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Can Alabama Lead the U.S. In Reading Achievement?

With the success of the Alabama Reading Initiative and impressive gains among Reading First schools, it just might happen.

IN A JULY memo to superintendents highlighting results from the new state assessment of early reading achievement, State Superintendent of Education Joe Morton closed with this comment: "Thank you for joining me in our pursuit of being among the top five states in reading achievement in the next five years."

Top Five? Alabama? While it may sound like an audacious goal (and maybe they're laughing in Minnesota), it's not nearly so far-fetched as some might think.

In an August 2004 evaluation of the Alabama Reading Initiative, independent evaluator Edward Moscovitch of the Massachusetts-based company Cape Ann Economics, described ARI as "undoubtedly one of the most exciting — and most important — reform efforts in the country."

Since it began as a 16-school pilot project in 1998, ARI has grown to include more than 400 schools and trained hundreds of principals and more than 20,000 teachers in the components of effective reading programs.

Although ARI's primary mission is to improve the teaching of reading, its designers have built the program using the latest school improvement research. Entire school faculties go through initial ARI training, and the effective teaching strategies they learn have ripple effects across the school curriculum. ARI "is one of the largest programs in the country working to implement the basic elements of whole-school reform," said Moscovitch, who has followed and evaluated the Initiative since its earliest days.

While Moscovitch's report

identifies areas in need of improvement, he seems confident that ARI will continue to strengthen "because its leadership is constantly re-inventing the program by building on past experience and developing new solutions to the increasingly complex business of school turnaround..."

This commitment of ARI's leaders to constant improvement is earning Alabama national recognition as a state determined to make its mark in reaching achievement. Two other developments have further increased Alabama's chances to meet its five-year "Top Five" goal.

- During its 2004 session, with Governor Riley's strong encouragement, the State Legislature took the first step toward including all K-3 schools in the Alabama Reading

Continued on page 2.

CLOSING THE READING GAP

Southside Primary's comprehensive program takes the struggle out of early literacy page 5

Scripted reading programs are "about what the kids need, not what I need" page 8

Data-driven West Jasper educators make sure "Kids Come First" page 12

A kindergarten teacher discovers the power of small group instruction page 11

READING ACHIEVEMENT

Continued from page 1.

Initiative by funding a \$40 million expansion program.

- In 2003, Alabama became one of the first three states to qualify for the federal Reading First program. Over a six-year period, the Alabama Reading First Initiative will invest more than \$100 million in our state's highest need schools.

In this issue of *Working Toward Excellence* we profile two high-poverty schools — Southside Primary in Dallas County and West Jasper Elementary in Jasper City — to help illustrate the impact of Alabama's reading crusade.

Our profile of West Jasper, a member of ARI since 1999, demonstrates the Initiative's cumulative effect on a highly motivated school. "If we hadn't become an ARI school," says principal Eric Smith, "the changes here wouldn't have come about — certainly not nearly so fast. It showed us how to teach more effectively, not just in reading but in everything we teach."

Our story about Southside Primary reveals what happened when an already improving ARI school went one big step further, joined the new Alabama Reading First Initiative, and adopted a highly structured comprehensive reading program. After one year using the program, says reading coach Allison Kelley, "our strugglers can hardly be called strugglers anymore. With the comprehensive program, you really shorten the time that it takes for someone to be a highly accomplished teacher of reading."

ARI: Building on the past to develop new solutions

During the 2002-03 school year, ARI leaders began retooling the program's professional development

to emphasize in-classroom coaching for teachers. The new training model was "brought to fruition" in 2003-04 with "stunning success," Moscovitch says in his recent evaluation.

"The near-unanimous testimony" of teachers and principals has been that the job-embedded training model "has made a huge difference in changing the way teachers teach and principals lead," Moscovitch wrote.

"Over and over again, principals and teachers report that they now really understand what data-driven instruction is about and how to use small-group instruction to tailor their teaching to the individual needs identified in diagnostic assessments. Teachers are doing progress monitoring weekly on struggling readers, principals are discussing individual student needs with teachers...and teachers are mentoring each other, visiting each other's classes and working more closely together."

Moscovitch based his conclusions on three weeks of discussions with ARI teachers and principals during the 2003-04 school year. Since Moscovitch completed his on-the-ground research, ARI leaders have actually taken the program's training component up yet another notch.

Through a collaboration of ALSDE sections, including Federal Programs, Special Education, Classroom Improvement, ARI and ARFI, in 2004, 20 Summer Reading Academies were held around the state. K-3 summer schools served 10-15 struggling readers in each grade at each site. For six weeks, students worked with master reading teachers from 8 a.m. until noon. Each day, every student had two whole-group intervention lessons and at least three small group intervention lessons.

