



Third- to fifth-grade students in Janine Colaizzi's Reading Intervention class in the Deer Lakes School District have gained self-confidence from overcoming reading problems. Surrounding Colaizzi are, clockwise from upper left, Bobby Bertha, Alexa Kudlach, Sidney Petroff, Valerie Zivcovich and Marisa Werner.

AS SCHOOLS STRUGGLE TO MEET NEW READING PROFICIENCY STANDARDS, A LANDMARK STUDY REFLECTS LAST YEAR'S

CLOSING

WORK OF THE ENDOWMENTS' EDUCATION PROGRAM: INTENSIVE TEACHER TRAINING AND TAILORED REMEDIAL INSTRUCTION

THE

THAT STRIVES TO MAKE EVERY CHILD A READER. BY ANN BUTLER PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNIE O'NEILL AND JOSHUA FRANZOS

reading

GAP

As winter melts into spring in southwestern Pennsylvania, the sky on view through the classroom window is an uncharacteristic blue instead of gray, and the click of the intercom brings word that recess will be outdoors later this day for the 460 students at Deer Lakes School District's East Union Intermediate Center.

In Janine Colaizzi's Reading Intervention classroom, third-grade students Bobby Bertha, Sidney Petroff and Alexa Kudlach react with wide grins, but Colaizzi doesn't let them miss a beat, quickly refocusing their attention on the day's reading exercise as they respond in unison to her rapid-fire questions: "Next sound? *Sh*. What sound? **Snap**. Yes, *Sh*. Next sound? *Ch*. What sound? **Snap**. Yes, *Ch*..." The cadence is a rap-like rhythm but the exercise demands concentrated effort. The teacher watches and listens closely to each student, while the group, in turn, strives to respond correctly on cue. In fact, students typically give 12 to 20 responses *per minute* in this class as opposed to zero to two responses *per class session* in the traditional learn-to-read setting. This "Word Attack" drill is just one phase of a scripted, structured reading intervention known as "Corrective Reading."

Colaizzi, a 27-year veteran of elementary special education, was trained in the teaching method last year when she signed on to be part of the Power4Kids Reading Initiative, a national research study designed to demonstrate that highly effective, remedial reading interventions will teach all but a small fraction of children to read.

The comprehensive Power4Kids study represents an unprecedented, foundations-driven response to a national education crisis: 10 million kindergarten-through-12th-grade children, 20 percent of the country's school-age population, cannot read at grade level. Only a minority of students—whether in 4th, 8th or 12th grade—reach proficiency as measured by the Education Department's National Assessment of Educational Progress. On a scale that has three levels—basic, proficient and advanced—most students score at the basic level or even below basic in every subject.

In the Pittsburgh region, where several foundations have joined to make reading improvement a signature component of education grantmaking, the stakes are just as high: one out

in lead grants for the \$9 million Power4Kids project and partnered with Grover J. Whitehurst, director of the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education, who approved a \$4.2 million grant for the project. In all, 12 regional and national funders signed on, including Pittsburgh's Grable Foundation and the national W.K. Kellogg and Smith Richardson foundations.

Gerry Balbier, a senior officer in the Endowments' Education Program, remembers being “blown away” by the implications of Power4Kids at a concept presentation to potential funders by Cindy Haan, who conceived the study and chairs the San Francisco-based Haan Foundation for Children. Haan, herself the mother of a son who had to overcome a reading deficiency, formed the foundation with the mission of identifying the most effective instructional methods and technology by way of scientific research and then providing them to educators and parents.

“From the end of that first meeting, I knew our goal had to be getting that initiative to Pittsburgh,” says Balbier. “It was

Next sound? *Sh.* What Next sound? *Ch.*

of three fifth-graders cannot perform at the standards set for that education level in reading and math.

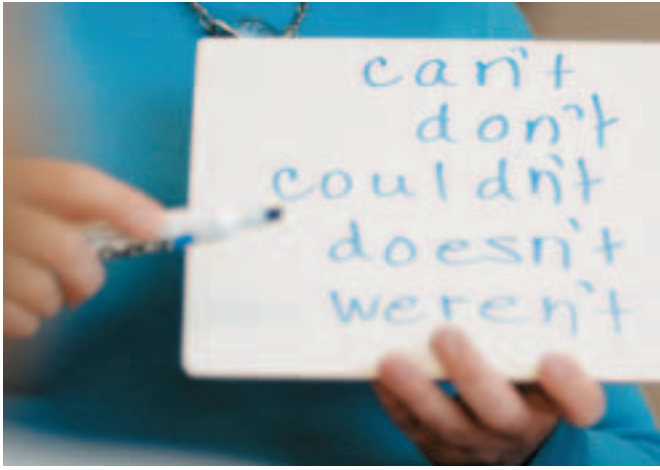
Classroom teachers across southwestern Pennsylvania are well acquainted with the plight of the struggling reader. Some students may have difficulty decoding words. Others may read well, but have difficulty with comprehension. Ideally, a teacher would choose from a repertoire of strategies to help each struggling reader overcome a particular reading deficiency. Even if these were bundled up and dropped off in classrooms, many regular education teachers are not reading specialists. Typically, they have limited knowledge of remediation strategies. And, many corrective practices are geared to the general domain of reading instruction rather than to one student's specific needs.

