Helping Struggling Readers in a Title One Elementary School
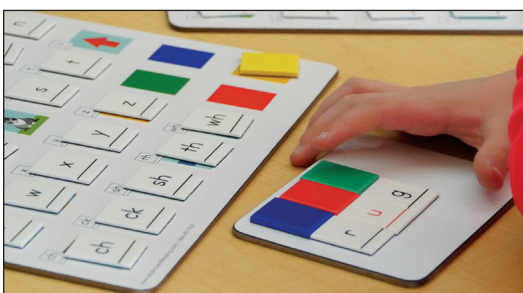
Implementing Really Great Reading

ABSTRACT

Hector A. Cafferata, Jr. Elementary School faced a significant challenge, with large numbers of struggling readers. Recognizing the need for a single, effective solution, Cafferata implemented the Really Great Reading's (RGR) programs in grades K-5 during the 2017-2018 school year.

To evaluate the effectiveness of RGR's instruction, SEG Measurement compared the beginning and end of school year STAR assessment results. Cafferata teachers and school administrators were surveyed and interviewed as well.

Students in grades 1-5 showed substantial improvement in reading skills. Students in grades 1 and 2 showed particularly large gains, with average increases of more than 100 points on the STAR. Students in grades 3-5 also showed substantial gains of between 75 and 90 points on the STAR. The high levels of STAR success due to the RGR program implementation were confirmed by the teachers and assistant principal at Cafferata.

Really Great Reading (RGR) provides a comprehensive set of tools to help to diagnose and teach reading, to any type of reader, including dyslexic, adult and struggling readers at every skill level. RGR's Phonics Suite instruction can be used in a variety of settings including whole-group, small-group, and specialized settings.

Students practice what good readers do naturally, which is pay attention to every word, read with a high rate of accuracy, and use strategies for attacking unfamiliar and multisyllable words.

RGR's research-based, multisensory programs, *Countdown*, *Blast Foundations*, *HD Word*, *Phonics Boost*, and *Phonics Blitz*, explicitly teach phonemic awareness, phonics concepts, and word attack skills. They also focus on reading accurately, which translates to better comprehension.

RGR offers diagnostic decoding assessments to help educators understand their students' decoding strengths and weaknesses, enabling students to be quickly grouped by skill level, or worked with on an individual level, to get maximum benefits from the program.

RGR offers professional development that provides valuable insight into teaching with RGR and provides teachers with a solid foundation to successfully diagnose, group, and teach struggling readers.

Hector A. Cafferata, Jr. Elementary School, in the urban Lee County School District, is located in Cape Coral, Florida, which is in southwest Florida on the Gulf Coast. Lee County School District is a large, urban district, with a total enrollment of more than 91,000 students. Cafferata has an enrollment of about 670 students in grades PK-5. Cafferata has a diverse student population: nearly half of the students (49%) are Hispanic, another third (37%) are Caucasian, and 8% of the students are African American.

Over three-quarters of the students (84%) are low-income, with more than two-thirds (68%) of the students receiving free or reduced lunch. About one in ten (12%) of the students are English language learners.

Really Great Reading(RGR): Meeting the Challenge

Caferrata faced a significant challenge with struggling readers. Their statewide assessment results indicated that just over half of the students were proficient in reading. The Cafferata teachers interviewed confirmed that there are many struggling readers at the school.

Recognizing this challenge, Cafferata investigated several possible solutions. Cafferata looked at reading programs designed to improve student reading skills and enhance reading instruction in the school. Lee County Schools and Cafferata Elementary School were already using a variety of programs to teach reading, and some teachers weren't using anything. Kimberly Molhem, the assistant principal at Caffereta, sought a unified solution to the literacy crisis at Cafferata. She realized that Cafferata needed a single, effective solution that could easily be implemented by staff across the board.

Molhem heard about RGR from a friend in the district and consequently purchased their programs for her school. They started using the RGR programs with 1st and 2nd graders during the 2016-2017 school year. After seeing the high level of success students were experiencing, Cafferata started using RGR school-wide for the 2017-2018 school year. "We used to use a variety of reading programs, but now [with RGR], kids from K-5, no matter what room, everyone is on the same page," stated Molhem.