"The day was very intense, very targeted to their specific needs," says Judy Stone, an education specialist in the State Department of Education and a member of the ARI leadership team. "There were at least weekly

assessments — sometimes they were done more often than that."

The *breakthrough idea* behind these "Super Summer Schools" was this: Each school also served as a training ground for teachers from schools participating in ARI's required third-year recertification process (ARFI schools were also included). For the most part, these were teams that had been trained in the early years of ARI, Stone says, before the program shifted its focus to more job-embedded professional development.

During the first week of the Academy, the students and master teachers "got settled and going" without any observers. Then each week for the next five weeks, different faculty teams came to observe and try out effective reading strategies. The focus at each Academy site was "intensive intervention," Stone says, with master teachers modeling a highly structured intervention approach.

Participating teachers were familiar with reading research and the science of reading, Stone says, but "these summer sessions really gave them a chance to get into the practice phase. During the course of the morning they would go into the students' classroom and observe a lesson. Our master teachers would pull students out of the classroom and the visiting faculty would really get in-depth by watching a lesson with a particular small group. Then they had the chance to go back into the classroom and practice that lesson themselves." After the practice session there was time for reflection and feedback from master teachers and coaches.

More than 2500 teachers attended the Summer Academies. "It was as close as we could come to giving them job-embedded professional development in their own classrooms," says Stone. "We tried this past year with the recertification



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John Norton,
Writer and Editor

to move toward training teachers with their own students. But it is logistically so difficult to get the kind of time during the school year that you need to have a real training experience.”

Stone says the Summer Academy model also created a unique opportunity to give a school’s entire K-3 faculty time to learn and practice together. “We’re blessed to have reading coaches in our ARI schools, but if you’ve got one reaching coach and 30 teachers in a building, they just cannot have the impact on teacher practice that teachers will feel when they start working with each other. When teachers have the opportunity to learn how coach each other, like they did this summer, it really opens up the door for much more reflection and improvement.”

Coaching the coaches

In his recent ARI evaluation, Edward Moscovitch found variations in the quality and preparation of school-based reading coaches across ARI schools. Aware that the demand for coaches will increase significantly over the next several years as the state expands the Initiative, Moscovitch recommended that standards be set for reading coaches, with “extensive training” provided.

The 2004 Summer Reading Academies offered ARI leaders an opportunity to pilot just such training. At eight of the 20 Academy sites, reading coaches from surrounding schools were invited to participate in a four-week internship — spending a week in each of the grades K through 3. The coaches were mentored by “master coaches” selected by the state ARI staff. “We really wanted people who had worked with coaches, not just teachers,” says Stone. “And they were absolutely great.”

Across the state, about 45 coaches went through the pilot internship. Most had already been involved in occasional ARI coaches

training during the school year, but “we could only pull them about one day a month,” Stone says. “And here we had the opportunity for them to train in small groups, in a school setting, for 20 days — which accelerated their training schedule by at least two years. What they learned went beyond our wildest dreams.

“They focused on observing and reflecting and giving feedback to teachers, which is the thing that is very often hardest for our coaches to do. It’s difficult to tell your peers what they’re doing ‘wrong.’ They spent a lot of time reflecting on lessons and giving feedback. They worked a lot on learning to plan and present content studies; on learning to plan and present model lessons. It was great training.”

The design of the summer coach internship program represented “three years of our thinking on how to do this right,” Stone says. The experiment was so successful that it will now become the basis of a mandatory internship for all new school-based reading coaches.

“Of the \$40 million the legislature has given us to expand the Alabama Reading Initiative, about \$30 million is going to fund reading coaches,” she says. “And we can’t make that kind of financial investment unless we’re willing to invest in high-quality training to make the coaching piece work.”

ARFI: Targeting our highest needs schools

The Alabama Reading Initiative (ARFI) sprang into gear in the summer of 2003, when 74 qualified schools began their adoption of one of six “comprehensive reading programs” approved by the state. The scientifically based programs are “scripted” in the sense that teachers are expected to follow a detailed teaching plan shown by research to be effective in developing early read-

Continued on page 4.

WHAT IS DIBELS?

DIBELS stands for “Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills.” DIBELS might best be described as a collection of mini-tests. Teachers use them in their own classrooms to take a quick measure of a student’s progress in developing various pre-reading and early reading skills. They take only a minute (literally) to administer and teachers immediately know the results. DIBELS makes it possible for teachers to “progress monitor” individual students on a regular basis. They can pinpoint a student’s specific learning needs and provide targeted instruction to meet those needs, either one-on-one or in small groups.

When DIBELS results are compiled by classroom and grade level, teachers, reading coaches and principals can look for patterns that may indicate a need for additional instructional materials and/or more teacher professional development.

