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HE DRAMA unfolds in first-grade schoolrooms across the country, as children begin to read and write. They're taking control of the most important tools they'll ever use, laying the foundation for their future as individuals. It's a critical stage in the learning process. Each step forward has a compound impact on the next. And each step not taken can derail the entire journey. A quick recovery early in the game can revise the script and set young learners back on the path to literacy.

Illinois State University is helping to rewrite the story throughout Central Illinois for struggling students. Since 1990 the College of Education's Center for Reading and Literacy has been home to a Reading Recovery teacher-training site. An international literacy program, Reading Recovery bases its unique and effective approach on early intervention. Its mission is simply "to reduce the number of first-grade students who have extreme difficulty learning to read and write."

"It really works. It's a really good thing," said Susan Almeida '73, M.S. '78, who is a research project coordinator in the College of Education. As a teacher leader with Reading Recovery, Almeida's job is "to teach teachers to teach reading better." Like all Reading Recovery professionals, she teaches reading directly to children as well.

"I've been in just about all the school districts in the area," she said, estimating that the University site serves approximately 600 children yearly in 30 to 40 school districts across a dozen Central Illinois counties. College of Education instructional professors Julie Eckberg and Marilyn Myers are also teacher leaders.

Founded by New Zealand researcher Marie Clay during the 1970s, Reading Recovery was introduced in the United States in 1984. It is available in 49 states, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, as well as its original New Zealand home. A Spanish component of the program, Descubriendo La Lectura, was established in Tucson in 1988 and now serves bilingual students in California, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, Texas, and Washington.



teacher earns graduate credit. Teacher leaders observe teacher-student contact sessions at least four times during that year. In subsequent years teachers participate in at least six sessions with a teacher leader who observes lessons through a one-way mirror.

"You teach reading by finding out what the child knows, child by child. Reading Recovery is an individualized program," Almeida said. Every Reading Recovery experience begins with a diagnostic tool developed by Clay specifically for children who are six years old. It assesses the child's exposure to literacy—word and letter recognition and basic concepts about print, such as opening the book and reading left to right and top to bottom.

With the assessment completed, a plan is developed for each child. "It's a matter of unlocking the code for each child," Almeida said. Once the connections are made, young readers can begin to move ahead.

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UST ASK 10-year-old Brad Hoselton and his family of Chenoa. Three years ago Brad was starting to fall behind in his first-grade reading class. Now he's an up-and-coming expert on lizards, a Harry Potter fan, and a future architect. His parents, Mari Lynn and Rodney Hoselton '86, mentioned their concerns to Brad's grandmother, Norma (Franzo) Oberholtzer '79, M.S. '88. A classroom teacher in Pontiac for 20 years, Oberholtzer knew her alma mater could help.

She "unretired" to supervise student teachers and eventually began teaching in the College of Education, where she met Almeida. Brad's Chenoa Grade School was a Reading Recovery program subscriber, and he was soon getting help from Karen (Augsburger) Skaggs '65, M.S. '82.

Skaggs retired from full-time teaching in 1999 and now works one-to-one with four to

Once a reluctant reader, Brad Hoselton went from learning to read to reading to learn as a result of Reading Recovery. He is now a Harry Potter fan, but he devours much more than just fiction. Hoselton enjoys creating cars and other models that he constructs on his own by following detailed instructions from manuals. He also relied on books to learn about lizards.

Gladly they read

University's center rescues struggling students BY JENNIE R. KING

"I first heard about it when I was teaching reading classes here at ISU," Almeida said. "I was desperate to help my students learn how to teach reading. Nobody really knew how to teach the struggling young reader. I came across a book called *The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties* by Marie Clay. This woman figured it out," said Almeida.

The Reading Recovery approach is one-to-one instruction, half an hour each school day over a period of 12 to 20 weeks for first-graders whose reading skills are significantly lagging. A supplement versus a substitute to regular classroom instruction, the program is implemented by certified teachers who learn to apply the Reading Recovery method at certified professional sites, such as Illinois State.

The initial phase of teacher training consists of weekly three-hour classes held over a full academic year, as well as daily contact with four students, for which the





Hoselton spent hours reading about lizards before making a purchase. His research gave him confidence that he chose a pet that is perfect for him, as well as the knowledge he needs to provide the appropriate care.

five students a day in the Reading Recovery program at Prairie Central School District #8 in Central Illinois.

