

Jason Lee School, Portland Public Schools

Pre-school-7

Number of Students: 367

Minority: 64%

English Language Learners: 29%

Economically Disadvantaged: 70%

Special Ed: 20%

Report Card: Strong

A Reading Cornerstone

A conspiratorial calm quietly envelops the halls and classrooms for the first 90 minutes of every day at Jason Lee School in Northeast Portland. It is the sound of reading—or learning to read.

In the first- through third-grade classrooms, some students read silently on their own, engrossed in their books, while others work quietly in small groups or one-on-one with a teacher or aide.

Throughout the school, even when the students are engaged in a read-aloud group activity with the teacher, the exchanges unfold at a lively yet focused pace. When the teacher speaks to demonstrate a pronunciation or ask a question, there is that remarkable sound of eager silence: the students are listening, engaged.

When the first 90 minutes is up, the sound and rhythm of the learning day shifts into high gear as the arts-rich program transforms academic subjects into culturally vibrant, active experiential learning. The sound of African drumming wafts from the cafeteria, where a class of older students at the K-7 school are moving—make that *really moving*--through an activity that involves dance and vocal responses.

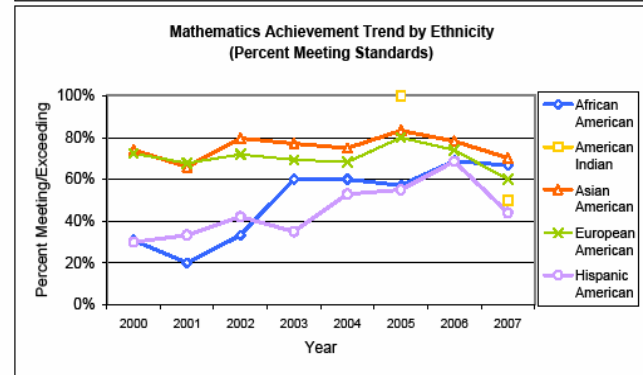
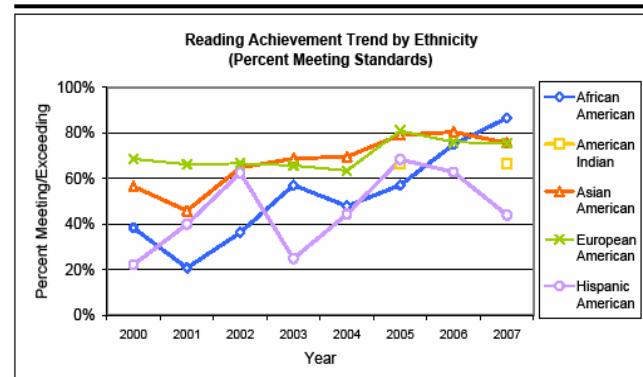
In the classrooms, subject matter is not only up for discussion, it is up on the walls in colorful posters or other visual presentations. Student projects fill available space, wall-to-wall. For the rest of the day, the quiet of the morning gives way to eager activity through which students engage intellectually and physically in their learning.

This is what “literacy development” looks and sounds like: children developing a comfort level with reading and language, specifically in English. That is a particular challenge at Lee, where one-quarter of the 367 students are learning English as a second language, two-thirds are from minority families and 70 percent come from economically disadvantaged homes, where reading traditionally suffers.

Lee’s distinctive blend of academic discipline within arts-rich curriculum is working. The school has made a U-turn from a history of low scores in standardized state tests for reading and math. More than two-thirds of the third- and fifth-grade students tested this year met or exceeded state benchmarks in reading. Signs of long-term improvement are strong, too. The improvement in math achievement showed 44 percent of third graders meeting or exceeding the state benchmark, a success statistic that became more pronounced by fifth grade, in which 65 percent performed at or above the state achievement marker. The trend appears to be continuing upward.

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Lee E.S. Grades 3-4-5



Note: Important rule changes have occurred over time, including which student groups are included in test results across the years. Importantly, 2007 saw changes to achievement standards (out scores), with elementary standards being raised, high school standards being lowered, and middle school standards being some of each. To protect student confidentiality as well as to avoid misinterpretation of the results, data for groups with fewer than 6 students are not reported.

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Principal Christine Bogdanow credits the turnaround to the school's heavy emphasis on basic phonics and reading skills, combined with an interdisciplinary, theme-based, arts-infused curriculum. Reading instruction has become the cornerstone of the school day for first- through third-graders, with those first 90 minutes of every day devoted to direct reading instruction and other reading activities. It remains a heavy emphasis through the day for other grade levels as well, integrated into content area studies.

The emphasis on reading provides an effective structure for the overall school program, and a reading-rich experience of school for the students. A strong commitment to the arts and culture-based activities provides a balance that engages children's attention and creativity, and incorporates different learning styles.

"This was one of the best things we did," says Bogdanow. "We make learning culturally relevant through the arts. It's critical, to give it meaning."

Lee School is serious about play, too. Like the arts, physical education and other opportunities for physical activity share a priority status in the curriculum. Games and exercise teach social skills, and research shows it enhances cognitive learning as well. In the learning environment, physical activities help kids use their energy in a positive way and are essential, says Bogdanow.

If programs provide framework, it is the teachers who bring the structure to life and make it work. "It's not just one thing, but the staff has really been on board for success since Day One," says Bogdanow. "They were willing to look at the problem and the possibilities and do it. You can have the best programs in the world, but if you don't have teachers who can deliver, it won't happen."

In these and other ways, the school continues to draw from traditional and innovative ideas to develop and refine its program to meet students' individual needs. Continual monitoring of student progress allows them to fine tune the program to support the individual student more effectively.

"We're not blaming the kids anymore. And we don't think in terms of excuses—they're low income, their parents don't speak English," says Bogdanow. "I tell my teachers, if a strategy doesn't work for a child, it's not because we're bad teachers; we're only bad teachers if we stop trying to figure out how to help that child learn. And they never stop."