

# Building Expectations

How a rural, Title I school achieved its first-ever “A” rating

By Sue Shepard

All children deserve a comprehensive education that prepares them to succeed. As educational leaders, how can we provide instruction that helps students learn and grow and is responsive to their needs?

At Ash Creek Elementary, we have implemented a number of strategies and initiatives to promote the success of every student in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade—and we’re seeing results. In 2018, our small, rural Title I school received its first-ever “A” rating from the Arizona Department of Education in recognition of year-to-year academic growth and

proficiency in English language arts, math, and science.

Here are several strategies that we have used that have had a positive impact on students’ learning and growth:

**Set the bar high.** Effective teachers and quality instruction are the most important factors in student achievement. Our teachers are qualified, dedicated professionals who enjoy teaching and working with children. We also have high standards; we expect students to do their best, just as we expect every teacher and staff member to do his or her best. When

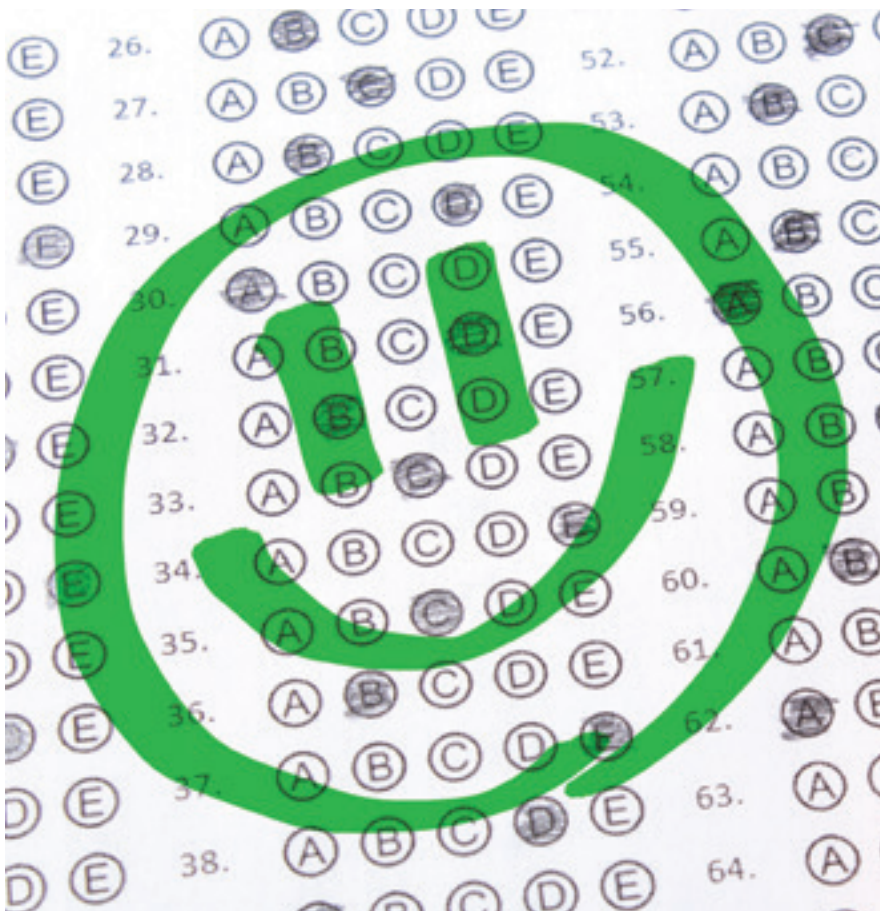
we set the bar high and provide the right supports, students and staff live up to expectations.

**Create a friendly, respectful campus.** We make it a priority for every staff member on our campus to know each student’s name. While this is easier to do in a small, rural school, it takes a campuswide commitment to make it happen. As the school principal, I try to get to know each child as an individual, and I let every student and parent know that I am always available to meet one-on-one.

