

Program helps York students learn to read

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Staff Reporter

EDUCATION

A few months ago, reading words such as "marshmallow" and "thermos" would have been a struggle for six-year-old Joshua Townsend.

But today, the Grade 1 student at Maple Leaf Public School in Newmarket confidently reads through the pages of a book called *The Missing Necklace*, pausing only occasionally to form a new word in his mind before reading it aloud.

And when he isn't reading to his little brother Jacob, Joshua likes writing stories - both on paper and the family's home computer.

Joshua's mother Maria attributes her son's new-found love of literature to Reading Recovery, a specialized program that began in York Region four years ago to ensure all children can read - and understand what they're reading - by the end of Grade 1.

"I see so much improvement in this child - the change in him is extraordinary, it's a miracle," said Townsend. "He always makes books now - every day he asks for paper and writes something. It's getting to the point where Joshua is reading to us."

When he arrived at Maple Leaf in November, Joshua's peers had already undergone a series of early literacy tests identifying students at risk. But when Joshua was tested in February, his teachers determined he needed help in reading and writing.

He could identify letters and words such as "the" and "at" but he couldn't pull all his knowledge together to read a sentence

or story with ease and understanding.

His teacher, Penny Zielinski, said Joshua was reading at level one, not a good sign since Grade 1 students are required to read at level 16 by the end of the year.

A level-one story involves reading a sentence such as, "I am laughing." A level-16 story involves reading four or more sentences on each page, such as, "He was a brave little knight who wasn't afraid of any old dragon."

Joshua easily reads level-16 stories now and is ready to leave the program, following 30 minutes a day of one-on-one instruction for two months.

He is just one of hundreds of children this year who will go through the program, which claims a 90-per cent success rate.

Offered in 71 schools across the region, board officials hope all schools will have Reading Recovery by 2000, once enough trained teachers are available.

The program began in the western part of the region, where 23 schools offer it, and quickly spread to 18 schools in the north.

Reading Recovery is viewed as a chance to halt illiteracy early. Although some taxpayers may balk at the program's annual budget of \$260,000, studies show it saves money on special education later on.

"Up to 20 per cent of students need individualized help and if we don't close that gap right away, kids will continue to struggle and every year that gap just gets wider," said Zielinski.

"It would work in grades 2 and 3, but it would take the kids longer - they can't achieve in other areas if their reading and writing skills aren't there."

Although it varies from school to school, about four children per Grade 1 class will require the program.

Originating in New Zealand, Reading Recovery is now used around the world.

The program works, teachers say, because it provides a guided approach to teaching a child to read. It teaches students to look at the word, its meaning, and the way it fits into the sentence.

For instance, when encountering the word "thermos", Joshua would seek out the sounds and combinations of letters he already knew - "th" and "her" - and then look at the rest of the sentence.

"He looks for the chunks he knows," explained Zielinski. "We teach them to use their strategies to get over a word they're stuck on. We also have to let them do it and insist they do it. They have to be independent."

Teachers also learn to shed all preconceived notions about what a child knows when they pick up a book.

Students aren't the only ones benefitting from the program, says Zielinski, who has been a teacher for 15 years.

"I've learned so much about the teaching of reading and writing," she said.

Many teachers have said they thought they knew how to teach reading, until they took the Reading Recovery training.

And teaching a child to read is the ultimate reward of the profession, says Maple Leaf principal Glenna Collins.

"There is nothing more soul satisfying as

Reading Recovery no panacea: parent

Reading recovery may be viewed as the best means available to boost early reading skills in children, but one Thornhill parent argues it isn't the panacea some would believe.

Occasional teacher and parent Shelley Smith says if teachers learned how to teach reading properly in university, there would be no need for Reading Recovery or the program's \$260,000-a-year budget.

"If teachers are not taught to teach reading in teachers' college, it should be up to the board to come up with something that is used across the board," she said.

Smith recently made a presentation to trustees, questioning the current methods of teaching reading in York Region's public school board.

The issue became a concern for Smith two years ago when her daughter was having problems learning to read.

After conducting research of her own, Smith discovered a program developed in Florida that stresses the importance of sounds and recognition of letters or symbols in language.

Known as Phono-Graphics, the program doesn't rely on memorization of words. She feels the board should conduct a pilot study in Grades 1 and 2 using the program.

"I don't think (Reading Recovery) is the best program on the market. I have a lot of questions about the results," she said.

Trustees referred Smith's report to the special education department for further study.

— Jennifer Brown

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