“You can just see it, almost daily,” she said, describing how students respond to the program’s methods. “They get their confidence. When you start with them they’re unsure of themselves. They sometimes realize that they aren’t able to read as well as the other children in their class. I really do enjoy watching the sparkles in their eyes as they learn.”

An integral part of the Reading Recovery program is keeping a journal, sometimes about books and sometimes on real-life experiences. Brad recalls that one of his first stories was inspired by a Beanie Baby. “It was a bull. It had gold horns, an orange nose, and a brown body,” he remembers.

Skaggs credits Brad’s success to his parents’ involvement in the daily activities of the program. After each Reading Recovery session, students head home with books that they and the teacher have gone over, “so they don’t have any apprehension and they feel good about reading it with their parents,” Skaggs said. She extends the journal component to the parents to keep in contact. Students take the writing home too, breaking sentences apart for their parents.

Brad is now an A student. “I got to go to Brookfield Zoo,” he said, noting that the trip was a result of his perfect score in Accelerated Reading in fourth grade.

“He’s been so successful,” Oberholtzer said of her grandson. “He really didn’t know why he had to know how to read. Now he reads all the time,” she said. “He loves to read directions, because he loves to put things together. He’s made that transition from learning to read to reading to learn. He’s doing really well. He has no problems at all now.”

The change doesn’t surprise Oberholtzer, who knows that attitude correlates to a child’s level of frustration. “If you’re frustrated by inadequacies, then you get this bad attitude,” she said. “You have to get through to that frustration if you’re a teacher.” Skaggs was able to do that with Brad, who has been successful in other subjects because he reads with confidence and enthusiasm.

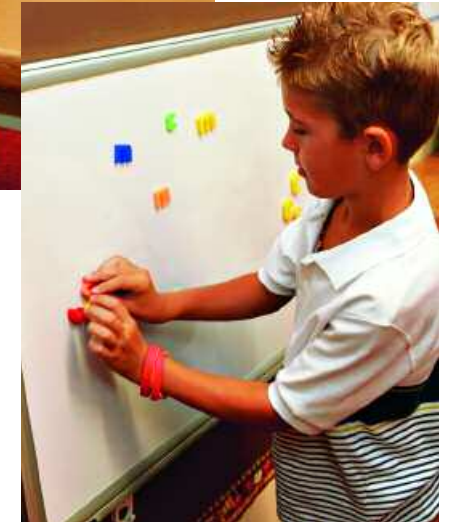


READING RECOVERY’S long tenure in local school districts throughout the country testifies to the effectiveness of this approach. Operating independently from Title I or other government-funded reading programs, Reading Recovery depends on support from the school districts that recognize its profound impact on literacy and make it available.

Almeida describes the program as “a rare collaboration” between the government, universities, and schools that sustain the totally nonprofit enterprise. Salaries are partially funded through the Illinois State Board of Higher Education, but school districts pay fees to Illinois State for Reading Recovery services. Schools eligible under Title I may apply their federal funds to Reading Recovery. Other schools may use Reading Improvement funds supplied through the Illinois State Board of Education, but some schools conduct their own fund-raising projects to cover the cost.

Financial support for the program got a boost recently from the University with the establishment of a Reading Recovery Program Fund within the Illinois State University Foundation. Donors to Redefining “normal” designated contributions to the Reading Recovery Program Fund under the College of Education’s Center for Reading and Literacy.

School personnel who are familiar with Reading Recovery agree that the benefits of the program far outweigh its costs. A district that says “our children are



Individual sessions are integral to the Reading Recovery program. Illinois State University Reading Recovery Teacher Leader Julie Eckberg, *above foreground*, observed a lesson led by Lora Miller. A Reading Recovery teacher at Jefferson Park Elementary School in El Paso, Miller worked with first-grader Tucker on text and on letters at a magnetic board, *right*. Reading Recovery teachers get the support they need from College of Education Research Project Coordinator Susan Almeida, *fourth from left*, who meets weekly with teachers in training.

worth it” builds it into the budget somehow, Almeida said. Oberholtzer agrees, noting that if students need the program, administrators find the funds. The investment inevitably pays huge dividends that are obvious in the lives of young students, such as Brad.

One big grin from a happily reading lizard collector says it all.

Editor’s note: To learn more about Reading Recovery, go to www.coe.ilstu.edu/ci/SPECIN/rr on the Web. For information on how to make a donation to the program, contact Gail Lamb at (309) 438-2903 or galamb@ilstu.edu.