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Canton City targets at-risk students with summer reading program

The Canton City School District, which had highest rate of Stark County students fail the October reading test, has taken a two-pronged approach to address the new state reading standard known as the Third Grade Reading Guarantee: The district has invested more than \$120,000 into a six-week summer intensive reading program for those students who are in danger of being held back. It also has partnered with the Stark Education Partnership to study whether the Third Grade Reading Guarantee does a better job of getting student caught up compared to the current intervention programs the district already offers.

Hundreds of Stark County third-grade students will find out next week whether they get to move on to the fourth grade this fall.

The Ohio Department of Education is expected to publicly release Tuesday the results of the Ohio Achievement Assessments that students took last spring. Included in the results will be the reading scores for the 1,600 Stark County third-grade students who scored poorly on the test last October.

Under the state law known as the Third Grade Reading Guarantee, students who do not pass the reading portion of the assessment must be held back unless they have special needs, speak English as a second language or pass an alternative exam. Students will have one final chance to take and pass the state reading test in July. The Canton City School District, which had 64 percent of its third-graders fail the October reading test, has taken a two-pronged approach to address the new reading standard: It has invested more than \$160,000 into a six-week summer intensive reading program, and it has partnered with the Stark

Education Partnership to do a nine-year-long study on whether the Third Grade Reading Guarantee does a better job of ensuring students graduate

compared to the intervention programs the district already offers.

“Is the Third Grade Guarantee making a difference come graduation? One argument we’ve made is that kids come in (to our district) behind and we work to get them caught up to grade level,” Canton City Superintendent Adrian Allison said. “Does the Third Grade Guarantee do a better job of getting the student caught up? ... I think the jury is out on that. But the ... study, we hope, will provide more clarity on that.”

Joseph Rochford, vice president of the nonprofit Stark Education Partnership, said the study, which still is in the planning stages, will track the district’s current third-grade students through their high school graduation.

“The major study on third-grade reading, called Double Jeopardy, basically says that kids are four times more likely to (drop out) than kids that do pass the Third Grade Guarantee,” Rochford said. “We feel that is not reflective of conditions in Canton City. ... We have a situation in Canton City Schools where, progressively, poverty levels have gone up but academic levels also have gone up. That’s what experts say shouldn’t be happening, but it does in Canton City.”

Rochford believes the study will show that whether a student passes the state reading test as a third-grader has no bearing on whether the student will graduate or drop out of high school. The real difference in the child’s success is Canton City’s intervention programs, he said.

“Our supposition really is that the district will have suitable interventions in place where all kids, whether they pass the initial test or not are going to graduate on time,” he said. “... The only way to prove that is if we can (study) it through graduation. Nobody else has really done that.”

READING HELP

Last week, Canton City launched a summer reading bootcamp to improve the reading skills of the students in danger of being held back as well as the help some second-grade students who will take the assessment for the first time in the fall.

“It’s intervention for third-graders and prevention for second-graders,” Allison said.

Allison said 170 students were eligible for the program, which began June 4, and 156 of them signed up.

“To me, that is a testament to the engagement of our parents and guardians who understood the critical nature and consequences of this law and made a commitment for the students to participate in this program,” Allison said.

He said some of the students may learn next week that they passed the last state reading test, and will be given the option of leaving the summer program.

“I prefer they stay,” he said. “It can’t hurt them.”

Classes for the summer school are held from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday at the Arts Academy at Summit. The district buses the students to and from the school and feeds them breakfast and lunch. Roughly three hours are set aside strictly for instruction.

Allison said the district recruited 20 of its best literacy teachers for the program, and have proposed to give the teachers an incentive if a certain percentage of the students pass the next state reading assessment in July. The higher percentage of students who pass, the higher the bonus.



PHOTO/ CANTONREP.COM / MICHAEL S. BALASH

Canton City school teacher Crystal Patterson helps students learn how to identify the main idea of a paragraph during the district’s six-week summer intensive reading program. The program aims to improve the reading skills of the students in danger of being held back due to the Third Grade Reading Guarantee and to help some second-grade students who will take the state reading assessment for the first time in the fall.

IN CLASS

On Tuesday, roughly 155 students showed up for class at the Arts Academy. Jody Ditcher, principal of the summer reading program, said each class is focusing on teaching students how to find the main concept of a passage and how to reach a conclusion using supportive details.

“We focused on the two areas they need the most practice with: Main ideas and inferences,” said Ditcher, who will be the principal at Cedar Elementary next fall.

In teacher Crystal Patterson’s classroom, six girls read passages about the solar system and learned about words with multiple meanings, such as a star in the sky versus a star athlete. Their silent reading time provided a glimpse of the struggles and successes teachers are bound to encounter during the next few weeks.

One girl, who had just finished reading the book “The Day Leo Said I Hate You” for a second time, took the quiz that tested her comprehension of the book and passed — answering every question correctly.

Excited, she high-fived Ditcher, who had been monitoring the class, and went back to the book box to dig out another to read. Ditcher said each box contains 60 age-appropriate books selected by the Stark County Library. She said the classes will get a new book box each week.

Meanwhile, another child in Patterson’s classroom, who had arrived two hours late, forgot her glasses and struggled to see the words in her book, while another student dashed through the book she was reading.

Patterson reminded the students why they were there.

“The idea is not to rush through it, the idea is to understand it,” Patterson said.

As of Thursday, Allison said, the students attending the summer program had read 489 books and more than 164,000 words.

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Tell us

Are you worried that your child may be held back due to low reading scores on the Ohio Achievement Assessment? We would like to hear from you on how the new state reading standard is affecting your family. Please contact Repository staff writer Kelli Young at 330-580-8339 or kelli.young@cantonrep.com.