

English Language Arts & Reading: Prince of Peace Catholic School 2009-2010

OUR GOAL: that your child enter high school able to read challenging works of literature, history, theology or the sciences, to analyze and evaluate what they read, then to speak or write (a research paper or 5-paragraph essay) with facility, coherence, and attention to structure, vocabulary, and grammar. (*To learn more about our writing program in particular, review the Excellence in Writing tab under "Curriculum"*).

Early Childhood Reading and Spelling. Our core strategy for teaching children to read is phonics. The Open Court reading program has been a champion of phonics since first publishing its texts in 1960 and is credited with improving student test scores in school districts throughout the country. One California study in 2002 concluded that "*Open Court schools outgain Non-Open Court comparison schools by 50 to 75 percent.*" All POPCS early elementary faculty (K4 to 3rd) have trained with Open Court Publishing consultants so that the program is implemented in our classrooms as designed by their specialists. Spelling review and assessment beginning in first grade insures accuracy when students write (and associate sounds with the *correct* letters!).

“Sound it out!” Up to the beginning of second grade, students at POPCS learn the phonemes (sounds associated with letters and words) and practice by reading brief stories and being read to by teachers, volunteers, and their parents at home. As they build their “phonemic awareness,” and learn that sounds are the building blocks of words, they begin to recognize words in text and learn to read. We believe this foundation can lead to above grade-level reading ability.

Sight Words. Open Court’s method also introduces to children over 200 whole-language vocabulary and spelling words (also called "sight words" or “high frequency words”) from Kindergarten through second grade. Recognizing sight words automatically is important for emergent readers, and children will improve reading comprehension skills considerably into third grade when this recognition skill is combined with Open Court phonics instruction.

3rd Grade Reading for Comprehension and Learning. By December of second grade, students move from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” where independence and personal skill growth are encouraged. By third grade, a child’s reading vocabulary (where new and unfamiliar words are being learned) begins to surpass the simpler early childhood vocabulary. A more serious attention to the academic study of science, history, grammar, works of literature and so on makes third grade a turning point in a child’s academic education. Attention to study skills and test preparation by our teachers (and with them the child’s family) becomes critical for the successful navigation of the third grade year. Research suggests that preparation for opportunities that demand “high stakes outcomes” is rooted in a focus on reading comprehension and reading fluency by third grade.

4th to 8th Reading. Beginning in fourth grade, students transition from the Open Court basal readers and textbooks of the early elementary grades to chapter books, short stories, novels, American poetry, and even some Charles Dickens and Shakespeare. Our selections cover various genres and include both classic and modern stories drawn from award-winning and time-honored selections of great literature. Link: Our Reading List 4-8 [click online]

Novels & Stories. Children who in third grade adopt the habit of reading novels and stories on their own will develop – almost without realizing it – the reading and language comprehension skills required of a challenging high school college prep curriculum. Children who don’t read independently or who never cultivate an interest in reading chapter books and novels, will struggle with language and comprehension skills throughout their years of study.

Independent Reading. To encourage independent reading, we use the Scholastic Reading Counts program from Scholastic Publishers to “motivate readers” and “measure success.” How it works: students check out a book each week from the POPCS library (which now has more than 6,000 volumes), and when they’ve finished reading, they take a computer generated multiple choice test to assess comprehension. Our POPCS Library/Media Specialist afterwards reviews scores and tracks student progress as children grow in reading ability outside the context of the classroom.

Prince of Peace Catholic School Children (measured as whole classes) achieve class averages near or above the 90th percentile point nationally on Iowa Reading Tests as noted by the US Department of Education:

