

## READING RECOVERY AT THE MATHER SCHOOL

*by Kim Marshall*

Any educator who reads the professional literature or attends conferences knows that one of our most difficult jobs is telling hype from the real thing. For several years, I had been reading articles about a program called Reading Recovery, and frankly, the program sounded too good to be true. How could the lowest-achieving first-grade students be permanently cured of their reading problems in only twelve weeks of instruction? I put these articles aside along with write-ups of other wonderful-sounding programs that I was sure wouldn't pan out in the real world.

But then, through a lucky series of events, I took a closer look at Reading Recovery. I happened to attend a Fireside Chat at the Harvard Principals' Center, and hear the noted psychologist, Jerome Kagan, issue a provocative challenge. He said that educators were too bureaucratic to implement his simple solution to inner-city reading problems: bring in high school students to tutor first graders in reading for an hour a day.

Although I found myself thinking of all the logistical obstacles to this idea (How would we get the high school students over and back

home? How could we get the older students to come consistently? What would the first graders be pulled out of? Would the high school students be well enough trained to do the job?), I was nettled by Kagan's accusation that those who would not implement the idea were "bureaucratic." I've always prided myself on being non-bureaucratic, and I wanted very much to implement an effective early-intervention program for our many high-risk first graders. Did I have a better idea?

This troubling thought was churning around in my head the next time I read about Reading Recovery, and I suddenly saw the program in a new light. Here was a one-on-one tutoring program for first graders that claimed dramatic, long-lasting gains, but, unlike Kagan's idea, Reading Recovery took place right in the school. It had a 20-year research base, a proven track record, and an elaborate training regimen which would be available in Wareham, Massachusetts starting that fall. I eagerly gathered more information on the program and passed it along to my Zone Superintendent, Clifford B. Janey, for his reaction.

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Dr. Janey urged me to attend the annual Reading Recovery conference in Columbus, Ohio in February, 1990. After flying through a driving snowstorm, I confess that I walked into the two-day conference with piracy in my heart. Dr. Janey and I both thought that we could take the basic ideas of Reading Recovery gleaned from the conference and set up a pilot program of our own in some East Zone schools. After all, the basics of the program sounded obvious: one-on-one instruction, a blend of phonics and whole language, using good children's books, etc. What was so arcane about that?

In the very first workshop I attended, the idea of pirating the program quickly wilted. Reading Recovery is much, much more than just tutoring of high-risk students. The reason that the program has such phenomenal results with first graders (claiming to permanently lift 90% of its graduates out of the remedial track), is that it has one of the most intensive training programs in education and a support network second to none. This is not just ordinary tutoring; as I attended one workshop after another in the glittering Hyatt Hotel in Columbus, I learned that each 30-minute, eight-part Reading Recovery lesson is highly structured and

requires literally a year of training, observation, and critiquing to do properly. Did I get religion in Ohio? You bet! I came back convinced that there was only one way to implement Reading Recovery — by the book.

Dr. Janey agreed, and he decided to pilot Reading Recovery at the Mather School during the 1990-91 school year. Two experienced Mather Chapter I Reading teachers, Barbara Dickersin and Rita Lyle, volunteered to give it a try (working on Reading Recovery for half of each day, regular Chapter I Reading the other half), and they won admission to the Wareham Public Schools' highly selective training program. The training began with a full week in August and continued with a weekly three-hour session in Wareham every Tuesday afternoon for the entire year.

What has happened in our first year of implementation? Both teachers are very, very positive about the program. At this writing (mid-April), we have graduated all eight of the initial round of students (each teacher has four students at a time) and are hard at work on the second group of eight. It's highly likely that we will graduate sixteen students before the end

of this year. In the second and subsequent years, we expect to graduate twenty or more students a year. All of these are children who, without Reading Recovery, would almost certainly repeat first grade and become "lifers" in Chapter I or Special Education classes, forever behind, never catching up with their peers, many of them becoming discipline problems, most believing that they were in some way inferior to other children their age.

Why is Reading Recovery so effective? Here are my observations:

First, of course, is the daily, intensive, one-on-one tutorial attention; kids are getting much more reading and writing time than is possible in regular classrooms or even small Chapter I or Resource Room classes.

Second, the teacher training is absolutely first-rate. Barbara and Rita have been through one of the most rigorous experiences of their professional lives, learning an entirely new approach to teaching through intensive, hands-on methods.

Each weekly workshop begins with a trainee teaching a full Reading Recovery lesson behind a one-way mirror, observed by the other trainees. Then another teacher-in-training teaches her lesson, and then both are supportively critiqued by the entire group.

Trainees read extensively in theoretical work, do their own research, write constantly about what they are doing, and track every move as their students progress. I know of no other training in education that is as clinical and rigorous as this!

Third, Reading Recovery is an artful blend of a whole language and a more phonetic approach. Children read colorful, well-written children's books in every lesson, but also learn basic word attack skills by working with many different kinds of writing surfaces.

Fourth, Reading Recovery blends writing with reading. In every lesson, students are writing words and sentences. Like IBM Writing to Read labs, this program uses the important connection between taking in information from print and producing print oneself.

Fifth, there is a strong emphasis on making students independent readers. Rather than fostering dependence on the cozy tutorial setting, Reading Recovery constantly pushes students to learn the reading skills that good readers use and be able to use them on their own. One of the constant refrains from the trainers is, "Who's doing the work here?" Teachers are pushed to make sure that it's the student who is actively engaged and progressing.

Sixth, parents are included in the process. Each night, Reading Recovery students take home their

latest little book and read it to a family member. They also take home the day's cut-up sentence in a little zip-lock bag and assemble and read it at home. Reading and constructing for a loved one every day has to have a major impact on reading progress.

Finally, Reading Recovery builds on students' strengths rather than remediating their weaknesses. This approach, plus the tenacious expectation that students WILL learn how to read, pervades every minute of instruction. On the wall in my office is the slogan, ALL CHILDREN CAN LEARN. Reading Recovery teachers really make this happen.

One comment I've heard about Reading Recovery is that it is a great program but too expensive to be broadly replicated. I think the opposite is true. Two Reading Recovery teachers in a school the size of the Mather (600 students) will subtract 20 students a year from the high-risk population. Over a period of five years, as each cohort of students moves through the school, this will dramatically cut the number of students who need expensive Special Education and Chapter I services. Although we

have needed an extra Chapter I teacher in the first two years of implementation, the long-range savings will be significant. So it's not a question of inner-city schools not being able to afford Reading Recovery; the truth is that we can't afford NOT to adopt it!

I think Reading Recovery teachers are among the luckiest people in education. All of us make a difference, but Reading Recovery teachers see dramatic proof of their effect on students in a very short space of time. Students who could not read a single word and are tied up in knots at the beginning of the program are reading fluently on grade level 12-15 weeks later, and virtually none of these students will ever need Chapter I or Special Education services again. This early boost will have a life-long effect on each student. I envy those who work in Reading Recovery, and I have great respect for their courage in taking on such a rigorous, professionally challenging program. They are on the cutting edge of American education, and are a shining example to all of us. As education develops into a more and more professional field, I hope there will be more and more programs as effective as Reading Recovery.

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