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Literacy Effort Leads El Mirage School's Rally

By Monica Mendoza

EL MIRAGE -- You could say the odds were against them.

Only 14 percent of the students at El Mirage Elementary School could read at grade level, and more than 80 percent of the children were learning English as their second language.

But the principal, the teachers, the parents and even the grandparents of this small, mostly Mexican neighborhood school knew they had to turn the children into readers.

"Students can't do math or science if they can't read," said Kristie Shea, a third-grade teacher and reading facilitator at the K-8 school.

Last year, the teachers voted to use a new reading program called Success for All. It cost about \$75,000 for books and teacher training and was a big shakeup for longtime teachers who were used to having more independence in how they taught reading.

The Success for All program is scripted, meaning all teachers use the same techniques and books and move at the same pace. In order for it to work, children must hunker down and read every day in class for at least 90 minutes and at home for 20 minutes each night.

"This program has been effective with kids who are in our demographics," Principal Glenda Rios said.

Today, one year after El Mirage teachers launched the program, 41 percent of the students are reading at or above their grade level. There is still a long way to go, but every group of readers is making gains, teachers said.

There's a new energy on campus. Children run to reading classes. Students ask for more books to take home. "The kids are reading on the playground," Shea said.

The key is that children are tested at the beginning of the school year and placed in reading groups with other children who are reading at the same level. In some reading groups, high-level first-graders are partnered with second- or third-graders.

The children are tested every eight weeks. If they make gains, they advance to the next reading level. If they stagnate, they are sent to tutoring classes.

"As a society, we are realizing that kids don't learn at the same rate," said Carrie Derr, a second-grade teacher and reading facilitator.

Success for All was developed in 1987 at a Baltimore elementary school. Today, about 1,500 schools use the phonics-based program. Studies by Johns Hopkins University researchers have indicated that students, even second-language learners, in the reading program can catch up to their grade level and even jump to the next level in one year.

For El Mirage, the real test will be this spring when students take Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards, also known as the AIMS test. Scores from the test are heavily weighted in the state's labeling program. And this year, El Mirage was labeled underperforming. The children must show gains in their test scores to shake the label.

But Rios isn't lecturing about AIMS in staff meetings. Instead, teachers are talking about reading.

"There is a feeling that if the teachers hit these reading strategies, that test scores will go up," Rios said.

It will take help from parents. They must sign off on their child's 20-minute nightly reading assignment.

Six-year-old Casandra Lopez gets frustrated having to sound out words and sometimes resists doing her reading homework, her mom said.

"It isn't always easy," said Casandra's mother, Cecelia Lopez. "But no matter what, we get through it."

A family support coordinator meets with parents regularly to talk about student progress and keeps parents involved in their child's reading program. Once a week, parents are invited to school to learn reading techniques and talk about books and homework.

For some children, the school reading time and homework assignments aren't enough. About 50 kids show up every morning for the "Breakfast Club" before school starts to read with teachers while they eat.

About 60 kids at various reading levels are tutored throughout the day. Third-grade teacher Richard Mendivil is a full-time tutor this year. He and four other tutors work daily with children in 20-minute sessions.

"One thing you learn is patience," Mendivil said.

In one instance, a girl struggled day in and day out for months and did not seem to be making progress.

"Then one day, she just took off," he said.