

A BETTER WAY TO TEACH

HOW ONE MADISON SCHOOL ACHIEVED SUCCESS BY BUCKING THE DISTRICT'S FAVORED APPROACH

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If watching kids succeed is a teacher's joy, then watching them fail is their worst nightmare. In her 15 years of teaching, mostly in special education, Sara Obern has witnessed all too many failures.

Her daughter's friend is a case in point. "She's in fourth grade, and she can't even read," says Obern, who teaches at Sennett Middle School. Obern is a tall woman, with a mane of wavy, graying hair and a ready laugh. Right now, she's dead serious. "She's been in Reading Recovery, and Title 1, and SAGE [all supplementary programs], but I don't think she can read all the months of the year. And it just breaks my heart."

Obern frets that the girl will fail upcoming fourth-grade tests. "What's that do to this kid? She's a wonderful sweet kid. Her mother and father are just scraping to get by, and they're just praying that their kids are safe each day. That's all that they can do."

If the girl had attended Lapham Elementary, a kindergarten-through-second grade school on the east side of Madison, chances are that she would not be struggling, says Obern. Six years ago, in 1999, Lapham bucked the Madison district's reliance on a reading program known as "Balanced



Literacy" — a "Whole Language" spin-off—in favor of a grounding in explicit phonics for nearly all first-grade students. The results have been impressive. They have also been ignored.

Former Lapham principal Barbara Thompson often invited district administrators to visit, but they never seemed interested. Thompson later left to become superintendent of the

New Glarus school district.

Lapham's innovative approach employs a curriculum known as Direct Instruction: SRA Reading Mastery. It differs from Whole Language, which is based on a belief that kids can incidentally learn the connections between letters and sounds if they're immersed in a literature-rich environment. By contrast, Direct Instruction begins by teaching children the sounds of letters and then moving on to letter blends, words, and sentences. The Madison district had incorporated phonics into its methods and renamed it "Balanced Literacy," but critics claim it is still not sufficient. While many children do read without explicit phonics instruction, many others do not.

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Reading Mastery is one of the programs recommended by the U.S. Department of Education as part of its push to encourage schools to improve the ways they teach reading. Reading researchers across the nation had found that many kids benefit from a highly structured approach to instruction that teaches rules and strategies, leaving little to chance or guesswork. When the department later developed its \$5 billion Reading First grant program, SRA Reading Mastery was among the “core” reading programs it agreed to fund.

At Marquette Elementary, Lapham’s 3rd through 5th grade sister school, skillful use of Direct Instruction has resulted in reading scores for Marquette third-graders that are virtually unsurpassed district-wide. Scores for black students particularly stand out.

In 1998, just 9% of Marquette black third-graders were considered “advanced” readers, as measured on the third-grade state reading comprehension test; by 2003, 38% were “advanced.” District-wide, only 9% of black children scored as “advanced” in 2003.

For Marquette’s low-income kids, the “advanced” figure was 32%, up from 19% from five years earlier. For all students combined, the school ranked a close second to Shorewood Elementary, with 52% scoring “advanced.” Some especially needy children are placed in special education and given the same instruction, but in a more intense fashion. Marquette’s third-grade scores for special ed kids are also among the highest in Madison.

Despite Marquette’s success, Madison administrators turn a blind eye. District officials are proud of a different set of statistics that show that the pool of third-graders scoring at the bottom on the third-grade test has steadily improved. And it’s true. Critics, however, contend that it will take fifty years to bring those children to the heights of those now at Marquette.

Meanwhile, most other Madison schools use Reading Recovery for some of their struggling readers. Reading Recovery is a catch-up program that not only has had mixed results, but is costly to boot. A 2004 internal district

report showed that one successful Reading Recovery student costs an average of \$8,400. Half the students make no progress.

School districts across the country, including Chicago, have abandoned Reading Recovery for precisely these reasons. But Madison plans to continue.

Madison has always been known as a comfortable, complacent college town, mostly white and full of well-educated academics and government workers. Downtown living is more popular than ever before; construction cranes dot the cityscape, new restaurants and music clubs compete for patrons, and the Madison Symphony Orchestra even has a donated multi-million-dollar new home. But in outlying neighborhoods, there are pockets of poverty and high numbers of poorly-educated families flowing in from tougher towns. Madison offers a reprieve to many of these newcomers, and better schools are at the top of the list.

But right now, those schools offer only standard fare to their neediest kids, and it’s the kids who lose. Some observers think Madison is making a huge mistake.

