

Ramping up early learning with *Superkids*

An opportunity to pilot

Although the Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Knoxville had recently purchased a standard K–5 reading program from the state-approved list, their superintendent and principals decided to pilot *The Superkids Reading Program™* starting with kindergarten in the 2016–2017 school year. With the prior program, according to Sister Mary Marta Abbott, RSM, superintendent, “Everyone was struggling with the K–2 material; it just didn’t meet their needs.”

Director of Curriculum and Instruction Sedonna Prater had been interested in *Superkids®* for nearly a decade. “I am thrilled that we are using it now,” she says. After using the program in her class during its pilot year, kindergarten teacher Michelle Dougherty agrees. “In the early grades, we’re learning to read, not yet reading to learn. This program really takes that to heart.”

The challenge of a new approach

Zaner-Bloser worked with the diocese’s schools to implement *Superkids* thoughtfully. To introduce the program to classroom teachers, representatives hosted a dinner to address teachers’ and administrators’ questions. At least one longtime teacher was initially skeptical.

“*Superkids* considers the developmental needs of K–2 students.”

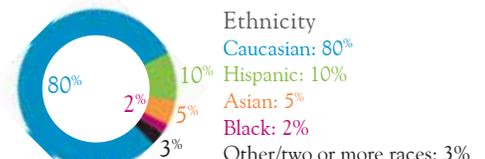
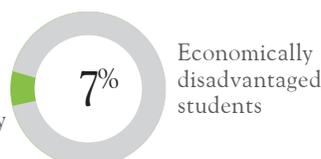
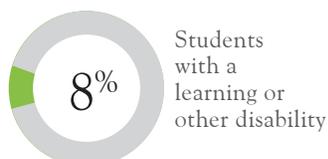
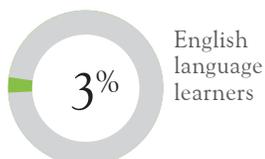
—Michelle Dougherty, Kindergarten Teacher

“When we were invited to the meeting, as kindergarten teachers, we came in with kind of an ‘Okay, what is this going to be about?’ attitude,” remembers Dougherty, who has been teaching for 22 years. She explains that she entered the dinner skeptical and left with hope. “The more they talked, the more my wheels were turning, and I left really excited about *Superkids*.”

What persuaded Dougherty was the research-based instruction found in the program. “As a teacher, I love the phonics, the phonemic awareness, and the developmental appropriateness of the program—that it was made just for K–2.” Her first year teaching with *Superkids* proved that the students responded just as the program’s

Diocese of Knoxville

A Catholic-school diocese with eight elementary schools in East Tennessee



representatives predicted. “Our rep said this is a program where kids are engaged. I was skeptical. But I am happy to be proven wrong because students really are engaged!”

Greeting the second year

First-grade teacher Cathy Sompayrac implemented *Superkids* in the 2017–2018 school year with students who were in the prior year's pilot. “Kindergartners coming in who had done *Superkids* last year loved it. They know the characters. And I noticed that, in their reading, they recognize characters,” she explains.

“***Superkids is deeper than just cute little characters.***”

—Cathy Sompayrac, First-Grade Teacher

Sompayrac believes *Superkids* made a real impact on students because they entered first grade more prepared. “Our reading program before was definitely lacking in phonics and phonemic awareness. And I see my students entering very strong in those areas.” She also appreciates the thoughtful organization of the curriculum, even given her 20-year teaching experience. “It’s very systematic, so the way it flows is easy for me to start with, as a teacher new to the program.”

Handwriting integration

Superkids’ integration of other foundational literacy skills impressed administrators. After speaking to her representative, Sister Mary Marta, RSM understood how *Superkids* teaches students handwriting in the context of letter recognition and prepares them for cursive in third grade with the same pedagogical approach as *Zaner-Bloser Handwriting*.

Sompayrac applauds the inclusion of handwriting. “The handwriting components are great,” she points out. “I’ve seen a big improvement in students’ skills.” With *Superkids*, teachers have a package and a solid curriculum that integrates letter formation with letter recognition, creating the important reading base of writing by hand to learn letters. “The writing program—how we go from drawing pictures to labeling pictures to writing things? No other reading program is doing that,” she says.

Supportive coaching strengthens classrooms

“Another great benefit with *Superkids* is they provide a coach,” says Sister Mary Marta, RSM. Kindergarten teacher Dougherty concurs. “This is the first time in a

textbook adoption that we’ve actually had a person from the company come and talk to us about what we’re doing and what she’s seen in other classrooms,” she says.

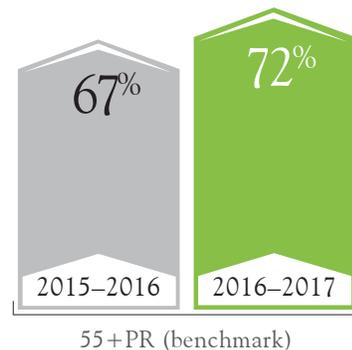
“***I’ve done all sorts of programs, but I’ve never had a coach, even a rep, give this kind of support.***”

—Michelle Dougherty, Kindergarten Teacher

Dougherty describes her coaching experience during the first year of the *Superkids* pilot when the coach visited early in the school year. “She noticed I had a struggling student, and she asked me whether I had used the *Superkids Skill-Building Book*. She described that the strategies can be used one-on-one with a student struggling with letter-sounds or other skills. To know that a coach can help me and just point out things, that’s awesome,” says Dougherty.

Kindergarteners showed growth with *Superkids on STAR™ Early Literacy*

More students achieved benchmark (55% rank and above) during the pilot year with *Superkids* (2016–2017) than the previous year.



Administrators and teachers became *Superkids* fans in less than one year. “I have a classroom in one of our schools that likes to do a lot of Montessori style. They’re happy with *Superkids*, and they were really pushing back at first. Now, they’ve gotten into really using the program,” says Sister Mary Marta, RSM.

Teachers agree. “It would be really difficult to get me excited about another program,” says Dougherty. “It would have to knock my socks off, like *Superkids* has done.”