The DIBELS measures, developed by reading experts at the University of Oregon, grow out of the latest research on essential early reading skills. “Each measure has been thoroughly researched and demonstrated to be reliable and valid indicators of early literacy development and predictive of later reading proficiency to aid in the early identification of students who are not progressing as expected.”

In Alabama, the first widespread use of DIBELS began a few years ago in schools that were participating in the Alabama Reading Initiative. This past school year (2003-04), *all* Alabama schools with grades K-2 were required to begin administering DIBELS (82 percent of schools also opted to use the assessments in Grade 3).

By compiling the 2003-04 DIBELS data from across the state, the Department of Education is able to give us our first in-depth look at how well Alabama is teaching “the big ideas of early literacy development” — and which schools and districts are having the most success in solving the reading puzzle.

When he released the statewide DIBELS results to city and county school superintendents in July, State Superintendent of Education Joseph B. Morton noted that “These results are not used for *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) accountability but rather for instructional improvement that will lead to improved NCLB accountability results.”

“The DIBELS data are of utmost importance because they point to what matters most for teaching students to read and because they predict performance on the high-stakes Stanford 10,” Morton wrote. “Teachers, principals, and superintendents can know by mid-year of kindergarten which students are on track...to score well on the Stanford 10.... Students who are not on track to be grade-level readers need intervention immediately while it is still easy to accelerate their learning.”

If you’d like to know more about the DIBELS reading assessments, visit the official DIBELS homepage at the University of Oregon: <http://dibels.uoregon.edu/> ♦

READING ACHIEVEMENT

Continued from page 3.

ing skills. Each school receives an annual grant to purchase the program and consumables, provide professional development for teachers, and hire a full-time reading coach.

After one year using these

programs, most ARFI schools made significant achievement gains, as measured by the state's DIBELS early reading assessments (see page 3).

In this issue, we profile the top-performing ARFI school for 2003-04 — Southside Primary in Dallas County.

Several school systems with ARFI-eligible schools used Title I and other funds to provide comprehensive reading programs for *all* of

their K-3 schools. The decision paid off for Montgomery County, which ranked first in the state in reading gains for the 2003-04 school year. (See page 19.)

ARI leadership team member Judy Stone says the top-performing ARFI schools have produced unprecedented one-year reading gains. She attributes the success to

Continued on page 18.

HOW TO INTERPERT THE DIBELS SUMMARY REPORTS IN THIS ISSUE OF *WORKING TOWARD EXCELLENCE*

This issue of *Working Toward Excellence* includes tables showing DIBELS reading assessment data for our profiled schools. Here's an explanation that can help the uninitiated decipher this information!

The first column in a DIBELS summary report shows the various skills measured by DIBELS "mini-tests." (See box on page 18 for an explanation of each skill.) These one-minute tests are used to monitor the progress of individual students at each grade level. The state requires that all students be assessed at least three times each school year (fall, winter, spring), but teachers may assess individual students much more frequently if they appear to be struggling with a specific skill. The data in our tables is drawn from the three mandatory state assessments and summarizes the performance of all students at a grade level.

The DIBELS assessment system sets a benchmark for each of the reading skills that have been found to be critical in the development of early literacy. When a student is "benchmarked," he or she is considered to have mastered that skill. Students are expected to meet the benchmark for certain skills in kindergarten; other skills are not "benchmarked" until first grade.

One skill area — Oral Reading Fluency — does not have a final benchmark but a series of goals that extend upward through the grades. For example, at mid-year in first grade, a student who is "on track" should be able to read at least 20 words fluently in 60 seconds. By the end of first grade, that student should be reading at least 40 words a minute. By the end of second grade, the goal is 90 words per minute.

The data in our DIBELS tables is shown with one of two sets of labels:

Low Risk/Some Risk/At Risk — These are designations that DIBELS uses during the time before a student has reached the developmental stage where he or she is expected to master a skill. Teachers are able to measure a student's progress toward mastery (the "benchmark") by comparing the results of their DIBELS mini-tests to goals establishing for beginning-of-year, mid-year, and end-of-year. These goals are a "moving target" — they increase at each testing point.

Here's an example: In the skill area called "Phoneme Segmentation Fluency," kindergarteners are expected by mid-year to be able to sound out at least 18 phonemes in a minute. (Hint: the word *mop* has three phonemes!) By the end of the year, the goal is 35 phonemes or more a minute.

