

By Robert R. O'Reilly

ACROSS THE WORLD

Getting Serious About Literacy in Schools: Canada and

CANADIAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS

are now serious about the goal of ensuring that every student be able to read and to achieve a high level of literacy. In its latest published three-year plan, Alberta Education has identified literacy as an area of priority and will spend \$66 million over three years to assist school boards to aid young children with difficulty in literacy skills.

Reading and literacy difficulties of young children begin in kindergarten or grade one. By the end of grade 3, the winners and losers in these areas are well identified. Research tells us that by the end of grade 3, some children will read about as well as the average high school student, whereas the poorest reader is unlikely to improve reading skills, no matter how long they stay in school.

Research and practice also tells us that remediation programs for poor readers begun in the primary grades have a very high chance of success; remediation programs begun after the child leaves grade three have a low chances of success.

Finally, extensive experience with practical programs and rigorous academic evaluations have identified excellent cost-effective primary level literacy programs which work for almost every child. Robert Slavin and colleagues at Johns Hopkins University have reviewed and assessed the best of such programs and his results are now widely used across the United States, Canada and Australia.

The State of Victoria in Australia, a school system with 800,000 students, is just completing a rigorous program to eradicate failure in early literacy. The program, supported by a budget of \$52

million (Australian funds — approximately \$50 million in Canadian dollars), is based on the following principles. The first is a pre-condition to any learning. It is the expectation that given good instruction and remediation, any student can achieve a high standard of literacy. Good instruction means that teaching is relentless and is directed to the needs and learning abilities of the child, and that sufficient time is allocated to the learning process.

The second principle is that good teaching must be guided by a detailed and systematic knowledge of each child's learning needs and learning progress. Such a record is essential for successful intervention by teachers.

The third principle is that teachers must be sufficiently skilled to be able to direct teaching activities to the needs of the child. Teachers must have a good understanding of the processes of reading and writing to be able to do this successfully. The complexity of the task also means that most teachers require on-going support from colleagues and experts.

The fourth principle is active intervention for those who fail to make satisfactory progress. Slavin's research has shown that such intervention, for the poorest readers, requires specially trained remedial teachers who can provide regular one-to-one teaching. For those students with severe difficulties, perhaps 2% of the total population will require further intervention, perhaps in a specialized facility.

Finally, successful literacy programs must link the activities of the school with the home and the larger community.

THE Program

The program incorporates state support in the form of leadership, training, monitoring for evaluative and research purposes, and special funding. Schools must agree to abide by the principles of the program, involve principals and teachers in the training programs and allocate some of the school's resources to the program.

Specifically, each school must endeavour to allocate two hours per day to all literacy activities. Each child must be

Australia



assessed upon entry to the school and records must be kept of the progress of each child. Each school must designate a senior teacher as the school's literacy coordinator. Depending on the size the school, that co-ordinator will be assigned to this task from 0.5 time to full-time.

Each primary level teacher must take part in the in-service training program, which consists of four full days of training. In addition are workshops in which teachers and co-ordinators review, discuss, and seek to improve each element of the program and their own practice. School co-ordinators are also offered an additional seven full days of training so that they can successfully fulfil their roles. Principals are also required to attend orientation sessions so that they can be in a position to offer continuing leadership and support for the programs.

Classroom practices include a mix of teacher directed whole-class activities, and small group work. It is a balanced program that differs from similar American programs in significant ways in that it relies more on the results of the workshop sessions of teachers and less on the prepared teaching scripts of experts. The full range of literacy activities is provided, from oral language, guided reading to independent writing. Teachers have identified 11 different literacy learning activities. Following the teacher directed whole-class activity, the teacher begins to work with small groups. It is here that the teacher customizes the teaching for individual students. For example, poorer students receive short intensive exercises every day, whereas more proficient readers receive longer, more in-depth sessions less frequently. Small group activities may take advantage of the presence of school volunteers or aides. They are designed to enable children to practice skills which they have already learned. Since it is crucial that teachers have uninterrupted time with each group, all children are trained to respect this need and no interruptions are tolerated. Time-on-task is thereby enhanced for all concerned.

Beginning in grade 1, children who are identified as falling behind are assigned to Reading Recovery teachers. These are already skilled teachers who have completed a further year of graduate level training in the teaching of reading, writing and

the methods of Reading Recovery. Services are provided to children on a one-to-one basis and teachers typically have four students per semester. The great majority of students so identified are able to read at their grade level and to make continued progress after about four months in the program.

Results

The results of the Australian experience to date are very promising. Comprehensive testing of children indicate, first of all, higher levels of achievement of children in schools which first entered this program as opposed to children in comparable schools which continued with the traditional programs. Secondly, the level of achievement for class groups approached the hoped-for targets — that 80% of all children would read at grade level with a balanced whole-school approach to literacy, and that after intervention only 2% would not be at grade level. However they are not there yet.

A major result of the program has been the increased level of professional ability and enthusiasm of the teachers for teaching literacy. It is hoped that continued refinements to the program through continued co-operation among teachers, co-ordinators, experts and government will soon permit every child in Victoria's schools to succeed. It is a model that Canadians should examine closely. ■

1 Robert Slavin and others, "Success for all: a summary of research," *Journal of Education for Students At Risk*, September 1996, 1:41-76.

2 I am indebted to Professor Peter Hill and Ms. Carmel Crévola of the Centre for Applied Educational Research of the University of Melbourne for introducing me to this program and for inviting me to participate in training sessions for school principals, co-ordinators and teachers.

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