

One Focus, One Agenda: Achievement for All Students



2003/2004 Achievements

Identifying and implementing strategies to improve student achievement has been an ongoing endeavor in the Ann Arbor Public Schools. However, recent initiatives by the state and federal government have added visibility to the goals of achievement. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires schools and districts to increase the percentage of students attaining a proficient level on state read-

ing and mathematics tests, with the goal of 100% proficiency by years 2013/14. The state addresses its responsibilities for meeting these goals via its Education Yes! school accreditation system, which assigns letter grades to schools based primarily on student performance on the state MEAP tests.

To this end, the AAPS district has been implementing the Balanced Literacy program that has placed literacy demonstration teachers in every elementary school who coach colleagues on reading instruction with added training for teachers on working with the most challenged readers.

In 2003/04, 81% of first graders and 82% of second graders achieved the targeted reading levels. 86% of 4th graders met and/or exceeded proficiency in reading on the MEAP test. Achievement discrepancies between groups of students identified by race closed significantly. Students defined as economically disadvantaged and with limited English language also increased in reading proficiency by 10 percentage points or more.

By June 2006, the district has set a goal of ensuring that all third graders will read at grade level.

The Ann Arbor Public Schools

is committed to:

- Putting the needs of students first in all decisions and actions
- Having high expectations for all students and staff
- Meeting students' educational and social needs
- Valuing and treating students as individuals
- Serving students, families, and the community in a professional manner
- Facilitating open, inclusive communication within the school and with the greater community
- Encouraging and supporting students to become responsible, independent life long learners
- Providing equitable access to opportunities and resources for students
- Practicing mutual respect among students, staff, parents, and community members
- Welcoming parents' involvement in the education of their children
- Maintaining a safe and orderly school environment

From **A to Z**

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A2 Literacy Initiative promises to transform reading and writing... and help bridge the achievement gap

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Leaders in Literacy

Something unique and wonderful is happening in Ann Arbor's K-5 classrooms. For at least two hours every day, students and teachers are working at literacy in an entirely new way. As a result, reading accuracy is improving. Comprehension levels are increasing. Writing skills are being honed. National test scores are moving up steadily. Equally important, students are becoming avid readers, and loving every minute of a remarkable process that makes reading and writing a joy rather than a chore.

Changing the Paradigm: The Literary Collaborative

Five years ago, the A2 Public Schools set out to reform literacy teaching in the elementary grades. Staff members began exploring best practices throughout the country and eventually chose to become part of the Literary Collaborative, an association of several major universities and several thousand schools. AAPS Elementary Literacy Coordinator Chuck Hatt notes that joining the Collaborative was a major decision and one that carried a certain level of risk, since it involved comprehensive school reform. "We knew that everything was subject to the possibility of change," he says, "not just elements of the curriculum but the way our schools organize themselves around staff development, teacher practice and the application of data and research findings."

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Teaching the Teachers

During the first year of the transition, four staff members from the Ann Arbor Public Schools were trained as Literacy Coordinators, a process that involved seminars with university faculty followed by on-site classroom coaching with those same faculty members. The four individuals would eventually become trainers and "change agents" for the schools. In year two, Ann Arbor's elementary teachers underwent 45 hours of training and professional development as well as weekly coaching sessions. The goal was to celebrate what the teachers were doing well, while constantly seeking opportunities to strengthen their practice. "This was a major paradigm shift," Chuck explains, "in a period of two years, we went from individuals teaching on their own to a collaborative learning community – always looking at other practices, always in conversation with each other, always seeking ways to achieve better results with our students."

A Customized Approach to Reading

Under the new system, children are assessed continually for their individual reading level. Teachers use the assessments to establish a literacy benchmark for each individual child. As Chuck explains, "Our educators used to teach a set curriculum for their particular grade. Now those same educators are finding the instructional level of every student and then teaching to that level."

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THE READING REVOLUTION

Leaders in Literacy (continued)



In other words, we're taking the children where they are, and building from there."

The classroom experience is also structured much differently.

In the past, all students were assigned readings from the same text. These days, the focus is on independent reading behaviors. Students are free to choose from many different titles, and teachers help each child select a "just-right book" appropriate for their reading level.

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After 45 minutes of independent reading, students are encouraged to have conversations with their fellow readers, to make connections, discuss the stories they've read and ask questions about plots and characters. As they become engaged with books, and apply strategies that are taught to them, their comprehension level increases.