Periodic DIBELS Assessments "Raise the Bar"

Goals for DIBELS assessment of "Nonsense Word Fluency"

| | Middle of Kindergarten | End of Kindergarten | Beginning of First Grade | Middle of First Grade | End of First Grade (mastery) |
|------|------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| GOAL | 13 letter sounds | 25 letter sounds | 25 letter sounds | 50 letter sounds | 50 letter sounds |

Established/Emerging/Deficit — Once students reach the developmental stage where the DIBELS researchers believe they should master or "benchmark" a skill, the assessment data begins to be presented using these descriptors. "Established" means the student has mastered the skill. "Emerging" means they're close. "Deficit" indicates a student is still struggling and needs extra intervention. The researchers point out that "It is not enough for students to simply meet a goal; they must meet the goal by a specified time period so that they can make the necessary progress they need to develop into lifelong readers."

Hint: To make a judgment about the success of a school's early literacy efforts, compare the the percentage of students who are "low risk" or "established" at the beginning, middle and end of the year. These percentages should be greater each step of the way. ♦

Southside Primary's Reading Odyssey: Taking the Struggle Out of Early Literacy

A high-poverty school's decision to adopt a comprehensive reading program has earned it top honors in the Alabama Reading First Initiative.

BY JOHN NORTON

THIS IS THE story of one school's remarkable academic odyssey — a five-year journey that had its beginning in struggle and frustration and ultimately burst forth into an almost unimaginable new world, where virtually every student is now mastering the fundamentals necessary to become a successful early reader.

Nothing about its geographic location, physical appearance or demographic statistics would have led turn-of-the-millennium prognosticators to put Southside Primary on a list of likely "breakthrough" schools. Southside is located on the rural outskirts of Selma in a community that shows few signs of the prosperity America enjoyed in the 1990s. Its students and faculty work together in a simple flat-roofed red brick schoolhouse — the kind of structure built by the hundreds across the South in the 1950s and 60s. The children who go to school here are smiling and energetic, but they are also mostly poor (98%) and mostly minority (98%), and many enter kindergarten well behind the curve in language development.

What Southside did and does have going for it is strong leadership, a caring faculty, and a hard-won willingness to take professional risks for the sake of kids. These assets — and a decision one year ago to adopt a

comprehensive approach to reading instruction — has earned Southside recognition as the most successful school (among 74) in the Alabama Reading First Initiative for 2003-04.

Setting sail

Five years ago, Southside reading coach Allison Kelley was a first-grade teacher in the K-2 school. "We found that we were having problems with our students meeting the reading promotion requirements that Dallas County had established. We knew our existing program was not meeting their needs, and some of us went out on our own and began to try new strategies. But what we really needed was a way for all of us to expand our knowledge as teachers of reading."

Patricia Redd was principal at Southside for 13 1/2 years. Last January she accepted a position in the district office, but Redd stays involved in the school's reading program by helping with schoolwide assessments and serving as a sounding board for Kelley and the new administration.

Redd recalls that in 1999, "We were using a reading program that was probably 15 years old. It was the only thing we had for reading. We had really not done any type of professional development other than for the basal program. Our children were just not making progress. They were not learning to read the way we

wanted them to read. So we decided to try the Alabama Reading Initiative."

Southside became part of ARI's "third cohort," just as the program was going through its first major expansion. Southside teachers joined faculties from more than 80 other schools for 60 hours of professional development in the summer of 2000. The Reading Initiative was in its toddler stage, and ARI leaders were still trying to find the most effective ways to train and support school faculties on a large scale.

"We came back overwhelmed," Redd says. "We had been given so much to think about, and so many strategies to implement. It was really hard to decide where we were going to start when we came back to the school."

Gwen Carrington, who stepped in as interim principal last winter after Redd's move to central office, also participated in the 2000 summer training. "Many of the presenters said to us during those nine days, 'You're not going to be able to do all of these things at one time. So we really embraced the one or two strategies we felt were our top priorities.'"

As a K-2 school serving many children with oral language deficits, "we realized that the main thing our instructional program lacked was a strong phonics-based program,"

Continued on page 6.

ON THE WEB

More Ideas from Alabama Schools!

For more stories about Alabama schools where educators are making progress in closing the achievement gap, read the Spring 2003 issue of *Working Toward Excellence*, which features the cover story, "Four Schools That Teach So All Students Learn."

This 2003 "gap beater" issue includes a two-page summary of recent research on the characteristics of highly challenged, high-performance schools. You can download the entire issue in PDF format (267k) at:

<http://snipurl.com/beatthegap>

Kelley says. “We realized that we had to help our children build a foundation. They needed to be able to decode and blend in order to be more skillful readers. So that was the first schoolwide focus.”

As the start of the 2000-01 school year, Kelley accepted one of two new coaching positions at Southside. “During the first year I think we were all still trying to figure out how to translate what we know works into everyday classroom practice. Our conversations tended to sound like this: ‘Are we doing this right?’ ‘Is this effective?’ ‘What should we do next?’ ‘Maybe we should try this.’”

