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Literacy top priority for Seattle schools

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Before the second-graders in Christine Hackett's reading group tackle a story, they sit on the carpet for an unconventional vocabulary lesson.

"Enormous means un-u-u-u-u-sually large — real huge!" the children chant.

"Obey means to follow a rule, law or command."

"I command you to sit up," says the teacher, and the kids straighten their backs.

Each child volunteers to recite a ditty that defines a word.

The words are challenging, but the fun lesson makes them memorable to the 12 children, whose families have come to Seattle's Rainier Valley from Eritrea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Mexico and China.

These "dancing definitions" are among the tools Hackett has learned through the Seattle School District's Literacy Initiative.

Aimed at teachers, instructional assistants and principals from kindergarten to 12th grade, the Literacy Initiative is the most ambitious professional-development effort undertaken by the 47,000-student district in recent years — and perhaps the biggest ever.



[enlarge](#) TOM REESE / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Ismael Ruiz, left, and Yahaira Carrillo, right, and fellow Kimball Elementary classmates practice "dancing definitions" as teacher Christine Hackett works from the back of the classroom promoting a new approach to literacy.

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The district will spend nearly \$3 million this year on a program that now is training more than 750 teachers. Administrators hope to continue the effort until the district's 3,000 teachers have all been trained.

In the face of budget cuts topping \$11.8 million, the district had proposed to trim the number of teachers entering the program from 450 to 200 next fall.

But because literacy is "our key objective" in improving student learning, Superintendent Joseph Olchefske said, administrators are scrambling to find funding sources to keep the program going.

Launched in 2000, the initiative is a centerpiece of the district's strategy for bringing 90 percent of fourth-graders to the state reading standard by 2003. Fewer than 64 percent of students met standard last year.

Taught by consultants from the Washington, D.C.-based National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA), the campaign also is intended to help teachers of all subjects boost students' reading, writing and thinking skills.

Participating teachers are paid to spend 72 hours in weekend and summer workshops during two years of training.

Consultants make visits

NUA consultants make day-long visits to each participating school several times a year, meeting with teachers and demonstrating techniques with children.

"We're not just the drive-by, hit-and-miss kind of professional development where you bring in an expert and disappear," said Eric Cooper, NUA's charismatic co-founder and executive director.

Exhorting teachers to expect more of students, Cooper tells of Israeli psychologist Reuven Feuerstein's work with a Down syndrome child who went on to become a physician, others who became lawyers. "You are powerful — powerful!" he tells the teachers.

Cooper has chided the Seattle School Board over its goal of 90 percent of fourth-graders meeting the reading standard.

The goal should be no less than 100 percent, he says.

District administrators say the nonprofit NUA was chosen for the Literacy Initiative contract — worth \$2 million this year — because the group had previously worked effectively with several Seattle middle schools, understands the issues of urban education and had the capacity to gear up for a large project.

It didn't hurt that Chief Academic Officer June Collins Rimmer had hired the same group to conduct a literacy initiative in Indianapolis before she moved to Seattle in 1999.

Rimmer sent several Seattle educators to Indianapolis to check out the group's work there. "It wasn't June's decision," she said.

The Literacy Initiative hasn't dramatically improved standardized test scores — something schools are under heavy pressure to do. But in the classrooms of schools involved in the program, there is a sense of excitement and hope that isn't yet reflected in test scores.

Improving punctuation

Christine Hackett was skeptical when NUA consultant Augusta Mann introduced a technique for dramatizing the importance of punctuation.

Children would read aloud without pausing at the end of run-on sentences that lacked periods, then would read the same selection with periods.

Students then would notice when periods are missing from their own compositions, Mann suggested.

"Yeah, right. It will be a waste of time," Hackett thought.

But when she tried the method, it worked. "Hot dog! They realized the period wasn't there."

More importantly, her second-graders are choosing to read text-laden books rather than picture books they preferred in previous years.

"I've been teaching 35 years," Hackett said. "This has been the most powerful, the most dynamic, the most fun, of any techniques I've ever come across. It works."

