

A Literacy SOLUTION

When Hope Has Evaporated

Is it too late for secondary students to develop literacy? Hope springs eternal in special educators. Yet the reality has been bleak for secondary students who read below grade level—until now. When Washington County School District's Secondary Literacy Team started the search for a program that could help the lowest readers, a solution was found in the program, *Language! A Literacy Intervention Curriculum*. The program solved two problems. First, it provided teachers with the skills they needed to teach reading and writing in a systematic, integrated way. Second, it provided students the skill and practice they needed to improve and experience success.



Cody Dupass from Hurricane Middle School had a class of ten eighth graders with an average reading level of 2.4. They didn't know a noun from a verb or an adjective from an adverb. They didn't even realize that their own names need to be capitalized. Seven years of frustration and failure brought out the worst behaviors she had ever dealt with in her eleven years of teaching. She wondered if she could make it through the year.

As a member of the literacy team that realized the frustration of secondary teachers, Cody said, "The buck needed to stop here. Our students needed concentrated, prolonged, and structured instruction. We needed to make time the variable, not student progress." The *Language!* program requires a 90-minute block of time. So, schools with 45-minute periods, needed to shuffle schedules to accommodate the students. Cody spent the first two weeks re-arranging schedules. She also scheduled a parent meeting so that all parents were able to understand what they were trying to accomplish. More importantly, parents learned how to support their

students at home. "It was wonderful to sit with the parents and watch as I gave them tools to help their children be successful," Cody recalled.

The complete three-year *Language!* program offers 18 strands of instruction. These include: speaking/listening, phonology, phonemic awareness, orthography, phonics, word recognition, spelling, syllabication, text reading, vocabulary, comprehension, morphology, semantics, figurative language, grammar/usage, mechanics, syntax, and composition. Cody likes the way it provides structured and sequential lesson plans. She states, "This program leaves nothing to chance. The students learn and master each new skill with eighty percent mastery before they move on." She goes on to say, "There are daily phonemic drills, vocabulary builders, as well as writing and grammar practices. Being sequential allows students to fill in the gaps missed during their earlier schooling."

The advantage of starting with the basic skills using new vocabulary and techniques, offers students an opportunity to be successful. Cody

said, "Although the beginning material is simple and basic, it is written on an appropriate age level of interest, which helps bolster self esteem."

Cody and her students are successful, as indicated on the STAR reading test. Looking at the results, she said, "If a teacher is only as good as her slowest student, I must be one amazing teacher." For her, to see the growth of these students in just two terms has been remarkable. Her words speak for the success of the program. "They are finally starting to read for enjoyment. They can write complete sentences with correct capitalization and punctuation, even when they are asked to write them in cursive. They can change a

let them make the decision to continue or not. Their only question was "Will this help me read better?" They agreed to keep going.

Leslie said, "I compared their reading skills to the foundation of a house. If a person wants their house to stand strong throughout life, it must have a good solid foundation. Unfortunately, their foundations were filled with holes, some small and some large. If the foundation is full of holes, it will not hold up the weight of the building. It will crumble even if the outside is covered with band-aids. I told them that we had to go back and fill in the holes with the materials that are missing, before we can build upward."



STAR Reading Test Results

Students	8/18/03	3/29/04
Student 1	.9	4.8
Student 2	3.5	5.3
Student 3	1.9	2.7
Student 4	2.3	4.1
Student 5	3.9	5.8
Student 6	2.1	3.6
Student 7	2.1	5.1
Student 8	2.7	4.7
Student 9	1.3	1.9 on 1/7/04 - missed 3/29/04
Student 10	Missed 8/18 test	2.4

Results from Hurricane Middle School's eighth grade *Language!* class
Teacher: Cody Dupass

simple phrase into a complete sentence or a question without difficulty. They are able to locate the nouns and verbs in a sentence as well as the subject of that sentence. For the first time in their school careers, they are feeling success."

Another teacher, Leslie Taylor from Hurricane High School said, "I was excited when I was asked to attend training on *Language!* last fall. I had seen part of the program a few years before and understood it to be a good program. As I sat in the first three days of training, I was impressed with the materials and lesson plans. I was excited to take it back and begin using it with my students." Leslie was apprehensive about her high school students' reactions to the program, though. Placement tests indicated that her students needed to start on Unit One—all the way back to the beginning of literacy basics. "At first, my students hated it," she confided. "They asked me why we were doing this baby stuff. Their behavior was disruptive. There were many days I felt like quitting or jumping ahead to units that would seem more on their level." She was reminded of the importance of starting at the beginning and filling in all the holes while attending the monthly study groups that were set up for teachers during the implementation year. Leslie kept telling the students that if they would stick with it, they would see it was worth it. She wisely

In April, Leslie tested all her students using the same reading inventory she had used the first month of school. Not only were reading levels up, but student effort had really changed. She shared the story of one student who read on a first grade level. "When she spelled a word, the letters didn't match the sounds. Now as I give words to spell, I see her write the word, then stop and read back over it, saying each sound, and noticing when the letters don't match up to the sounds. Another student would hurry through everything he writes. Often when he said the words to himself, he was not forming the sounds correctly; therefore he would misspell most words. He now slows down and thinks about his words. The drills and activities help teach these students to focus and to listen carefully."

Can struggling readers be taught to read in secondary schools? Yes, they can be taught. It takes intensive intervention, but that's what *Language!* is about. It is worth every effort to have students feel success and enjoy reading for the first time. ■

To learn more about *Language! A Literacy Intervention Curriculum* training contact Peggy Childs at pchilds@wash.k12.ut.us. A 5-day training from a national trainer in the *Language!* curriculum will be hosted in St. George on August 2-6, 2004.