

## Graham Road Elementary School

3036 Graham Road  
Falls Church, VA 22042  
Principal: Terry Dade

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Serving approximately 400 pre-kindergarten through sixth-grade students, Graham Road Elementary School is one of the highest achieving — and lowest income — schools in Fairfax County, Virginia. Ethnic- and language-minority students comprise over 80% of the student body. The mission at Graham Road is “to inspire students to achieve academically, to think critically and creatively, to learn independently, and to become ethically responsible within a diverse and dynamic community.” Administrators and

teachers believe that even if students enter school far behind their peers in vocabulary and background knowledge, they can learn at the highest comprehension levels with the appropriate instruction. Staff at Graham Road make students and their learning a top priority, and students are engaged with an enriched, rigorous academic program that matches individual needs.

- ◆ Elementary (Pre-K–6)
- ◆ 69% Hispanic
- ◆ 13% Asian or Pacific Islander
- ◆ 10% Black
- ◆ 3% White
- ◆ 4% Other
- ◆ 85% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ 58% English Language Learners
- ◆ 12% Special Education

Graham Road operates on a year-round schedule, with regular two-week intersessions used to help some students catch up and accelerate others. Students who are significantly behind receive multiple doses of guided reading and/or alternative reading methods. Students reading above grade level participate in advanced programs, such as “Jacob’s Ladder” from the College of William and Mary. In addition, all students take home reading books daily and complete logs to self-monitor their reading accomplishments.

### School Turnaround Success

In 2005, Graham Road began efforts to implement a comprehensive student achievement turnaround plan. The school made rapid improvements through the adoption of rigorous, high-quality student assessments, modifications to teacher evaluation and professional development structures, and effective use of data to track student performance. During this time period, teachers began teaching to all of Virginia’s learning standards, not just the “power standards” necessary for proficiency. This standards-based focus has contributed to a large percentage of students exceeding expectations. Between the 2002–03 and 2006–07 school years, third-grade English test scores jumped from 49% to 91%, and fifth-grade scores rose from 71% to 98%. As a result of these dramatic improvements, the school has been placed in the spotlight and educators in and outside the district have requested to visit and learn what changes have been made to allow for such a turnaround.

## **Reading Comprehension**

Graham Road focuses on a “balanced literacy” approach to teaching reading and comprehension. Teachers look at students’ phonemic awareness in fluency and how it relates to reading comprehension. Beginning in the early grades, students take a phonemic-awareness assessment to identify where they have difficulties identifying sounds and the placement of sounds in words. As students get older, the emphasis shifts from sound recognition, decoding, and sight words to fluency and comprehension.

Administrators and coaches work with teachers, including those in ESL and special education, to ensure consistent instruction across the school. Students learn static decoding and comprehension strategies across grade levels as well. Beginning in kindergarten, for example, students are taught to sweep through a word rather than sound out the letters. In comprehension, students learn to follow a retelling rubric that teaches them to tell the beginning, middle, and end of a story, as well as the characters’ names. As students progress through the grades, they are also taught supportive mnemonics, kinesthetic modality, and visual cues to improve comprehension.

To better serve the school’s large English language learner population, teachers differentiate instruction to address the diverse range of readiness levels in each classroom.

## **Instructional Strategies**

Teachers and administrators at Graham Road have established a schoolwide environment to motivate and engage students in reading. Teachers emphasize “what good readers do” through modeling, as well as classroom posters, activity centers, and materials that appeal to students’ interests and support the development of comprehension strategies. Teachers’ common goal is to help students realize that learning is a lifelong process in which they should be constantly engaged. Thus, teachers deliberately incorporate strategies to boost students’ foundation to learning: their language development. Through buddy reading and partner conversations, students learn to talk about what they are learning, the meaning of a story, or the skill they are working on.

Teachers use the gradual release of responsibility model, which enables students to become capable thinkers and learners. In this framework, teachers read to students, then with students, and finally encourage the use of strategies during independent reading. Interactive read-alouds, guided reading, and word study also allow teachers to gradually release responsibility and promote independent readers at all grades. In the upper grade curriculum, vocabulary development is also embedded.

With instruction being data- and research-driven, teachers at Graham Road see the value in focusing on cooperative learning, summarizing and note taking, and nonlinguistic representations and questions as a way of meeting students’ needs. Students also learn to become empowered readers by applying “Best Effort Strategies” like cues and advanced organizers to better comprehend text.

### **Setting Time to Review Data and Collaborate**

Quarterly grade-level data meetings allow teachers to discuss student performance on each benchmark that has been set. Color-coded charts are created to document student performance, which allows administrators and teachers to see how each class is doing. During data meetings, positive and negative observations and examples about students' learning are encouraged. For example, rather than just looking at reading progress, teachers examine the growth pace. Data meetings are also an opportunity for teachers to recommend and exchange instructional strategies. When several kindergarten teachers noticed students were struggling with letter recognition, one teacher shared how she has students make letters with Play-Dough and shaving cream.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are also an important time for discussing assessment data. During these weekly, grade-level meetings, teachers have “data discussions” with the math and reading coaches, and time is strictly focused on instruction and the standards for the upcoming week. Teachers collaboratively develop lesson plans that will make the standards meaningful for students. PLCs also serve as a springboard for professional development by providing teachers the opportunity to evaluate professional weaknesses that need to be addressed.

Teachers new to the school are required to complete a course on balanced literacy. All teachers receive individual coaching with reading teachers or instructional coaches. This instruction might be focused on reading components, such as comprehension, decoding, fluency, and language development. Graham Road also has a coach who maintains a model classroom, teaches a class for teachers, and coaches teachers in implementing the balanced literacy framework.

### **Maintaining Community Partnerships**

Support of community and business partners helps Graham Road reach success. These relationships help ensure that students have opportunities and resources to succeed. For example, during the 2006–07 school year, business partners provided a new desktop computer and printer to sixth graders who completed an extensive beyond-the-bell training program. Graham Road also receives support from a local church, which supplies tutors for the school's after-school Homework Club.

In addition to the school partnerships, students are supported by a cadre of school leaders, support staff, and teachers who hold themselves and the students to high standards. Graham Road recruits highly skilled teachers dedicated to meeting the needs of each student. Administrators set the bar high for teachers, and a supportive environment with a wealth of resources helps them collaborate and meet those expectations. Staff members have dedicated professional collaboration hours to develop the appropriate type and intensity of instruction to meet students' needs. The principal and reading coach, for example, provide teachers with protocols, time, and human and financial resources. With such structures in place, teachers are supported in doing their work and helping students reach academic success.