williams and her faculty are continuing to refine their process. They constantly review their methods and strategies to make sure they are taking their students as far as they can go. Here are some of the refinements in store for this year:

- Open Court provides a 220-day curriculum, although Alabama has only a 175-day school year. In kindergarten, most students have reached their end-of-year DIBELS benchmark by February. So kindergarten teachers are going to go further into the Open Court curriculum to accelerate learning.
- The school is also brainstorming about how to prevent a "second grade slump." Williams held data meetings this August with first and second grade teachers to discuss every child in those grades. As a result, the second grade teachers will know more about their students as the school year even begins.

Back in August 2005, Lisa Williams set a goal for every teacher. By the end of the school year, they would be able to say that every student in their classrooms learned as much as he or she could in one year. The following May, every teacher felt they'd accomplished this goal. At a recent data meeting, Williams asked her faculty if there had ever been a time before ARFI when they could say they'd brought every child as far as he or she could go in a year. They answered, unanimously, "No."

"I've read that in the third year of implementation of any improvement program, you see a wane in enthusiasm or a slip in gains," says Williams. "That's not happening here. The momentum we've found with ARFI is extraordinary. We're getting more and more excited because we know it's working." ❖

2006 Alabama Reading and Math Test						
Students Scoring "Proficient" (Levels III + IV) Alba Elementary and State of Alabama						
	Reading			Math		
	Alba Elementary	All Alabama students	Alabama students in poverty*	Alba Elementary	All Alabama students	Alabama students in poverty*
Grade 3	90%	84%	77%	88%	78%	70%
Grade 4	90%	84%	77%	88%	78%	70%

* Students eligible for free/reduced lunch. At Alba, 90% of students are in this category.
Source: Alabama State Department of Education

A High School Faculty Succeeds By Learning to Teach Better Together

BY JENNIFER PYRON

MANY ALABAMIANS KNOW the little town of Montevallo as an education center—the home of the University of Montevallo and its nationally recognized teacher preparation program. But how many realize that the south Shelby County community is also the home of one of the state’s most progressive high schools?

Montevallo High is located directly across from the stone and iron gates and tree-lined roads of the University. A large lawn leads up to an inviting two-story red brick building with white columns. The outer doors and bulletin boards are plastered with signs advertising after-school activities and encouraging students to vote in the upcoming Student Council election. The halls bustle with teenagers giving shouts, waves, and “high fives” as they pass their friends on the way to class. It seems to be a typical day at a typical high school.

But once the hallways clear, it becomes apparent that this is not your standard-issue high school building. Student work is displayed everywhere. Poetry and other writing assignments, geometric figures, and history “word walls” take center stage.

In the classrooms, teachers are encouraging students to work together in small groups. Many students read in-class assignments with a stack of “sticky notes” next to them, marking passages that are unfamiliar or tricky for them. Teachers use these “flags” to identify who needs one-on-one or small group assistance. Groups of students map out math chapters with graphic organizers that help them “chunk” the information for easier mental digestion.

Could this be Montevallo Elementary School? If so, the first graders are really, really tall.

Small School, Big Changes

Located 40 miles southwest of Birmingham, Montevallo is an out-of-the-ordinary community of less than 5,000 people. The major employers are the University and several industrial plants. The high school’s 366 students are racially and socio-economically diverse, with 46% qualifying for free/reduced lunch, 43% minority and 12% receiving special education resources.

“That’s one of the things that is so neat about this school,” says Judy Simmons, who has been the principal at Montevallo High since 2002. Prior to that she was the Assistant Principal for three years. “We draw students of professors who are well-traveled and well-educated, and we have a significant number of students who will be the first in their family to graduate from high school.”

The diversity can be a bit challenging in a small school

where 34 teachers must stay current on instructional strategies for reaching students from many different backgrounds. “For example,” Simmons says, “we have four English teachers in grades 9–12. At each grade, a single teacher has to teach the advanced students and the struggling students. Our teachers have to be willing to try new things and be flexible in order to reach every child in their class.”

That’s where the school’s involvement the Alabama Reading Initiative has paid big dividends. The school joined the ARI in 2002 and was soon experiencing the Initiative’s data-driven, results-oriented approach to teaching and professional development. One outcome has been a dramatic change in culture during the last four years, as the faculty has coalesced into a viable professional learning community with a shared commitment to meet the needs of every student.

