



THE GROWING READERS INITIATIVE:

A GROUND BREAKING APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Based on a shared commitment to proving that poverty is not a barrier to student achievement, The Learning Community and the Central Falls School District have formed a long-term partnership to improve reading performance district-wide. The first phase of this innovative work, The Growing Readers Initiative, began in August 2008 and showed strong results within six months. **This is one of the rare places in the nation where charter and traditional school teachers are working together in the classroom to improve instruction.**

What does the Growing Readers Initiative do?

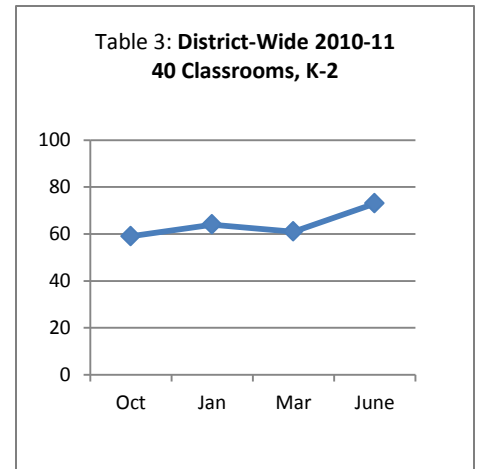
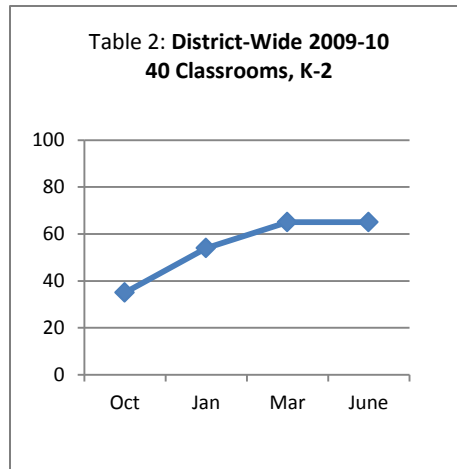
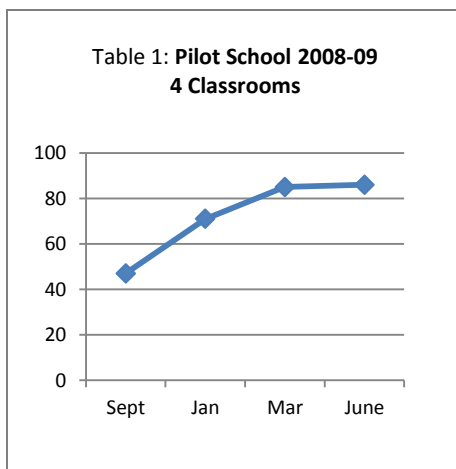
The Growing Readers Initiative invests in Central Fall's dedicated teachers and specialists -- giving them the tools and support to increase their effectiveness in teaching reading. In the project's pilot site 86% of students were reading at or above the national benchmark within the first 6 months. The Growing Readers Initiative supports:

- *Dramatic Gains in Achievement:* advancing every elementary school to make gains in reading
- *Excellent Teaching:* models and supports excellent teaching
- *Quarterly Assessments:* a more frequent system of quarterly assessments, based on national standards, tells teachers what their students need right away.
- *Targeted Investments:* maximizes resources by providing highly targeted professional development
- *Scaling Innovation:* enables innovation in one public school to be shared rapidly district-wide

What are the Results?

We saw dramatic results in less than one year (Table 1). And our latest data (Table 3) indicate we are building a solid track record of success: **24% more students are reading at benchmark than one year ago.**

% of Students Reading at or Above Benchmark on K and DRA Assessments



Significantly, students have started each year at a higher level of overall reading achievement (Tables 1-3). At our pilot school 86% of participating students were reading at or above the national benchmark in reading after six months: **a 39 point gain** (Table 1). Based on the success of the pilot, the initiative was expanded district-wide in 2009-10 to include every K-2 classroom in every elementary school. A great deal of energy was spent listening to teachers concerns and questions and responding rapidly to build trust in this new work. The results in the second year were impressive. Between October and June, **performance district-wide in grades K-2 increased 30 points – a 54% gain** (Table 2).

Teachers are using assessment data to inform and refine their practice in ways that were not possible two years ago; for instance, teachers are reassigning reading groups quarterly based on an analysis of assessment data. And most importantly, classroom teachers, the linchpin of school reform, are embracing this new data-driven approach. Through relationship-building and support even teachers who were vocally skeptical a year ago now articulate the benefits of this approach to their teaching.

