

Education

How to Succeed in Education by Really, Really Trying

In the course of researching the multi-issue *Oregon's Future* Education Forum we have encountered extraordinary educators succeeding despite the ideological and political fights surrounding K-12 education. Their stories are inspirational as well as practical. We have chosen to profile for you 4 award-winning programs with diverse approaches, populations, and age ranges but you will see there are commonalities that can improve the education of all Oregon's children.

The Education Glossary starts on page 27—use it to better understand the language of the education world.

Without Exception and Without Excuse

Ball Elementary School

An interview with Jane Fielding, Instructional Specialist
Interviewed by Jay Hutchins, Executive Editor

Ball Elementary is a school-wide Title I school. Could you tell me briefly what that means?

Fielding: School-wide Title I means that we have a written school improvement plan to address the needs of all the groups of children. Basically, all supplemental services are open to all students. For example, we no longer compartmentalize special-education students. When we identify someone with a special-ed need we put that child with other children who have the same instructional needs and form a group, but they are not identified as special education.

Where does the funding for the supplemental services and other programs come from?



Ball Elementary School was named for John Ball, the first school teacher in the Pacific Northwest. It was built in 1949, like many Vanport vintage schools it was an "efficient" wood frame structure.

Fielding: Title I and special education are supported federally. We have used desegregation money. The state controls much of the funding, allocating money through the district—which allocates it to the schools. Locally we have received money from the Multnomah County Income Tax (ITAX) and local option funds.

Please describe the demographics at Ball Elementary and the success you have had.

► **Fielding:** Our largest group right now is our Hispanic families and I believe that's about 32 percent. After that are African Americans at about 30 percent, European Americans are about 26 percent, and the rest is made up of Asians, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. The unifying feature is that 85.6 percent of our children are on free and reduced-fee lunch, meaning they are from low-income families.

This year at 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade 100 percent of the students met reading benchmarks. For math 100 percent of the 3rd and 4th graders met benchmarks and 97 percent of 5th graders.

In the 2004-05 school year, we were recognized with an Excellence in Education Award from the Portland Public Schools Foundation for the achievement of our intact populations—students who had been at Ball for 3 years.

When did your students start meeting benchmarks the way they are now?

Fielding: It's been a steady climb. When we began designing our literacy program, only 35 percent of our students were at benchmark. This was a real problem because academic success is always connected to reading ability. Our students have always demonstrated stronger math skills, but one year we had a dip in our scores. That was the year we implemented the new Investigations math program. Everybody needed a chance to learn it. Teachers needed time to learn the new instructional format and students needed time to learn foundation skills that may not have been emphasized by the previous curriculum.

Tell me about Investigations.

Fielding: Investigations is a commercial program. We had to tailor it for our district and our students. I mentioned that we had a dip in

our scores when we first implemented this program. One of the reasons our students didn't do as well initially was the sequencing of the units. We were following the prescribed units as they came up and discovered that measurement skills were not addressed until after the test was taken. Measurement is an area that we know our students have difficulty with. So sometimes it's **when** you teach something, not **whether** you teach something.

► **The unifying feature is that 85.6 percent of our children are on free and reduced-fee lunch... This year at 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade 100 percent of the students met reading benchmarks.**

Is Investigations an elementary school version of Connected Math?

Fielding: Yes, it is part of the elementary school curriculum that Portland Public Schools adopted. It provides children not just with the ability to do math but to understand math concepts strongly and deeply.

What you have done is remarkable.

However, some people are very concerned about basing student success on testing. Tell me more about how you use testing.

Fielding: We use the computerized version of the test, TESA. Students have two opportunities to pass benchmarks. Many of our students this year passed it on the first opportunity. But the nice part is that by testing on computers you get your score back as soon as you complete the test. And shortly thereafter, you get scores for the strands. This year we are also tracking the amount of time it takes the students to take the test. We feel that if a student can finish the test in one session they

have stronger skills than students that take two sessions. This additional information let's us know more about what kind of instruction and support a child needs.

Please tell me about strands.

What are they?

Fielding: The word *strand* is used to describe how we break down a subject such as reading or math. The strands in the *Reading & Literature Knowledge & Skills Test* are word meaning, locating information, literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, evaluative comprehension, and literary elements and devices.

Two years ago, the upper grade teachers met before school started and looked at the data for all the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students. We evaluated each child's strengths and weaknesses so we could design an individual emphasis for each of them as we moved them through the next year. Just as important, we looked for instructional weaknesses. When we looked at the math assessment by strand, we found that our students needed stronger skills in the areas of measurement and probability. So we used that information to take a good look at what we were teaching, how we were teaching, and where the classes needed more assistance.

Do you level the classes to make all this easier?

Fielding: We usually don't mix students way up and down the grade levels, but through testing those with similar educational needs are brought together in groups. These students may go to regular classes for part of the day, to supplemental services, and then back into the classroom. There they receive teacher support that generalizes the special learning so the student can apply it in the general education classroom environment.

Obviously, at Ball a lot of effort goes toward not leaving any child behind. I do hear you saying that you don't level classes but I think you are being overly careful about the language. Am I right?

