

Ramping up reading efforts

New Falls City program has kids making sizeable gains

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

FALLS CITY — Small group reading time for first- and second-graders at Falls City Elementary School begins with, not a book, but stretching, singing and dancing.

OK, so it's not that unconventional — the phonics "dance-chant" helps them memorize letter sounds, and the movement is an energy outlet for a naturally fidgety age group.

The best part? Seemingly, the students look forward to literacy song and dance.

Second-grader Allyssa Hurst walked into the library where Falls City reading specialist Suzi Spencer was waiting. Allyssa approached the wall with colorful cards posted representing letter sounds and how to pronounce them, with a sheep for "sh," a chicken for "ch," and phone for "ph."

"Can I do this?" Allyssa asked about the chant and dance routine.

Spencer also is a fan of the before-lesson activities.

"They are asked to sit down a lot," Spencer said, noting the brief exercises break that routine.

That's just part of Falls City's overhauled reading program that appears to be producing results. Since the beginning of the year, students in Falls City, for the most part, have been improving reading skills by leaps and bounds.

The success has been a few years in the making.

In 2012, the district changed its K-6 reading curriculum, but it wasn't until the following year that the elementary school changed its reading program strategy. Previously, students had



JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-Observer
Suzi Spencer, reading specialist at Falls City Elementary School, leads a group of first- and second-graders through a "phonics dance chant" to begin a small group reading session.

Reading Improvement

Since beginning school in September, most students in grades K-6 at Falls City Elementary School have shown improvement in literacy skills testing. Here's the breakdown by grade level:

- **Kindergarten:** 55 percent increase.
- **First grade:** 37 percent increase.
- **Second grade:** 16 percent increase.
- **Third grade:** 39 percent increase.
- **Fourth grade:** 11 percent increase.
- **Fifth grade:** 2 percent decrease.
- **Sixth grade:** 8 percent increase.

Of note: Increases represent the growth in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding benchmarks for their grade level.

been taken from their classes and placed into the grade-level class that matched their reading level. That meant in some cases fifth-graders were taken to first- and second-grade classes, Spencer said. With small classes in Falls City, that wasn't the most confidence-boosting experience for the older students.

"With 10 kids in every class, walking them to (their) grade level for reading wasn't really working," Spencer said.

With the support of then-new Superintendent Jack

Thompson, the school's staff reversed that strategy. Instead of having kids leave their classes to go to a different grade level, Spencer and educational assistants went to the students.

"Beginning in the fall of 2013, we implemented a 'push-in' program with the educational assistants and myself providing support so the classroom teachers are able to instruct their own students in small groups who have similar skill levels," Spencer said.

Now in the second year of the program, required read-

ing tests — Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) — show marked improvement in all but the fifth grade, which slipped slightly.

While the fifth-grade class as a whole has performed well on tests in the past, the lack of growth has resulted in further changes — more reading and analysis of reading assignments — in hopes of seeing improvement.

Spencer said another key measure of success, and one that wouldn't be found in the results of any test, is that students are enjoying reading. She said the district has purchased books popular with students, making them more likely to read on their own.

"I love seeing students walk into the room with a book they've chosen to read — instead of one we've assigned to them," she said. "The students are talking about their books with each other and asking to share quotes from their books."

"When students are excited to read, and asking for more time to read, I think we are doing things right," Spencer added.

Legislation would jeopardize program

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

DALLAS — The Dallas School District is watching carefully a bill introduced this legislative session that could affect its Extended Campus Program and similar programs in other districts.

Extended Campus, Dallas' fifth-year — and now sixth-year — program, allows students to attend up to two years at Chemeketa Community College for free. Programs like Extended Campus are paid for with state funding as students enrolled in the programs defer receiving their diplomas, technically remaining high school students.

One bill in particular might threaten the popular DHS program that now allows students the possibility of earning an associate de-

gree concurrent with a diploma.

Senate Bill 322, sponsored by Sen. Mark Hass (D-Beaverton), would establish a funding mechanism that would allow \$4,500 for each student enrolled in a fifth-year program if they take at least 45 quarter credits per school year.

However, Dallas High School Assistant Principal Brian Green said there has been a recommendation to amend the bill to cut participation in programs in half by 2016 and eliminate them completely in 2017 because of concerns of using funding designated for K-12 education to pay for college classes.

Dallas Business Manager Tami Montague reported to the Dallas School Board Monday that the bill will be tracked closely as it moves forward.

DHS robotics team places first at state

Itemizer-Observer staff report

DALLAS — Dallas High School Robotics Team ramRod took top honors at the VEX Robotics State Championship Friday and Saturday.

Team ramRod's Jake Shryer, Jacob Reimer and Ben Rounds were on the winning alliance, consisting of three teams competing at the tournament.

Seventy teams qualified for the tournament, which took place at North Marion High School in Aurora.

"In the six years of robotics at DHS, teams have brought home a lot of trophies, but this is by far the farthest any team has gone," said Lee Jones, DHS robotics coach.

The team will now represent Oregon at the Worlds Tournament in Louisville,

Ky., in April.

"It is a huge deal," said Dallas High School Principal Steve Spencer. "I'm a big sports fan and love DHS athletics, but this is as big of a deal to me as anything else because it partners that competition with academics."

Robotic success is now moving to LaCreole Middle School.

The school's teams also participated in the first VEX Robotics Middle School State Championship tournament last weekend at North Marion, said Jamie Richardson, LaCreole principal.

Team members Samuel Noack, Brennan Bassham, Jackson Eastland and Walter Crichlow won the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) Research Award at the competition.

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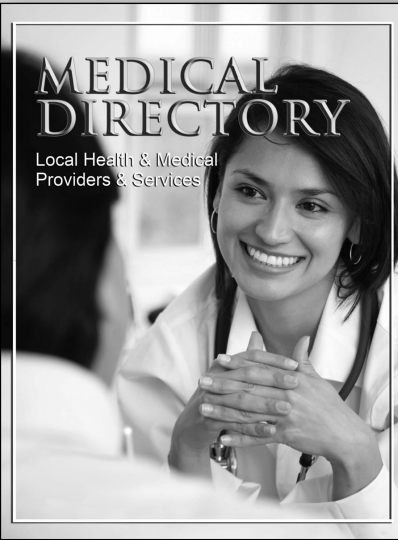
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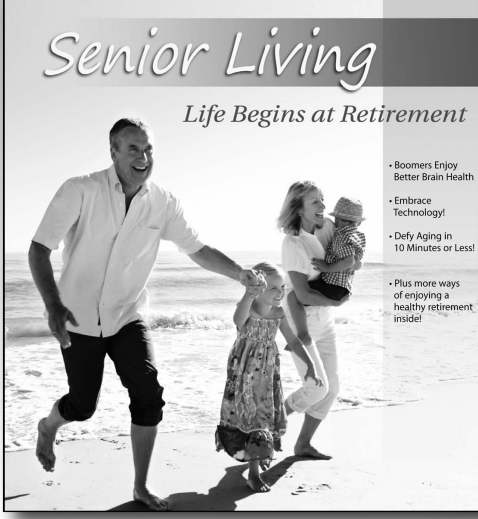
Talk to Heidi, Rachel or Karen.

Itemizer-Observer
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Polk County Medical Directory is your **FULL COLOR** guide to all health and medical providers and facilities throughout Polk County.

Deadline to Reserve: March 26
Publish Date: April 8



A large senior and baby boomer population call Polk County home. Are they aware of your business and/or services? They're aware of us. Let us help you reach them.

Deadline to Reserve: April 7
Publish Date: April 22