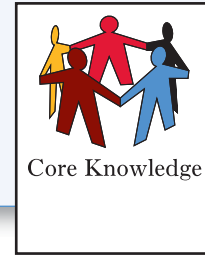


III. Three Oaks Elementary School Fort Myers, Florida



Grades PK-5

Enrollment: 1,006

Low-Income: 36%

Non-White: 35%

Located in a suburban neighborhood to the south of Fort Myers, Florida, Three Oaks Elementary School opened its doors in 1988-89. The following year, then-principal Constance Jones attended a national conference of educators, experts, and content area specialists convened by the Core Knowledge Foundation to hammer out a final agreement on the embryonic Core Knowledge Sequence. Excited by the result, Dr. Jones volunteered to pilot the Sequence at Three Oaks during the following year.

Fifteen years later, the curriculum is still being taught, and staff members are proud to work at “The Nation’s First Core Knowledge School.” Cyndi Wells, director of K-8 professional development for the Core Knowledge Foundation, visited Three Oaks last year and described the challenging, vibrant teaching and enthusiastic learning that still takes place there:

Ms. Scott’s third grade students excitedly shared their Power Point presentations on New World explorers and proudly displayed the explorer concentration games they had made themselves. Ms. Anderson’s fourth grade students were bursting with insights derived from on-line field trips to historic Williamsburg. Ms. Poppe’s students presented adjectives in the shape of flowers relating language arts with their study on life cycles in science. Displays of a recent study of insects, including a Venn Diagram comparing moths and butterflies, adorned the classroom walls.

Of course, the work of Core Knowledge staff is never completely “finished,” and Three Oaks continues to face—and overcome—new challenges as they arise. Last year the staff worked with the Core Knowledge Foundation to conduct a detailed, day-long “implementation analysis.” “Because of new teachers coming in,” says Vivian Posey, the current principal, “we felt we needed to step right back to the beginning and make sure everyone had a sense of their full responsibilities in implementing the Sequence.”

Starting this year, Dr. Posey is working to improve the induction of new teachers, especially those who begin working after the school year has started. “We were assuming teachers were informally helping along the newcomers, but based on our review last year we want to make sure we ... do a more thorough job in-servicing the new teachers and helping them understand the significance of the Sequence.”

Changes in state and district standards and accountability policies over time have presented another challenge, necessitating constant alignment work. “In a Core Knowledge school, it can sometimes seem like teachers have to be responsible for two different tracks. You have to blend the two, but it’s a challenging intellectual task.”



That hard work has paid off. After a brief dip in the early part of this decade, Three Oaks has earned A's on Florida's accountability rating system for three years in a row. And middle school teachers continue to tell Dr. Posey that they recognize Three Oaks graduates because of their much greater vocabulary and knowledge about the world.

Still, her teachers often tell her they wish they had more time in the day. "The topics in Core Knowledge are so exciting for children that their excitement encourages teachers to go further and further into a topic, but there's really not a lot of time for that," she says. "So we conducted a time analysis for them to help them see where they could find more time."



That's one reason Dr. Posey bristles when asked whether Core Knowledge is "developmentally appropriate" for young children. "I'm not sure that people who say that really understand what developmentally appropriate actually means. The students are the barometer of what's developmentally appropriate in the classroom. Our teachers are professionals and will know if it goes too far, but we never see that. We see kids wanting more knowledge, not less, and the only appropriate and just thing to do is give it to them."

Another charge she cannot fathom is that a curriculum like Core Knowledge will lead to rote learning and bored students. "This is intrinsically exciting information. Children love stories and so much of the Core Knowledge Sequence is a wonderful story of human history. And beyond that, I'd say

lecture and memorization is only one way this kind of content can be taught."

Indeed, Dr. Posey and her staff believe that, far from inducing boredom, a specific, content-rich curriculum taught engagingly can engender a lifelong enthusiasm for learning. Last year Mary Kathryn Hassett at the Core Knowledge Foundation tested the assumption by interviewing a former Three Oaks student named Raj Desai, who had been photographed as a second grader by Life magazine when it published a story on Core Knowledge back in 1991. Mr. Desai, by then a senior at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, told her:

Core Knowledge gave me a love of learning in general, since there was no subject that wasn't made fun and interesting. For example, I never learned to hate history because my first experience with it was not having dates and names and facts drummed into me but learning through interaction and stories. I remember having a Roman market day where we recreated the experience of a Roman bazaar with students manning the stalls and being the patrons.

Most importantly, he said, "The very broad range of education I went through in elementary school encouraged me to be open-minded towards courses in all of my further education."