

July 28, 2012

Sister Mary Ellen Schroeder, SND
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Re: Testimonial for the CogRead/PASS Program

Dear Fellow Educators:

I am writing to share my experience with the CogRead PASS Program. I have had 44 wonderful years of experience in the education field and am still going strong, working to ensure under-resourced children become proficient readers. I have a master's degree in reading, I taught first- and second-grade reading for 11 years, and I have been in administration for 30 years as an elementary principal. I have spent 26 years working with inner city schools, so I understand the challenges working with under-resourced students.

Despite all of my experience and knowledge, I knew that far too many children were failing in our education system, and I did not know why or exactly what to do to address the need. I had heard about the CogRead PASS training from my sister-in-law, but had not been able to follow up earlier because of my very busy schedule as a principal. Three years ago, I had the opportunity to explore the training and immediately saw it might provide the much-needed answer to solving the reading challenge.

However, even though I believed what I heard and read about the program and the research behind it, we wanted to see the results for ourselves. An opportunity presented itself two years ago. I was called to serve in New Orleans, but insisted on being able to implement this program as a condition of being hired as Co-Director of Mirabeau Family Learning Center. Three Sisters and I were given the opportunity to implement the program at an elementary school located in Central City New Orleans for the 2011-2012 school year. This school has faced very challenging conditions, as many schools in our nation look at failure to meet educational standards, the "blame game" as to who is responsible for poor performance, and programs that promise to provide catch-up growth with the results that drain the resources of funders and parents.

We had been presented with research information published by Dr. Joseph Torgesen, a noted researcher, which indicates most reading difficulties can be prevented if students are provided with intensive one-on-one training in phonemic awareness skills. The CogRead PASS Program specifically trains phonemic awareness skills and the full CogRead PASS+ program trains a broad range of learning skills.

We chose to focus on first grade using the PASS Program to validate the Torgesen research. We also used the PASS+ Program school-wide. Knowing that scheduling is an issue and pullouts make it hard on teachers to make sure every student keeps up, we devised a protocol to accomplish the training within a regular reading period. We split the class: half of the students stayed with the teacher and half went to the computer lab for training, typically 15-20 minutes daily, 4 days per week. Halfway through the period the two groups switched. The teacher liked the arrangement as she saw all of the students and was able to work with smaller groups for that period. The lab training was an extension of the reading curriculum; it provided one-on-one training in

phonemic awareness that a one-on-many situation cannot provide. This training is part of the Common Core Standard so it fits in with any reading curriculum.

We recommend a one-to-five ratio of adults to students in the lab to ensure adequate supervision, mentoring, coaching, and “tough love” as necessary. A qualified teacher needs to supervise, but can be assisted with properly trained volunteers.

We found that many of the higher-need students had a mindset of “learned helplessness”; that is, they gave up too easily when they found the training challenging. They also had very weak skill levels and it took us several weeks to bring these basic skills up to speed so they could do the online program. (We therefore recommend this training take place in kindergarten, if possible, so students are ready to begin the training in first grade.) But once the students got over the initial hump, they excelled. And when they started seeing success, it became contagious.

All students completed the basic program demonstrating they met the Common Core Standard, but most went far beyond. After a couple of months the teacher also started noticing a significant improvement in student behavior and performance. The students became more engaged and self confident. The training process proved to be the critical element in changing students from struggling learners to confident individuals in tackling the reading skills.

After five months of training, the school arranged to have the students tested independently using a nationally normed oral reading fluency assessment. Out of 28 students tested who worked on the program, 24 scored at grade level or above in reading fluency; 16 of the 24 scored above grade level. The results proved this type of training can indeed close the skill gap and improve reading scores significantly.

We did more extensive training with the 4th grade class and allowed other students to train on a less formal basis. Overall, the school has seen their greatest gains in test scores this year.

I urge every school to consider this training. I now understand why so many children fail to become proficient readers. They enter kindergarten one to three years behind in the core skills needed for learning and never catch up because the traditional curriculum is not designed to close the skill gap. Closing the skill gap is the step that needs to be taken in the K-2 grades. That’s what we’ve been missing.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. I will do my best to respond as time permits.

Blessings:

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