

## SUCCESS STORY

# National Blue Ribbon School, Hellgate Intermediate, Succeeds With Direct Instruction and *Reading Mastery*®

### Overview

Hellgate Elementary, Montana's largest, independent elementary school district, is located on the outskirts of Missoula, in western Montana. Built in 1869 as a school for 16 farm kids, Hellgate now encompasses three school buildings serving more than 1,500 students in grades K–8. Over the last eight years, the district has made great strides through its commitment to a Direct Instruction-based curriculum. In fact, Hellgate Intermediate, the school serving grades 3–5, was recently recognized as a 2015 National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence for Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing.

“Direct Instruction has been huge across the board, whether for academically challenged students or for those who are advanced,” said superintendent Doug Reisig. “The boat has risen for all of our kids.”

### DISTRICT INFORMATION



**Name:**

Hellgate Intermediate School

**Location:**

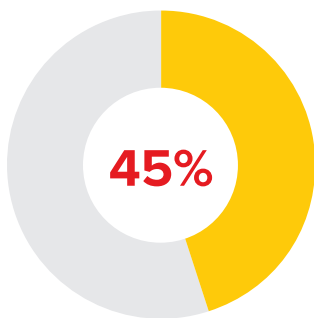
Missoula, Montana

**Grades:**

3–5

## The Challenge

In 2015, 45 percent of Hellgate Intermediate students qualified for free or reduced lunch—five percentage points higher than the state average. This growing school has done an outstanding job of overcoming its unique challenges. Reisig still sees opportunities for improvement, and he sees *Reading Mastery*® as the key to meeting them. “*Reading Mastery* addresses pockets of learning that kids may have missed and helps them progress along with their classmates, so they all reach the benchmarks,” he said.



**Percentage of Hellgate students qualified for free or reduced lunch.**

## Implementation

Hellgate Elementary implemented Direct Instruction in its classrooms in 2008 after failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on student academic performance targets mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act. After researching its options, the district chose *Reading Mastery*, a Direct Instruction program. Then, it partnered with Educational Resources, Inc. to train and support its teaching staff through the transition. *Reading Mastery* was initially introduced for grades K–5 and later extended to grades 6–8.

Fourth-grade teacher Kacey Criswell remembers the impact the transition had in her classroom. “The program we had been using was fun, but kids who struggled needed more,” said Criswell. “*Reading Mastery* repeated the lesson until everyone caught on. Confidence improved, I saw smiles on faces, and reading no longer got a sigh.”

Renee Isono, who has taught at Hellgate Intermediate for 25 years, also sees value in the repetition built into Direct Instruction lessons. Simply put, it helps her get results. “Of course, it can be boring for us,” she said. “We can read. But it makes the kids feel successful.”

Isono has noticed a shift in her students’ attitude about reading. “This program works,” she said. “I had kids who were reluctant readers because they had never been successful before. Suddenly, they wanted to know which story we would be reading that day.”

## Student Engagement

Direct Instruction revolves around teacher-student interactions. Fifth-grade teacher Nita Kattell has devised a way to make *Reading Mastery* even more engaging and relevant for her class. She uses the fifth-grade *Reading Mastery* decoding program with the fourth-grade *Reading Mastery* spelling component to help cement the rules for kids who are learning to sound out words.

“I like that you can follow the script but still add to it or attack things a different way if you need to,” said Kattell. “It is a really flexible program once you get the rhythm down.”

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*Reading Mastery addresses pockets of learning that kids may have missed and helps them progress along with their classmates, so they all reach the benchmarks.*

**–Doug Reisig**  
Superintendent  
Hellgate Elementary

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Isono agrees. “When you do *Reading Mastery*, everyone is learning the same skill, but you can add to and pull in students’ individual strengths. For instance, you can assign a complementary novel for faster kids,” she said. “The big goal is to help all of our kids read faster without sacrificing fluency. *Reading Mastery* lets us do that.”

According to Criswell, *Reading Mastery* stories are engaging for students at all learning levels. “We recently read a selection about gods and goddesses,” she said. “And it was really dramatic, exciting information for my students. That engagement—seeing that light bulb go on—is why you get into teaching.”