Direct Instruction

Lapham Elementary, a handsome brick school on Madison’s East Side, was built in 1939, a Public Works Administration project during the Roosevelt years. Decorative tiles cover Lapham’s hallway floors; colorful children’s art graces the walls. At a pint-sized table in a spacious classroom on the third floor, reading teacher Sandy Blume faces an eager trio.

Two are boys, the third a girl donned in a long red velvet dress, shiny black patent shoes, and leg warmers. Each child is in Title 1, a federally-funded program serving academically struggling kids who are frequently low-income.

At Lapham, if you’re in Title 1 for reading help, you can get Sandy Blume, the district’s best-known practitioner of the Direct Instruction teaching technique.

It is the Friday before Valentine's Day, and debauchery is in the air.

"Why is everybody eating candy today?" Blume asks, pretending to wonder. Her voice is bright. She asks a boy to wash his hands. Then, she starts the lesson.

"Get ready!" she says, in a singsong voice. "Eh!"

The children, three first-graders, pipe back. "Eh!"

"Get ready! Eh!"

The kids respond in unison. "Eh!"

"Get ready! 'Sennnt!' It rhymes with 'went!'"

The kids chime back, excited. "Wet!" they exclaim.

Sandy corrects them. "That word has an 'n' in it. Say it again! 'Sent!'"

They get it. She soon moves them on to sentences.

"Get ready!" she calls.

The children read in unison, fingers pointing to every word. "A-girl-said-to-a-man, 'Let-us-go-to-the-pet-shop.'"

Painstakingly, they continue. "So-the-man-and-the-girl . . ."

"Don't get fooled!" Sandy quickly interjects—"Went!"

"Went!-down-the-road."

Later in the lesson, the kids play a word game and receive their night's assignment. A page of sentences to read to Mom or Dad, or, in the case of kids lacking reliable relatives, to a favorite teacher. A previous day's homework sheet bearing an adult's signature earns them two Skittles. Today, one of the boys eagerly chooses plain green and sour. They depart the room and trip down the hall.

Much Direct Instruction (DI) is done in 30-minute increments by trained first and second grade teachers; the school also employs Blume, a half-time reading specialist, and Jill Jones, a one third-time DI coach who monitors kids' progress. Every September, Blume tests each first-grader on his or her reading readiness: letter recognition, name-writing ability, and reading speed. The tests are timed. The children are placed according to their score, and given a quick two-minute checkup every five lessons. Too many errors, and the child repeats the lesson. For kids at-risk, those from poverty or with special needs, the constant practice is key.

Says Virginia Woods, a Lapham education assistant: "The criticism is that it's too repetitive, but we find that with kids who have difficulty making connections, that the repetitions work. They build a foundation."

An "air-tight" technique

Ken Swift is a tall, bearded veteran first-grade teacher at Lapham who's experimented with many teaching techniques, including Whole Language and its spin-off, Balanced Literacy. Yet these aren't the only or the best ways to teach reading, Swift now thinks. This year, Swift has three reading groups in his class of 14. He juggles a loose assortment of kids engaged in various reading activities: writing in journals, silent reading.

Four children—three girls, one boy; three white, one black—sit at a small table with Swift as he clicks his fingers and guides them through a Direct Instruction passage. "Get ready!" he calls. They return a chorus of responses. "Some-bo-dy-told-them-to-come-down-the-stairs!"

Swift initially resisted the "scripted" nature of Direct Instruction, and even now injects his own humor. "But I do basically fol-

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low the script," he says. "I've learned over the years that it's for good reason, because it does the job so well."

Of five students in Swift's class who are learning to read the Direct Instruction way, only one qualifies for Title 1 help. These at the table do not, so Ken doses it out himself. Over the years, he says, he's learned that affluence does not always predict reading success. His own son is dyslexic and learned to read from Blume, in fact.

"They can be from a mansion on Sherman Avenue or from the Salvation Army homeless shelter, and they still may struggle," he says. "But for kids who may not have a lot of support at home, this is a really good program. It's really air-tight."

During each school year, continual evaluations allow Lapham staff to occasionally transfer kids into different reading groups, sometimes with different teachers. Such fluid movement of kids among classrooms was a hallmark of Thompson's methods, according to Swift.

"I know a lot of approaches say that you don't distinguish between reading levels, you teach all the kids together," he tells me later. "In certain parts of the curriculum, that's very fine. But in the teaching of reading, and in some degree math, you want to have kids working at their peak ability. You don't want to have some kids being really bored, while other kids are overly challenged."

Where's the proof?

While the No Child Left Behind Law is often viewed as meddlesome and overly punitive, there is great value in its emphasis on "evidence-based" teaching practices.

