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MI: District gets physical with reading



Students from the Body Phonics after school tutoring program make the shapes that provide their memory cues for the associated sounds.

Summary: Combining an imaginative system for teaching reading with creative use of school facilities, transportation, and the Boys & Girls Clubs has provided this district with a successful formula for helping struggling students become better readers.

Reading isn't a quiet, sit-by-yourself-in-your-seat activity for students who attend after-school tutoring sessions at Wick and Merriman Elementary Schools in Michigan's K–6 Romulus Community Schools. Sounds, letters, and words are munched, crunched, and pounced on as students learn with Body Phonics, a tactile and kinesthetic approach to reading. Everything is fair game as tutors use hand signals, storytelling, and picture drawing to sear the connections between sounds and letters—the base of

phonics—into students' minds.

This imaginative system for teaching reading combined with creative use of school facilities, the district transportation

system, and local Boys & Girls Clubs is a successful formula that helps struggling students become better readers. The after-school tutoring program is part of the district's six-point plan for advancing student achievement and encouraging community involvement in schools. The *American School Board Journal* recognized the district's accomplishments in 2006, by awarding it a Magna Award.

Touching, seeing, and acting out sounds

Special education teacher Chris Consales developed the Body Phonics reading method when she became frustrated trying to teach students sounds—the basic building blocks of reading—and corresponding letters. "It occurred to me that kids need letters to fly right off the page and right onto their faces where they can connect the shape of the letter with the actual shape of the sound. Through Body Phonics, students need only master four critical skills in phonics and sight words to become more able readers," says Consales who won a 2005 Michigan School Boards Association Award for her creative approach to teaching basic reading skills.

To learn the short "u" sound, for example, children put their hands under their chins in a "u" shape and make the sound "uh." The shape of their hands is their visual and tactile cue for the sound. To reinforce the sound, they may pretend to go under the water by lying on the floor under a table, and practice the "uh" sound with a phrase, such as "See the man with an umbrella under the sea."

Making up a story about life under the sea and drawing pictures provide more memory prompts to sounds and their connected letters. After mastering letter-sound connections, students move on to word families, single and multi-syllable words, and sight words (connectors such as "and" and "the" that appear frequently in reading). Testing for speed helps students become fluent by developing automatic responses to words. Students also apply their skills to reading increasingly challenging texts.

Leveraging your resources

Since the start of the district's 21st Century Community Learning Centers seven years ago, Body Phonics has been the foundation for teaching basic reading skills in the Centers' K–6 after-school tutoring program. In 2002–2003, Consales also taught Body Phonics to K–3 teachers throughout the Romulus district, many of whom still use the system in their classrooms today.

Each year, the tutoring program serves approximately 150 students from the district's six elementary schools. Approximately half the students need tutoring in reading and half in mathematics. Students needing basic reading skills receive one-on-one tutoring in Body Phonics two or more times a week in 45-minute sessions and average about 35 sessions each school year. Because of limited space and funds, entry into the tutoring program is determined by priority based on academic need in consultation with learning specialists, parents, and teachers.

The tutoring program leverages use of school facilities and the district transportation system to get students to the Boys & Girls Clubs at the Wick and Merriman Elementary Schools where the clubs and tutoring programs are located. Students from the district's other four elementary schools can ride the district buses, free of charge, to the Boys & Girls Club after-school programs that run from 3:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Club members receiving tutoring can

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District characteristics

Name: Romulus Community Schools
State: MI
Type: Urban
Grades: K–6
Enrollment: 4,349
Students per teacher: 18.2

Enrollment characteristics

Economically disadvantaged: 48%
English language learners: n.a.
Students with disabilities: 14.6%
White: 43%
Black: 54.7%
Hispanic: 1.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 0.3%
American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.5%
Other: n.a.
Source: SchoolMatters

also use the Boys & Girls Club facilities while waiting for their tutors to collect them or for their parents to pick them up after their session is finished.

"It's a win-win situation for everyone," says Tom Dolan, Romulus Community Schools director of instruction and curriculum. "The community has after-school access to our school facilities through the Boys & Girls Clubs, parents don't have to worry about where their children are, our school facilities are used throughout the entire day, and students from six elementary schools in the district have easy transportation to Boys & Girls Club activities and tutoring."

Making it easy and fun

Center tutors come from all educational backgrounds, but all have earned at least 60 college credits. Many of them are graduate students, as well as new, substitute, and retired teachers. Each year, approximately 10–15 tutors take on the challenge of learning Body Phonics and receive training from Ms. Consales. They also receive tutoring materials, student progress tracking sheets, and tests for each skill learned. Tutors communicate regularly with teachers about students' needs and progress. Teachers and parents receive a written progress report each quarter.

