

Knowing Their Names

Vernon Elementary School

An interview with Kathy Hagerty, Instructional Specialist
Interviewed by Jay Hutchins, Executive Editor

Please give me some demographics for Vernon Elementary School.

Hagerty: We are an inner city school of 400 students in Northeast Portland with pre-K through 5th grade. We have about an 87 percent free or reduced lunch population and about 65 kids who are English Language Learners (ELL).

How are your students meeting benchmarks?

Hagerty: The preliminary scores I just put together for this year show that for reading, over 90 percent of our kids are meeting or exceeding benchmarks; for math, over 90 percent; and for science, close to 85 percent are meeting or exceeding benchmarks.

Please give us a little history of the school.

► **Hagerty:** In 1996-1997, we were identified as a crisis school by the neighborhood's population, which included many of the African-American leaders in the city. At the time, Jefferson High School, Humboldt School, and Vernon in Northeast Portland were being threatened with reconstitution. The teachers here at the time truly believed we could make a change and we decided as a school to look at programs and the execution of instruction. We really looked at what staff could do to make things different. We had strong Title I support from the school district office and they suggested that I look at the *Success for All* (SFA) program.

By whose authority would you be reconstituted, meaning that the staff would be replaced?

Hagerty: Jack Bierwirth, superintendent at the time, and the school board were talking of reconstituting Vernon at the same time Humboldt and Jefferson were reconstituted

What programs were you using at the time?

Hagerty: Everyone did their own thing—for teaching reading some people were still using whole language, some used phonics, and some were using Reading Recovery strategies. This inconsistency seemed to be part of our problem. We didn't have solid reading instruction happening in every classroom. Some teachers felt that they lacked essential skills to teach



The present Vernon School designed by district architect George H. Jones was built in 1931, replacing a 1907 wood frame school, designed by prior district architect, T.J. Jones, George's father.

beginning readers. We often had 4th and 5th grade students who were not reading even at pre-primer first grade reading levels. We decided that we needed to do something, so I went to look at schools in California that were using the SFA program, and another team of teachers went to schools in Washington.

Did you get a Title I grant to do this traveling?

Hagerty: Yes, Title I paid for me to go. Essentially what I saw in the 5 schools I visited

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in California and Washington was that regardless of where SFA was being used, the instruction looked the same. It had the same core best-practice structure in every classroom.

What do you mean by core best-practice?

Hagerty: Phonics-based instruction was being taught in every classroom. The children were learning how to decode and they were learning strategies for identifying words. So when I say best practices, I am talking phonics strategies. Teaching children strategies to overcome their inability to read, providing them with skills.

That's any good reading program. What was good about the Success for All program, that we felt would benefit us at Vernon, was that it had a structure; it had lesson plans that were already developed, that had been researched by Bob Slavin and his wife Nancy Madden. Using SFA, children learn words through the context of a story as well as through phonics. Children learn how to decode and sound things out. Children are able to say that word again when they see it—say it slow, say it fast. (*Madden and Slavin run the Success for All Foundation—they met as undergraduates and first developed their ideas about education at Reed College -Ed.*)

Is this a whole language or direct instruction approach?

Hagerty: It is a direct instruction approach. It provides an experience with literature that allows students to learn decoding, comprehension, vocabulary, and expressive language. There is also a fluency component. The SFA program evolves as research results become available and the staff updates the schools that are part of the program. *(Please see Jane Fielding's interview for more on fluency—Ed)*

Was there resistance to these changes?

Hagerty: At the time the ESL (English as a Second Language) department felt that SFA was too structured for our second language population. But this has really proven to not be a problem. Many of our English language learners are some of our better readers. It was eight years ago that the staff decided to buy into the Success for All program.

Who else did the program help?

Hagerty: We have found that what's good for an ESL student is equally good for any child who's lacking vocabulary and development. Many of our children do not come into school with a very strong vocabulary. We call them low language learners.

Where did the leadership for this move into the future come from?

Hagerty: I've got to say that along with Lessie Houston, principal at that time, I was a part of that, and Carolyn Moilenan, who was the Title I Director in the district at the time, was highly encouraging. I knew Carolyn because I was the Title I coordinator at Vernon. I expressed my concerns about the curriculum to her. So the year Jefferson High School and Humboldt schools were reconstituted, Vernon went ahead and adopted the Success for All program. We did lose some teachers when we brought it on, because they didn't like the structure. And that was fine because the school district found other places for them.

