

CASE STUDY:

Lexiles Help Alaska Elementary School Foster Strong Reading Habits, Increase Student Reading Proficiency



Lexile: Matching readers to text

Schools everywhere are grappling with balancing the ever-increasing emphasis on standardized test scores while ensuring that each student's individual learning needs are met. A small Alaska elementary school has achieved that delicate balance. East Elementary School in Kodiak implemented a schoolwide reading initiative that is instilling a lifelong love of reading in its students and making their scores on the Alaska state reading assessment skyrocket.

Part of the Kodiak Island Borough District, East Elementary is located on an island off the southern coast of Alaska, where it serves 320 students from the town of Kodiak and the nearby Coast Guard station. School principal Ron Fried and reading specialist Margaret Reed embody the independent, self-sufficient attitude for which the forty-ninth state is known, and in 2002 created an in-school reading program using The Lexile Framework® for Reading.

The Lexile Framework provides a common scale for matching reader ability and text difficulty, enabling teachers and parents to choose materials that can help to improve student reading skills and monitor literacy across the curriculum and at home. Recognized as the most widely adopted reading measure in use today, Lexiles® are part of reading and testing programs at the district, state and federal levels. More than 100,000 books, 80 million articles and 60,000 Web sites have Lexile measures.

East Elementary's school-wide reading initiative combines Scholastic Reading Counts!, a software program that manages and motivates independent reading, with the "just-right books" philosophy, which takes inspiration from Goldilocks' fabled search for the right porridge, chair and bed. "It's always been a challenge to match books to the reading level of a student," said Fried. "Lexiles help us to hone in and connect students with books at their level. And the fact that they can really see how they improve has been a great help."

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Reed added, "The way you become a better reader is like anything else worth doing well—practice, practice, practice. Practicing with just-right material, we become the best readers we can. Lexiles show our students their growth in a way they understand."

Finding Inspiration in Increasing Lexile Measures

Since the beginning, when only a handful of teachers were using Lexiles in their classrooms, students were excited about seeing their scores improve. Student enthusiasm for Lexiles ultimately sold using the measures to the other teachers. "Once the students could see the relationship between time spent reading and improved reading skills, their enthusiasm promoted using Lexiles with their teachers in the next grade level," Reed said. "It's such a valuable tool that the kids promoted it."

East Elementary begins each school year by administering the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) to establish a baseline Lexile for each student. Students receive their Lexile measures and set their Reading Counts! points goal for the year. They monitor their own progress as closely as the teachers do.

"Everyone in the building knows their Lexile and the range of just-right books," said Reed. "The library is coded so students trying to find just-right books are guided by the dot colors indicating ranges, then look inside to see the Lexile level. The library is open for an hour before school and more time after school so kids can come in and read and take the Reading Counts! tests."

Progress on the tests is closely monitored and jubilantly celebrated throughout the school, particularly by East Elementary's own superhero—the Masked Reader. A parent volunteer comes in every week as the Masked Reader and visits classrooms to celebrate students and classes making progress toward their reading goals. "She makes a big deal out of student growth and celebrates real accomplishment with each classroom and each student," said Reed.

Connecting Students With Just-Right Books Key to Progress

While knowing their Lexile range makes it easier for students to locate just-right books, Reed emphasizes that students make informed book choices. "My rule is that students can read any book they want, any time they want, even outside their range," she said. "But if they're reading for the purpose of engaged practice, they have to read within their range." Her philosophy appears to be working. Since the reading program began in 2002, the number of books checked out from the library increased from 4,000 to 16,000 in just three years.

Since the Reading Counts! books are not segregated from the rest of the library collection, students are able to browse the shelves and enjoy titles that they might not have encountered otherwise. The entire library is Lexiled, which makes it easier for Reed and other teachers to guide students to appropriate-level books.

"A classic example of what happens is that we used to have kids who were frustrated with reading who are now checking out books and reading every day. We are raising more sophisticated readers than in the past. These readers know how to select the right books with

the right amount of reading challenge,” said Reed. “Lexiles help us know which books are too hard, too easy and just right.”