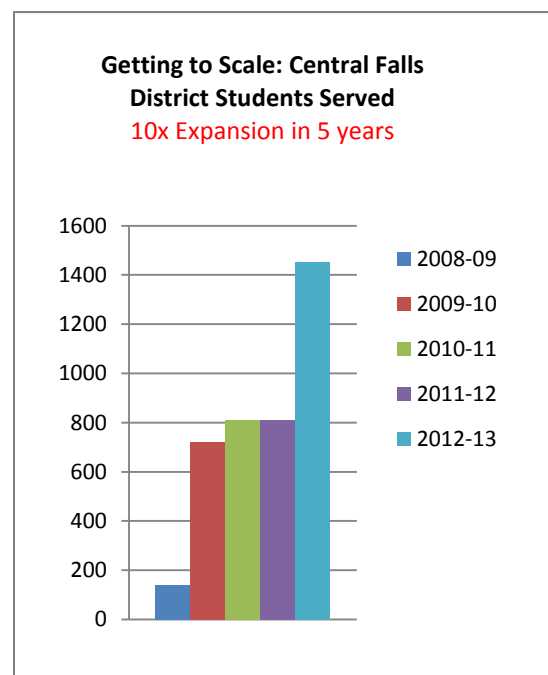
Our Reach

In August 2008 the Growing Readers Initiative began at a single pilot site. In August 2009 the Initiative expanded district-wide in grades K-2 to include:

- Every elementary school in Central Falls
- 41 teachers and 3 teaching assistants
- 4 reading specialists and 1 literacy assistant

Through this work we are reaching 800 students in grades K-2 with targeted, data-driven instruction.

Additional Learning Community consulting teachers are now preparing to increase the number of partner classrooms. In 2012 we hope the initiative will reach more than **1400 Central Falls district students, serving grades K-5 district-wide.**



How does the Growing Readers Initiative do it?

1. **Targeted Professional Development:** Instructional coaches from The Learning Community observe Central Falls teachers while they implement new strategies and then debrief on their observations. Coaches also teach lessons while teachers observe and then debrief afterwards. This “embedded” coaching takes place in each teacher’s own classroom with their students and provides practical suggestions that teachers can use immediately. Coaching happens in intensive one week blocks at four times throughout the year.
2. **Supporting Excellent Instruction:** All classrooms are using a modified form of Reading Workshop (a technique popularized by Lucy Calkins of Columbia’s Teachers College) as the instructional structure for reading. Central Falls teachers are given units of study crafted by Learning Community teachers and tested in our classrooms and the daily teaching points for those units. Coaches provide several lessons plans that have been tested at The Learning Community and then support teachers in learning to craft clear lesson plans using the Reading Workshop approach. Instead of being handed a prescribed curriculum, teachers are building their toolbox of strategies.

3. **Using Data to Inform Instruction:** Teachers and reading specialists are transitioning to The Learning Community’s assessment system that measures students’ academic progress against national benchmarks quarterly, instead of just once or twice a year. They receive critical data immediately about a student’s reading comprehension, fluency and accuracy. The Learning Community has identified quarterly benchmarks for each grade level so that teachers can know if their students are on track to meet the national standard in reading by the end of the year. Teachers learn how to analyze assessment data and use it to decide what each student needs to continue growing as a reader. This analysis informs the composition of the small, targeted Guided Reading Groups that teachers convene in their classrooms as a part of regular instruction and also informs which students might need support from a reading specialist.

Gaining National Attention

Growing Readers was presented to a national audience at the **nation’s first conference** on charter-traditional school collaboration in September of 2010.



In the Spring of 2009 our work was featured in the national journal, *Voices in Urban Education*, as an innovative example of reform based on collaboration.

4. **Rapid Response for Students Needing More Support:** We have created a Reading Safety Net system at each school for students who have fallen below the reading benchmark. Safety net groups, run by reading specialists, are dynamic – a student may be in the group for a month, a semester or throughout the year, depending on need. This support is in addition to regular classroom instruction, which means these students receive nearly twice as much small group reading instruction as their peers. All reading specialists are learning to run reading safety net groups, manage quarterly assessment periods, and analyze school-wide data. In addition, they are attending Reading Workshop trainings to facilitate collaboration between reading specialists and classroom teachers.

How is this Partnership Unique?

- The Growing Readers Initiative is one of only a few examples nationally of a deep partnership between a traditional school district and a charter school.
- It is a teacher-to-teacher, embedded professional development model – sharing practical tools that work in real urban classrooms.
- All materials and trainings are grade-specific and tailored to the needs an urban population.
- For consulting teachers the partnership offers opportunities for professional growth on a broad scale.
- The partnership is maximizing our public investment: The per pupil investment for 500 students at The Learning Community is being leveraged to reach an additional 1400 students.
- The partnership is producing rapid results within months, not years.

How Can I Learn More?

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We are grateful for support from