“We’ve always been a good little school, but at the high school level, it’s easy to splinter off,” says Simmons. “It’s easy for the social studies teachers to just care about social studies and the math teachers to just care about math. But we’ve been able to use the ARI and its whole-school learning approach as a platform to make significant changes in how we do business.”

Montevallo’s involvement with ARI began after the faculty agreed to face up to a problem common among many high schools—too many struggling readers. “We got the commitment from the teachers to join ARI and just took it from there,” Simmons explains. “But it’s not just about reading anymore. It’s about

improving the quality of all our instruction. We believe that intensive, meaningful professional development is what will improve teaching and learning at this school.”

Building a Professional Learning Community

At Montevallo High School, teachers employ ARI’s instructional strategies in every core subject, essentially making every teacher a reading teacher. Teachers not only integrate reading instruction into the study of their particular subject matter, they constantly monitor student learning—a key component of ARI’s teacher training—and discuss the progress of individual students together.

Through this approach, Montevallo High School has created an authentic professional learning community where teacher collaboration goes on not just during planning periods and faculty meetings, but in the lunch room, in the halls, and even after school. Montevallo set the stage for the emergence of a PLC by having teachers collaborate with each other in cross-curricular teams. The teams meet frequently to review student data, share strategies, and discuss challenges and successes.

According to Simmons, the real turning point came when she asked the faculty to participate in their first book study. “Book studies have been invaluable here because they have brought together teachers who wouldn’t have a reason to get together otherwise.”

The first book study explored *Reading Reasons: Motivational Mini-Lessons for Middle and High School* by Kelly Gallagher. Teachers and

students read the book together to emphasize the important connection between reading skills and high school success.

“The school-wide study gave us a common purpose,” Simmons says. “And for once it was not just about bringing up test scores. Our shared purpose became the quality of instruction that we provide for students. Those are two completely different things to me. Test scores are important, and we all need to be working on them, but we also need to do some action research ourselves to sharpen our performance.”

The school’s second book study—*Subjects Matter: Every Teacher’s Guide to Content Area Reading* by Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman—focused on incorporating reading into all the subject areas. To reinforce the schoolwide emphasis on improving instruction and promoting a culture of learning, all teachers participate in the book discussions, including the athletic director, the band director, and the coaches.

“As the teachers have read, discussed and presented together, we’ve really brought some people into the fold that might have remained on the sidelines,” Simmons explains. “When dynamic, strong teachers get a chance to share things they’re doing in class with their peers, then their peers catch the fire. This has really helped create the professional climate.”

During the 2006-07 school year, teachers will choose from several books and form their own study groups. Their choices include *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby K. Payne and *I Read it, But I Don’t Get It* by Cris Tovani.

Every Teacher Teaches Reading

Gathered around a table in the school’s library are six of the 34 faculty members at Montevallo High School. The camaraderie between them is obvious—laughter and conversation come easily. Their pride in their school is evident. Each of them, from the geometry teacher to the physics teacher, professes a com-

mitment to the teaching of reading and an appreciation for the teaching strategies they’ve developed through the Alabama Reading Initiative.

Jane Clayton, the school’s full-time reading coach, describes the school from a teacher’s perspective. “Since we joined ARI four years ago, this school has morphed into the most pleasant learning culture that I have ever worked in,” she says.

“You will not hear a math teacher or a science teacher at this school say, ‘I’m not a reading teacher.’ They know how to teach reading. That empowerment, and the communication among teachers, has created a culture of learning that I think is outstanding.”

At Montevallo, students are expected to read and write in every content area. Comprehension is key. They carefully analyze difficult science content in their biology and chemistry classes. In English, they learn to read and understand poetry and plays. In math classes, they dissect word problems. And in history, the focus is on making sense of primary documents that offer clues about our past.

Teachers have embraced reading instruction, Simmons says, for a very simple reason. “All these teachers love their subject matter. ARI helps them teach that subject matter so that students really comprehend it. That’s why they love ARI.”

So what does teaching reading across the curriculum look like? Here is what the teachers at Montevallo have to say about how ARI strategies and quality professional development have helped them improve their instruction.

Continued on page 15.