Why do you think this program works?

► **Hagerty:** I think any research-based reading program works if the staff provides consistency in instruction. I talked a little earlier about best-practices. It doesn't make

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any difference what the reading program is, it's the consistency of instruction and the amount of time allowed for instruction. We happen to have a 90-minute uninterrupted block of time daily for our kids. We don't do anything else in that time. We have reading five days a week, 90 minutes every day.

Does the Success for All program level the kids by ability?

Hagerty: Yes, SFA is an ability-based program. At the same time every day, all students go to their reading class within their ability group. Everyone who's teaching here at Vernon School teaches a reading group so during reading time some of our groups are very small, maybe only six or eight, depending upon the students' needs.

Some of our reading classes will have 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade students in one class. Some classes will be 3rd and 4th, or some will be 4th and 5th. We test every eight weeks in reading, so students move to a higher level as soon as they are ready. Our philosophy has always been that we never go backwards.

We have students we are challenging at the 7th grade reading level—about 20 students.

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We try to have smaller numbers of students in each of our beginning classes—we call them roots classes—which begin reading at the 1st grade level.

So how do you determine the levels for reading instruction?

Hagerty: We actually use the Gates-MacGinitie test, which is a standard, nationally-normed test used to level students for language arts.

Please talk a little bit about what it actually tests for.

Hagerty: It tests comprehension and vocabulary and gives us a benchmark of where that child is successful, and what his or her needs are. In individual reading groups, the teachers are also checking on students' reading fluency and how are they doing on their daily work.

Do you use special supplemental programs such as DIBELS?

Hagerty: Yes, we use Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). Reading Mastery is another one that we use, I think this an excellent supplemental program, even though only a few children need the level of explicit instruction that Reading Mastery provides.

That seems to be another sign of the schools that do well; they target the issues of the students and they address them very directly.

Hagerty: Yes, at Vernon, every child in the school belongs to every teacher. That's a comment that some of our parents have made. We like it that all the teachers know our children's names. And we're able to do that by having that cross-grade level movement in the hallways with kids going to different reading teachers.

Do you level the grades in math?

► **Hagerty:** No, the only thing we level is our reading program. Leveling in reading complements the abilities of the students in the room so there is much less frustration. High-performing students want to be leveled; they want to be very successful. And never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would have boys coming and knocking on my door asking me if they could take the reading test. We test every eight weeks, but the kids were

clamoring to be tested. You know that you are making an impact if you have children asking you to test them.

Could you talk a little about testing, assessment, how it works here, and your basic philosophy about it?

Hagerty: We use the assessment to help drive the instruction. We look at the data that we get from the test scores and from the 8-week assessments. The teachers determine work effort on a child's part and homework is another big piece. But, looking at the individual daily progress is just as important as the 8-week assessment when looking at comprehension and vocabulary. Teachers look at that information to decide the level of challenge a child should experience in the next session.

We also use the state test—the online Technology-Enhanced Student Assessment (TESA)—for math and reading. We've done it in science with our 5th graders. It has been helpful because we're able to test the students three times a year using the computer lab. And we're very fortunate to have a computer lab so we can set the kids up in a quiet environment.

Did you receive special money for the computer lab?

Hagerty: No, it's something that we just banked our dollars for—we knew what we wanted. We didn't buy computers the first time around; we waited and made a plan. We have an excellent technology person here, Michael Malone.

Are you going to raise the goals you originally set for 85 percent of kids meeting benchmarks in math and reading?

Hagerty: Most likely we are. We're in the process of writing the school improvement plan. As we fine tune information, then we'll be raising that bar. But, of course you know, you raise the bar and it's a little harder to get there.

So what else are you expecting in the future? Do you have any special grants now?

Hagerty: Because a high percentage of our kids are on free or reduced lunch we are a full Title I school. We use the money for our materials—and then primarily to buy teachers to keep our class sizes low. We don't have large

classrooms. Next year will be a different story. We'll see class sizes grow up to 28 because we're losing funding. The FTE formula has been changed by the school district. In the past we have had local option money, plus we had desegregation money, and we're losing both of those pieces of funding, which fund quite a few teachers. Next year, we lose close to seven full time positions, or seven FTE, so that will have an impact. *(Please see more about FTE in Hosford School, Melissa Sandven's interview—Ed)*

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You're telling me your teacher-student ratio's going to go from 20 to 28? It sounds like it's a team effort to work out these budget issues.

