

Reading program breakthrough - Herald-Tribune

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By Billy Cox

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SARASOTA — The object of so much adult scrutiny on this day clearly gets plenty of attention at home. The wellscrubbed little girl wears a petite necklace, a silver ring around a finger and a red bow in her hair. But at age 7, for at least some prospects of what she might someday become, time already is running out.

Her name is Salena, and as an ELL student, or English Language Learner, she has likely fallen into what some researchers call the “30-million word gap.” This is the projected difference in the number of words heard by 3-year-olds from well-to-do families versus those heard

See READING, A10

Wilkinson Elementary School teacher Kelly Watts works with first-grader Sophia Lansley as other educators observe through a one-way mirror. [HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTOS / DAN WAGNER]

Lisa Fisher, Reading Recovery teacher leader, discusses an observation with other educators.



READING

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by 3-year-olds in low-income households.

What is objectively verifiable is that Salena has been struggling to read since the shy firstgrader entered Tuttle Elementary School last fall. In January, she tested at a level 5 reading proficiency; according to the metrics, a student of Selena's age should be scoring anywhere from levels 16 to 18. That explains her intensely supervised presence inside Tuttle's veritable laboratory, known informally as "Behind the Glass."

The room is small, but equipped with, among other things, books, a whiteboard, magnetic letters, pencils, markers, paper, scissors, a mounted microphone and a huge two-way mirror. The mirror conceals the presence of

half a dozen educators who, from an adjacent darkened room, are monitoring every move.

Not only are they watching instructor Leigh Michalojko guide Salena through today's lesson, they are taking coded and highly detailed notes on both performances. When the session is over, Salena will return to her regular class and Michalojko will huddle with her "Behind the Glass" colleagues for questions, comments and an exchange of ideas.

This is significant because something dramatic is happening. Over the past three months, Selena's reading scores have vaulted 10 levels. That puts her within easy striking distance of normal expectations before summer break.

It's not just Salena.

Introduced in a limited rollout during the 2015-16 school year, an internationally acclaimed intervention program for rescuing low-performing first-grade readers from what could lead to a lifetime of failure is about to go big.

Renowned for offering daily, half-hour, four-day-a-week, one-on-one sessions between teachers and students, a celebrated formula called Reading Recovery draws on 30 years and a database of 2.2 million students to support its methods. Seventy-two percent of the children who complete the course, which runs anywhere from 12 to 20 weeks, are able to successfully "discontinue" the program. That means that kids once considered candidates for special education will likely never need remedial reading again.

Last year, 61 qualifying students from Tuttle, Cranberry, and Atwater elementaries, all low-income Title 1 schools, cycled through the system. Eightyseven percent of the local students who finished Reading Recovery last year discontinued.

Reading Recovery is so customized and expensive, it's offered nowhere else in

Florida. But on the strength of indispensable trailblazing public-private partnerships, Sarasota County is about to become the first and only district in the state to make Reading Recovery a remedial option for every floundering first-grader in public school. Or at least for those whose reading skills languish in the bottom 20 percentile.

During the 2016-17 year, Reading Recovery expanded into the rest of Sarasota's 10 Title 1 elementary schools. In 2017-18, thanks to an increased financial assist from the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, the Barancik Foundation and philanthropists Keith and Linda Monda, specially trained Reading Recovery instructors — known in academic jargon as “primary literacy experts” — will be available in all 23 elementary schools.

With the Sarasota County school district clinging to its A-rating by 0.04 of a point, the strategy could be perceived as counterintuitive. Reading proficiency tests aren't measured statewide until the third grade, meaning the effectiveness of Reading Recovery on next year's first-graders won't be known until 2020.

“It's going to require an element of patience that we don't always give to these types of initiatives. We usually look for programs that are cheap and have an immediate impact,” says School Superintendent Todd Bowden, only halfway joking.

“This program is neither.”

Precise regimen

Youngsters may know the letters of the alphabet, they may know how letter combinations sound, and they may even know how to spell a few words. But without combining visual elements with word meanings, piecemeal knowledge of these components will not help them read.

Reading Recovery compresses all those elements into a surgically precise

regimen designed to identify where those breakdowns occur, then delivers more accessibility to learning. By literally breaking words apart, syllable by syllable, letter by letter, seasoning the exercises with phonics, linking those words to pictures, and reconstituting those words with their own hands, their own script, in their own voice, students are guided through these puzzle-solving rigors with persistent nudges forward.

Teachers maintain a running record of each student's progress and — within the Reading Recovery tool kit — build upon those foundations with situational improvisation. But the basic arc involves a daily review of previous storybooks, a systematic segue into more complex material and establishing the student's mastery of storylines through verbal and written expression. Considering how a 6-year-old's attention span can be difficult to maintain, the pacing is always lively.

What may go unnoticed or appear inconsequential to the uninitiated can be cause for quiet celebration "Behind the Glass." Typically halting in her oral readings, Selena rattles off an entire phrase, catches a mistaken pronunciation, stops and re-reads it without being prompted. "She just self-corrected!" notes one teacher. "That's great."

When the lesson ends, Salena will return to her regular class. Michalojko, her instructor, will join her peers, who exchange notes and feedback. It is part critique, part student evaluation, and all inquiry: Is there evidence from Salena's writings that she needs to work on her word endings? Inflectional endings? At Level 15 does she still need those magnetic leaders?

