

## Growing Readers Together: A Schoolwide Transformation Esther Jackson Elementary School

### A History of Growing Readers at Esther Jackson

The Growing Readers Program is a kindergarten through third grade professional learning grant that provides consistent and high-quality professional learning to teachers on effective reading instruction. The program's ultimate goal is to ensure children are reading at grade level by the end of third grade. Growing Readers began as a two-year program in 2015 and started its second two-year iteration in 2017.

Esther Jackson Elementary School, located in Roswell, GA, serves a diverse kindergarten through fifth grade community of approximately 650 students, of which 57% are Hispanic, 40% are English Language Learners (ELL), and 74% qualify for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL). When Esther Jackson began participating in Growing Readers in 2015, only 36% of its students read at or above grade level. Determined to change this statistic, Esther Jackson's administration chose to participate in Growing Readers to improve student literacy and provide ongoing, applicable professional learning and support for its teachers.

“We really needed to improve literacy achievement for our students,” explained Jennifer Cassidy, principal of Esther Jackson. “We wanted an opportunity for teachers to grow their practices.”

Fortunately, for Esther Jackson, Growing Readers helped the school approach its goal. Between 2016 and 2017, the percentage of students reading at or above grade level had increased by 8.6 percentage points. Due to this success, Esther Jackson's leadership team decided to integrate Growing Readers, which originally targeted kindergarten through third grade teachers, into their schoolwide approach to professional learning to achieve student literacy goals.



The administration determined that if every teacher could improve the reading levels of at least six students, the Super Six, Esther Jackson could achieve its schoolwide goal of 65% of students reading at or above grade level by the end of the 2015-2016 school year. The school leadership team's goal-oriented approach and clear implementation expectations for teachers has transformed Esther Jackson's instruction and reading culture – leading to gains in reading achievement. Growing Readers practices provided the necessary support and structure to sustain the professional learning and literacy gains.

## Transforming Instruction

The first step in Esther Jackson’s plan was to transform instruction at the classroom level. Each month, Esther Jackson’s teachers received targeted professional learning, followed by one-on-one coaching in the classroom to support implementation of Growing Readers strategies. Teachers developed positive and supportive relationships with the literacy coaches, who grew to know each teacher’s students, classroom, and teaching style. Literacy coaches utilized the personalized knowledge to provide individualized support to teachers.

After each monthly Growing Readers professional learning session, teachers were tasked with implementing specific instructional strategies on a small scale with their Super Six. Administration supported teachers in accomplishing this task by providing clear expectations and flexibility and fostering a risk-free environment for teachers to test new strategies. Once teachers saw their Super Six improve, their increased confidence encouraged them to utilize Growing Readers strategies with additional students in their classroom.

Aligned goals and consistent literacy coaching have also contributed to the development of a shared language among teachers, literacy professionals, and the administration.

*“We’re all on the same page and we all use common language. We’re all celebrating each other’s kids because we all understand what’s happening.”*

Contrary to other professional learning sessions, teachers believe that Growing Readers is not just another program to implement; it creates a community that focuses on best practices and provides the necessary classroom support, tools, and confidence teachers need. Through Growing Readers, teachers learn sustainable strategies, both for their growth as teachers and for the growth of their students. Teachers learn how to accurately observe student reading behaviors, identify student needs, and recommend strategies for improvement—all of which are effective instructional practices they can apply in multiple content areas. Teachers receive concrete reading strategies specific to their students’ individual needs and can utilize everything they learn through Growing Readers sessions as soon as they get back in the classroom. Growing Readers not only grows students as readers, but also grows teachers as professionals.

## Transforming Reading Culture

As Growing Readers has transformed classroom instruction, a new schoolwide reading culture has emerged. Since Growing Readers, Esther Jackson teachers give students ownership over their progress and literacy goals through an emphasis on conferencing, strategy groups, and goal-setting.

“During conferences with my teacher, I feel like each time I read with her, I get stronger because she tells me advice, she tells me what I should do better, and that’s what makes me a better reader,” reflects one third grader who has grown three reading levels since the beginning of the school year.

Students know that they are reading to reach goals, which are often printed on their bookmarks or in other easily accessible locations. While a teacher conferences with a student or small group of students with similar literacy needs, other students know to read independently, utilize their reading strategies, and wait for their turn to conference with the teacher. Students not only become accustomed to the routine of Growing Readers instructional strategies, but they also internalize the significance of these strategies and what they mean for their



personal growth. While this transition is not immediate, teachers overwhelmingly agree that students become accustomed to the Growing Readers focus on continuous improvement and goal-setting.

When asked about his reading progress, for instance, one third-grade student explained how, “Last year, in second grade, I was at an N, but this year I am on a T. I made a lot of progress because I read a lot of books over the summer.” When asked about his future goals, the student specified that his goal for third grade was to reach a V. Reading levels are not just abstract concepts for students – they see both intrinsic and extrinsic value to growing as readers and know that they need to grow their skills to do so.

## Transforming the Future: Growing Readers’ Lasting Impact

Growing Readers has already contributed to multiple transformations within Esther Jackson, including transforming instruction by providing consistent professional learning, developing aligned goals, creating a shared language, and transforming reading culture. Through supportive leadership and consistent implementation of Growing Readers, Esther Jackson’s reading culture, professional learning practices, and student literacy has the potential to continually improve.



*“Growing Readers is less of a program. I feel as if it has educated me the same way that I, in turn, am educating my kids. It’s giving me strategies, it’s giving me resources, just as I’m giving my kids. It’s giving me the same template that I’m giving them for, ‘These are things that you can use across the board with different books,’ and I’m doing the same thing with my kids. There is a strategy for each child; it might be different, and it doesn’t matter.”*

## Additional Information

For more information about the impact of Growing Readers, please watch the [Growing Teachers to Grow Readers Across Georgia](#) case study video series, view the [2017-2018 Growing Readers infographic](#), or read the [2017-2018 Year-End Growing Readers Evaluation Report](#).