

SUCCESS STORY

Sangaree Elementary Provides Equity in Reading Instruction with Direct Instruction

Overview

Sangaree Elementary is a Title 1 school located in Berkeley County—the third fastest-growing county in South Carolina and home to branches of several major companies, including Google, Volvo, BMW, and Boeing. Employees come from all over the world to work in the county, directly contributing to the diverse student population in its district’s schools, including Sangaree Elementary.

Sangaree Elementary students come from a wide range of backgrounds with varying language skills, so it is critical for school leaders to support instructional equity across all grades. Sangaree Elementary does this by using Direct Instruction (DI) programs *Language for Learning*® and *Reading Mastery*® to help ensure strong reading skills and social and emotional learning for its PreK–2 students.

Implementation

Sangaree Elementary is unique in that it only serves students up to second grade. Starting in third grade, students are moved to Sangaree Intermediate (grades 3–5), which shares the same campus. This arrangement provides an opportunity for teachers to really focus on certain age groups of students, but in years past, Sangaree Elementary struggled with its reading scores.

DISTRICT INFORMATION



Name:
Sangaree Elementary

Location:
Summerville, South Carolina

Grades:
PreK–2

“When I first got here six years ago, our principal had just introduced a new intervention program,” recalled Ginger McCoy, Title 1 facilitator at Sangaree Elementary. “At that time, we had nearly 200 students who qualified for reading intervention, and even though retired teachers were coming in to help, after two years, there was still no growth. Only three or four students were released from intervention support. It became painfully clear we needed something else.”

Instructional Coach Lauren Dillard began work at Sangaree Elementary during the 2014–15 school year, which was a year of transition at the school. The principal, who had been there for 16 years, was departing just as the need for better intervention reached its peak.

“In the past, the focus was on traditional teaching without innovative or challenging thinking, and it wasn’t working,” said Dillard. “It was an all-hands-on-deck situation because 191 of our first- and second-grade students needed reading intervention, and we only had 70 spots. That’s when we started looking for new approaches.”

One of Dillard’s friends was using *Reading Mastery* with success at a nearby school, so Dillard and other teachers decided to investigate. McCoy knew they would need to use Title 1 funds to get the program, so she, too, began looking at the data and building a case. It took some time to get their new intervention plan approved by all department heads, but by the next summer, Sangaree Elementary was beginning its Direct Instruction methodology training.

In 2015, Barbara Webber came in as the new Principal at Sangaree Elementary to implement the schoolwide intervention. She had no previous experience with DI, but she felt supported by the Direct Instruction implementation coach and the district.

“The first time I saw someone teach *Reading Mastery*, it was an out-of-body experience—in a good way!” Webber said. “Everything is there in the materials and the teaching manual, so it made me comfortable.”

Many of the educators at Sangaree Elementary, including Cleovonne Johnson—who has been a kindergarten assistant at the school for 12 years, were eager for the change. “The first year was a little rough, but we were open to the new program,” she recalled. “The training familiarized us with the program, and we knew exactly what to do and how to get results. It was wonderful to see those little babies improve so fast, even though they started off knowing nothing.”

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–Lauren Dillard
Instructional Coach
Sangaree Elementary

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Results

In addition to all kindergartners receiving Direct Instruction as foundational learning, 58 percent of first and second graders (every child below grade level) were also placed in DI reading intervention.

DI time, referred to as STAR (Students and Teachers Are Reading) time, occurred for the first 45 minutes of the day, five days a week.

Sangaree Elementary students began to show progress right away. Today, after three years of using the programs, only 23 percent of first- and second-graders are in intervention, and retention rates have dropped dramatically.

Sangaree Elementary Reading Intervention Retention Rates Per School Year (Grades K–2)	
2014–2015	34 retentions
2015–2016	32 retentions
2016–2017	11 retentions
2017–2018	8 retentions

“As an intervention program for first and second-graders, *Reading Mastery* has had an impact on their readiness to move on,” said Principal Webber. “Three years ago, 67 percent of students starting third grade at our sister school were below grade level. Last year, only 32 percent were below.”

Johnson appreciates the assessments in *Reading Mastery* that allow her to see exactly which sounds and letters her kindergarten students already know, so she can quickly get them up to speed and raise their levels of confidence.