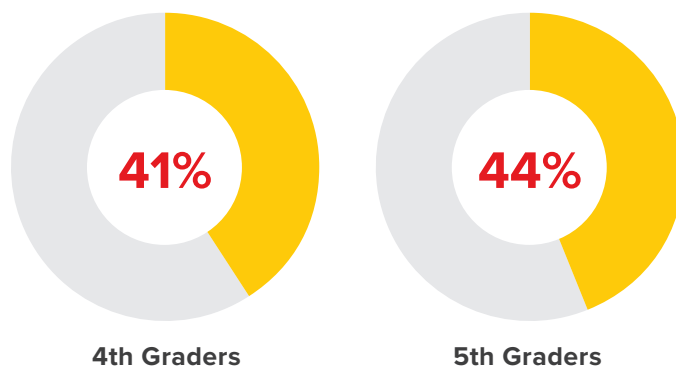
## Results

Reisig looks at the numbers every day to see how his district can improve on past successes. He’s happy about what he sees. In 2008, just 41 percent of Hellgate’s fourth-grade students and 44 percent of its fifth-grade students tested proficient and above in reading. In 2013, the last time students were assessed, those numbers had increased to 72 percent and 80 percent, respectively.

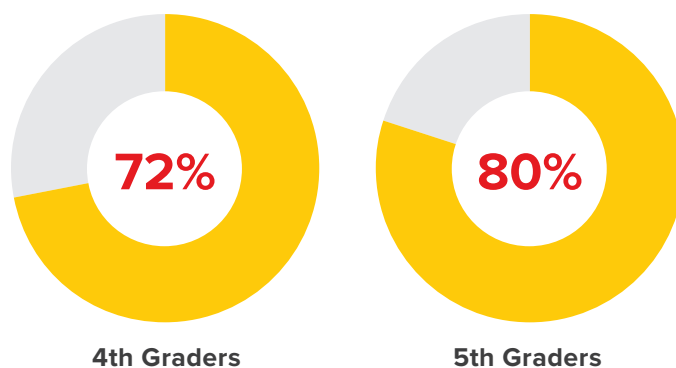
Reisig believes Direct Instruction programs like *Reading Mastery* have made a strong impact at Hellgate because everyone is committed to them. “We are an independent elementary school, and Direct Instruction is part of our culture,” he said. “That means professional development is ongoing and sustainable, and our teachers feel there is always room for improvement.”

Isono said the payoff is seeing those results come to life in her classroom. “In November, my students may be reading 50 wpm when the goal is 110 wpm,” she said. “When they start to reach about 90 wpm, they get excited. Their parents get excited. I start hearing, ‘They can read now!’ and the kids want longer stories. That is success.”

## 2008 Student Proficiency in Reading



## 2013 Student Proficiency in Reading



## The Future

Most of the teachers at Hellgate Elementary agree with Kattell when she says, “I think Direct Instruction is a godsend. It gives us a foundation we can add to, so by fifth grade, our kids are done learning to read and can start reading to learn.” Reisig is aware there is still work to be done. “If you look at all of our students in one group, 90 percent are at benchmark or proficient at reading. Ten percent still aren’t there, so we need to shore them up. They are all our kids, and we have an obligation to help them,” he said.

Clevenger, principal of Hellgate Intermediate, is extremely proud of the honor his school has received. But he knows that Direct Instruction implementation is a work in progress. It will take a focused effort to keep the momentum going.



That means maintaining schoolwide enthusiasm and fine-tuning the curriculum to ensure it is effective for every student.

Clevenger has set his sights on new achievements. “We work really hard for Building 3–5 because we’re preparing those kids to be successful in junior high,” he said. “But our five-year goal is to receive the Blue Ribbon for Overall Academic Achievement at Hellgate Elementary.”

If past successes are any indication, that goal is well within reach.

### **About Reading Mastery**

*Reading Mastery* is a Direct Instruction program for grades K–5 designed to provide explicit, systematic instruction in English language reading. Program materials offer support for modeling new content, providing guided practice, offering individualized practice, and applying skills.

**DIRECT**  
INSTRUCTION



To learn more about McGraw Hill Direct Instruction programs, please visit:  
[mheonline.com/directinstruction](http://mheonline.com/directinstruction)