One immediate “sea change” brought on by the involvement in ARI, says Kelley, was a new vision of staff development. “We quickly moved away from the traditional three-hour workshops to ongoing, extensive

professional development. And it’s all based on the professional development needs we discover by doing regular assessments of the children.”

Over the next two years, the faculty at Southside learned a great deal about effective teaching strategies in reading. With Kelley’s urging and support, they began venturing out of their classrooms to observe one another. Their confidence grew. “We could feel that we were improving,” Redd says, “but we didn’t have really good ways to assess our progress until DIBELS.”

At the beginning of the 2002-03 school year, ARI schools were required to begin using the DIBELS reading assessment system to monitor progress. By taking a measure of their students’ status at the beginning of the year and then measuring their growth at mid-year, the Southside teachers were able to see clearly for the first time that they were having a significant impact on children’s reading achievement.

When kindergarteners arrived

in August 2002, 78 percent were found to be struggling with initial sounds. By mid-year, that figure had dropped to below 30 percent. Data from other assessments in kindergarten, first and second grade were also highly encouraging.

“Seeing that data was a big event for us,” says Killian Albritton, who began teaching kindergarten at Southside right out of college six years ago. “We felt like we had really pulled things together. We were climbing to the top.”

As it turned out, however, the teachers and students of Southside Primary had not yet reached the peak of early reading achievement. They had another voyage to make.

Moving from good to great

By the end of the 2002-03 school year, Southside Primary’s teachers were justifiably proud of the school’s reading achievement gains. But there was a feeling among some teachers — a feeling shared by Redd

Southside Primary

BEFORE IT BECAME a Alabama Reading First Initiative (ARFI) school in 2003-04, Dallas County’s Southside Primary participated in the Alabama

Reading Initiative (ARI) for several years. All ARI schools administered the DIBELS reading assessments in the 2002-03 school year, making it

possible for Southside to compare student data before and after it adopted a comprehensive reading program in the fall of 2003.

Impact of Comprehensive Reading Program On Kindergarten Reading Achievement at Southside Primary School (Dallas County)

| Kindergarten Classes of 2002-03 (year before comprehensive program) Mid-Year DIBELS Assessment | | | Kindergarten Classes of 2003-04 (first year of comprehensive program) Mid-Year DIBELS Assessment | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Established 58% | Emerging 29% | Deficit 12% | Established 88% | Emerging 10% | Deficit 2% |
| Low Risk 18% | Some Risk 42% | At Risk 40% | Low Risk 51% | Some Risk 31% | At Risk 17% |
| Low Risk 48% | Some Risk 17% | At Risk 35% | Low Risk 72% | Some Risk 19% | At Risk 9% |

SOURCE: State Department of Education DIBELS summary reports. Used with permission of school. Some rows may not total 100 percent due to rounding.

The DIBELS data shown in this table demonstrate the impact of a sharply focused, comprehensive reading program (in this case, Voyager Universal) on the reading achievement of kindergarten students at Southside. Keep in mind that Southside is a high-poverty school where many children enter kindergarten with below-average language skills. Among 74 schools in the Alabama Reading First Initiative, Southside ranked first in reading gains in 2003-04. (Find out more about DIBELS on page 3. And see our guide for interpreting DIBELS reports on page 4.) ♦

and Kelley — that they could do more.

“We had teachers who had worked with their strugglers and had good results,” Kelley says. “But we had others who felt like we really hadn’t unlocked the puzzle yet.” Those teachers wanted something more than another add-on program. “It was almost like going to the doctor and saying, ‘Don’t give me another prescription for the pain — cure this!’”

In 2002, Alabama became a partner in the federal Reading First program, which offers sizeable annual grants to qualified high-need schools. The grants come with one very large string attached. Each school must adopt a “research-based comprehensive reading program” that meets criteria set by federal and state education officials. After exploring the possible advantages of a highly structured reading program, Southside applied and was accepted into the Alabama Reading First Initiative.

Representatives from each of the six reading programs approved by the state presented to the Southside faculty. The Voyager Universal program for grades K-1 seemed to be the best fit. The program alternates between whole group and small group instruction and uses centers or “stations” to reinforce learning. “We thought the design would most meet the needs of our students,” Kelley says. “Students move around, and they have opportunities for leadership and character building, too.”

The decision to move to a comprehensive program, Kelley says, was not an attempt to “teacher-proof” reading instruction. “Our teachers already knew what works in reading. But they were spending so much of their time planning and finding resources to implement the strategies, that it was almost stressful when it came time to teach it. So why wouldn’t you want to give them a strong program with all the resources built in?”

“Everything in this program is coordinated,” Redd adds. “Even the intervention is coordinated with what’s going on in the regular classroom. So there are not any gaps. No one is asking, ‘If this child goes into intervention, what are we going to do?’ We know what we’re going to do.”