**Organize and prioritize curriculum standards.** In years past, teachers created grade-level curriculum maps over the summer. Now, our school uses a curriculum framework from Beyond Textbooks, an organization created by teachers and district leaders in the Vail Unified School District, to map the year based on state standards. The standards are organized to ensure they have the greatest learning impact, while giving teachers creative freedom in how they teach.

**Create a personalized learning environment.** Our teachers regularly tailor lessons to individual student needs. We launched a 1:1 initiative so that every child has a laptop, and we use a variety of adaptive learning programs in core academic subjects. For example, we use a blended learning program called Odysseyware to provide teachers with lessons, assessments, and instructional tools to help differentiate instruction and allow students to learn at their own pace.

**Foster a schoolwide commitment to reading intervention.** Part of our school’s vision is to inspire literacy and build strong minds, but teachers



haven't always had the commitment necessary to implement interventions. Now, K–8 classes work 30 minutes per day on Fast ForWord, an evidence-based intervention that provides students with the foundational language and cognitive skills, practice, and guided reading support they need to address the root causes of their reading difficulties.

**Share progress data with students.** To help students focus and take ownership of their learning, we regularly share data on their progress with them. For example, our teachers share weekly reports from the reading intervention program with students. Students talk with teachers about their successes and how they can improve specific skills. This helps students “own” progress and know that their efforts are paying off.

**Be inclusive.** We believe in teaching children who qualify for special education in the least restrictive environment—most often in regular classroom settings. A Resource Room is available for children needing additional services.

**Integrate the arts.** Arts integration has proven highly effective among students. Our teachers participated in professional development and collaborated with artists to create arts-integrated academic units as part of a three-year Southeast Arizona Arts in Academics grant. Upon completion of the grant, they continued to integrate the arts into academic teaching.

The arts tap parts of the brain that subjects such as literacy, math, and science don't, and using art as a vehicle can boost understanding among struggling students. We expect students to be dedicated to their work or performance, and they do amazing things; many special-needs kids have shown talents that no one knew they had.

**Incorporate real-world, hands-on learning.** Hands-on learning creates real-world connections for students. As part of our agricultural education program, an educator with a local dairy visits the classroom once a week, teaching lessons aligned to state standards in science and math. We participate in the WeatherBug program and have a weather station at our school, enhancing math, science, geography, and technology study. Students also tend a school garden and harvest produce for the salad bar, which ties in with health and wellness initiatives.

**Take a brain break.** Even with the best instruction, children sometimes get antsy or have energy to burn, which can lead to behavior management issues. To give students

a “brain break,” we use GoNoodle. These short videos focus on movement and mindfulness so students can move with purpose and then get back to work.

### Helping Students Succeed

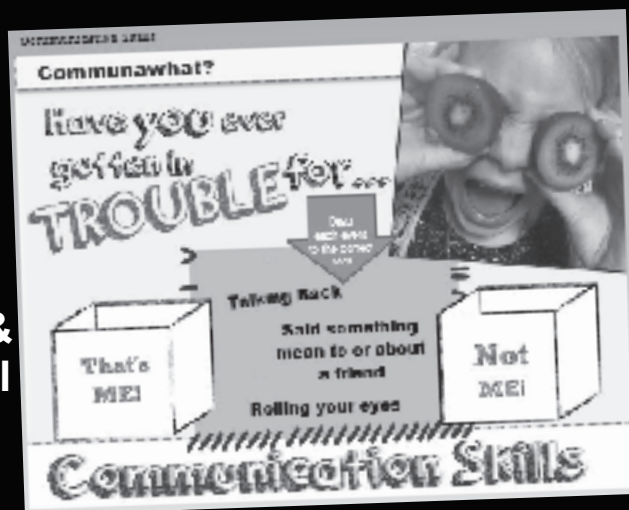
It has been a joy to see students' growth and their progress on state assessments. It is also rewarding to see them take responsibility for their own learning, set high expectations for themselves, persevere when things get tough, and celebrate their successes. Thanks to our efforts, students with different learning styles feel welcome and are valued members of our community. **P**

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