Using Lexiles Across the Curriculum

As student enthusiasm and teacher participation grew, Lexiles became an integral part of lesson planning and materials selection across all content areas. One example reflects how the school's curriculum takes advantage of its unique island location. “Part of the fifth-grade curriculum across all content areas is going to a nearby island for three days of camping,” said Fried. “The kids learn about orienteering by compass, tide-pooling, bird-watching, creating survival shelters and so forth. Topics are taught throughout the school year, and then the trip is in the spring. Once Lexiles were integrated into our school, the teachers reviewed the materials they'd been using, Lexiled them, then changed them to be more level-appropriate.”

With curriculum materials better suited to the fifth-graders' reading abilities, plus the participation of the U.S. Coast Guard, Audubon Society, Alaska Department of Fish & Game, Navy Seals and Woody Island Tribal Council, the annual camping trip is an invaluable teaching opportunity, as well as a milestone the kids eagerly anticipate, despite the almost-guaranteed rain.

Reaping the Rewards of Increased Reading Proficiency

All of East Elementary's hard work has paid off in higher levels of reading achievement on the Alaska state assessments. In the spring of 2001, third-graders scored a 56 percent proficiency rate in reading. After three years of the school's reading initiative, those same students scored 79 percent on the sixth-grade assessment. This result repeated with the 2002 cohort of third-graders, who went from 67 to 83 percent proficient. Each year, students started third grade higher than the grade before, then sustained the same growth trend. The 2005-2006 test scores showed third-graders scoring 93 percent proficiency. Reed and her colleague, teacher Dawnn Catt, are currently at work defining a third-grade proficiency Lexile cut-score for predicting success on the state standardized test.

While pleased to see the improved scores, Fried is adamant that East Elementary's reading initiative is about much more than assessment. “Assessment is a byproduct,” he said. “You have to focus on getting kids to read and read well. If Lexiles have done one thing, they've helped us focus. Our teachers may think about tests, but they're not teaching to them.”

While state assessment results are important to every school, Fried relies more on Lexiles to show progress. “If you use SRI and Lexiles, you see growth along the way,” he said. “You can really use it to support teaching throughout the year, which you can't with a state assessment.”

Taking Ownership of Reading Growth

Most gratifying is the student dedication to the reading program. Fried said, “Lexiles have given kids more ownership of their reading ability. They go back and check and see a trend of why their scores go up or don't go up, and they see that they don't go up by magic—it takes practice.”

Reed is especially pleased with how the scores motivate students to work harder. One example is a student who transferred mid-year from another school. Although she was in fourth grade, she came to East Elementary reading at a first-grade level. However, with appropriate-level books combined with hard work, the student reached the fourth-grade range by the end of the year.

Another student, a second-grader, worked hard and monitored his progress throughout the first semester. After a long vacation where he did not practice reading, he discovered his scores had flat-lined. Realizing that reading practice made a difference, he worked hard at it and met his goal by the end of the year.

“The students take ownership in their growth,” Reed said proudly. “We track Lexiles, fluency and comprehension, and they understand the significance of the scores. It's very meaningful for them.”

Fried added, “The best thing is not only when the kids earn points but when they see their Lexile measure change and realize they are now reading harder books.”

East Elementary will continue to use The Lexile Framework for Reading as the cornerstone of its reading initiative and to find new ways to weave it into the fabric of instruction. “It's the most useful tool that has come down the pike, ever,” said Reed. “Lexiles have affected reading growth more than any other single tool we've used.”

East Elementary is a Title I school with 47 percent low income and serves a diverse population of 320 K-5 students representing 12 different languages in the Kodiak Island Borough School District of Alaska. The student body is made up of children from the city of Kodiak, as well as from the nearby Coast Guard station.

Contact

Margaret Reed
mreed01@kodiakschools.org

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Benefits of Using Lexiles

- Makes it easy for students to find “just-right” books
- Motivates students by showing growth
- Helps students develop a love of reading
- Provides tracking and assessment feedback for administrators

For more information on Lexiles, contact us at 1-888-LEXILES or visit www.Lexile.com.

For more information, press only:

Lisa Wolfe, L. Wolfe Communications, 773-325-9935, lwolfe@lwolfe.com

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