"In the past," says Chuck, "we tried to improve comprehension by asking questions, by grilling the students. That's like trying to make a pig fat by weighing it rather than by feeding it. These days, we understand that effective reading occurs when children are actively thinking and talking about books." Once a week, each student writes a letter to his or her teacher, commenting on a book and receives a detailed response.

This year, the goal is to have 80 percent of all K-5 students reading at or above grade level. Children functioning at levels below a specific target receive guided reading sessions at least once a day.



Eberwhite Kindergarten teacher, Dawn Anderson with her students. Results to date show strong, sustained literacy improvement among all students and a gradual but steady closing of the achievement gap between black and white students.

Significant, Successful Outcomes

For decades, educational achievement levels in Michigan have been based on results of the MEAP test. In recent years, Ann Arbor Public Schools have been using MEAP scores to evaluate the Literacy Collaborative. "The findings," says Chuck, "are highly correlative."

Over the past five years, for example, Pattengill School has seen student reading scores rise from 42% to 84%. In a reversal of a longtime trend, reading scores are no longer lagging behind math results. Best of all, the gains in both reading and math are being sustained over time.

Of course, there is also plenty of anecdotal evidence. More students are openly enthusiastic about reading. Staff development days that feature literacy training are attracting capacity crowds. Students now see themselves as part of a community of readers and writers. Or as Chuck prefers to describe it, "Our schools have become like gigantic Oprah reading clubs."



Since the introduction of the Literacy Collaborative in K-5 schools, Eberwhite Media Specialist Bettie Fisher has documented a dramatic change in book check-out patterns over the school year. Instead of dropping off sharply in November, check-out rates rise significantly in the first few months of the school year— and then remain at those high rates through the last day of class.



Superintendent Dr. George Fornero reads to Bryant Elementary students on Reading Night.

THE ELEMENTS OF ENRICHMENT

In a typical week, Ann Arbor's K-5 students are exposed to an amazing array of enrichment activities. Yet as diverse as these programs are, they are all shaped around one fundamental objective: helping each child make the most of his or her abilities.

K-5 Schools Strive to Bring Out the Giftedness of Every Child

Administrator for Elementary Education, Lee Ann Dickinson Kelley describes it this way: "We recognize that there is giftedness in all children, and that it is our job to provide every possible opportunity for students to grow in a holistic way. Rather than focusing purely on skills, we look for ways to extend learning at every moment. Thus, our programs are designed to wrap around the curriculum, make connections, integrate disciplines, and capitalize on a child's natural curiosity."

This past year, thanks to the skill and imagination of the district's educational enrichment coordinators, K-5 students—and in some cases, their parents as well—benefited from hundreds of programs that included:

- Environmental field trips and nature clubs
- Mini-concerts and workshops with professional musicians
- Museum tours in Ann Arbor and Detroit
- Academic tournaments
- Diversity celebrations
- Dance workshops
- Classroom presentations by scientists and engineers
- Theatrical performances
- Residencies in storytelling and creative writing
- Workshops in computer literacy

Many of these activities represent ongoing partnerships with local universities, arts organizations, and businesses. There are also a number of first-time programs. One of the new initiatives is **GO! Outdoors!** funded by a two-year, \$200,000

Great Outdoors Grant from the Southeastern Michigan Community Foundation. The project is an extension of the district's Environmental Education Program, which has organized daily field trips for Ann Arbor students since 1961. Program partners include Lakewood Elementary, a designated Environmental Focus School; the Environmental Education Program; Ann Arbor Public Schools Department of Recreation and Education; the Ecology Center; and the Department of Natural Resources.

"The goal of this program is to get children and their parents away from passive indoor activities and into the great outdoors," says Sara Aeschbach, Director of Community Education and Recreation. Toward that end, the program is sponsoring after-school nature clubs as well as family expeditions.

AAPS Environmental Education Consultant David Szczygiel, who leads field trips for more than 10,000 students each year, is now organizing weekend versions for families. The Winter Survival trip was featured on Detroit Public Television-Channel 56, another Great Outdoors grant recipient. Other outings focused on winter birds, gravel pit geology and spring wildflowers. A field trip is also planned to Pioneer High School's state-of-the-art planetarium. This year, **GO! Outdoors!** offers Walking School Buses, a program in which Lakewood students and parents walk to school accompanied by a naturalist.

For a complete listing of school, weekend and summer programs, visit [HYPERLINK](http://www.aaps.k12.MI.US/aaps.home/inthespotlight) <http://www.aaps.k12.MI.US/aaps.home/inthespotlight>