



# IMPROVING 3RD GRADE LITERACY:

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LESSONS FROM NASHVILLE  
CLASSICAL EAST



NASHVILLE  
CLASSICAL  
— CHARTER SCHOOLS —



Tennessee Charter  
School Center

# INTRODUCTION

In 2024, Tennessee fully implemented the Literacy Success Act (LSA), which aims to ensure that all students achieve foundational reading proficiency by the end of third grade. Third grade is a critical time in students' literacy as it represents a shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Without a solid foundation in reading by the end of third grade, students will struggle to learn across all academic subjects - not just language arts. In fact, research has shown a strong association between 3rd grade literacy and a number of outcomes later in life including academic achievement, high school graduation, and college enrollment.<sup>1</sup>

Using TCAP ELA scores as a benchmark, the LSA mandates that students scoring below or approaching expectations must participate in summer learning or tutoring and successfully retake the reading assessment in order to move on to fourth grade, with some exemptions allowed. As such, improving literacy outcomes for students in early grades has become a key focus for many schools across the state. This report focuses on one notably successful charter school, Nashville Classical East, which ranked in the top 14% of all Tennessee public schools for 3rd grade ELA. In 2024, it was also the top-ranked school in Davidson County for third-grade ELA proficiency among economically disadvantaged students. The aim of this case study is to answer the following research questions:

**01** What policies and practices have contributed to Nashville Classical East's success in 3rd grade ELA?

**02** What challenges has the school faced in pursuit of this goal, and how have they addressed them?

**03** How has the charter school model, specifically, supported Nashville Classical East's success?

To explore these questions, we conducted interviews with four staff members from Nashville Classical East, including school leaders, coaches, and teachers. The findings from these interviews are summarized in this report.

## BACKGROUND

Nashville Classical Charter Schools provide a rigorous, joyful, and classical education for students from kindergarten through 8th grade. A classical education at these schools means the schools emphasize character development through core habits—focus, integrity, resilience, scholarship, and teamwork—while delivering a curriculum centered on great books, fine arts, and foreign languages. Their approach is designed to equip students with the knowledge and habits necessary for success in high school, college, and beyond.

The original Nashville Classical East campus, located in East Nashville, opened in 2013, and a second campus, Nashville Classical West, was launched in 2023. Diversity is central to the school's mission, with families coming from all over the city. At many zoned neighborhood schools in Nashville Classical's cluster, diversity is limited. Due to local demographics and housing patterns, racial minorities and low income students are concentrated in a few schools. Nashville Classical, on the other hand, has worked intentionally to build a student body that reflects the diversity of Nashville through strategic outreach, free transportation, and an open enrollment policy with no geographic preference. The school's leadership believes this focus on diversity helps students learn to think more critically by exposing them to different perspectives and also fosters a learning environment where students are seen and supported as individuals. The school's commitment to educational excellence, especially for diverse student populations, is reflected in its strong academic outcomes.

1. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/midwest/Ask-A-REL/10268>

# POLICIES AND PRACTICES

## GREAT PEOPLE AND STRONG SYSTEMS

Nashville Classical East's leadership emphasizes that there are no "silver bullets" for improving student achievement. Rather, the combined effects of several policies and practices have contributed to the school's success. One key factor is the team itself—a high-caliber team of teachers, school leaders, and families working together to support student learning. This is paired with robust systems designed to ensure success for all stakeholders.

- **Staffing:** Nashville Classical East prioritizes hiring staff who are committed to the school's mission and have a genuine desire to work with their students. To retain these staff members, the school offers competitive salaries, a supportive professional environment, and clear career pathways. Teachers have opportunities to serve as leaders through mentor roles, grade-level lead positions, and professional development leadership. A two-week training session at the start of each school year sets teachers up for success, and weekly staff meetings help foster connection and preparedness. These investments in professional development have led to the retention of high-quality teachers, with all 3rd grade ELA teachers having several years of experience.
- **Leadership and Coaching:** Staff members are supported by a strong leadership and coaching team, which further contributes to teacher retention. As one 3rd grade teacher explained, "If I go to my coach and say I'm overwhelmed, she'll say 'How can I take this off your plate or rework your schedule?' If a student is having a problem, leadership steps in. It really is all hands on deck." Nashville Classical's instructional leaders have all served as teachers within the school and grew into leadership through the school's talent development initiatives.