There's good reason to demand that rigor. "The 'evidence-based' idea is a reaction against the traditional educational policy, which is that people introduce new curricula without prior testing," says UW-Madison psychology professor Mark Seidenberg, who co-authored a much-discussed 2002 article in *Scientific American*, "How Should Reading Be Taught?"

Seidenberg is serious and intense, shuffling playing cards as he talks, seated behind a handsome desk of cherry wood stacked high with reports.

It's like introducing a new drug without having done clinical trials. So, people said, "whole-language," sounds like a good idea to me! One could have asked: Does this make kids a better reader? Those studies weren't done. They're being done now.

That new neurological research shows the critical nature of "decoding," the specific instructions that explain connections between spoken language and the written word. "That is a crucial step," he says.

You leave that step out, then the [Whole Language] idea that the kid's going to be able to guess the words from the context, because they've got a lot of background knowledge, or because they understand the structure of stories, that's not going to be sufficient.

Obern agrees. She notes that some families don't have books in the house. And some kids struggle over the meaning of simple words.

These kids are trying to generalize, they know there's some rules to this game, but [they wonder], won't somebody just tell me the rules?

Teaching "the rules" was recommended in a 2001 report known as "Put Reading First," issued by the National Reading Panel. The report stated,

Systematic phonics instruction is significantly more effective than non-systematic or no phonics instruction in helping to prevent reading difficulties among at-risk students and in helping children overcome reading difficulties.

Over the years, phonics has been incorporated into Reading Recovery, the Madison district's flagship reading program for struggling first-graders. It is a flawed program, however, some contend. Only a fraction of the kids who need intensive help actually receive it; in 2001-02, 325 first-graders were served, two-thirds of them minorities. Furthermore, half don't "graduate" and require more assistance. Sometimes that means a referral to special ed.

It's also expensive. Reading Recovery cost \$1.3 million in 2001-02, with nearly \$1 million of that coming from the school district's general fund. The price per student was about \$4,000. During an earlier budget crunch in 2002, the consulting firm Virchow & Krause suggested cutting or even eliminating Reading Recovery. "It is the highest cost literacy program," the report stated. It was retained.

Seidenberg calls Reading Recovery,

an inefficient use of money. If some of those methods were just incorporated into the curriculum, you'd have fewer kids who need to go to Reading Recovery. And the big bucks that are going to Reading Recovery could be used for other things, which we know teachers and schools need.

District administrators, however, remain wedded to the status quo, and last fall even refused an offer of \$2 million in federal Reading First money that would have paid for an "evidence-based" reading program, such as Reading Mastery, at five low-performing Madison schools. The district decided to continue to place its faith in "balanced literacy."

The problem with "balanced literacy," says Seidenberg, "is that it could mean anything. It depends on the teacher. It depends on how long ago they came out of ed school." What Obern and others see in the Madison schools is a scattershot, albeit well-intentioned, approach to reading instruction.

Special Ed and DI

In the Madison schools, Direct Instruction is used mostly by a small handful of special education teachers. In 1997 at Glendale, Sara Obern was assigned to teach a group of special

education kids: one autistic, one emotionally disturbed, one labeled "cognitively disabled," and seven called "learning disabled." Several had already been through Reading Recovery. All but the autistic child was black.

Obern grouped them according to certain innate traits—"some were real bouncy, high-energy kids, others were ponderers who needed time to think things through"—and gave each a daily 20-minute lesson from a SRA Direct Instruction book. By year's end, every learning-disabled child had moved ahead two grade levels in reading, far enough to drop the LD designation. The cognitively disabled student had also improved.

Obern was thrilled for the kids, but appalled that it took a "special ed" classification to provide those benefits. "It made me so angry just having those kids and realizing, 'They're not disabled!'" she says now.

They're saying this kid is failing because there's something wrong with this kid. But if I can have him come up two years in one year, there's nothing wrong with that kid.

Meanwhile, statistics show the Madison district is far above the state average in its numbers of black kids labeled "special ed." (Madison referred 33% of its 4,764 black students to special ed in 2002-03; the statewide figure was 19%.) Obern thinks the Madison figure is so high because many first-graders need a reading curriculum that is far more explicit than "balanced literacy."

"DI is so carefully thought out, that it doesn't matter how many wacky things are happening in a kid's home and life," she says. "Just ten to fifteen minutes of this, and it's like a potent medicine, they get it! But, if you just

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say"—here she raises her voice to a lilt—"“Oh, what’s the print in your environment?’ Lady, you’re speaking from another planet.”

Obern’s abiding frustration is her conviction that the district’s menu of Balanced Literacy is heavily weighted against the one program that works well with the kids who need it most: phonics as taught in Direct Instruction.

