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# Smarter Balanced and Higher Achievement at Geary Elementary

After implementing Achieve3000, Geary Elementary/Middle School saw standardized test scores soar by 13 percent. Read the school's incredible story!



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Designated a “focus school,” [Geary Elementary/Middle School](#) in Left Hand, West Virginia, has one of the state’s largest achievement gaps between their lowest- and highest-performing students.

But with the help of Achieve3000 and an extremely dedicated group of educators, the focus designation may soon be a distant memory.



Just a few short months after implementing the online differentiated reading program, the K-8 school saw significant jumps in standardized testing scores despite the fact that it was their students’ first year taking the Smarter Balanced [assessment](#).

“Achieve3000 is the program we introduced that had a significant impact on student achievement,” said Lorra Tanner, Title I teacher at Geary. “It’s not the sole reason for these results, but it had a large impact.”

### **Always Room for Improvement**

Before Achieve3000 was on their radar, Lorra said their school had tried a variety of ways to help students excel, including walk-to intervention groups, reading specialists and other resources to assist with remediation.

She noted that their [intervention](#) groups were formed based on core diagnostic testing, benchmarking, and teacher observations, as well as formative and summative assessments.

“We used these as a guide to see which skills needed improvement, and looked for areas of enrichment,” she said.

The school also has a county literacy reading specialist and reading/writing coach work with students on different activities, such as reading articles and highlighting important text.

However, the teachers felt there was more they could do help their students.

“I always find there’s room for improvement,” she said. “Basically, I thought: ‘This is where we’re at. Which outside resources can we use to help kids improve?’”

But that’s not the only reason that prompted her to search for additional solutions.

### **Nonfiction Text: Filling the Void**

2015 was the first year Geary students were to take the Smarter Balanced assessment, and teachers wanted to be sure their students were prepared.

“When we took the Smarter Balanced practice test in 2014, we saw that it was completely different than what the kids were used to with the WESTEST,” said Lorra. “The teachers felt it would be overwhelming to students if we didn’t have them prepare for it all year long.”

One of the main areas in which they felt students were lacking was proficiency with nonfiction text.

“Up to that point, most textbooks are written in fiction; there wasn’t a lot of nonfiction being used,” she said. “We wanted something to give them nonfiction and informational text to help meet the state’s new requirements. We were looking to fill that void.”

Unfortunately, at that time, she recalled, their reading text wasn't up for adoption.

"The adopted series was several years old," she said. "It wasn't meeting state requirements as far as informational text, and teachers were going to have to find a way to supplement the adopted series."

### **Discovering Achieve3000**

At about the same time Lorra was searching for a way to better prepare students for the Smarter Balanced assessment, she recalls that she had a conversation with her brother, whose children were transferring to a new school in West Virginia – Kenna Elementary. Curious, she decided to check out the school's test scores, and discovered that it had been the highest-achieving school in the state that past year.

Since Geary was only 40 minutes away, Lorra decided to ask the principal at Kenna if some of Geary's teachers could observe at their school.

That's when they discovered Achieve3000.

Lorra and two other teachers were able to see the program in action, including how students used the After Reading Polls and Stretch Articles.

"We began to understand that students were able to read the same article at their own [Lexile level](#)," she said. "We saw how they worked with the Stretch articles, thought activities, and how they were able to take notes and write essays."

After that afternoon, said Lorra, the teachers were sold.

"As far as anything else on the table, we thought this was something our students would benefit from," she said. "The informational text, highlighting, critical thinking: Our teachers felt that would fill the void we had."

After sharing the experience with their principal and school leadership team, The School Leadership Team began to think of ways they could fund Achieve3000 for their own school.

An Avon fundraiser and several BoxTops later, they had raised enough money to cover staff development for teachers in grades 3 through 8.

They held their first professional development session in December 2014, gave the Levelset assessment prior to leaving for break, and began using Achieve3000 when the students returned from winter break.

### **Weekly Drawings Boost Participation**

Teachers at Geary use Achieve3000 not only in [English language arts](#) classes, but also in [science](#) and [social studies](#), and for walk-to interventions.

At first, Lorra recalls, it was a challenge getting the 3rd grade students to use the program in the most effective manner.

“We tried to get them to do two lessons per week,” she said. “What we were finding is that they would try to hurry through and get done in order to get credit,” she said.

To provide some incentive – and fun – they decided to institute a weekly drawing for those students who completed their lessons with a score of 75 percent or above.

Every student who got a 75 percent on the first try got a ticket, said Lorra. If they didn’t get it on the first try, but scored 100 on the second try, they received a bonus ticket. At the end of each week, they held a drawing of regular and bonus tickets, and awarded prizes to student winners.

“When we started doing that,” said Lorra, “they really started taking their time so they could get those tickets.”

### **Test Scores Soar by 13 Percent**

When the results of Geary’s standardized testing came in later that year, the School Leadership Team knew they had made the right choice with Achieve3000.

In reading/language arts, every grade tested saw an overall 13 percent increase in score from the previous year, said Lorra.

And, although she’s careful not to attribute the improvement to any one factor, she does note that Achieve3000 is “the one thing we did differently.”

She added that the materials and formatting of Achieve3000 activities, including highlighting, writing and moving things on the screen helped the students feel more prepared for what they would see on test day.

“It’s a good segue from Achieve3000 to Smarter Balanced,” she said. “The students had prior knowledge of how to manipulate things on the screen, so they were more focused on the test questions and how to respond.”

### **A Win with Summer Reading**

Lorra knew that her school wouldn’t be able to afford another year of Achieve3000 without some creative funding sources, so when she found out that the school could enter a contest to win a one-year site license for the program, she signed her school up right away.

Through the West Virginia Department of Education’s Summer Learning Reading and Math Challenge, the schools with the highest percentage of students who pledged to

read over the summer could win their choice of reading programs, including Achieve3000.

Geary won the No. 2 spot in the contest.

“That was really exciting!” she recalled. “You couldn’t peel me off the ceiling. We got on the intercom and announced it. The kids really liked it, too. They enjoy reading the articles.”

She hates to think what would have happened if they hadn’t won that contest.

“It would have been really sad,” she said. “We made those great gains. It would have been devastating to not use the program, because it’s so beneficial.”

### **Differentiation: Giving Every Student What They Need**

Lorra has been impressed with the level of [differentiation](#) that Achieve3000 provides to their students – without a lot of additional effort on the part of the teachers.

“Kids can learn at their own levels, and the text changes as their Lexile levels grow,” she said. “It’s nice that it’s tailored for individual students, and is not one article that all kids are struggling with.”

She added that because the questions are different depending on Lexile level, the program helps with intervention and enrichment.

“Some students who have Lexiles of 1100 and some with 800 are in the same class,” she said. “With Achieve3000, the kids with higher Lexiles are challenged more with critical thinking, while those with lower Lexiles are challenged with critical thinking for their level.”

“It’s hard for a teacher to differentiate that many different types of articles for every student in the class. With Achieve3000, it does it for you, so every kid gets what they need.”

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