

The Oregonian

Early results brighten Election Day

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ROBERT LANDAUER –The Oregonian

Results being tallied on programs in various Oregon kindergartens will matter more long term than will votes counted tonight in any contested election. The explanation is simple. Preventing problems is more efficient, effective, economical and humane than correcting them. School dropouts, lack of job skills, criminality and premature parenting are a few of the intergenerational societal hazards often traced back to kindergartners unprepared to learn to read when they step up to first grade. Their difficulties compound like interest on credit-card debt.

Strong evidence has emerged that success rates can be vastly improved:

University of Oregon researchers have developed indicators that can identify students who are likely to have trouble learning to read in first grade and calibrate the degree of risk.

Teaching materials -- segmented into 126 lesson plans targeted to specific preliteracy skills -- have been developed for classroom use.

So what's the problem if you can identify the kids likely to trail their classmates and materials have been produced that could help them?

Kindergarten teachers often have too little time for the multiple, daily small-group instruction necessary to bring the needier youngsters up to the first-grade skills. And tight-budget districts routinely fail to give instructors the targeted teaching materials.

Two years ago, **PacifiCorp Foundation for Learning** became convinced that University of Oregon researchers truly had found efficient ways to identify and rescue children who arrive at kindergarten unprepared to learn how to read. It invested in a three-year trial, called Project Optimize, in six Oregon schools. It decided to check at all six schools to see whether results approach the promise.

At Parkside Elementary in Grants Pass, Principal Diane Mease has seen many more previously at-risk first-graders "retaining their knowledge of letter identification, letter sounds and being able to read and write three-letter words. . . . We feel committed (to the program) for the long term."

Many Warm Springs Elementary School kindergartners speak "a transitional language" between tribal tongues and English, says Principal Dawn Smith. Success rates approach 85 percent in helping at-risk kindergartners reach reading benchmarks. Some who weren't successful in year one were able to graduate later. "We just need to give them more time."

"Eighty-five percent of the kids arriving in kindergarten were not targeted for reading success," said Principal Susan Foxman at Vestal Elementary School in Northeast Portland. She adds an important wrinkle: "With this intervention, children who might have been referred to special education classes can be helped."

At Metolius Elementary in Madras, only two first-graders who went through last year's program are not on pace to reach reading benchmarks. All 15 kindergartners who have completed the program and been tested this year have reached benchmarks. Principal Kathy Bishop reports that a one day "preteach" to give monolingual Spanish speakers a sense of the program's concepts has these kindergartners "making the same level of progress" as native English speakers.

All but three of 22 kindergartners in Eagle Point's Little Butte Elementary "are at or above grade now," says teacher Karin Beagle. The other three "have been helped by the program and will get there but are not developmentally as far as the others."

Second-year data at Boise-Eliot Elementary in North Portland show 85 percent of youngsters most needing reading-readiness help are reading at benchmark levels, says Isaac Regenstreif of the **PacifiCorp Foundation for Learning**. First-grade teachers "are elated with the program" because their students came into this school year so much better prepared, said Principal James Brannon.

Russel Sweet, Oregon Department of Education school improvement specialist, reinforces that view: "First-grade teachers are delighted at how well prepared the youngsters are compared to earlier years. Schools are also seeing faster growth among the kindergarten children during the year."

Those early returns brighten my Election Day.

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