With the goal of empowering reading teachers, The Heinz Endowments, in 2003 and last year, made a total of \$1 million

clear that the region that landed the study would be first in line to benefit from its findings.” Balbier and other Endowments program staff brought the Power4Kids research team to Pittsburgh in 2002, a year before the study would begin, and won over key educators and funders, ensuring that the Pittsburgh region would be the study ground.

“Once Heinz committed, well, it's all quite a miracle,” says Haan, who is confident that even preliminary results from last year's intensive tutoring will provide teachers and parents across the country with reliable methods to address specific reading deficiencies. Before Power4Kids, says Haan, educators had to guess at which targeted reading intervention worked best for a particular learn-to-read problem.

“Cindy Haan created this project from her own real-world experience, which is the best insurance for success,” says



Amie O'Neill

sound? **Snap.** Yes, *Sh.* What sound? **Snap.** Yes...

Endowments President Maxwell King. “She comes to this as a mother who has struggled with her own child’s reading problem and as someone who has experienced the frustration of teachers who need better tools and training.”

As the largest rigorous science-based study of remedial reading instruction ever conducted in public schools, it uses a randomized field trial, the gold-standard methodology in social science research. Conducted during the 2003–04 school year, it

covered 44 teachers and 772 students in schools throughout suburban Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. Each teacher received intensive training in one of

four remedial reading methods: Spell Read, Wilson Reading and Failure Free Reading, in addition to Corrective Reading.

While results of the study are still being analyzed, Deer Lakes School District administrators have been so pleased with the informal outcomes that they are continuing Corrective Reading this year, even though funding for their portions of the study ended last year. In fact, eight of the 27 school districts that participated in the field trial last year adjusted their budgets this school year to continue Power4Kids reading strategies.

“The kids are happy. The parents are excited. There’s been so much success,” says Barbara Tomlinson, Deer Lakes’ director of special education and Colaizzi’s supervisor.

“I have students who are moving from ‘at risk’ to ‘some risk’ to ‘low risk,’” says Colaizzi, who also is bolstered by rave reviews of progress from parents, fellow teachers, even the school psychologist. While students in the program may not be aware

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Percentage of all fourth-graders in the nation who were not proficient in reading in 2003, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (*The Nation’s Report Card*)



Joshua Franzos



of specific measurements of their progress, they know they are succeeding and that they are having fun in the process.

Nine-year-old Bobby Bertha, with his Harry Potter–like hairstyle and glasses, hunches over his textbook, tracking words with his “pointer finger” during a Corrective Reading lesson. He will tell you that recess is the best part of school. But he’s told his mom that he loves his extra reading class. His mother,

Laura, has been gratified to see her son add reading to his list of favorite activities —now in the same mix with soccer, science, video games and the Boy Scouts. It’s a dramatic change from last year’s nightly battles over homework, with Laura finally realizing that his reluctance to deal with homework stemmed from embarrassment at not being able to

read. His struggle with words was a mystery to her. “I knew he was smart as a whip,” she says. But this year, Bobby is doing his homework on his own. No wonder the new confidence. On this day in Colaizzi’s class, Bobby is reading smoothly at 122 words per minute, a dramatic increase from the halting 94 words per minute he was reading when timed three months ago at the beginning of the course.

And, when he returns to his regular third-grade classroom and his teacher calls on him to read, he’ll be able to do it. No sweat. No embarrassment.

This is huge. Bobby knows what it feels like to be in second grade, listening to classmates reading aloud, and feeling his stomach twist into knots as the anxiety grows. When will the teacher call on him? How will he get through his turn? Will the other students make fun of his word stumbles and slow

reading pace? It was like that in first grade, too. Kindergarten was worst of all, Bobby remembers, because everybody else was getting it. “It makes you mad,” Bobby says. “And sad.”

That lesson plan for individual failure is repeated each day in thousands of classrooms across the country. Nationally, about 37 percent of fourth-graders cannot read at competency level. “Educational researchers consider this grade level the tipping point,” says Balbier. “If you aren’t achieving basic competency in reading by fourth grade, then future success in school is going to be limited.”

