

Boys Class Boosted Scores - APS Cuts Fifth-Grade Experiment, Citing Tight Budget

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The boys who were enrolled in Reid Nunn's all-boys classroom last year have some pretty clear ideas about why their test scores improved.

"There were no girls to ruin the fun," said Aaron Wright, 11.

The boys were part of a teaching experiment at McCollum Elementary School, in which Nunn taught a boys-only fifth-grade class and used boy-centric teaching methods: lots of competition, books about adventure, breaks for physical training and male guest speakers every week.

The good news is that the boys' scores on the New Mexico Standards-Based Assessment jumped dramatically after they had been in the class.

The bad news: Albuquerque Public Schools is discontinuing it because budget constraints have led to larger class sizes at McCollum.

Nunn's class last year had only 16 students, while this year he is teaching a coed class of 26. Parents had to opt into Nunn's boys class, and the district couldn't risk the cost of a smaller classroom if a full roster of students didn't sign up, APS spokesman Rigo Chavez said.

The academic improvements are undeniable:

80 percent of the boys were proficient readers at the end of the year, compared with 66 percent at the start.

Math proficiency jumped from 26 percent to 60 percent.

In both math and reading, 6 percent of students were in the "beginners" category at the start of the year, while none was in that category at the end. The number of "advanced" students doubled in both subjects, from 6 percent to 12 percent.

Science scores went from 53 percent proficiency to 86 percent. The number of advanced students went from zero to 20 percent.

Every student improved, and none slipped backward, Nunn said.

Those boys are now in middle school, and many of them are still friends. They say they have carried lessons with them that they learned last year.

Kishawn Wilson, 11, said he uses test-taking strategies of narrowing down a field of answers and making educated guesses — something he hadn't mastered when he took the SBAs in fourth grade.

"I was freaking out (in fourth grade) because I didn't know the answers," Wilson said when some of the boys gathered this week. "Last year, I just went straight through."

And the boys are definitely readers. A group of five of them reunited Thursday to talk about the experience and started talking over one another when the topic of books came up. Ziazyzie Green, 11, said he was reading "My Side of the Mountain," a book about nature that sparked his interest after the boys read the survival novel "Hatchet" in class last year.

Matthew Marler was reading the Chronicles of Narnia, "because it has weapons and swords, things kids like us are into."

And Wilson said he had recently enjoyed "Because of Winn-Dixie," a dog story, which he picked up after the boys read "Where the Red Fern Grows."

When "Where the Red Fern Grows" was mentioned (spoiler alert: the dog dies at the end), the boys glanced at one another and had a half-hearted dispute about whether "everyone cried." The consensus was that some people cried, and "everyone wanted to."

Nunn said he worked to create a safe environment in the classroom where the boys could feel comfortable crying or expressing their feelings, without worrying about impressing girls or looking macho.

"They could cry in here and not worry about it," he said, adding that the class was a mix of different social groups. "These were some of the nerds who used to get picked on and some of the tough kids," he said.

Renee Hutzen, whose son Jacob was in Nunn's class last year, said the camaraderie among the boys made a noticeable difference in her son's attitude toward school.

"He had a lot of the male bonding and was always excited to come to school," she said, adding, "Boys really do learn differently."

And on Thursday, there was still no evidence of friction between cliques.

"By the middle of the year, we knew each other's hearts and backed each other up," Marler said at the boys' gathering Thursday. "We're all brothers."

JIM THOMPSON/JOURNAL Teacher Reid Nunn listens as members of his all-boys class talk about their experiences last year and how they are using those lessons in middle school. JIM THOMPSON/JOURNAL From left, students Ziazyie Green, Jacob Romero, Kishawn Wilson, Matthew Marler and Aaron Wright talk about their experiences in teacher Reid Nunn's all-boys classroom last year at McCollum Elementary.

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