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Testing CAN Make A Difference

by Mildred Royal, Van Buren Intermediate School District

It was two years ago that our schoolboard bought the new Houghton Mifflin basal reading program. However, somehow, we didn't get off to a good start! There was no in-service training for the teachers and no skilled person available to help implement the new series. Each teacher used the books more or less as she wished, while some even put them aside and continued with their previous familiar materials or with favorite supplementary books. Our rather low reading scores showed the need for a structured program of skills, taught right up through the grades. This was when we stopped and took another look at our basal readers.

We surveyed the entire series of Houghton Mifflin books and were still satisfied that they offered a good sound approach. More than that, there were post tests at the end of each section of every book in order to evaluate the student's knowledge of the particular skills that had been taught during that period. By administering these tests the teachers could see if each child really knew all the instant sight words and skills that had been presented. There were suggestions, too, in the teachers' guides for reteaching the specific skills.

It was decided that we would all begin to follow the basal program, give the post tests conscientiously, and record the scores. Then, when the children fell below the critical score, (and most of them did at first), we would not just shake our heads, make a few comments about the careless and stupid mistakes, and move on to the next chapter. Rather, we would go back over that section and carefully reteach the specific skills to every

child who fell below in a particular area. Children were not moved ahead to a new and higher level until we were sure they had mastered the material. In some cases we found it necessary to teach children how to mentally prepare to take a test, - and in our present day and age of accountability, this, too, seemed important!

We individualized our reading program by encouraging those students who didn't need reteaching of the various skills to read library books and form little discussion groups to share ideas from their different books. Also, as we went back over the skills in a section of our basal readers, children were entitled to reread the stories orally on a tape recorder, role play or dramatize stories, make movies or dioramas, produce puppet plays, and read to partners.

Teachers became very conscious of the fact that we were striving to teach the actual reading process and not just let children slide along and stumble through the books. Some teachers kept names clipped to their guidebooks to remind them of individual students who still needed special help and attention when they came to certain specific skills in the new unit. The children, too, became aware of the importance of the skills being stressed in their flexible needs groups. They also realized the significance of the assignments in their workbooks reinforcing these skills. Sometimes the students kept their own record of how they scored on pages dealing with particular skills. Then, they themselves knew what they must learn.

After we recorded and analyzed all our scores, we discovered that, as a whole school, we were weak in refer-

ence skills and in literary skills such as selecting the setting, the main character, and the plot of the story. Therefore, we plan to compile suggestions for new and creative ways to upgrade these areas where our children are falling below the critical levels. We will use the test scores as a guide to improve our teaching and our curriculum.

Yes, many of our children did have to move backwards a little in their reading texts, especially at first. However, by using the post tests as an assessment instrument, we are striving

to prevent children from reaching new and more difficult levels before they have really mastered the materials in earlier books. The tests are helping us to identify specific individual weaknesses and to correct them before the child moves on to more complex and complicated reading and study skills. In this way we hope to develop better prepared students who can progress through school with confidence and self assurance, ready to meet the challenges of a new and ever-changing era.

CORRECTION

In the Right to Read article in the fall edition of the *Journal*, Jerilee Gregory of the Hartford Schools was inadvertently omitted as one of the two trainers in the Southwest Right to Read region. Our sincere apologies to Ms. Gregory for this error.