“With this comprehensive structure in place,” Kelley says, “our children are getting double-dipped, and some are getting triple-dipped. And we have a few that are even getting quadruple-dipped. We know exactly what they need, and we keep giving them what they need until they master the skills. We’ve never really been set up to do that before. It’s not the way we’ve ever ‘done school,’ and I don’t just mean *our* school.”

Teacher reaction was mixed

The advantage of a comprehensive program seemed clear to Southside’s leadership team, but

Continued on page 9.

DIBELS Summary Report 2003-04 Southside Primary • Dallas County • Alabama Reading First Initiative School First Year of Comprehensive Reading Program – High Poverty (90%+)

| Kindergarten | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|----------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| | Beginning of Year | | | Mid-Year | | | End-of-Year | | |
| Initial Sound Fluency | Low Risk 67% | Some Risk 20% | At Risk 13% | Established 88% | Emerging 10% | Deficit 2% | No group testing after mid-year | | |
| Phoneme Segmentation Fluency | Not tested until mid-year | | | Low Risk 51% | Some Risk 31% | At Risk 17% | Established 99% | Emerging 1% | Deficit 1% |
| Nonsense Word Fluency | Not tested until mid-year | | | Low Risk 72% | Some Risk 19% | At Risk 9% | Low Risk 94% | Some Risk 2% | At Risk 4% |
| First Grade | | | | | | | | | |
| | Beginning of Year | | | Mid-Year | | | End-of-Year | | |
| Phoneme Segmentation Fluency | Established 67% | Emerging 26% | Deficit 7% | Established 98% | Emerging 1% | Deficit 1% | Established 100% | Emerging 0% | Deficit 0% |
| Nonsense Word Fluency | Low Risk 71% | Some Risk 14% | At Risk 15% | Established 91% | Emerging 7% | Deficit 2% | Established 97% | Emerging 1% | Deficit 2% |
| Oral Reading Fluency | Not tested until mid-year | | | Low Risk 70% | Some Risk 26% | At Risk 4% | Low Risk 83% | Some Risk 11% | At Risk 5% |
| Second Grade | | | | | | | | | |
| | Beginning of Year | | | Mid-Year | | | End-of-Year | | |
| Oral Reading Fluency | Low Risk 61% | Some Risk 27% | At Risk 12% | Low Risk 75% | Some Risk 13% | At Risk 12% | Low Risk 77% | Some Risk 12% | At Risk 11% |

SOURCE: State Department of Education DIBELS summary reports. Used with permission of school. Some rows may not total 100 percent due to rounding. See table explanation on page 4.

“IT'S ABOUT WHAT THEY NEED, NOT WHAT I NEED”

Killian Albritton has spent her six-year career as a kindergarten teacher at Southside Primary, a high-poverty K-2 school near Selma. In an April interview, Albritton described her initial resistance to her school's adoption of a comprehensive reading program, and her eventual coming-to-terms with a “scripted” teaching approach that has transformed “even my strugglers” into successful early readers

“When I first began to teach at Southside,” Albritton recalls, “the main focus for kindergarten was not necessarily reading. Reading was important but the pace was slow. We had the naptime, we learned the alphabet, and by April they were able to read the simple books.”

When Southside Primary joined the Alabama Reading Initiative, Albritton says, the emphasis on kindergarten literacy intensified. “We had a lot of training and we began to see what was really possible. Before, you might look at a certain group of children and say, ‘You know, they don’t get help at home; the community is not supporting them; they can’t learn; they don’t care.’ But they really do, you know. What we were finding is that the more we did with them, the more they soaked in.”

By the 2002-03 school year, Southside’s teachers had begun using the DIBELS assessment system for early reading. The data revealed that several years of intensive professional development was having a big impact on reading achievement across all three grades. Albritton says teachers “felt like we had really pulled things together.”

So when Southside applied for a federal Reading First grant – which would require the school to adopt a highly structured comprehensive reading program – “a lot of teachers were saying, ‘Why do we need this program that tells us what to say and when to say it? Why do we need that when we did so well last year?’”

For grades K-1, Southside adopted Voyager Universal, one of six research-based comprehensive programs approved for Alabama Reading First Initiative schools. Albritton and her teacher colleagues spent part of the summer of 2003 being trained to teach reading following Voyager’s step-by-step approach.

At the beginning, Albritton says, “I just hated it. I chose to teach in kindergarten because we could be so creative! We could talk about the Gingerbread Man, we could make gingerbread cookies, we could have a lot of fun. Then lo and behold we adopted Voyager, and we axed all of that.

“It was totally scripted. Everything was set out for us. And we were really unhappy. My attitude was, ‘You don’t need a certified teacher to do this. Anybody can come in and read this script. Don’t tell me what to do and say. I’ve been doing it for six years and I’ve been doing fine.”

