

Blog Series Title: Joyful Learning: Guiding Discovery at ESN - Insights from the Head of School

Blog Post Title: Unlocking Potential: Why is Learning to Read So Important?

Dear Episcopal School of Nashville Community,

As we embark on another inspiring academic year, I find myself reflecting on the foundational aspects of education that set our students on the path to success. One of the most vital building blocks in this journey is the ability to read proficiently.

It's my pleasure to introduce the first entry in a new series of regular blog posts, where I will share insights, reflections, and updates on topics close to our educational mission. Prompted by Tennessee's recent third grade retention law, today's post focuses on the importance of reading, particularly reading at grade level, and how this skill significantly impacts a student's academic future.

The conversation around reading is not just confined to the classroom but extends to our homes and community. By understanding and embracing the role we all play in nurturing a child's reading ability, we collectively contribute to their growth and empowerment.

I invite you to read on and join us in this exploration of learning and development.

The Pivotal Third Grade: Building Foundations for Future Success

Third grade stands as a beacon in a student's educational journey. This is the year when reading takes on new dimensions, evolving from mere decoding of words and building fluency to an immersive experience where students use their reading skills to comprehend multiple text types, gain new knowledge, and enjoy diverse stories from multiple perspectives. Building on the foundational skills nurtured from Pre-Kindergarten through second grade, third grade marks a pivotal point in literacy development.

But third grade is more than just a developmental milestone; it is traditionally viewed as a lens into future success. It's the stage where the oft-quoted saying "learning to read" transforms into "reading to learn." No child is beyond help, and third grade offers a chance to assess and nurture each child's literacy. Here, standardized testing in the state of Tennessee begins for the first time, providing the initial public data set that can predict (but not determine) future academic trajectories.

At Episcopal School of Nashville (ESN), we recognize the third grade as a crucial year that sets the stage for lifelong learning, emphasizing a growth mindset in each of our students. Our approach emphasizes student interest, motivation, choice, and exploration. From studying different topics to engaging in novel studies, we turn reading into a joyous pursuit of knowledge. Our reading instruction seamlessly integrates phonics, and our teachers adeptly guide students in applying reading skills to real-life situations.

Moreover, we embrace collaboration with parents, extending the joy of reading beyond the classroom. Family projects, parent communication, and home learning extension opportunities make the third grade at ESN a comprehensive and shared experience. These strategies collectively ensure that our students are on the path for a future filled with curiosity, empathy, and critical thinking.

Fostering Literacy: A Community Effort

Literacy is a shared responsibility that goes beyond school walls. A prime example of our commitment to this community goal is our collaboration with East Nashville Hope Exchange. By hosting their six-week summer literacy program for over 100 students aged PK-5th grade this summer, we not only contributed to literacy enhancement in East Nashville but also demonstrated the power of partnership in fostering a culture of reading and learning. This initiative aligns with our belief in education's unifying power, and our ongoing commitment to leverage our resources, expertise, and passion for elevating literacy in our community. Several of our teachers participate in EdCo (The Educators' Cooperative), and we were honored to host an EdCo event for teachers across the community earlier this year. Our teachers are excited to continue to build community and share best practices with the other great educators across our city.

At Episcopal School of Nashville (ESN), we are proud of students' reading achievements and even more determined to help each child reach their fullest potential. A couple of highlights from our 2022-23 Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) testing data:

- 100% of our third graders read at or above the 50th percentile nationally.
- 94% of our students school wide read at or above the 50th percentile nationally.
- 98% of our students performed at or above the 50th percentile nationally (only tested in grades 2-4).

However, the heart of this process lies in the alignment of our mission with our practices, where each student is seen and nurtured. As a school of choice, ESN has the privilege of welcoming families who are especially invested in their children's education. This investment leads to strong educational outcomes, as parents actively participate in and reinforce our mission. Our parent partnership is not just about involvement; it's about alignment with a shared vision. Regular communication, family reading nights, and tailored support all contribute to this collaborative approach, enhancing the bond between home and school. Our teachers, with their unwavering dedication and innovative methods, further bolster these achievements. Coupled with a robust library program that encourages exploration and curiosity, they create a nurturing environment where literacy thrives. Together, these elements create a vibrant educational community at ESN, where reading is not just taught but lived, loved, and celebrated. These statistics symbolize a collective achievement that goes beyond mere numbers, reflecting a school where partnership, choice, and commitment come together to shape well-rounded, empowered learners.

The Power of Student Engagement

In third grade, where reading takes on a pivotal role, student motivation and parent collaboration are essential. At Episcopal School of Nashville, we foster student interest through research on diverse topics, focusing on reading as not merely an educational requirement but a joyous pursuit of knowledge. Our third-grade curriculum offers students choices, allowing them to explore novel studies on fun and engaging subjects like the solar system, famous Americans, and different countries. These units of study are crafted to be relatable and connect literature to real-life situations, sparking curiosity and deepening comprehension. For example, this past year, our third graders visited the Civil Rights Room at our local library and got to ask Deputy Mayor Brenda Haywood questions about Nashville history. And later in the spring, they wrote to local and state legislators to advocate for more school safety measures.

A Gateway to the World

Reading does more than open doors to academic subjects; it provides a gateway to understanding the world and our place within it. Being able to read empowers individuals to engage with diverse cultures, navigate complex societal issues, and participate actively in democratic processes.

Resources for Fostering a Love of Reading

- **Podcasts and Research:** Explore topics like the shift in phonics teaching and its resurgence with the "Sold a Story" podcast.
- **Read Aloud to Your Child Every Day:** This vital practice exposes your child to new vocabulary, enhances listening comprehension, and cultivates a love of reading.
- **Visit the Library Regularly:** Libraries provide a treasure trove of age-appropriate books, igniting curiosity and encouraging exploration.
- **Provide Diverse, Engaging Experiences:** Visiting the zoo, travel, museums, concerts all help reading development. These experiences build content knowledge and help with vocabulary acquisition.
- **Encourage Independent Reading:** Foster a reading habit by setting aside daily reading time or using reading as a positive reinforcement for completed tasks.

By working together as educators, parents, and community members, we ensure that literacy becomes not only a milestone achievement but a lifelong love and essential tool for our children. Thank you to Becca Moll, ESN's third grade teacher, for her insights and contributions to this article.

With Mind and Spirit Soaring,

Signature

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