

Cracking the Literacy Code

High-poverty districts push to improve students' literacy and their lives

Glenn Cook

Sandra Alexander's parents didn't finish high school, but her mother was an avid reader who encouraged her daughter to do the same.

"She helped give me the words I needed to be successful," says Alexander, who became the first person in her immediate family to receive a college degree and was an English professor for 30 years at North Carolina A&T State University. "She gave me the fundamental skills I needed."

Today, as a member of North Carolina's Guilford County Board of Education, Alexander is one of the leaders of the district's broad and expanding "balanced literacy" initiative, which is starting this fall. The initiative is the latest in a series of programs the district

is using to help students demonstrate proficiency in reading.

Cracking the code on literacy, especially in a majority-minority district such as Guilford, is no easy task. Large-scale initiatives are costly and time intensive, and the needle on achievement rarely moves quickly. Earning buy-in and support from community and business leaders is critical, as is the need to provide strong professional development to teachers and a rigorous evaluation system that can accurately determine whether a program is working.

"As a board member, when you start a new program, the first question you get is, 'Is it working?'" says Guillermo Lopez of Michigan's Lansing Public Schools, which embarked on its own large-scale literacy initia-

tive several years ago. “I tell folks that it’s looking good, but we have to persist on a path that is going to give us some results. You can’t expect immediate results from one year to the next.”

The need and the case for support is clear: Nearly half of the nation’s minority and low-income students read below basic level by the end of fourth grade. The numbers are even worse for African-American and Hispanic males, four out of five of whom are not reading at grade level by fourth grade. Even more sobering: Students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school.

“Education researchers don’t agree on a lot, but they do agree on the need for early literacy programs,” says Joel Zarrow, CEO of the Philadelphia-based Children’s Learning Initiative (CLI), a national nonprofit that provides literacy coaches to schools. “The biggest lever for improving educational outcomes is reading and writing by third grade. It’s absolutely pivotal.”

EARLY LITERACY STRIDES

Zarrow’s point is borne out in a variety of recently released studies that show promise for both large- and small-scale literacy programs. Utah, for example, touts its statewide kindergarten readiness initiative, called UPSTART, that uses technology to deliver an early literacy curriculum to 4-year-olds in their homes. Now in its seventh year, the program has consistently helped students enter kindergarten at or above grade level.

Meanwhile, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, students who participate in free pre-k classes arrive in kindergarten more academically prepared than their classmates who do not, according to a 15-year study released by Georgetown University in May. The group that benefits the most: English language learners.

That comes as no surprise to Kathy Escamilla, a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder whose research focuses on biliteracy programs. Escamilla says non-native students who are taught to read in English as well as their own language have a much better shot at academic success. But the key is reaching the kids early.

“Learning a second language takes time, and the average reading program in a middle class school is typically disastrous for a second language learner,”

Escamilla says. “You have to make accommodations and be prepared to work with kids and families individually.”

Other districts have made strides in early literacy by taking nontraditional approaches. In Topeka, Kansas, the school district, the city’s housing authority, and the United Way have established a free all-day preschool program in two public housing complexes. Staffed with a certified preschool teacher and paraprofessionals, the program uses a district-provided curriculum to help students learn to recognize letters and numbers.

In Lopez’s district, the board decided in 2012 to move away from its traditional k-five, six-eight, nine-12 grade configuration to address Lansing’s literacy challenges. The 12,000-student majority-minority district is in a refugee resettlement community; 48 languages are spoken in the district.

“We knew we had to do something to address the issue of literacy differently,” Lopez says. “We wanted to do something that would allow the school community to wrap their arms around the children and work as a team to ensure our starting students will be reading at grade level.”

Today, Lansing’s schools are broken down into pre-k through grade three, grades four to six, and grades seven to 12; the district also has three pre-k through grade eight schools. Community agencies, such as the Boys and Girls Club, and businesses provide tutors to work with students on reading and literacy skills.

“We’ve seen some good results, but like everything else, there have been some bumps in the road,” Lopez says. “The first year was all about accepting the new grade configurations. Now it’s about managing expectations that things should be moving faster than they are.”

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

Rodney Schlit knows firsthand the problems children face when there’s no stability at home. From first through sixth grade, he went to two or three schools a year, bouncing from relative to relative after his parents divorced. After moving to a small town near the Oklahoma-Missouri border, he left school after the 11th grade.

“I knew how important having an education was, even after dropping out,” says Schlit, who got married

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and started working in construction before getting a GED. “I’ve been to a lot of different schools, some good and some bad. I’ve seen how education is very different depending on where you live and how much money your district has.”

In 2002, Schlit ran for the board of education in Adair, Oklahoma, the district where he attended—and dropped out of—high school. About 40 percent of the district’s 1,100 students are Native American, one of the populations deemed most at risk for dropping out of school, but the district’s high school has won a National Blue Ribbon Award and has seen two of its graduates receive full scholarships to Columbia University.

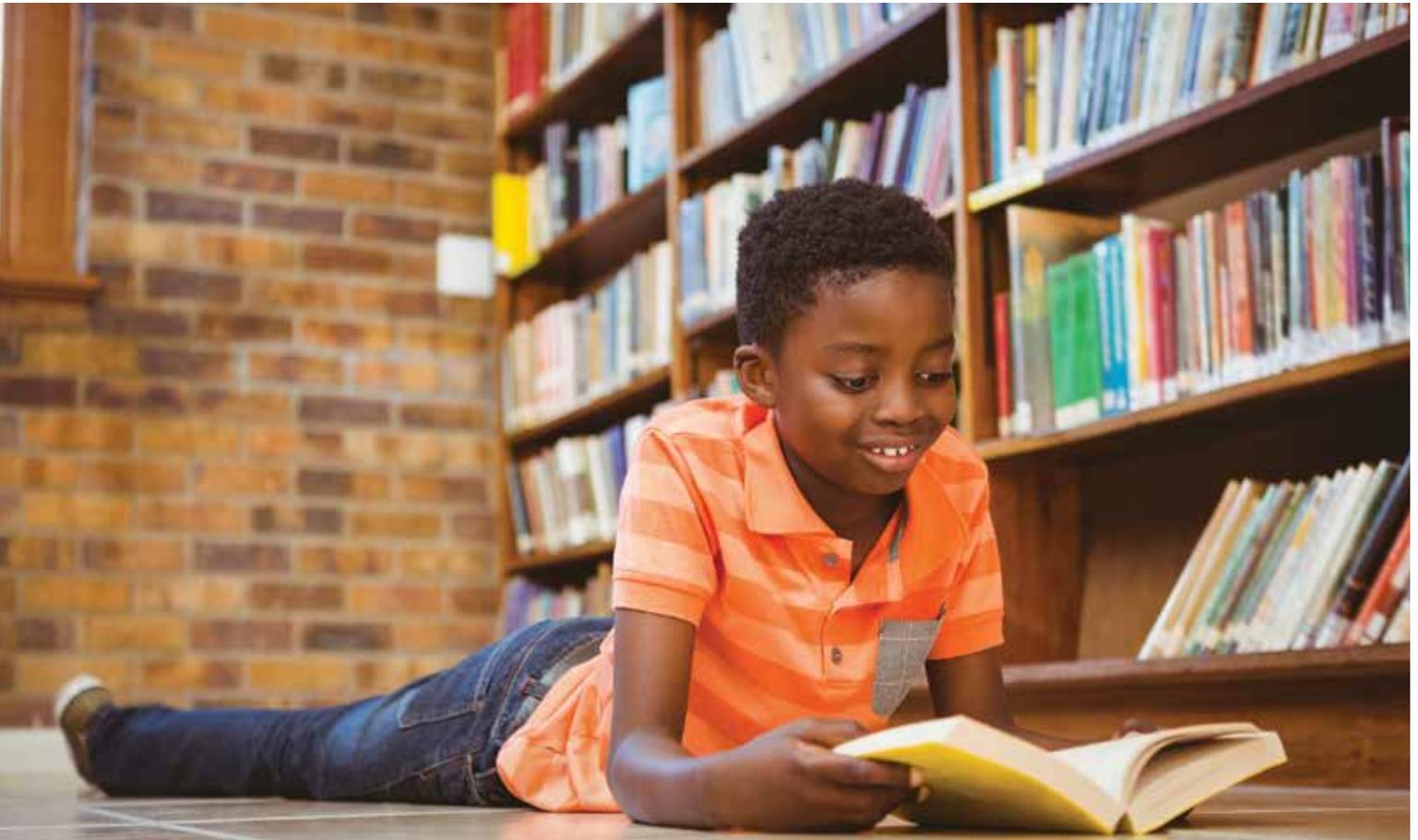
Several years ago, Adair’s reading and literacy scores started to decline, and the principal proposed a series of interventions for students in grades k-three. The

interventions, among them extended time for in-class reading and writing and more staff development for teachers, were put in place quickly. Schlit said the district started to see an uptick.

“We are fortunate that we live in a very stable community with very stable leadership,” says Schlit, chairman of NSBA’s American Indian/Alaska Native Caucus. “The principal at our high school and elementary school were raised among the people who live here, and so were many of the school board members. We are plugged into our community, and we know the pitfalls that our students and their families face.”

Zarrow, who worked for a decade with New Jersey’s lowest-performing schools before moving to CLI, says Adair’s thorough approach is something other districts need to emulate.

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“As a country, we have the knowledge base and the research base,” Zarrow says. “Literacy is not an obscure cancer or something where you have to do a scientific discovery to uncover some new gene. We’re not facing a knowledge gap. We’re facing an implementation gap. We know how to do this. But schools don’t know how to implement it successfully.”

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Schlit says he’s seen the effect of not sticking with a program long enough for it to be successful. Even though Adair overcame its “literacy crisis” and now is on the right track, he says each year brings new students and new challenges.

“The thing is you really only get one shot at an education,” he says. “We have our issues with funding, and we need to improve our infrastructure to support our technology needs, but that’s not an excuse for not doing everything we can to help our students. We have to teach them how to read, and sooner rather than later. It’s that simple, really.”

HUNGRY TO LEARN

Guilford County has used a number of different models to improve literacy, providing students with access to 10,000 free e-books, encouraging them to read 20 minutes a day at home, and holding summer reading camps. Various schools also have given prizes to students who read the most books in a week, month, or year.

Starting this year, all students in grades four through eight will have 15 to 30 minutes of indepen-

dent reading daily in their English Language Arts classes. The plan is to expand the program to include third, ninth, and 10th grades next year, and include all grade levels by 2020.

An audit released earlier this year showed teachers need more professional development that focuses on how to help students who are at different levels in the same classroom. The audit by the Education Resource Group also showed a need for more culturally relevant books.

“I remember the powerful effect that biographies of famous African Americans had on me as a young reader,” Alexander says. “When I read about someone who was like me, I realized that if they can overcome the obstacles that they have, then who am I to make excuses for what God has given me?”

Now, through a partnership with the American Reading Company, the district is providing teachers with an assortment of these books that students can read at school and at home. During independent reading time, teachers meet and set reading goals with each student.

“Over the years, we have not paid as much attention to basic fundamental skills our students need in order to survive in this society,” Alexander says. “We have kids who are hungry to learn. We just have to find the right way to feed them.”

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