

For immediate release

CONSORTIUM ON READING EXCELLENCE SEES ONGOING TEST SCORE IMPROVEMENTS IN HAWAIIAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

6/5/07, Berkeley, CA — Students at a once-struggling elementary school in Honolulu continue to make surprising gains in their reading test scores, according to the Consortium on Reading Excellence, whose staff has worked closely with the school’s teachers for the past several years. The latest score reports show that 70% of the second and third-grade students at Ala Wai Elementary School are meeting benchmarks in oral reading fluency. This is a remarkable achievement in a school where less than 20% of second and third graders met benchmarks three years ago. Based partly on this dramatic turnaround, Ala Wai’s principal, Charlotte Unni, is one of only eleven principals from Hawaii (and one of just two women) to be nominated for the prestigious Excellence in School Leadership Award. The school is also under consideration for the equally prestigious Blue Ribbon School Award.

Ala Wai’s rapid improvements are made even more noteworthy after taking a closer look at the school’s location and student body. Although its name makes it sound like it might be situated in an exotic and tropical locale, the school is actually located in a somewhat impoverished urban area, not far from the Hawaii Convention Center. High-rise apartment buildings are home to most of the school’s 500 students, more than half of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. “Diverse” best describes the students themselves, who do not fall readily into any easy categories. More than a quarter describe themselves as of “other” descent on school surveys and they report that more than 20 different languages are spoken at home. This diversity provides additional challenges to the school’s 33 teachers and results in a English Language Learner program that enrolls more than a third of the school’s students.

Reading Scores Skyrocket

Reading scores of Ala Wai’s students have increased dramatically since CORE consultants began working with the school’s teachers to help them implement a new reading program. Many of the improvements came about quickly, demonstrating the effects of faithfully implementing a scientifically-based curriculum—and paying close attention to differentiating student instruction based on formative assessments. In three years, from the spring of 2003 to the spring of 2006, students’ scores on individual reading measures (tested by DIBELS, the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills) rose as much as 60%.

The lead consultant for CORE, Nancy McGivney, who visited the school seventeen times in its first year of implementing the new curriculum, credits the enthusiasm and professionalism of the school’s teachers for their students’ successes and the building leadership’s commitment. She

says that the teachers “embraced the new curriculum and the new ways of teaching that it required.” She adds that “the teachers formed strong collaborative teams and quickly learned how to analyze the data” provided by test scores. This, she says, contributed to rapid skills gains by students. “The teachers have institutionalized the progress monitoring of students, which enables them to teach to the specific needs of every student.” She mentions, too, the importance of having a reading coach on the staff. Laurie Wong, who is Ala Wai’s reading coach, receives McGivney’s highest praise. “She has really made this new program work,” she says.

CORE Given Credit

For her part, Charlotte Unni, the principal, praises McGivney’s work. “She was professional, knowledgeable in the curriculum and in the change process, and skilled at working with all learning levels. She worked well with administrators and teacher leaders, pushing at the right time. We would not have been able to make the progress we did without the guidance and support from our CORE consultant.”

McGivney’s work at Ala Wai came to an end at the close of the 2005-06 year, which was the final year of CORE’s three-year contract. However, she is now working with another elementary school in Hawaii and recently stopped by Ala Wai during a four-hour layover at Honolulu’s airport. She was literally embraced by teachers and staff, who showered her with leis and gave her gifts of tea and macadamia nuts and even a school recipe book. “They brought out their students’ latest score reports and showed me how they just kept getting better. They were so appreciative of everything I had done for them. But I told them again and again that they were the ones who had made the program work. They were so enthusiastic. It’s nice to see how their hard work has paid off. And now they’re doing it completely on their own. I have to admit, it made my day!”

About CORE

Bill Honig, President and former California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, founded CORE in 1995. CORE serves as an advisor to K-12 schools, school districts, and states on the implementation of literacy instruction validated by scientifically-based reading research. Through technical advice, professional development, and onsite implementation support, the company builds the capacity of its clients to achieve sustained literacy achievement.

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