That’s why so much of the Endowments’ and other foundations’ grantmaking efforts to improve reading programs and teacher training are directed to the preschool-through-elementary grades.

As teachers face the enormous challenge of meeting standards set by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, namely, that 100 percent of all children perform with proficiency at their grade level in reading and math by 2014, the Endowments and other foundations are stepping in with additional strategies beyond Power4Kids.

A regional foundation partnership funds the county-wide Reading Achievement Center, where staff has coordinated the Power4Kids study but also manages a range of other initiatives, including student tutoring and state-of-the-art teacher training. For the Endowments, which has awarded a total of \$600,000 through the past three years toward the center’s \$650,000 average annual operating budget, the programs are key ingredients in the foundation’s Early Literacy Strategy, a joint initiative of the Education and the Children, Youth & Families Programs. The Endowments and partners—Pittsburgh, Alcoa and Hillman foundations—support the Achievement Center’s development, while the Grable Foundation has joined the Endowments and other national organizations in supporting the Power4Kids component.

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Percentage of Pennsylvania’s fifth-grade students who are not proficient in reading, according to newly released data from the 2004 PSSA and PASA reading tests



Intensive teacher training is being tested as part of the Power4Kids study. It's believed to be one of the most effective ways to improve students' reading ability. Far left: Melissa Simon of the Allegheny Intermediate Unit's Reading Achievement Center teaches the teachers in the latest instructional techniques. Middle: A reading instructor ranks words from best to worst in a class exercise. Immediate left: Highlands School District's Learning Support Program teachers Katie Nee and Judy Beresik confer on a student exercise.

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But the tie that binds all the work of the Achievement Center is teacher training, says Director Rosanne Javorsky, who came to the center after a long career in special education where, she says, 80 percent of the students can't read. "You try this and you try that. Teachers are always trying to find out what works, and we're about offering a structured way to do that." Today, she leads a team of 10 educational specialists dedicated to providing teachers with instructional strategies that work.

Debbie Beresik, a Title I reading specialist with 26 years in the classroom, took her place at one of the Achievement Center's "student" desks last year by signing on for the K-3 Apprenticeship Model. The two-year teacher-training program offers rigorous review of teaching performance, expert mentoring and innovative on-site support.

"This is truly *sustained* professional development, where someone comes to your classroom and watches you and helps you implement the strategy to make sure you are teaching it the right way," says Beresik, a teacher of struggling first- and second-grade readers in Deer Lakes School District's Curtisville Primary Center. Her experience began with three weeks of intensive training, followed by once-a-week, on-site coaching. She also participated in monthly meetings with fellow apprentices—29 teachers, from school districts throughout the county—demonstrating varying levels of expertise. At the end of the year, there was an additional week of leadership training to help her become a stronger mentor and coach to other reading teachers who would turn to her when facing problems.

Diane Maxwell, a third-grade teacher at Avalon Elementary in Pittsburgh's northern suburbs, says her teacher training through the Power4Kids study was the factor that kept her from quitting this year, as she faces one of the most challenging classes of troubled readers in her 17-year

career. "Sometimes I wonder how some of these students made it this far," she says. But applied against these toughest cases, Maxwell says her training has made a dramatic difference in individual student progress.

"I had a little girl who was a complete non-reader. When she finally learned, she was a totally new person. And her parents—when they came to thank me, they both had tears in their eyes. 'Finally,' they said, 'finally, someone has been able to get through to her.'"

Intensive teacher training, whether through ongoing programs offered through the Achievement Center or those specific to Power4Kids, is producing many other dramatic success stories in classrooms across the Pittsburgh region. But foundation officials and education researchers expect more quantitative validation to come in the numbers and measurements of the Power4Kids first-year tracking report this summer.

The data from the first year's results will help foundations determine which remedial reading strategies are worth funding for large-scale implementation. Students involved in the study will continue to be tracked for the next two years to further evaluate progress.

"Our plan will be to encourage more school districts in the region to send teachers for specialized training at the Achievement Center," says Balbier. "But we'll also be following Power4Kids closely. It may be the best tool we have to ensure that even students with severe reading difficulties will be able to learn."

Perhaps at no other time in the history of education grantmaking in this region has so much concerted effort been trained on developing system-wide remedial reading strategies that can be tailored to individual students. But then, even those school districts most obsessed with standardized testing can recognize the value of remedial instruction that aims to keep every student at pace for reading.

Certainly, there's no need to explain that to Colaizzi,

Bobby Bertha's teacher, whose eyes filled with tears when he announced he'd rather read a book than watch a video, or Bobby's mother, who now must make sure that her son's favorite book, *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*, is on board for every car trip. *h*

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One out of three fifth-graders in the Pittsburgh region is not proficient in reading