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# Kids happily keeping noses buried in books

MARYSVILLE | The Success for All reading program that Liberty Elementary School has implemented calls for involvement from all.

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At Liberty Elementary School in Marysville, it's not uncommon to find students reading. Every day. For hours. And loving it.

School officials say the buzz about books – and a boost in test scores – can be credited to Success for All, a reading program used in more than 1,500 schools across the country.

Most of the schools, including Liberty, are Title I schools, which receive federal funding to support students from low-income families. In the Marysville School District, Quil Ceda Elementary School also uses Success for All.

The Maryland-based Success for All Foundation, which began the program in 1987, aims to identify and address reading problems as early as possible and have all students reading at their grade level by the third grade. To do so, the program calls on myriad people in a child's life to get involved.

"It's about consistency and persistence, and it says, 'We don't give up on our kids,'" said reading teacher Lynn Bloss, who has been involved in the program since it started at Liberty in 1997.

Though the program is expensive – around \$75,000 to initiate and upward of \$10,000 annually to keep up with curriculum materials and technology – Principal Heidi Johnsen says the money is well spent.

The program, she said, has aimed the school and families at a common goal.



GREG GILBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Reading partners Josh High and Sandra Rosales study a book as part of the Success for All reading program at Liberty Elementary School in Marysville.

"What I like is the whole school is moving," Johnsen said. "It's a positive climate. Everybody is everybody's teacher. This gives that full Liberty feeling. I see smiles on faces and hands raised."

### A program for all ages

Before the school year, teachers who haven't participated in the program go through three days of training, familiarizing themselves with curriculum, strategies and assessments. Classroom teachers aren't the only ones who participate; educational assistants, physical education and art teachers go through training, too.

When school begins, students are test-

ed to gauge their reading levels. Kindergartners and first-graders are evaluated by teachers, while second- through fifth-graders take a computerized test, reading a passage and answering questions.

Students, regardless of what grade they're in, are then assigned to classes based on reading level. Every two months, students are retested. Students may end up working with several teachers in one year.

Throughout the year, teachers can use Success for All software to track students' progress, such as their attendance, reading level and homework scores, and ability to write sentences, comprehend

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a story's meaning and pronounce and understand words.

In the early grades, the program's curriculum addresses sounding out letters and words; in the upper grades, comprehension, fluency and thinking skills.

The records also can show a correlation between the levels at which students are reading and how many pass the reading section of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL).

"We've become more aware of the children and feel more responsible for them," Bloss said.

Before Success for All, she said, teachers across the school approached reading instruction in their own ways. That showed in Liberty's WASL scores, among some of the lowest in the district.

When district officials asked Liberty's leaders to find a reading program that fit the school's needs, they settled on Success for All after visiting schools in Everett that used the program.

### *A fun pastime*

School leaders aim to make reading fun.

When Success for All begins every morning at 9:30, students with books tucked under their arms boogie off to their designated reading classrooms as music blares over the school's intercom. On June 8, the Eagles' "Take It Easy" was the tune of the day.

Soon, though, students settle into their seats, knowing that the next 90 minutes are dedicated to improving their reading skills.

"We consider this a sacred time," Johnsen said, observing classrooms.

Though the difficulty level of books differs by reading levels, students in each class usually work on the same drills such as vocabulary exercises, discuss stories in groups, read to themselves or with a buddy, work with a tutor or re-enact scenes.

Last week, students reading at the second-grade level were discussing characterization and asked to draw the picture of a character in a book they were reading. One student, for example, said her character was nice and helpful, so she drew a picture of a girl smiling and waving.

Meanwhile, students at the fifth-grade level read each other passages of "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," and at the fourth-grade level, students reading a book about baseball great Honus Wagner were looking up definitions of

words such as "frankfurter" and "designated hitter."

Students say the program has affected the way they view reading and the world around them.

Fourth-grader Morgan McFalls said that when he reads books at home, he now stops to look up words he doesn't know. Third-grader Desiree Fredson, who recently read a biography of Jackie Robinson, said she now wants to read biographies about other people.

Many students enjoy getting to know new teachers and students from other classes and grades.

"Because of the [Success for All] classes, you say hi to people you never knew before," Desiree said. "It's just like a family, you get to know them."

### *Meeting the standard*

Though the percentage of Liberty's fourth-grade students who met standards on the reading portion of the WASL increased from 43.7 in 1997-98 to 75.7 in 2001-02 (before slipping to 54.9 in 2002-03), Johnsen said an equally important achievement is the increase in parent involvement.

About 60 percent of children at the 375-student school qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and nearly 30 percent of students are ethnic minorities. Many students' parents don't speak English.

Liberty has a "family support team" that includes teachers, administrators, counselors and parents who meet once a week to discuss ways to get more parents involved in school activities. Another program-related activity is a monthly Family Fun Night, with games, crafts, reading and dancing.

The school sends home a monthly Success for All calendar, outlining skills that teachers will cover, providing sample reading lessons and asking students to read at least 20 minutes four times a week.

"The structure is what makes it so good for our kids," said Tami Taylor, a reading facilitator.

Recognizing the program's importance, one local parents group recently donated \$1,850 to buy additional books and materials, and Latino business owners contributed \$1,250 to buy bilingual books.

"I think [Success for All] has definitely made school more family-oriented because it does entail the parents getting involved," said Carrie Dunshee, who has three daughters at Liberty. "It's kind of learning for the parents as well."