Albritton says her outlook began to change some after a conversation she had with her mother. “She teaches in high school. We would walk every afternoon and I’d be going, ‘I hate Voyager, I’ve got to pull all

these (drill) cards,’ and on and on. And my momma said, ‘Well, it’s about time y’all do something that works. We’re getting them in the 11th grade who can’t read. So suck it up!’ And I’m reeling a little bit and saying, ‘Well, I guess we *do* need to try something.’

Even so, says Albritton, the shock of having to give up all of her creativity – “they told us for the first half of the year we were going to follow the script very strictly and give it every chance” – continued to make her “quite resistant every once and awhile.”

“And then our reading coach began to show us scores,” she remembers. “She would say ‘look at these,’ and, they were a lot better than they were the year before. Then in January, when we heard we were the top-performing school in the whole state ARFI program, that’s when we all had to just say, ‘Wow. I mean WOW.’ That’s when it all sank in.”

“It would be hard for me to speak badly about a comprehensive program now,” Albritton says. “Even our so-called strugglers are so far above what we ever thought of as a struggler before.” Why does the program work? “It’s the careful structure, the routines. It seems so boring to us, but we’re not five. They don’t think it’s boring. When they can go through and sound out everything as fast as possible and not hit a glitch – it gives them the biggest confidence.”

Albritton has learned, she says, that no comprehensive program is teacher-proof. “You’ve got to know how to manage a classroom – you have to organize, organize, organize. You need to understand the principles behind what you are doing. I still don’t love it, but I see that it’s all about what they need, not what I need.”

Albritton says her only regret about the switch to a comprehensive reading program is “that we didn’t do something like this earlier.” With emotion in her voice, she adds: “If only the colleges had taught us how to order what we do – how to really organize it and do what’s most effective for kids. If they had said, ‘Drill this. I swear it will work,’ we would have done it. And for the early reading instruction we’re doing – it *does* work.”

“Here’s the funniest thing,” Albritton laughs. “We’re getting these great results, and we have 19 or 20 students in our kindergarten classes, which is the most we’ve *ever* had. And I can’t even complain about it. I can’t say, like I would have before, ‘I can’t teach this class because I’ve got 20 students.’ Because we’ve discovered that we can teach any student you bring into this school how to read. No doubt about it.” ❖

initial teacher reaction was mixed. For some, professional pride was at stake. "A monkey could teach this," one teacher was heard saying. Another factor, Kelley says, was a reluctance to keep pushing the reform envelope. "When we began to talk about a program that would require us to change even more, it was hard to persuade many of our teachers. Our DIBELS scores showed that we were really gaining ground. So why upset the cart?"

After a week of summer training, Southside's K-1 teachers greeted their 2003-04 students with the Voyager "teaching script" in hand. Killion Albritton was one of several teachers who were angry and upset about the change. By October, she says, "I hated it. Just hated it. It was taking all the fun and creativity out of teaching kindergarten."

"There were teachers who felt it stifled their creativity to use a scripted program," Redd remembers. And two months into the school year, some teachers were even wondering if their students were *losing* rather than gaining ground. "The general complaint," says Gwen Carrington, "was 'This is going too slow!'" Redd says the leadership team held their collective breath "because we were real pleased with our scores last year, and we were praying *'please* let the scores be higher this year."

Some teacher resistance came "from the fact that we tried to stay so true to the comprehensive program design during the first semester," says Kelley. "We pretty much put lock and key on a lot of things that we felt the teachers might fall back on otherwise, because those things were so much a part of their old routine.

"We instilled the idea from the beginning that, 'Look, we're going to have a blind faith here. The research says this is going to work. We want to

see the results for ourselves, and we've got to stick with it long enough to give it a chance."

The Voyager program is built on a foundation of small-group instruction, and teachers are expected to begin their small groups two weeks after the start of school. At Southside, a few teachers were trying small groups for the first time, and most others "were not used to starting that early," Redd says. "You get a mindset that it takes a certain amount of time to get a certain age group ready before you can trust them enough to work in small groups."

Kelley says the teachers' uneasiness was understandable, especially in kindergarten. "Let's face it — management is hard with five-year olds who have never been in a classroom setting. So it was a whole new game."

As October turned to November and the holidays approached, evidence began to accumulate that the program's strategies were working — even with students identified early in the year as strugglers. Still, Redd says, "I don't think some teachers were convinced it was the right thing to do until the mid-year results came out in January."

The mid-year data showed that students were reaching DIBELS goals and benchmarks at a much swifter pace than the year before. The percentage of kindergarteners still "at-risk" on one key measure — Phoneme Segmentation Fluency — dropped from 40% in mid-2003 to 16% in mid-2004. On another key measure, Nonsense World Fluency, the at-risk group shrank from 35% to 8%. (See table on page 7.)