“Yes, we give kids warm, fuzzy, welcoming classrooms, but we’re not teaching every kid in the way he can learn,” Obern says. “It doesn’t matter how nice the teachers are, if you can’t do what the kid sitting next to you can, you feel stupid, even though you’re not.”

At Lapham, she says, “it took big guts. And Barb Thompson was willing, because she saw the data. She saw the results.”

Kids left behind

In the spring of 2003, Barbara Thompson was still at Lapham. The prior year, she had been denied the vacant principal slot at East High, effectively ending her chances of promotion within the Madison district. Like Madison School Superintendent Art Rainwater, she is southern, but she’s black, not white. She grew up poor, in rural Georgia. In college, she said, she realized that some kids had indeed been left behind.

“I feel strongly about all kids, but particularly strongly about children of color,” she said then, in a calm drawl, seated in a Lapham classroom. “You often hear that they can’t learn, and that they belong in special ed. I’ve heard it.”

She’d seen Direct Instruction techniques used with great success in all-black Milwaukee inner city schools and was happy to see it work at Lapham. “Eighty percent of the district does okay with ‘balanced literacy.’ The population we’re trying to reach is a population that Madison typically hasn’t taught well.”

“There’s nothing wrong with these kids’ abilities to learn to read,” Thompson contin-

ued. “But you don’t want them turning to a life of crime because they dropped out of school.”

In the district’s downtown offices, however, Thompson’s methods held little water. When presented last spring with Lapham’s success story, Superintendent Rainwater turned curt.

“Lapham is a great example of what works at Lapham,” he said, testily. Rainwater is a big, charismatic man with a distinctive southern accent of his own. “It is not a great example of what works at Lincoln.” With obvious pride, he mentioned the better grades that many black students have achieved, districtwide.

Find me another place that that’s happened to. We must be doing some things right. Just because we don’t do what you want us to, doesn’t mean that we’re wrong.

There was defensiveness in his rising tone.

Believe me, my whole life is spent trying to help children be successful, So any indication that I could take something over here, that would make all our children successful, and that I would withhold that from other children, I find insulting. Absolutely insulting!

Lapham’s uncertain future

Today, Barbara Thompson is gone from Lapham and the new principal, Kristi Kloos, has had to navigate a middle course between downtown administrators and the preferences of Lapham teachers. The school’s reading program is now officially Balanced Literacy, she told me.

Duy Nguyen is one Lapham teacher who uses Balanced Literacy. In his first-grade classroom last spring, Kristi Kloos bent down to inspect a brightly colored picture book that a redheaded boy eagerly shows her. “That’s the ogre’s castle and that’s the knight’s castle,” he says. “Are you wondering why there’s a window?” She smiles.

Unlike Ken Swift, Nguyen does not use Direct Instruction, though one Title 1 student was receiving it through Sandy Blume. A visit to Nguyen’s classroom reveals a “word fami-

ly" wall, featuring the letters "D, U, I, R, S, and G." There are "book boxes" designed to meet every child's reading level. There is a story about an owl printed on a wall poster. There is the suffix "est" written on a board, and two children are working hard to make words. One girl in purple kneels over her paper and writes "vest," "nest," and "rest."

Ken Swift's classroom is not so different. What is different, however, is the number of teaching strategies he offers. And he says that while he likes Kristi Kloos very much, he greatly admired Barb Thompson.

"I feel Barb really stuck her neck out, advocated for that program, against the wishes of Art Rainwater and people downtown," he says. "She did things that she felt were important. She really did have kids first in her thinking."

Two losses that year—Barb Thompson and now the Title 1 funding—had left him apprehensive about the future of the Lapham reading program. For her part, Sara Obern contents herself with guerrilla tactics: sneaking Direct Instruction into the lives of the needy kids she meets at her school. But there are so many others.

She says, with a touch of cynicism in her voice,

Balanced Literacy means you use a mixture of whole language and phonics. Yes, you surround the kids with good books. Yes, you read out loud to them. Yes, you use many different approaches. Except—let's guess. Which one?

(Update, April 2005: In the spring of 2004, the Madison School Board voted to retain Sandy Blume's position. However, the loss of Barbara Thompson did have an effect. That September, two new first-grade classrooms officially became "off-limits" to Direct Instruction, according to teachers there, despite indications that a handful of those children needed more explicit instruction than that offered by Balanced Literacy. By February of 2005, several of those children had floundered and ended up being taught with Direct Instruction after all. Disgruntled parents precipitated the switches. Sandy Blume calls it "damage control.")