“*Reading Mastery* is universal,” said Johnson. “It doesn’t matter what a child’s background is. If they are ahead, a little below, or on-level, they will gain skills and confidence.”

Theresa Denholm, a second-grade teacher at Sangaree, previously taught DI when she was a kindergarten teacher. She noted the benefits of having data right at everyone’s fingertips and said that even classroom assistants now know how to use it to understand what students need.

“Before *Reading Mastery*, we were very frustrated because students were coming in with fewer and fewer skills, and we were always being asked to do more,” Denholm said. “Now we have data that tells us, ‘in this lesson, this child had a given number of errors,’ and we know exactly what to do. It doesn’t matter who is teaching because we all speak a common language, so everyone can give it their best.”

Student Equity

In a diverse school like Sangaree Elementary, equity is a big priority. *Language for Learning* and *Reading Mastery* are designed to engage all students so that everyone can feel successful.

Denholm believes the common language and techniques that make teachers successful with Direct Instruction is also what supports the creation of an equitable curriculum. She likes that *Reading Mastery* offers instruction on how to learn by providing directions such as “sit tall” and “talk big.” Such rules give students confidence and can improve their social and emotional skills. Denholm noted that *Reading Mastery* also challenges children who are high achievers and allows them to fast-cycle their reading levels as needed.

For students who may benefit from additional support with verbal skill development or are first acquisition English language learners (ELL), Sangaree Elementary uses *Language for Learning* to teach common vocabulary before moving them to *Reading Mastery*.

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–Barbara Webber

Principal

Sangaree Elementary School

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“*Language for Learning* is awesome for English language learners, and also for those with a low vocabulary who can’t answer basic who, what, where, when, and why questions,” Denholm said. “This program gives them the vocabulary to answer questions about the stories they read.”

Dillard said, as an instructional coach, she has seen the mindset of teachers change from thinking a child may fail to knowing that there is backup and there is something they can do to help every child succeed. This approach ensures they are tending to the whole child because when a child’s social and emotional needs are met, they perform better academically.

“With Direct Instruction, kids know exactly what they are good at and what they need to work on,” said Dillard. “The structure of DI provides consistency from kindergarten and beyond because the rules and signals of the program don’t change. When kiddos aren’t wondering what comes next, they feel safe and can learn.”

Everyone involved with DI at Sangaree Elementary enjoys seeing students who may have dreaded reading now dive into the book bin with excitement.

“*Reading Mastery* gives students of all levels the attack skills they need to attempt a new book,

even if it is a stretch for them,” said Dillard. “It becomes about what they can do, and not what they can’t.”

Principal Webber remembered a third-grader who had been homeschooled and couldn’t read or write his name when he came to Sangaree Elementary. Teachers couldn’t even understand him when he asked to use the bathroom.

“We put him in the K–1 group, and it was exactly what he needed,” Webber said. “In six months, he gained a year and a half of learning, and instead of just crying as he did in the beginning, he learned to share his thoughts and felt like a part of the class.”

The Future

When asked if Sangaree Elementary will continue to use *Reading Mastery* and *Language for Learning*, Principal Webber was adamant about keeping the programs. “If we have to, we will sell donuts to get the renewable materials and training,” she joked.

“I trust Direct Instruction. It is not a gimmick. It is a tried and true practice with research behind it, and it has been our answer for continual progression.”

McCoy agreed, “We will do it until we work ourselves out of intervention. That’s the goal.”



About *Language for Learning*

Language for Learning is a comprehensive oral language program that teaches essential concepts and skills to beginning ELL and elementary students, so they can learn the words, concepts, and statements important to both speaking and writing the English language. The program provides carefully sequenced lessons to help students learn vocabulary commonly used by teachers and in instructional materials, and it introduces different sentence forms that enable children to ask and answer questions and follow instructions.

About *Reading Mastery*

Used in thousands of schools across the country, *Reading Mastery* has been a successful reading intervention program with a wide range of students, including significantly at-risk populations, for more than 35 years. *Reading Mastery* explicitly teaches phonemic awareness and sound-letter correspondence, word and passage reading, vocabulary development, comprehension, and building oral reading fluency.

DIRECT
INSTRUCTION



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