

Garfield Elementary School

121 West Walnut Street
Garden City, KS 67846
Principal: Willis Pracht

Located in a rural, southwest Kansas school district serving 7,500 students, Garfield Elementary School has a large population of minority and migrant students (81% Hispanic and a 40% mobility rate). Over 80% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Only 19% of the parents have an education beyond high school and English is not the primary home language for 50% of the families.

- ◆ Elementary (K-4)
- ◆ 81% Hispanic
- ◆ 13% White
- ◆ 4% Other
- ◆ 2% Black
- ◆ 83% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ 63% English Language Learners
- ◆ 12% Special Education

In 2006, Garfield Elementary became a Reading First school. “Quality instruction and techniques are ingrained as part of the school culture,” explains principal Willis Pracht. “There is a culture of ownership in the fact that academic achievement is expected.”

The district’s three-tiered reading framework focuses on providing appropriate support based on students’ needs. All students receive Tier 1 classroom instruction. Lessons are structured around 90 minutes of uninterrupted core reading instruction, whole group instruction, differentiated literacy centers, and small group and independent guided reading. Students who require more support receive additional Tier 2 instruction for 30–40 minutes daily. Tier 3 intervention provides an additional hour of targeted, individualized instruction for students needing further support.

Facilitating Student Discussion of Text

Teachers at Garfield incorporate a wide range of cooperative learning strategies to engage students in text discussion. In third and fourth grade, for example, students may complete a “numbered heads together” activity, working in small groups to answer specific reading questions. Students are actively engaged in text discussion and work to ensure every group member understands and can answer the questions. As a lesson wrap-up activity, students may participate in a “Quiz Quiz Trade” activity, which helps them review vocabulary, cause and effect, text features, or prefixes and suffixes. Teachers may use talking chips to guide a reading discussion group. This teacher-directed activity is often initiated with student-written questions, followed by sentence starters, such as “I think...” or “I agree....” Teachers may also use prompts and sentence starters to help students join a conversation about a book. These strategies give students opportunities to reflect and discuss with their peers.

Modeling Comprehension Strategies

Teachers at Garfield use a spiral approach to teaching metacognitive and comprehension strategies from kindergarten through fourth grade. In each grade-level team, teachers identify a new comprehension strategy or skill to be taught weekly.

Using techniques such as thinkalouds and graphic organizers, teachers model the comprehension strategies to their students. Teachers help students learn to identify which strategy they need to use when they are struggling with a text. With frequent and explicit modeling and opportunities to practice using the strategies in small groups, students internalize and transfer them to learning in all subjects.

Graphic organizers are frequently incorporated into whole-group and guided reading lessons to help students understand the content or structure of a text. In each lesson or reading series, the teacher starts by giving a whole-group demonstration on how to complete a graphic organizer. Students follow along in their own reading notebooks. Often, the same graphic organizer is carried over into guided reading and independent comprehension centers to provide students with extra practice using it with text at their level.

To engage students in earlier grades, teachers often model comprehension and metacognitive strategies using puppets and props. For example, during a lesson on predicting, a first-grade teacher introduces the puppet Paula the Predictor, whose voice and physical action help students remember how to predict. The puppet appears in guided and independent reading activities. Another modeling strategy used in lower grades is the thinkaloud, using strategies such as making connections and visualizing. Students are taught that paying attention to the movie playing in their heads can help them retell information from a story.

Planning for Effective Reading Instruction

Literacy coaches provide teachers with time and expertise to help them improve reading instruction. Principal Pracht observes, “The literacy coaches help teachers at the grassroots level to do things like task analysis and help extrapolate those results into quality instruction through staff development, modeling effective practice, classroom walkthrough feedback, and providing tangible resources that correlate to the students’ needs.”

The literacy coach organizes weekly, after-school study groups where teachers can collaborate within and across grade levels to create centers and activities to be shared and adopted schoolwide. For instance, third- and fourth-grade teachers worked together to develop a student worksheet on prediction. When the first- and second-grade teachers saw what was developed, they realized they could adapt and introduce it to their students. This allowed for students in the earlier grades to become familiar with the strategy and activity before reaching third grade.

During grade-level meetings, teachers participate in book studies where they discuss strategies suggested in the reading and identify how they could be applied to their classroom.

In addition to study groups, the literacy coach conducts individual coaching sessions. Individual sessions occur after the coach has completed classroom observations and a review of lesson plans. During this one-on-one conversation, teachers receive feedback on their instruction and have an opportunity to discuss classroom best practices and intervention strategies for individual students.

Teachers also benefit from working with administrators and the reading coach in professional learning communities where teams analyze student data, discuss individual student needs, and identify ways of improving instruction. It is common to

find the literacy coach regularly modeling lessons in the classroom, particularly around reading comprehension. The literacy coach has helped teachers develop a shared language of instruction among the staff and the students. Principal Pracht summarizes the essential components of Garfield's success: "Teach the qualities of good instruction relentlessly, set high expectations, and provide high levels of support."