Montevallo HS – Two-Year Trend			
Alabama High School Graduation Exam Reading and Mathematics			
	Did Not Pass	Pass	Pass (Advanced)
11th Grade Reading			
2005-06	13	62	25
2004-05	21	55	25
11th Grade Math			
2005-06	7	82	12
2004-05	25	60	15
12th Grade Reading			
2005-06	6	62	32
2004-05	5	60	16
12th Grade Math			
2005-06	5	77	19
2004-05	8	74	17

Percent of students in each category. Percentages are rounded and may not total 100.

Note: Students who pass a portion of the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (reading, math, language, science, social studies) in the 11th grade do not take that portion in the 12th grade.

LITERARY ENHANCEMENT STRENGTHENS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' READING SKILLS

According to national statistics, 700,000 high school students graduate each year with only marginal reading skills. Identifying and intervening with struggling readers at the secondary level is critical if the nation hopes to decrease its illiteracy rates among young adults. But how does a high school faculty accomplish this daunting task?

According to Montevallo principal Judy Simmons, it takes a school-wide commitment to ensure that no student leaves high school unable to read his or her diploma.

"There are so many things that cause a student to be at-risk of academic failure," Simmons says, including family problems, community setting, drug and alcohol use, and family illiteracy. Simmons estimates that 75 percent of Montevallo's students are vulnerable as a result of one or more of these factors. "That's why we felt it was so important to improve (reading) instruction in all grades and in all classes."

To monitor progress, the school administers the STAR reading assessment three times a year to all students. If a student is struggling, Simmons suggests they enroll in the school's Literary Enhancement elective course. "I strongly encourage them to take it, and I talk to the parents. Once they understand how important this is, they will encourage the student, too."

Seven-year veteran Rose D'Alessio is Montevallo's reading intervention teacher. She says the school's professional learning culture makes it easy for her to meet the needs of her struggling students.

"Because we have such a supportive environment, I don't ever feel anxious about asking (other teachers) for help and ideas to reach the ELL students and struggling readers in my intervention classes.

"I've learned that students who are still struggling at the 9th grade level really need something to rope them into learning. I see myself as a cheerleader for reading. I try to make it fun and give them something to grab onto and remember."

In D'Alessio's Literary Enhancement class, students approach reading differently every day. "Sometimes we'll all read out loud. Sometimes I'll do the reading. Sometimes I'll pair them and they'll read to each other. If they're working with a partner, they help each other instead of relying on me."

Research has shown that linking linguistic learning with visual learning is an excellent way to reach struggling readers. To that end, D'Alessio tries to tie every new vocabulary word to a visual image. For example, when her students encountered the word "magnanimous," she showed them a cartoon of "my nanny moose"—a moose wearing eyeglasses and a dress.

D'Alessio's most ambitious instructional strategy is also her most successful, and it's a perfect example of how this small high school is raising the bar for student learning. Struggling readers at Montevallo High School are not shuffled to the backs of classrooms. Instead, they are brought to the front of the class—to teach.

Several times a year, D'Alessio's students prepare lessons for children at Montevallo Elementary. Stereotypically, these are not the students who would be selected to go to an elementary school and represent their high school. Instead of being tagged as "strugglers," they are made to feel special by being given the honor of teaching younger students.

It takes several weeks to prepare each lesson. Students choose books, fiction or nonfiction, and discuss them in class until they are comfortable with the subject matter. The students then prepare a presentation and discussion based on the book, incorporating the same instructional strategies used in D'Alessio's classroom.

Students also have to select a snack that relates to the subject matter and create an activity based on the book. "I forbid paper and pencils," D'Alessio says. "The activity has to be something really good, something hands-on, a novel idea." On the appointed day, the high school students walk to the nearby elementary school to assume their roles as teachers.

"They begin by reading their books out loud in small groups to first, fourth and fifth graders," explains D'Alessio. "Then they move on to the activity and snack." D'Alessio has been "surprised and impressed" by the thought and creativity that her students put into developing the activities. When a group of ELL students presented a book about soccer, they designed a small soccer field to show the younger children how to kick a ball down the field. One student created a chance card game on a book about mythology. Another student used rubber bands to make a statue of the dog in his book.

