

Cole Elementary School, Nashville, TN

TURNING THINGS AROUND WITH HEADSPROUT READING TOOLS

Headsprout Early Reading and Headsprout Reading Comprehension individualized instruction proved to be especially helpful for ESL students at Cole Elementary.

Our students' starting line is much farther back

Cole Elementary School is one of 74 elementary schools in the Metropolitan Nashville Public School district. Cole serves some 900 students in grades Pre-K-4, and 48 percent of them are Latino. The rest are a mix of Eurasian, Kurdish, Caucasian, African American, and other nationalities. Because of the school's racial diversity, more than 60 percent of the students speak English as a second language.

The school has a 5 percent immigration rate and a 30 percent mobility rate. This means that students are constantly moving in and out of the school, which can be very disruptive in the classroom. "Housing is so cheap around our school that people move in and out fairly often," explains Chad High, Cole's principal since 2008. "The greater challenge is that the kids coming in often have a lot of social, emotional, and physical needs, and are usually way behind their peers academically."



"If school is like a race," adds High, "our students' starting line is much farther back than it is for those who are read to every day and come from two-parent homes. Only 1 out of 190 kids might know how to read when they start kindergarten here. Most don't even know the alphabet. We have to hit the ground running to get them caught up."

Despite Cole's team of dedicated and hardworking teachers, statistics have worked against them. In January of 2011, Cole Elementary was identified as one of 10 underperforming elementary schools in the district. As a result, the superintendent saw a critical need to help turn those schools around.

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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.

Web-based and it teaches children to read through a series of lessons, usually in 20-minute chunks. I had never heard of it and I was a bit skeptical, since we had tried Ramp Up to Reading without much success.”

In January of 2011, Headsprout trainers came to Cole to show the teachers how to use the product. The central office funded the purchase, along with support from Federal Title I money.

That year, Cole Elementary had a very unusual winter—they had to close the school for 12 days because of snow. High’s son was five years old at the time, and they were home together a lot. High enrolled his son in the Headsprout Early Reader program and watched him complete 35 episodes. “The more I watched him, the more I became a big believer in the program,” says High. “He would wake me up each morning and say, ‘Let’s do Headsprout!’ He thought he was playing a game, but I knew he was actually learning. It was amazing to watch his progression.”

In February, the school began preparing for the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) Achievement Test, which is given each spring. “Because we had missed so many school days, we invited 316 students to come to school on Saturdays in order to give them more chances to use Headsprout instruction. We had 205 students show up for 8 straight Saturdays. They even came during spring break.” High invited his staff to come, but told them that, unfortunately, he couldn’t pay them. He spread the word to anyone who had expressed an interest in helping the school to come tutor its students. Fifty volunteers showed up prior to the test to help Cole’s 3rd and 4th graders. “Our families



and students are so appreciative of the education they get here – that’s why they were willing to show up on weekends,” says High.

“Shocking” increase in reading proficiency rate

Even though Cole Elementary had only had Headsprout individualized instruction for a few months before the TCAP, the school improved its reading proficiency rate by 10 percent over the previous year. “That kind of increase was a shock,” says High, “given that a three percent increase is usually considered a success. Our teachers worked really hard to improve our scores, but Headsprout had a lot to do with it. In fact, all 10 schools that received Headsprout outperformed the 64 schools that didn’t, in terms of growth.”

This year, Cole Elementary purchased the Headsprout Early Reading program for its kindergarteners and first graders. “Our students use Headsprout every day,” says High. “They can get on the computers from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., and they just love it.”

Asked if he would recommend Headsprout Early Reading to another school with struggling readers, High replies, “Absolutely. It’s been great for our school.” The Headsprout support people have stayed in touch with High, and he says the program has definitely helped with morale. “For so long our teachers were told that they were no good. After using Headsprout, our test scores finally validated their efforts. Now they walk with their heads a little higher. Our students’ confidence has increased, as well.”

Last year’s TCAP indicated a school-wide reading proficiency of 36 percent. This year, High is hoping to see even greater improvement.

“Our goal is to help our students become better readers so they can become better students,” says High. “We want to prepare them to live successfully in this world, and I believe that reading is the ticket.”

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