Fielding: People get so upset if you use the term leveling. Some think this means you're tracking children and they're never going to get where they need to be. We are vigilant about putting them in a group that meets their needs—and we do this by testing. The goal is

to improve student skills as soon as possible. The students are never leveled and left there; it's very fluid. They move at least quarterly, and frequently more often than that.

This includes children that are accelerated and the children in the middle?

Fielding: We look at the children in the middle, too, because when they hit a road-block, or make a big jump, their needs must be addressed as well. We look at all children, no matter where they are placed.

What if a student is exceptionally good at reading?

Fielding: Like the rest of our students they would be taught at their level. For instance, we have some 3rd graders who have been accelerated since 1st grade, however, they have been doing the rest of their work in their regular grade. We've also grouped 4th and 5th graders with strong reading skills for accelerated instruction through novel studies, a program which is similar to a book club.

You don't seem particularly worried about adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements and the penalties that go along with not meeting AYP under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Fielding: We're ok there. But while I have been talking, I've been thinking that it sounds like we're teaching to the test, and we are not. We use testing to tell us what we have to do to make sure a student is going to be well-educated when they leave us, and whether they have foundation skills to be successful at the next level.

One of the things that we're working really hard on right now with our students in reading is fluency. That's not yet officially tested on the benchmark, but research shows us that if you can't read fluently, you can't direct enough of your cognitive power to comprehension.

Could you define fluency for me and how it fits into the elements of learning to read?

Fielding: Fluency is reading aloud at a rate that matches the normal speech rate, it also includes grouping words in meaningful phrases which is called prosody. Grouping words helps people with comprehension.

►There used to be an issue—that NCLB now addresses—if you had a child you didn't think could meet the benchmark, you could choose not to test that child. It was a statistics game used by some schools, but that wasn't fair to those students.

Using information on fluency, benchmarks, and strands we can see where our students need more help. Perhaps one of the reasons we can feel comfortable about doing all this is that we *are* meeting AYP. We have a history of good attendance. People get their children to school here. We don't exclude students from testing.

What do you mean you don't exclude children from testing?

►**Fielding:** There used to be an issue—that NCLB now addresses—if you had a child you didn't think could meet the benchmark, you could choose not to test that child. It was a statistics game used by some schools, but that wasn't fair to those students. Assessments should be used to know what and how we need to teach and to improve our instruction. For many years, Ball has taken assessment very seriously, particularly in the primary grades, even before the district started doing it. (NCLB now requires all at risk students to be tested — Ed.)

What are some of the programs you use?

Fielding: We use the district adopted math programs, Investigations and Everyday Counts.

Our core reading program is Open Court. Every student, 1st through 5th, receives instruction using these materials. The core program for Kindergarten is Read Well K, which includes whole class and small group instruction. We use Read Well 1 in 1st and 2nd grade to support students who are having difficulty learning to read.

Read Well 1 is a beginning reading program designed for 1st grade students that also works well for 2nd and 3rd grade students who struggle with reading. We use the small-group instruction from the program for this level.

►We have had a tendency to look for the silver bullet, but have come to understand that we will always need to keep looking for answers. We have a large menu of programs and materials that we match to student needs.

The Portland Public School Foundation's Excellence in Education Award

In 2005, the Foundation focused on high performing schools and the school community it takes to make each student successful, recognizing schools that have shown significant progress in raising student achievement and closing the achievement gap. These schools have been chosen through a careful review of student achievement data for all schools where 50% or more of the students are from low-income families. The 2005 Excellence in Education Trail Blazer Awards for High Performing Schools were awarded to:

Clark Elementary School
and
Ball Elementary School

I think our readers want to know how you do this. How do you meet benchmarks so successfully with so many students who are potentially at risk?

Fielding: Well, I think it's important to say that students who meet the benchmarks easily cross all socio-economic statuses. This challenges the usual assumption that children from a higher economic status automatically are able to meet benchmarks more easily because they have experiences and opportunities that many children from a lower socio-economic status may not have had. Stimulation at home may make it easier for you to be successful in school, but it's not required. Every child can be taught and it is our job to teach them.

Many people express concerns about students developing their comprehension with many of the programs you mention. How do you address this concern?

Fielding: The Read Well program provides direct explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, blending, and comprehension. An example of how we build comprehension in students who may be challenged is through a clever idea in the Read Well program called duet stories. In a duet story students are responsible for reading the words in large print, the ones they will be successful with, while the teacher fills in the story by reading the words in small print. Concepts such as metamorphosis in butterflies are introduced and this creates background for comprehension. Read Well matches our focus on assessing, placing students with like needs in flexible groups, instructing for mastery of skills, and ongoing assessment.

Understanding what you read is the goal of reading, but you can't understand what you can't read. We work on decoding which is essentially the reading of words and comprehension at all levels, Kindergarten through 5th grade. Literacy is the gate-keeping skill. Without strong reading skills a person's options will always be limited.

Would you like to say more about the reading program?

Fielding: I would like to mention that researchers believe that students who aren't on grade level by the end of first grade may never read at grade level. Early reading success

is perceived to be a critical factor for future success. We think that if we have done our job correctly at the elementary level, middle schools should not have to teach basic reading instruction as they have to now.

