

is for Bucket

Northeast BOCES/Otis Elementary School, Otis R3



Imagine having to memorize every book, newspaper, or letter you read. That's what Melissa, an Otis first grader, believed: reading is memorizing whole books in one huge chunk.

Brad thought he had aced the alphabet. He chanted confidently, "...H, I, J, K, amineto, P." Letters were just sounds to Brad, not visual symbols that he could combine into words and stories.

Children's notions about language and reading can set the tone for their reading experiences. If misconceptions aren't corrected early, children may set up a pattern for failure that will follow them for a lifetime. As Joy Perry, an Otis Elementary School teacher, said, "I could see things going wrong for some kids in the first grade. By third grade, they were failing. I just didn't know how to help them."

Early and individual tutoring was the answer. Otis Elementary was one of nearly a dozen northeastern Colorado schools that opted to participate in the Early Prevention program offered through the Northeast Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES). A hybrid of several other successful approaches, EP is tailored to the needs and structure of rural schools.

The program targets the lowest 20% of first-grade students. Those students are assigned to trained tutors—teachers, skilled paraprofessionals, and trained community volunteers—who expose

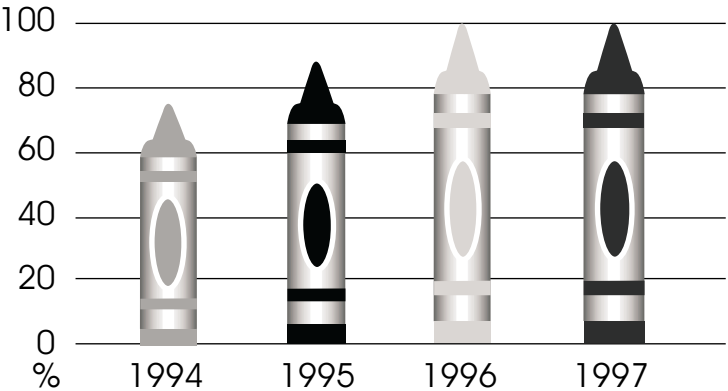


students to a wide variety of literature, including rhymes and high-interest stories, for 30 minutes every day. Children see and read their own stories in print. They learn letters, sounds, and words through magnetic letters and association. Every session includes at least three books, writing, and phonics.

Books and other tools are selected according to each child’s special challenges. For example, Melissa tried to memorize because she had no concept of words as separate parts of the whole story, Joy Perry said. “To push her beyond memorization, I would choose texts that showed in pictures and words things like a ball, a cow, and a bucket. When she read ‘pail’ I could help her understand that the word in the text started with the letter B, then help her work out ‘bucket’ by looking at the whole word.”

First-Graders Reading at Grade Level

Otis Elementary School



Other techniques zero in on auditory and visual discrimination problems—perhaps speaking the text into a child’s ear as she reads, or encouraging another to use his finger to guide his eye along a line of text.

“Direct instruction—teaching each child the way that child needs to be taught—is the key,” says Marcia DeGroot, Title I coordinator and EP trainer for the Northeast Colorado BOCES. “Kids, not curriculum, drive instruction.” That approach works: 72% of the children served last year needed no further help when they entered second grade.

Everyone is benefiting. Teachers feel renewed and able to make a difference, and

children are more confident of their abilities, DeGroot reports. Students actually enjoy reading and writing now—and two children from Sedgwick who emerged from the program won first and third places in their district spelling bee.