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Reading for all

USU-developed system helps students overcome problems when learning to read

By **Twila Van Leer**

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RALP: You won't find it in a dictionary, but it's a four-letter approach to reading that is helping students from Puerto Rico to Utah improve their skills.

At Riverton Elementary in Jordan District recently, aide Becky Pugmire used RALP (Reading for All Learners Program) to bring five first-graders up to par on reading. "Is that what I need?" the children read in unison. "Yes, it is a net."

"Five is as many as we want in any group," said principal Mark Riding, who has used RALP to help students in two Jordan District schools that he has headed in recent years. He uses whatever sources he can find — the school's share of trust lands funds, state money targeted specifically for reading and his allotted classroom funds — to hire the aides needed to work with students, using the RALP formula. His four aides and other volunteers, including parents, are key to the success of the program, he said. Tutoring and heavy phonics emphasis are RALP's twin pillars.



USU researcher Alan M. Hofmeister introduces puppets to students at Riverton Elementary School.

Paul Barker, Deseret News

The program consists of a series of small books — color-coded — for children in kindergarten through second grade. They were designed based on 30 years of research about how children learn, said Alan M. Hofmeister, one of a group of Utah State University researchers who created the program.

Riding uses RALP for three groups at Riverton Elementary: for the 20 percent of first-graders who don't grasp decoding techniques easily; for the children in a special class of intellectually challenged children; and for those recommended by teachers for special resource assistance.

When he started using the reading program, it had not yet been approved by the State Office of Education, but it is now on the approved list for reading curricula.

The curriculum design works well for tutors, even if they don't have extensive training, he said, because guidelines are printed as needed as footnotes on the same pages from which children read. Praise is a large component of the format.

Does it work?

Riding enthusiastically shares state core test results: In 1999, 205 of Riverton's first- through sixth-grade students tested in the minimal- or partial-mastery range; in 2000, there were 141, a drop of 32 percent; and in 2001, only 97 failed to rise above the minimal/partial mastery range. Improvement was noted in four of six grades, he said. Now, all six grades are testing above the state office-set minimum threshold identified as "near mastery."

The principal registered the same good results at Edgemont Elementary, a school that has more children on free lunch — a commonly accepted predictor that children may have special challenges in school. The school went from the bottom third in reading achievement in Jordan District to the top third, he said. District officials invited him to present the results to the Jordan Board of Education and explain the program.

Hofmeister, director of the technology division and the Center for Information Technology at Utah State University, believes that a child's socioeconomic background doesn't need to forecast failure in reading. In fact, he said, even children from homes with highly educated parents may find reading difficult.

"Twenty percent (of all students) will find reading the hardest thing they have to do," he said. And if they haven't mastered the principles of decoding language by third grade, they never catch up, often because of a sense of failure and the bad attitudes that accompany failure. In fact, Hofmeister says, "If they are not successfully engaged by mid-first grade, they may have a serious problem." If a child's focus is on the struggle to decipher a word, he is likely not to comprehend the message of several words strung together, he said.

"We can't afford to get distracted by demographics," he said. "We have to teach whomever comes through the door."

One of the sites where RALP was tested was Puerto Rico, a Spanish-speaking country where



Teacher's aide Becky Pugmire helps Riverton Elementary students using RALP program.

Paul Barker, Deseret News

learning a second language might be seen as a particular challenge.

"Educators there know that if their students are to survive economically, they need English. They start English as a second language in kindergarten," he said. RALP showed good results with Puerto Rican students.

RALP also has been used in the Harlem and Bronx, New York, where socioeconomic factors are daunting.

The Reading Excellence and Discovery Foundation there tried RALP for a summer reading program in 2000. At the end of the six-

week program, a group of independent evaluators using a proven assessment instrument determined that 72 percent of the students advanced by at least one full level; 92 percent advanced by more than a half-grade level and 66 percent by at least one full grade level, according to a report posted on the foundation's Web site, <http://www.readnyc.org/>.

RALP is a phonics-immersion approach to reading, Hofmeister said. More phonics emphasis has support in The Partnership for Reading, a national collaboration that includes the National Institute for Literacy, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the U.S. Department of Education. It was established to help promote the Bush administration's education objectives.

Among the summary findings of a Partnership report titled "Put Reading First" is the conclusion that "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."

The system also is right in line with new Utah standards for educational accountability that demand reading proficiency by third grade, Hofmeister said.

Hofmeister believes schools can improve reading by basing practice on good research and by using the best teachers to work with the most challenged children. Principals such as Riding, who are willing to try something new, are critical, he said. RALP is now being used in about 90 Utah schools, including 40 in Davis District.

In a recent visit to Riverton Elementary, Hofmeister left the grown-up statistics behind and got down to child level with teddy-bear puppets with names like Mat, Mit and Sam. As he helped to

bring sounds home to disabled children in the school's special needs class, they responded with glee.

Bottom line? Reading should be fun, not a struggle. Information about RALP is available on the USU Web site: www.usu.edu/teach/read.

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