"It's so rewarding to see these kids open up," she says. "One student I've had for awhile has changed a lot as a result of this experience. She's usually very reserved and closed off, but when she's with the elementary school children, her face is lit up with energy. At the beginning of the year she was so disinterested she couldn't be bothered to turn in an assignment. It's gone from a chore to something that she really wants to do."

Principal Simmons says the program has really boosted the self confidence of the Literary Enhancement students. "They may complain the whole time—after all, they're teenagers! But once they walk through the doors of the school, they all are so excited. And the younger kids love interacting with the 'big kids.'"

Recently, one of D'Alessio's 9th grade students was sitting in a small group reading to first graders. His former first-grade teacher came in the room and sat down next to him so she could observe the lesson. "She had to get up and leave the room because she was so emotional," D'Alessio says. "She was so touched and amazed that this young man had come so far."

The Literary Enhancement students keep reflections in a daily writing journal. "We are the role models," one student wrote about the elementary teaching project. "The children look up to us." Another penned this observation: "Teaching them that reading can be fun is so cool." A strong statement from a 16-year old who has struggled with his own literacy issues. And strong evidence that Montevallo's Literary Enhancement strategy is building skills, awareness and self-confidence. ❖

MONTEVALLO HIGH SCHOOL

Continued from page 13.

Veronique Zimmerman-Brown, Math: “At first, I was hesitant about ARI because I couldn’t see how it would help with math class, but I soon realized how beneficial the subject specific training was for me. I learned specific strategies to use in math classes. When my students can communicate to me what is going on with the theorems and word problems, then I can determine where there are gaps in understanding. ARI doesn’t feel like one more thing on my plate. It feels like adding something beneficial to reinforce my teaching.”

Jennifer Turner, History: “I can’t think of a day that I don’t use an ARI strategy. Before I went through ARI training, my unit on Pearl Harbor involved students taking notes while I read from the textbook. Maybe they would watch a video. Now, I begin the unit by reading to them from a book of first-person accounts. Then we do a graphic organizer about the entire lesson, including a minute-by-minute account of the event. I bring in books about everything, and we read them together. I can really see a difference in the way my students learn.”

Michelle Adams, English: “Students in this school come to class expecting to read and write. The collaboration between teachers makes it exciting for them. For example, in history they read an excerpt from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. Then a few months later they read the entire book in English class. They were already familiar with the story and the history, and that made them want to read even more. They get reinforcement from all of their teachers.”

Brent McCaleb, Science: “When I came here three years ago, my whole outlook on reading was this—if a kid gets to my physics or anatomy class and he’s a senior and

he cannot read, I can’t help him. And now I see that’s not true. I can take a student that’s just gotten by for years and watch him get stronger as a reader as a result of the ARI strategies we use in the classroom. When my students leave this school, if they can read and understand science concepts and know how to search and learn about what they don’t understand, then I’ve succeeded.”

Success Across the Board

Montevallo’s intense focus on higher levels of literacy has spurred improvements in many other areas of the school. Here are a few other things Montevallo High School is doing to meet the needs of their students:

Ninth Grade Assessment and Intervention – The high school receives STAR reading results from the middle school for every incoming 9th grade student. The 8th grade teachers also make recommendations for placement based on what they’ve seen in their classrooms. Using this data, the high school identifies the students most in need of intervention for reading skills. These students are placed in reading intervention classes (see story on p. 14). All 9th graders—along with all other students in the school—take the STAR assessment three times a year to assess progress and ensure they are on track. If challenges are identified, the students are assigned to intervention classes.

Block Scheduling – Montevallo’s faculty recently led the move to a block schedule. The school had been on a traditional seven-period schedule for many years, but ARI training helped teachers see the value of longer blocks of instructional time. The teachers worked together to design a new schedule that they believe will better meet the needs of their students. It consists of four 96-minute periods a day. Classes alternate on Monday/Wednesday and Tuesday/Thursday. On Friday all classes meet for an hour, allowing

teachers to review material, make assignments, and give end-of-the-week quizzes. “This is one of our greatest victories,” says Judy Simmons. “We feel like with 96 minutes, we can do more of what we need to be doing.”

AHSGE Prep – The school pulls out all the stops when it comes to preparing for the Alabama High School Graduation Exam.