Thomas Plum, director of 21st Century Community Learning Centers for the district, says, "Among the many effective ways of teaching reading, Body Phonics stands out, not only because it works, but because it lends itself to being understood easily by students AND to being taught easily to tutors." Tutors can learn the system with approximately 12 hours of instruction, two hours per day over a two week period. Body Phonics is a time- and cost-efficient training system notes Plum.

Tina Suleiman, Site Coordinator for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, got hooked on the program as a tutor four years ago. Suleiman finds the program has important benefits for tutors: "Tutors have a well-thought out plan of action based on the Body Phonics program and materials made available by Ms. Consales. It's great because you know just what you're going to do with students when you meet with them. Even if you're not a professional teacher, you feel confident about what you're doing. Students have fun learning and can bring their own creativity to the process too. It's amazing how much progress students can make with this system of teaching reading."

Documenting success

Does the Body Phonics program work? By all accounts, it does. Parent Tyson Morgan whose two sons, an elementary school student and a high school student, have been tutored in Body Phonics says: "When Ms. Consales showed me the system, I could understand how it might improve reading, but I was even more surprised at how well it actually worked. My fifth-grader has had trouble reading since kindergarten. Now when we're riding together in the car, he can read the signs as we pass by. He's able to read words that I wouldn't ever have expected him to know."

Consales and the Centers have carefully documented the success of the Body Phonics method. "Unlike many teachers who start a program or who aren't required to do so, Chris understood the need to keep data from the start, and data really tell the story," says recently retired Wick Elementary School principal, Deborah Juriga.

Pre- and post-test data from almost 1,000 students who took the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test after Consales trained district K–3 teachers in 2002–2003 showed improvement in students word recognition scores by six standards points after one year of instruction and a positive correlation between the amount of Body Phonics lessons given in class and student achievement in word recognition.

Over the past seven years, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers have administered the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test to a total of 210 students at the beginning and end of their tutoring. Basic reading students who started the year academically well below their peers had caught up with their classmates and were reading at the "average" level. Woodcock test results for 2005–2006 showed that students' rate of improvement was nearly three times the rate considered "good" and 40 percent greater than the rate considered "excellent." Ms. Consales takes special pride in the fact that many of her own students who were certified as special education students because of reading deficiencies have been decertified as a result of their Body Phonics training.

"Students' failure to grasp basic skills in reading and math can put them behind for the rest of their lives," observes Learning Centers Director Plum. "Programs like Body Phonics combined with good tutors, creative use of resources, and a willing school district can make sure that doesn't happen and also improve students' chances for future success in their studies."

Lessons learned

- Districts need to encourage and support teachers to be innovative and entrepreneurial. One person with an idea can make a big impact throughout the system. "Administrators can and should follow the lead of passionate and committed teachers to help them implement programs that will have a positive impact on students' achievements," says Tom Dolan, Director of Instruction and Curriculum. "When there's a good idea at the local level, with some funding and creativity, you can have a winning combination that will benefit students, parents, the school, and community."
- Don't stop an academic enrichment program because your school or district has met its academic goals or grant funds end. "Although we no longer have any failing schools in the district and are not required to offer tutoring, we felt that the tutoring program is essential to many of our students' success," says Tom Plum. When funding for the tutoring program ended through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, Romulus Community Schools found another source through Title I, because of the high percentage of children from low-income families in the district. Each of the six elementary schools now makes a contribution from Title I funds to support the tutoring program.
- Be comprehensive and integrated in your approach to leverage all the assets available to you. As resources dwindle, agencies such as schools and community-based programs, like the Boys & Girls Club, need to combine their resources, facilities, and best teaching strategies and practices. "You can't be a stand-alone company any more. An added benefit is that you're breaking down barriers about who is responsible for children. When everyone participates, everyone is responsible," observes Dolan.
- A program doesn't need to be expensive to be effective. "Body Phonics itself is an inexpensive way to teach reading with only paper goods and know-how," says Consales. Romulus Community Schools provides after school use of classrooms for tutoring free of charge, administrative support and use of building facilities, including office space and copies, and transportation, leaving most of the tutoring program budget to pay tutors' salaries. Ms. Consales offers tutor training gratis. By leveraging all available assets, public school-sponsored tutoring programs can provide tutoring at a fraction of the cost of commercial programs.

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