Sullivan County Department of Education Announces Promising Academic Progress in Elementary Reading

Gains seen across all elementary schools and across students of all reading levels, and result from recent investments in new reading curriculum and teacher training.

BLOUNTVILLE, Tenn. (February 4, 2019) – Sullivan County elementary students showed gains in the screening assessments administered by the district, with evidence of student gains districtwide.

The district tests all students in grades kindergarten through sixth grade three times per year, in line with Tennessee mandates, to gauge reading and math proficiency. These “universal screener” assessments help the district to benchmark its students’ performance versus national benchmarks, and also to identify students who are “at-risk” of not meeting grade level expectations, and therefore need additional academic support in reading or mathematics. School teams use the data to tailor activities for students, based on their specific academic needs.

In this year’s winter screening, Sullivan County students showed historic gains in reading:

Decreased Number of Students Identified as At-Risk Readers

The district achieved a significant decrease in the number of students with “at-risk” levels of reading proficiency, from 37.8% of students in the fall screening to 29.9% in the winter screening. This means that the district has 351 fewer elementary students with an “at-risk” designation for reading. The gains were most pronounced in first and second grade, which saw 8.8 and 10.6 point drops in the percentage of at-risk students respectively.

All eleven elementary schools in the district saw decreases in at-risk students. Central Heights Elementary School showed particularly strong gains, with approximately 20% fewer students are considered to be “at-risk” in first, second, and fourth grades.
Increased Number of Students Performing at Top Levels

Across all grades, more Sullivan County students scored in the top range of performance. In the Fall, 15.2% of students were in the 75-100th percentile compared to national benchmarks, and in the winter screening, 23.2% of students were reading at this highest level. Every school in the district saw gains at these upper levels, either in all five grades or in four out of five grades.

Overall, the picture is one of improved performance across all segments, from high-achieving to lower-achieving student populations.
Investments in Reading Instruction Paying Off

Sullivan County attributes these gains to a multi-year investment in reading proficiency, centered around the adoption of an improved reading and writing curriculum as well as extensive teacher training on success with that curriculum. The curriculum – Core Knowledge Language Arts, provided by Amplify – is designed to engage students with rich science and history topics while they grow as readers. Students read interesting books about those subjects, then participate in detailed discussions, complete projects, and/or write about the topics. The curriculum also provides materials for teachers around all of the key pillars of reading development, such as explicit phonics instruction.

The district began implementing the curriculum during the 2016-17 school year, and this year, teachers appear to be hitting their stride with the program. Sullivan County has also focused on the most effective ways to use data about student skill gaps to tailor the work that students do when working in small groups with instructors. Sullivan County also believes that its partnership with families has helped to fuel these improvements.
“These types of districtwide gains, crossing all elementary schools and all student performance levels, are both atypical and exceptional. It’s a strong indication that our investments in reading are working for our students and teachers,” said Superintendent Evelyn Rafalowski. “It is one of the Sullivan County Schools’ highest priorities for students to read on or above grade level by the end of third grade, and I am so proud of our team for its commitment to our reading initiative, and for these inspiring outcomes, which we hope begin a trend.”

“We attribute our students’ success to a much stronger literacy curriculum taught by exceptional educators who have committed to establish high expectations for all students,” said Supervisor of Elementary Education Robin McClellan. “Our students are rising to levels of growth and mastery as evidenced by both qualitative and quantitative data. Collaborative, dedicated teachers and leaders who are eager to tackle new challenges as we build a literate community are at the heart of the work.”

Sullivan County Schools will continue to partner with families to build a community of readers. The district encourages families to read to or with children for 20 minutes every day, as part of the “Read 20” at-home reading initiative.

Questions can be directed to Robin McClellan at robin.mcclellan@sullivank12.net.

Sullivan County Department of Education serves 9,500 students in grades kindergarten through 12th grade, operating four high schools, seven middle schools, two K-8 schools, and nine elementary schools. The district focuses on the learner and continually seeks professional learning to enhance educational opportunities for all students. Decisions are grounded in data and driven by a focus on positive relationships, high expectations, student engagement, and student growth.

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Robin’s blog draft