

Parent Voices

Elementary Principal Understands the Power of Reading Recovery

Joel Rivera, Silverthorne Elementary School, Frisco, Colorado

As a middle school principal and former middle school math teacher, I came to elementary school not understanding how challenging it is to teach reading and how complex reading instruction is.

I thought it was easy to learn to read. It's just letters and sounds, right? Letters, sounds, and sentences make stories. Easy. I had no idea just how hard it is to get kids to not only learn to read, but LOVE to read.

My first feeling that it was more than sounds and letters happened when Addi, the youngest of my three kids, was in kindergarten. We had reading homework, and I approached it like I would math homework. It was so hard for Addi. Here I was, a skilled teacher and principal, and I couldn't teach her how to read? What should I do? How could I help? Should I read to her? I remember writing notes of desperation to the teacher.

When they called about Reading Recovery, I was worried there would be a stigma attached. I didn't expect this. I felt like Dad had given up on her. She didn't want to read. She didn't like it. But all that changed when her Reading Recovery lessons began in February of first grade.

"Addi loved stories but thought that reading was about reading the letters," recalls her Reading Recovery teacher Betsy Buerk. "When she brought the letters and the stories together, a whole new world opened up for her. She was one of the most fluent, expressive readers I have taught."

Betsy sent books home with Addi that were on her reading level. Addi would sit with her book bag and just read — often 5–7 books every night. She wanted to do it. She would want to read another book and would see that there



Addi loved to learn but was struggling with reading until her Reading Recovery teacher helped her put the letters and the stories together.

were no more books in the bag. All of a sudden, she knew all these words. There were so many new texts with tough words. This was such a positive portion of her life. Now it was like reading had always been easy.

There is something about watching your elementary age kid reading in the car and then laughing, gasping, or even crying all because of something they are reading. Literacy is no doubt one of the most critical components of a child's success.

Reading Recovery leveled the playing field for Addi. When her Reading Recovery lessons ended, I could support her as a parent in the way that I knew how. She was happily reading 30–40 minutes every night and continues to be an avid reader. Her teachers in second and third grade kept the books coming and now she reads an entire series of chapter books.



Joel Rivera and his kids—Addi, James, and Autumn—enjoy hiking in the mountains of Summit County, Colorado.

“Reading with Ms. Buerk in first grade was really fun,” Addi remembers. “I loved the *Big Hungry Giant* series. Now I’m reading the *Harry Potter* series. The first one got me hooked because it was a cliffhanger. I knew there was going to be another year and I was like, ‘I have got to find out what happens next.’”

Reading Recovery was a like a switch that flipped. I’m not a reading teacher. I was frustrated. I tell this story at the Reading Recovery parent meeting every spring and fall. Reading Recovery really helps our parents engage with reading and with their child’s reading progress in a positive way. They can help with the cut up story and talk with their child about the stories they write. They can listen to the child read successfully. And they come to school for the parent meeting and to watch a lesson which is another positive experience.

We have faced so many cuts at our school because of declining enrollment, but we keep Reading Recovery intact. We have the highest needs in first grade each year in terms of literacy support needed to make growth. Quantitative data isn’t the only source we use to make decisions about staffing and budget.

We watch the growth in first grade very carefully. We want to capitalize on it and keep the growth happening for kids. Reading Recovery helps us hit our purpose: proficient readers who are lifelong readers. Like my daughter, Addi, and my two other kids.

Editor’s note

Joel Rivera has been the principal at Silverthorne Elementary School since 2017. In his 6 years as middle school principal, the school received some of its highest-ever performance ratings for academic growth and achievement. In 2015, Joel was named Colorado Middle Level Principal of the Year by the National Association of Secondary School Principals who sponsor the program. The award recognizes principals who succeed in providing high-quality learning opportunities for students and demonstrate exemplary contribution to the profession. He was selected by the Colorado Association of Secondary School Principals and Colorado Association of School Executives based on rigorous criteria.