- Preparation classes are held for all sections of the exam. Students are placed into them as soon as possible. Any students who have not passed a portion of the AHSGE are placed in mandatory prep class for that section. Classes are held on Saturdays, before and after school, and during study periods.
- During the month leading up to the exam, the school’s daily mass communications broadcast focuses on the kinds of questions and material covered in the exams, including vocabulary words.

These efforts are working. In 2006, 87% of 11th graders met or exceeded standards on the reading portion of the AHSE. And 94% of 11th graders met or exceeded standards on the math portion of the exam.

Writing across the Curriculum – The Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing is given to 10th graders each March. As part of Montevallo’s school-wide plan, each student has a writing assignment in each core class every nine weeks. This means that every student at the school does four writing assignments every nine weeks. “We feel like writing is not a separate skill,” says Simmons. “It’s interrelated with everything, and success depends on it.” Between 2005 and 2006, the percentage of Montevallo’s tenth graders meeting or exceeding the DAW composition standard grew from 73% to 87%, and student gains on the writing mechanics, sentence formation, and grammar aspects of the test were even more dramatic.

“We’ve discovered what works”

There are many success stories at Montevallo High—some large, some small.

“One day I was going over a lesson,” math teacher Veronique Brown recalls. “One of my struggling readers raises her hand and starts begging to use a sticky note. That may not seem like a huge breakthrough, but it was. She’d finally internalized a strategy designed to help her learn, and she was making it her own.”

Simmons and her tight-knit faculty have come a long way in three short years. But she is quick to point out that “we are not where we want to be.” Collectively, the faculty continues to research ways to raise the graduation exam pass rates and to improve the school’s attendance rate.

“We are a work in progress,” Simmons says. “And every year we get a new group of kids with a new group of needs. But there is no doubt in our minds that what we’ve discovered and put together is what’s going to work for our students. The school culture and the quality of instruction are the most important things. Everything else will follow.” ❖

Find links to other resources on this topic at: www.bestpracticescenter.org

Highly Challenged, High-Performing Schools

Why do some high-poverty and high-minority schools perform at higher levels? In a variety of studies, researchers are finding some common characteristics among such schools: High standards, high expectations, strong leadership, powerful professional development, teacher collaboration, and a culture of caring. This document prepared by ABPC summarizes three studies that looked at elementary, middle, and high school.

<http://snipurl.com/HiPerfResearch>

Just What Is a Professional Learning Community?

Is the term "professional learning community" in vogue in your school, school system or college of education? The idea of the PLC has been around just long enough to have become diluted by educators who have a penchant for picking up the latest school improvement buzzwords. But, as PLC expert Rick DuFour reminds us in this 2004 article from *Educational Leadership*, the development of a true professional learning community is hard work, albeit work with a big payoff. Read DuFour's definition of a PLC and see if it comes close to the reality of your own education situation.

<http://snipurl.com/DuFourPLCs>

Strong Teacher Teams

Why do some schools have strong organizational cultures that grow highly effective teacher teams? This article from the *Journal of Staff Development* (Spring 2006) identifies school leadership factors that current research suggests are most likely to increase teaching expertise and student achievement. The "DNA of school leadership" has three elements, the authors say: academic focus, shared values and beliefs, and productive professional relationships. When all three of these strands are

present, more teachers make better decisions more of the time. Includes a discussion of phased stages school and teacher leaders can use to build the professional relationships that are characteristic of successful schools. (420k PDF file.)

<http://snipurl.com/ThreeStrands>

Helping All Students Succeed

One of the nation's best education magazines, *Educational Leadership*, has adopted the practice of publishing an annual "online only" edition during the summer months. The theme for Summer 2006 was "Helping All Students Succeed," and the half-dozen articles are currently available to the public at this link. You'll find helpful pieces on a variety of topics, including effective homework policies, combining literacy instruction and the arts, closing the college preparation gap, and a spirited defense of middle schools.

<http://snipurl.com/ELallstudents>

Assessment For Understanding

After a week of high stakes testing, says the teacher who sent us this link, "it was a breath of fresh air to view an inspiring eight-minute online video from the George Lucas Educational Foundation about performance based assessment." The video illustrates "a kinder, less hectic way of assessing what kids know," our teacher colleague says. "It shows schools that are making inroads in performance-based testing—true pioneers." An accompanying article sets the context for the video segment.

<http://snipurl.com/AssessUnderstanding>

Working Toward EXCELLENCE

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