Is this why Vicki Phillip, the Portland Schools Superintendent, is putting such strong emphasis on early childhood education?

Fielding: I'm sure it is one of the reasons. At Ball, we have put a lot of resources into our Kindergarten and 1st grade to assure that as many students as possible meet the early benchmarks.

Tell me about the leadership for the exceptional progress at Ball Elementary.

Fielding: Principal Tamala Newsome has helped us stay focused on our school improvement goals. Literacy has been our targeted area. She has provided the entire staff—teachers and assistants—with access to quality staff development, both school-based and from outside sources. She makes sure that we have instructional resources and access to district resources as well.

►We have had a tendency to look for the silver bullet, but have come to understand that we will always need to keep looking for answers.

Where else does the leadership come from at Ball Elementary besides Principal Newsome?

Fielding: It comes from a shared responsibility for each child's success. Six years ago teachers did their own thing, without much concern for the previous or next grade. Then, Mrs. Newsome had us spend time collaborating between grade levels. The difference this made was to inform teachers at every grade

level about the challenges students faced at the previous level and the skills students needed to succeed at the next level.

We also have a literacy team that designs and monitors programs for our most at risk students. We believe that children should be taught what they need every day.

Please give some examples of the program-related training your teachers receive.

Fielding: Our staff benefits from a variety of training sources. Teachers have funds available to attend workshops that meet their continuing education needs. Mrs. Newsome makes sure we have district supported training provided by TOSAs (Teachers On Special Assignments) who are experts in their area. This year, our intermediate team received some excellent training for teaching written expression which we hope to expand to the whole staff.

One very successful school-based training focus was Dr. Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. We spent 2 years focused on her work. As a staff we came to understand that the worlds of school and work are based on middle class values and assumptions. People who have grown up in generational poverty do not necessarily share those assumptions and values. This work has helped us develop better relationships with many of our students and community members.

Are there any other programs that have helped address the needs of your demographic population?

Fielding: Mrs. Newsome has built an arts program at Ball with music, art, and drama. Drama and music have been used to decrease class sizes, so that classroom teachers have only half of their class at a time. We know that class size makes a difference. We know that individual attention makes a difference. Our arts program is critical to this community because many of our students would not have the chance to experience music and drama outside of the school. Our arts program has addressed an important equity issue and helped us engage some reluctant students in school.

How has the funding crises affected your overall program at Ball?

Fielding: All of our funding has been reduced for next year, so we will have to redesign our

supplemental services to match our staffing. The local option and desegregation funds are also gone. We will have only one educational assistant, who will be shared at the Kindergarten level. The members of our staff who worked in that capacity provided both direct instruction and classroom support in the primary grades. They will be missed! At this point there will be no music and only a half-time drama program at Ball next year.

What would you like to say to end this interview?

Fielding: Even if we had 100 percent of our children meeting benchmarks in first grade, we would still continue to work on fluency, comprehension, and strengthening language skills. Because meeting benchmarks is not enough, is it? Children need to be challenged and they need to be provided with the skills to excel.

What we've done at Ball—as our Principal, Tamala Newsome says—is put children first. We expect every child without exception and without excuse to make progress and to make good progress.

Jane Fielding has a Masters of Science in Education and Administrators certificate from Portland State University. Jane has been teaching for 25 years in elementary education beginning her career as a para-professional (educational assistant). Jane has worked several positions in special education including, one year as a Teacher on Special Assignment for special education administration, a self-contained classroom special ed. resource center, and as a Consulting Teacher.



The present Hosford was built in 1924 replacing the 1916 Hosford school, originally known as Madone Heights School. It was designed by architect Edward A. Miller. It was named for the Rev. Chauncey O Hosford (1820-1911). He was a Methodist minister and school teacher who owned 200 acres on what is now Mount Tabor.

Rigorous Curriculum at All Levels

Hosford Middle School

An interview with Melissa Sandven, Principal
Interviewed by Jay Hutchins, Executive Editor

Hosford Middle School in SE Portland was recently recognized by the Oregon Department of Education as one of fifteen schools showing progress toward closing the achievement gap. What unique approach has Hosford used that has made a difference?

Sandven: Our most recent state assessment, just completed this spring, is our best yet. Around 80 percent of our students are meeting benchmarks. The main reason for our recognition is that our at-risk groups are doing much better than the state average

Who are the at-risk groups?

► **Sandven:** There are different groups of students who traditionally do not perform as well as the majority of our population on standardized tests. These groups are referred to as subgroups under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. Examples are economically disadvantaged kids, English language learners (ELL), Hispanics, African-American, and learning disabled. Our ELL students include Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Ukrainian students—there are up to 15 different languages

spoken in the homes of our students. As you know, to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards under NCLB, test scores for all of our kids are included. The reason that some schools around the state don't meet AYP is due to the progress of their at-risk groups. All this is important because traditionally schools have not had the same level of expectations for these groups of students.

AYP is based on each individual state's standards and the state benchmarks or grade standards determine whether or not you've met the federal AYP?