

Cedar Rapids Community School District, IA

HEADSPROUT EARLY READING GETS KINDERGARTENERS READING

In the Cedar Rapids School District, Headsprout made the difference for struggling readers.

A diverse student population, with little experience with reading fundamentals

In July 2011, Susan Van Woert became the elementary facilitator for language arts and social studies in the Cedar Rapids Community School District in Iowa. Having been in the district for 24 years as an elementary school teacher and then as an instructional coach, Van Woert had a good sense of the responsibility she was stepping into.

Cedar Rapids School District is an urban district with 24 elementary schools and approximately 1200 students per grade level. About half their students qualify for free and reduced student lunches, and the district has a very diverse student population that collectively speaks 23 different languages.

Van Woert's role is to support the implementation of many different district initiatives as they relate to language



arts and social studies. She's "on call" regarding problems that come up with the different types of programs they have implemented, and she intervenes with struggling readers.

"In our district we have a significant English language learner population and a very high incidence of poverty—those newly living in poverty and those of generational poverty," explains Van Woert. "We have families who are trying to hold down multiple jobs, often have low paying jobs, or have educational challenges of their own. Unfortunately, this generally means there isn't a lot of time spent reading books on laps. When many of our students enter as kindergarteners, they usually have very little experience with the fundamentals of reading."

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In 2014, Learning A-Z merged Headsprout's two elementary reading products — Headsprout Early Reading and Headsprout Reading Comprehension — into one adaptive, effective, and fun K-5 online reading program. From introducing early readers to key reading fundamentals to growing reading comprehension skills for more established readers, Headsprout is the perfect resource to help children become capable and confident readers.

“ Headsprout has helped us improve as a district”

Headsprout Early Reading supports students at the youngest ages

In 2008, Van Woert was an instructional coach at Nixon Elementary – one of the elementary schools in the district. Two other schools – Polk and Hoover – were struggling with reading scores, so Cedar Rapids District purchased Headsprout Early Reading and Headsprout Reading individualized instruction.

“Early access to books and early intervention are important to helping kids learn the fundamentals of reading. Our district needed resources that could support students at the youngest ages, and Headsprout’s reading programs provided that.” After using the program at Polk and Hoover, the students were assessed for phonemic awareness, knowledge, phonics, words, and writing – and they demonstrated significant improvement.

In the summer of 2010, the district purchased Headsprout Early Reading and Headsprout Reading individualized instruction for 1200 kindergarteners across the district and other students on an as-needed basis. “Based on the earlier success with the Headsprout programs, it was a fairly quick decision,” says Van Woert. “I remember just before the school year started being pulled into training with the Headsprout representative,” said Van Woert. “Some of the students had had experience with a computer and a mouse, but some hadn’t had any, and those children needed a lot of explicit instruction.” The Cedar Rapids district hired paraprofessionals (part-time teacher’s aids) to manage and support students who wanted to participate in the program. The learning curve was steep, but they moved quickly and enrolled nearly every kindergartener across the district in the early reading program.

Each school in the district was able to design how they wanted to use the program. Some used it as part of a rotation with a literacy block, where paraprofessionals worked with students in the computer lab at literacy centers. Other schools had children work independently

with a teacher, or directly with a teacher as a small group. Today, kindergarteners in the Cedar Rapids Community School District use Headsprout Early Reading for about 25 minutes a day, four days a week.

Many variables go into district achievement, and the Cedar Rapids district is implementing continuous improvement practices using the professional learning community model. “Headsprout is just one piece of our improvement plan,” explains Van Woert, “but it’s one of the pieces that has really helped us improve as a district.”

When Van Woert was at Nixon school, part of their kindergarten assessment was to ask students to identify 21 consonant sounds, long and short vowels, and vowel pairs and digraphs. “Not many of the students had knowledge of the vowel pairs and digraphs,” she says. “But we noticed that once the students were exposed to Headsprout, there was a significant difference in the students’ overall knowledge of those sounds.”

A reading program designed for success

Van Woert adds, “Headsprout’s strengths include its animation and the balance of the games along with the reading. The program is very engaging and there are a variety of ways for students to experience the letters or blend the sounds together. Having to say the sounds out loud is a great way for them to learn. And the benchmark system, where they use checks and balances to ensure that the students can read the text before moving on, is part of what makes the program so successful.”



Says Van Woert, “Cedar Rapids’ kindergarten students are thrilled that they’re able to read at a kindergarten level now, and so much of that success has to do with Headsprout.”

Headsprout is part of Learning A-Z, a leading PreK-6 provider of online resources and tools for Reading, Writing and Science. To learn more about Learning A-Z, please visit LearningA-Z.com.

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