

Chalkboard

By

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Guest Author: *Gayla Wilmoth, Gentry Primary School*

For the next five weeks, I will join you as a reader of the *Chalkboard* as both you and I will be treated with the point of view of a guest author. The guests will be the school district's four principals and the assistant superintendent. If you make a commitment to read all five articles, you should end the series with a both a general understanding of the programs that drive our curriculum and the perspectives of the people who implement those programs.

“On May 6, 1998, Governor Mike Huckabee announced a major initiative called Smart Start. The Smart Start initiative is a plan for student achievement that focuses on high academic standards in reading, writing, and mathematics. It is based on the premise that all children will meet or exceed grade level requirements in reading and mathematics by Grade 4. You may be wondering: “How has the Smart Start initiative affected Gentry Primary School? What changes have been implemented to increase student achievement at Gentry Primary?”

We have learned that in order to increase student achievement we need to address three factors: curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These factors are key ingredients in the Gentry Primary School Improvement Plan. The Gentry Primary School Improvement Plan has two priorities: improving Literacy and improving Mathematics. Within these priorities are numerous interventions and actions to help ensure that all of our students are equitably educated.

At Gentry Primary School the state standards are used extensively to design curriculum and instruction, and assess student work. Though dictated by the state frameworks, the grade levels review our curriculum often in their efforts to increase student achievement. We have a fluid document that is updated annually. Each teacher has a copy of the curriculum for his or her grade level. The success of our curriculum is judged on the basis of achievement with a variety of measures. The teachers and I review standardized test scores, Arkansas Primary Benchmark results, and skills checklists, as well as teacher created materials to assess student achievement. We used this information to compare student performance to those same state standards in our efforts to stay focused on what is being learned at our school.

Our staff has focused on research-based instruction – especially in the areas of reading and writing. Our reading curriculum combines carefully designed systematic instruction in 5 areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Our staff has been trained in Step Up to Writing. The connection between reading and writing is taught on a daily basis. Students write daily. In our efforts to increase student achievement in literacy and mathematics, we have focused our staff development in the area of critical thinking. Dr. Lee Hannel is training our staff in “Highly Effective Questioning” and “Kiddie-Cog”. These programs are designed to improve the ability of young students to think critically. The strategies of highly effective questioning are intended to help children learn how to learn. We hope this training promotes a better understanding of critical thinking for our teachers as well as our students.

Students at the Primary School are assessed in a variety of ways: standardized tests, mastery checks, skills checklists, and teacher created assessments. The No Child Left Behind blueprint requires that school be held accountable for their effectiveness with annual state reading and math assessments. In April 2003, Gentry Primary School second grade students were tested with the SAT-9 – a nationally normed standardized achievement test. Our second graders scored at the 64th percentile in reading, the 62nd percentile in math, and the 63d percentile in language.

It seems that students, teachers, and the school as a whole are benefiting from the implementation of the Smart Start initiative. In short, we are proud of what we do, and proud at what our students have accomplished. We think that the more you look at Gentry Primary School, the more you’ll find to like and appreciate.”