In Reading Recovery, even the teachers are students.

Private initiative

Sarasota's adoption of Reading Recovery was the result of an offer it could hardly refuse. Laura Kingsley, then the county's executive director of elementary schools, remembers the phone call she got as the 201516 school

year drew to a close last May. It was from Veronica Brady, senior vice president for philanthropy with the Gulf Coast Community Foundation. Brady wanted to know if the district would be interested in Reading Recovery.

“I said, ‘Are you kidding me?’” recalls Kingsley, now the district’s assistant superintendent and chief academic officer. “I’ve been interested in Reading Recovery for a long time, but we never had the money for it.”

Brady and major GCCF benefactor Keith Monda had been discussing Reading Recovery for quite some time. As a member of The Ohio State University Foundation Board, Monda had a unique perspective.

The American edition of Reading Recovery is headquartered at OSU, where training and evaluations are conducted. Eight years ago, Monda, who made his fortune with luxury fashion accessories giant Coach Inc., moved to Sarasota, which has been the beneficiary of his interests in everything from the arts to hunger programs to youth swimming lessons. Two years ago, he wanted to bring remedial reading on board.

“I think when you have a chance to keep 20 percent of your kids from falling behind in reading, you take it,” Monda said. “And sometimes it really does take a village to make it happen.”

Brady’s call to Kingsley triggered a network of cooperation that also would include the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation along with a number of excited individual donors. In yet another twist of kismet, the Sarasota village that Monda alluded to would also include local resident Leah McGee.

Education author, former president of the National Reading Conference and OSU’s Marie Clay Chair of Reading Recovery (named for the Kiwi researcher who designed the intervention program her native New Zealand embraced in 1983), McGee agreed to join Sarasota’s Reading Recovery project. Again, it wouldn’t be cheap.

“Professional development is really the key, because the teachers are on a learning curve just like the students,” McGee said. “We’re talking about highly specialized instruction.”

So specialized that the district recruited 20-year elementary schoolteacher Lisa Fisher to attend graduate-level training at Ohio State prior to the 2015-16 school year. With Fisher in the lead teacher role and McGee backing her up as an omnipresent consultant, Title 1 schools Cranberry, Atwater and Tuttle started the year with two experts apiece and two Reading Recovery primary literacy experts.

As the program expanded into 10 schools during the current year, newly announced superintendent Bowden said he began sketching out a budget that would bring Reading Recovery teachers to six more schools during 2017-18, and complete the job in 2018-19 with the addition of seven more teachers.

Says Bowden, “That’s when I received a call from Veronica (Brady) saying ‘What would it take to go to all 23 of our elementary schools for 2017-18?’” Brady says there were enough donors and partnership resources to make it happen sooner: “Why should kids who need this help have to wait another year?”

Adds Barancik Foundation President/ CEO Teri Hansen: “Sometimes it’s easier for government to get behind a program that is already being championed by a philanthropy, and I’m not just talking about startup funds. I’m talking about overall community support.”

Future impact

Should all parties agree to the proposed budget, 35 Reading Recovery teachers — non-Title 1 schools get one apiece — will be waiting when school doors swing open in August.

Total cost to the district and its private philanthropies, in terms of training,

personnel, books and miscellaneous support: \$1,527,500.

Some \$803,000 in federal Title 1 funds are earmarked for 22 teachers.

For a rough sketch of that impact, multiply nine students — the estimated yearly load of low-performing students each instructor will handle — by 35 Reading Recovery teachers. If the success rate is conservatively 72 percent, that means some 227 Sarasota students who might otherwise be sent to special education will graduate high school, have a shot at college and qualify for specialized careers with higher-paying jobs.

“Intervention is expensive, but the opposite of failing to create a love of reading is so much more expensive,” says Kingsley. “Eighty-five percent of the people in jail are non-readers.”

In pulling it off, one of the busiest teachers in the county will be Fisher. Her job is to make sure her new literacy experts are on task as well as the students.

Last March, she joined a contingent of Reading Recovery supporters making their final presentation to the School Board. Fisher told the story of a first-grader named Arseney.

Arseney started out at Level 2, knowing how to write just five words. Worse, his self-esteem plunged when he had overheard adults talking about how he might not be able to learn. By the end of 17 weeks, however, Arseney was at Level 18. By that time, he was reading to his little brother at night.

Arseney asked Fisher to inform his mother how smart he was. Fisher agreed, but asked who needed to understand that the most. Arseney ventured unsatisfactory answers — you? Dad? Homeroom teacher? — until he got it and smiled back.

“And I didn’t stop there,” Fisher told the board. “I said Arseney, do you believe that you’re smart? Do you know this?”

Voice growing thin with emotion, Reading Recovery's lead teacher for the Sarasota experiment expressed her gratitude to work in a district with well-heeled supporters willing to take a chance: "I believe every one of our children have the right to know they are capable of learning and capable of achieving. And I'm very thankful I get to be a part of that every day."

Wilkinson Elementary School teacher Kelly Watts works with first-grader Sophia Lansley as other educators observe through a one-way mirror.

Wilkinson Elementary School first-grader Salena Thach practices reading as other educators observe through a oneway mirror.

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