# POLICIES AND PRACTICES

## SYSTEMS FOR SUCCESS

- **Goal Setting:** Goal setting is foundational to Nashville Classical East's culture. The school uses an "arc-of-the-year" model, breaking the school year into chunks and identifying what success looks like every six weeks. This is done among all staff and students. With regard to school-wide goals, all resources and activities are aligned with these goals, creating shared clarity among staff. The school holds quarterly reviews to assess progress and reflect on whether the previous quarter's strategies were successful. Teachers also set personal career goals and collaborate with students to set individual learning goals. These student goals are aligned with data and communicated to families to ensure collaborative support both at school and at home.
- **Science of Reading:** Nashville Classical East was an early adopter of the Science of Reading, a research-based framework emphasizing explicit instruction in foundational literacy skills like phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This approach, now mandated in public schools statewide, guides the school's literacy instruction, ensuring that all teachers are trained in phonics and decoding strategies. The curriculum and teaching schedule also reflect this approach, reinforcing the importance of foundational skills.
- **Structured Literacy Blocks:** Each class at Nashville Classical East includes three integrated humanities blocks—Knowledge, Writing, and ELA/Phonics/Decoding. These blocks are taught consecutively, reinforcing skills and knowledge in a seamless manner. These blocks are focused primarily on Tier 1 instruction. However, students in Tiers 2 and 3 receive additional instruction to support their learning needs. Tier 2 students receive 20 extra minutes of instruction four times per week, while Tier 3 students receive an additional 30 minutes. This structured approach is critical to ensuring strong literacy outcomes. Nashville Classical has also designed their program for coherence, ensuring curricula in intervention blocks directly addresses gaps and helps students to access Tier 1 instruction.
- **Professional Development:** Summer professional development at Nashville Classical East is focused on understanding and implementing the Science of Reading. Teachers learn specific strategies for incorporating elements of Scarborough's Reading Rope into their lessons. This knowledge empowers teachers to prioritize skills and ensure that no crucial aspect of literacy instruction is skipped.

## RTI'S TIERS OF INTERVENTION

**Tiered instruction within the Response to Intervention (RTI)** framework is a multi-level approach to providing differentiated teaching based on students' needs. RTI is mandated in most states and Tennessee uses its own version known as RTI<sup>2</sup>. Tiered instruction typically consists of three tiers: Tier 1 offers high-quality, evidence-based instruction for all students in the general classroom; Tier 2 provides targeted small-group interventions for students who need additional support; and Tier 3 delivers intensive, individualized interventions for students with significant learning challenges. This framework emphasizes early identification and continuous progress monitoring to ensure that students receive timely and appropriate instruction.<sup>2</sup>

2. Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. S. (2006). Introduction to response to intervention: What, why, and how valid is it? *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(1), 93-99. DOI:10.1598/RRQ.41.1.4

# POLICIES AND PRACTICES

## SCARBOROUGH'S READING ROPE

Scarborough's Reading Rope is a model that illustrates the key components of skilled reading, dividing them into two main strands: Word Recognition and Language Comprehension.

- **Word Recognition** includes phonological awareness (understanding sounds), decoding (sounding out words), and sight recognition of familiar words.
- **Language Comprehension** involves background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge.

As students develop their reading skills, these strands are woven together, with foundational skills in word recognition supporting more complex language comprehension. The model emphasizes the importance of balanced instruction that integrates both strands for effective reading development. This model is central to the Science of Reading.



## TEACHER CONTINUITY

Teachers at Nashville Classical East are incentivized to “loop up” with their students - teaching them in two consecutive grades. Two out of the three humanities teachers looped with their students in 2023-2024, ensuring continuity in relationships and reducing the time needed for teachers to learn about their students' needs. By offering a stipend to encourage this, Nashville Classical East has created a stable teaching environment where teachers are deeply familiar with their students' strengths and challenges.

# CHALLENGES

Despite their impressive results, Nashville Classical East has faced challenges on its road to success. For instance, the 3rd grade students who attended in 2024 were directly impacted by the Pandemic. Many of these students lacked foundational literacy skills which makes Nashville Classical East's results all the more impressive, lending even more credibility to the approach.

Improving outcomes for students in Tiers 2 and 3 also remains an ongoing challenge. However, these are a focus area identified in the school's goal setting this year. As described above, the school has structured its schedule and devoted resources to provide additional instruction for these students. Early results have been promising with students assigned to interventions showing a faster rate of progress than their peers. Nashville Classical offers a slightly longer school day to ensure scholars have access to remedial instruction without missing critical enrichment opportunities like art, physical education, or music.

Another challenge is the impact of digital media and devices on students' attention spans and well-being. While digital tools are neither inherently good nor bad, early exposure has led to concerns about students' ability to focus.<sup>3</sup> Nashville Classical East is working to be intentional about how it structures the use of these devices and works hard to help students stay engaged and understand the value of their education.

## BENEFITS OF THE CHARTER MODEL

The charter school model has been instrumental to Nashville Classical East's success. The autonomy given to charter schools allowed Nashville Classical to be an early adopter of the Science of Reading and to select its curriculum and schedule in a way that best supports student learning. The school's ability to make intentional decisions about time management, such as the consecutive humanities blocks, and to design their budget to offer stipends to help staff retention has been key to ensuring students receive high-quality, continuous literacy instruction.

# CONCLUSION

Nashville Classical East has demonstrated that a combination of strong leadership, dedicated staff, evidence-based practices, and a supportive school culture can lead to exceptional outcomes in literacy. The school's commitment to the Science of Reading, recruiting and retaining high-quality staff and along with intentional goal setting has positioned it as a leader in Tennessee's efforts to improve literacy outcomes. School leaders and policymakers can learn from Nashville Classical East's approach. The lessons summarized here offer a roadmap for stakeholders at all levels who are committed to ensuring that every student in Tennessee can read by 3rd grade.

3. Santos RMS, Mendes CG, Marques Miranda D, Romano-Silva MA. The Association between Screen Time and Attention in Children: A Systematic Review. *Dev Neuropsychol.* 2022 Jul;47(4):175-192. doi: 10.1080/87565641.2022.2064863. Epub 2022 Apr 17. PMID: 35430923.