Cafferata teachers typically use RGR with their students from one and a half to three hours per week. "Kindergarten uses Countdown, Grade One uses Blast, and grades 2-5 use Really Great Reading [HD Word] in whole-group classes. If they are not a strong decoder, they pull the student into a small group to work with them," according to Molhem. Cafferata teachers use a full range of RGR program materials including Really Great Reading's Countdown, Blast Foundations, and HD Word programs, student workbooks, student manipulatives (letter tiles), and the Grouping Matrix.

Results: Students Show Substantial Reading Skills Gains

SEG Measurement, an independent research firm, evaluated the Cafferata results for the 2017-2018 school year. SEG analyzed the school's reading assessment data to determine the extent to which students using RGR improved their reading skills during the school year. Cafferata teachers were surveyed and the assistant principal and several teachers were interviewed.

Cafferata students have substantially improved their reading skills using the RGR programs. RGR is focused on diagnosing, teaching and assessing decoding skills in all grades, and providing educators with the tools and knowledge to teach all students to read.

As measured by the third party independent STAR assessments (from Renaissance Learning) used by the district and data collected from both teachers and school administrators, RGR program use has been very successful at improving students' reading skills.

Students took the STAR assessment at the beginning (August/ September) and end of the school year (April/May) to determine the extent to which students using RGR improved their reading skills. In grades one to five, where assessment results were available, students showed school-year reading skills gains that were both statistically significant ($p<.001$) and educationally meaningful (see Figure 1 right).
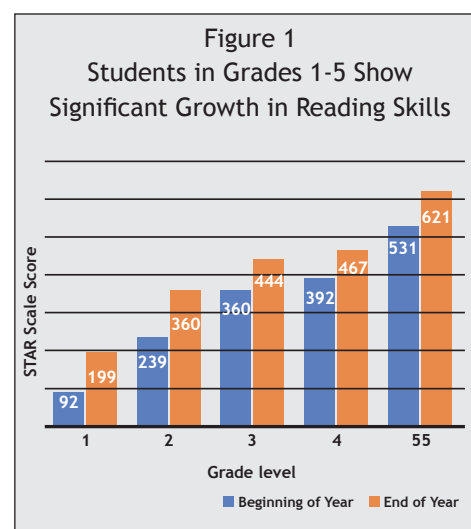
Students in grades one and two showed particularly large gains, with average increases of more than 100 points on the STAR (Grade 1 = 107, Grade 2 = 121). This is a gain of more than one and one third standard deviations in reading skills (Grade 1 Effect Size = 1.37; Grade 2 Effect Size = 1.38), or a gain of about 41 percentile points.

Students in grades three, four and five also showed substantial gains of between 75 and 90 points on the STAR (Grade 3 = 84, Grade 4 = 75, Grade 5 = 90). This is a gain of nearly a standard deviation in grades three and four and a gain of about three quarters of a standard deviation in grade five (Grade 3 Effect Size = .98; Grade 4 Effect Size = .90; Grade 5 Effect Size = .76), or a gain of about 28-34 percentile points (Grade 3 = 34 percentile points; Grade 4 = 32 percentile points; Grade 5 = 28 percentile points).

The high levels of STAR success were confirmed by the teachers and Kimberly Molhem, assistant principal at Cafferata.

"In all of the classes with RGR, we have seen great growth," said Molhem. Looking at second grade, where the largest gains were seen, "Second grade is doing phenomenally with the program," she said. "…Even in the lowest class…they have grown…"

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Figure 1
Students in Grades 1-5 Show
Significant Growth in Reading Skills

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 "We love it. Everyone responds quickly with Really Great Reading — the whole staff is amazing. They have had other programs where they cannot reach anyone at all, ever. This is so helpful."

Teachers overwhelmingly felt the programs were effective. When asked why the students were achieving such success, one teacher said, "I believe it has been effective because it taught my students to be better readers. They learned new rules and skills needed in order to be successful readers." "Students now enjoy reading," added another Cafferata teacher.

According to its website, RGR "believe[s] it is never too late to improve these basic skills in struggling readers. To do this, it is critical to diagnose their specific problems and offer appropriate instruction." RGR provides assessments, a grouping system, and lessons that help students strengthen key basic reading skills, which leads to improved reading fluency and text comprehension.

This school year, 2017 to 2018, Lee County Schools has a district-wide implementation of RGR. "We really need it," said Ms. Molhem. "We love it. Everyone responds quickly at RGR -- the whole staff is amazing. [Our teachers] have had other programs where they cannot reach anyone at all, ever. This is so helpful."