Hagerty: It is a team effort. Everyone needs to know that if they are staying at Vernon, they'll have to do more.

On that upbeat note, let's move onto another subject. I understand you had some discipline issues at the school earlier on?

Hagerty: Sure. About seven years ago, problems had been escalating to the point that we had a very high burnout rate for teachers.

Was this after you implemented Success for All?

Hagerty: Yes, Linda Wakefield was the principal at that time. We called in experts to talk about discipline; they gave us a lot of theory that didn't make sense to us. So our staff got together and devised our own plan. We felt we had a reading structure that worked. I had teachers pointing out that the SFA program was really working for us in the reading classes. We had clear expectations of students, how they sat, how they behaved. We had quiet

signals that the kids responded to—and we thought why not just develop this as a school philosophy and our school discipline. So, by using the techniques we learned from *Success for All* we gained more control over the atmosphere in the school.

We now use these techniques in all of our classes; we use them in the hallway, all teachers are responsible. We have something called a self-manager program, and each month children who have an 80 percent self-manager status are rewarded.

Explain self-management.

Hagerty: Self-management means taking care of yourself so that you don't have to go to detention. One infraction constitutes a non-self-manager for that day. We allow 4, but that's it. So children know they can't have more than 4 a month.

It sounds like you've done very well. And the school feels really good. Just sitting here, the feeling of it, the way that people are directed . . . and the way the staff in the office speaks to the kids...it feels very safe and nurturing.

► **Hagerty:** It is a nice school. It's a very pleasant school. One of our biggest problems—I have to be very honest—is getting the community to take a look at us.

The larger community or the immediate community?

Hagerty: The immediate community knows what we're doing, it's the outer community. It's our young families that are moving in with the 3-year olds who say, "well I'm looking at other schools because I'm not sending my child to Vernon." We'd like to know why aren't they sending their child to Vernon. Why don't they come up and visit. And so, that's going to be one of our big public relations pushes here at Vernon, to get the word out and invite more of our growing community to come in and see what we are doing.

I have a final question for you—why are you motivated to do that?

Hagerty: Because we're proud of what we've done. We have teachers that are very proud of the Celebrating Student Success 2005 award which we received this year from the Department of Education for reducing the

achievement gap. We were one of six schools in the state to receive it.

It has certainly helped our teachers feel good about themselves. It was a real honor. I must say the teachers have been working hard. They are dedicated and they like being here.

Kathy Hagerty is a 20-year veteran teacher at Vernon.

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Celebrating Student Success Awards

Instituted in 2004, the Celebrating Student Success Award recognizes leadership within Oregon's K-12 public school system and highlights schools and school districts that have made significant progress toward closing the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students and between disadvantaged students and their peers. Each recipient receives an unrestricted \$2,000 grant award.

Stretching from one end of Oregon to the other, the 2005 recipients of the Celebrating Student Success awards

all face enormous challenges. And each has a unique formula for success. Yet despite their differences, these remarkable schools share an unshakable conviction that, given a thoughtful and rigorous plan of action and a dedicated staff of educators to carry it out, all children, regardless of their color or ethnicity or their family incomes, can excel. Profiles of recipients and finalists can be viewed at the Oregon Department of Education website (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=187>)

The 2005 Celebrating Student Success Award Recipients:

Beaver Acres Elementary, Beaverton
 Fairfield Elementary, Eugene
 Nyssa School District, Nyssa
 (one elementary school, middle school and high school)

Rocky Heights Elementary, Hermiston
 Vernon Elementary, Portland
 White City Elementary, Eagle Point

Promising Practices Award for demonstrating great potential:

Hosford Middle School, Portland

Student Success Award Finalists:

Astor Elementary, Portland
 Echo Shaw Elementary, Forest Grove
 Lake Labish Elementary, Salem-Keizer School District
 Mountain View Elementary, Eagle Point

Russell Academy of Academic Achievement,
 Parkrose School District
 West Powellhurst Elementary,
 David Douglas School District