The Literacy Initiative has grown in popularity as word has spread among Seattle teachers. When the program began two years ago, 150 teachers from 25 schools signed up for training.

Last fall, 450 teachers from 44 schools entered the training. Some teachers were turned away, while others pulled strings to get in. Altogether, about 900 of Seattle's 3,000 teachers are enrolled in the program or have completed it.

At Kimball Elementary, "It just kind of spread like wildfire," said Principal Barbara Nielsen. Fewer than half a dozen teachers joined the first training group, but their enthusiasm encouraged their colleagues to sign up.

Nearly the entire staff joined the Literacy Initiative, including the principal, assistant principal, music, computer and physical education teachers.

Unique strategies

Denise Nessel, the NUA consultant to Kimball, recently spent a day at the school discussing teaching strategies with teachers and aides.

One strategy was "word sorting," in which students sort groups of words by vowel sound or by meaning. The other, "imitation writing," is aimed at building students' understanding of sentence structure.

On a visit to Mercer Middle School, Nessel took over a special-education classroom to demonstrate imitation writing to some teachers and administrators.

She also strategized with eighth-grade language-arts and social-studies teachers about how to help students frame "essential questions" to research in their Washington state history projects.

Many of the techniques are new to teachers, who are willing to try them because of the consultants' credibility.

"They are master teachers," Rimmer said of the consultants.

"They've taught in tough situations, they've taught all kinds of students, and they've had success with students. They come not as a prophet who's 50 miles away. They can only say, 'I've done this and it works. You can try this and see if it works for you.' "

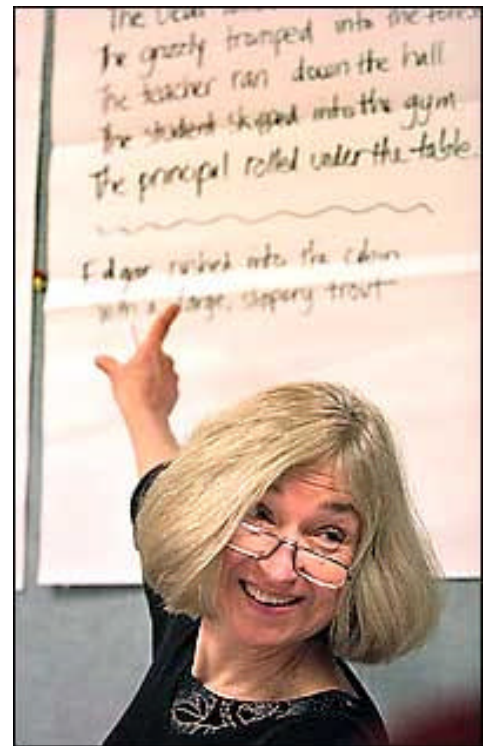
The district does not require teachers to participate in the Literacy Initiative, but some principals tell job applicants they expect them to take the training.

With nearly one-third of district teachers trained or in training, the benefits of the Literacy Initiative are not well documented.

The first group of teachers was drawn disproportionately from elementary and middle schools in which students' improvement showed lower-than-average scores on the reading and writing portions of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL).

After those teachers began the training in 2000, their students' WASL gains substantially exceeded those of students in other schools. Because teachers had been in the Literacy Initiative for only one month at that time, however, it is uncertain how much of the gain was attributable to the initiative.

The performance of "literacy schools" on the 2001 WASL has not yet been compared to that of "nonliteracy schools." WASL reading scores remained stagnant for the district as a whole.



TOM REESE / THE SEATTLE TIMES

[enlarge](#) Denise Nessel, a literacy consultant, explains writing strategy to teachers.

At Kimball, the number of children meeting the reading standard rose 11 percentage points to 70 percent — an impressive pass rate for a school with so many bilingual and poor children.

Principal Nielsen attributes those kinds of results to the school's clear focus on literacy, which has become "the centerpiece of everything that we do."

It also has to do with giving teachers the confidence and the skills that will allow their students do what in past years they couldn't do, said consultant Nessel.

"When teachers say, 'Well, you don't know my kids, they probably couldn't do this,' our response is, 'They probably can — let's figure out how they can do this.' "

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