The impressive gains earned Southside Primary recognition as the high-performing ARFI school in the state on the mid-year DIBELS assessments. At that point, most teachers were ready to embrace the new program. "It helped that the teachers here had already bought into the

research-based components of successful reading instruction," Carrington said. "Every teacher didn't jump on board in the beginning, but they had an open mind. And then the data made them believers."

"What it really boiled down to was students' needs versus teachers' desires," Kelley says. "What do we really need to focus on — our desires to be comfortable, or the fact that we know some of our students need more than we are giving them?"

Albritton says her early resistance to the scripted program began to fade as she saw the change taking place in her classroom. "When you think about it, the most important thing is not whether I'm having fun teaching. It's whether they're having fun because they're learning a lot more. They're really excited about what they can do, and I'm finding ways to have fun, too." (See more of Albritton's comments on page 8.)

Teacher professionalism in a "scripted" school

After Southside leaped the mid-year performance hurdle, Kelley and Carrington began to encourage teachers who wanted to add some of their own ideas to the comprehensive program.

"Now that they are learning to implement the program with fidelity," says Kelley, "they have a better understanding of how and why the program works. So they are able to select some high-interest activities they've done in the past that will work with this approach. We're not adding other programs, but we are able to make judgments about supplemental activities that can complement what we're doing."

School leaders at Southside don't want the scripted reading program to retard the development of the school's emerging professional learning community. "We want teachers to continue to collaborate

Continued on page 10.

ON THE WEB

Energize Your School Improvement!

Energy is a keystone of school improvement, says organizational expert Jane Dutton. But in many schools today "the energy seems to be generated by external pressure." The core premise of Dutton's new book *Energize Your Workplace* is that "every organization already has available within it a renewable wellspring of energy that flows from how people treat each other in their daily interactions." Find out how Dutton's ideas can help build collaboration and drive school change in this interview from the *Journal of Staff Development* (Summer 2004).

<http://snipurl.com/dutton>

and share their best ideas,” Kelley says.

One way Southside supports collaboration is by including classroom teachers on “walk-through” teams. *Walk-throughs* are a familiar strategy in ARFI and ARI schools. Typically, a small team (which usually includes an administrator and the reading coach) enters a classroom unannounced. The team is looking for evidence of one or two specific practices associated with effective reading instruction. By selecting a few practices to look at in advance, the team maintains a sharp focus and can move in and out quickly. These visits are usually followed by “debriefs” with the visited teachers.

When teachers participate in walk-throughs at their grade level, says Kelley, “They love seeing what’s going on in all their peers’ classrooms and discussing it. Some valuable questions and answers have come out of that. And I think when peers are involved in the walkthroughs, it’s more of a relaxed atmosphere. A teacher will see something that excites her — ‘I have to ask her how she’s grouping these children so she’s released to have these strugglers for twice as much time’ — and then talk about it afterwards in a peer-to-peer kind of way.”

“They can’t believe what’s happening”

Voyager “is a really good program,” says kindergarten teacher Shaunda Fleeton, a young educator who came to Southside last fall after one year teaching in another school district. “You can see the quality by looking at the scores, or just looking in my classroom — all of my kids are reading.”

Fleeton says she knew the program was making a difference the first few weeks of school. “You could

hear kids going down the hallway making the sounds of the alphabet. Now you can hear them singing the Voyager songs throughout the day. You can hear them recalling words. You can see them walking through our building, pointing to words and sounding them out. Five-year olds! That is amazing to me.”

Parent response is another indicator of the comprehensive reading program’s impact. “When I see parents, they can’t believe what’s happening,” Albritton says. “I saw the parent of one little girl and I said, ‘Well tell me about the reading going on at home.’ And she said, ‘She won’t stop reading! She reads everything!’ And that little girl went from just not getting it, to really really getting it in a matter of months.”

Dallas County supports a systemwide parent involvement program that includes monthly visits by a parent facilitator to each school. “At one of our meetings,” Carrington says, “she had a group of about 14 parents, and one parent just spontaneously said, ‘My child can read! I can really see a difference in this child and my older child who is in this school. My child gets in the grocery store and she’s sounding out words — she’s looking at the signs and reading them.”

Kelley says the comprehensive program includes a home-school connection component. “The parents actually get games and activities they can play with their children each month that teach the skills they are currently working on. We’ve had parents say, ‘Oh, we did our home study guide!’ Finally we have something we can put in parents’ hands that can help them help us.”

Despite Southside’s success, Kelley and Carrington (who is now the district reading coordinator) know that the ultimate test of their efforts will be how well students move from basic literacy to high levels of reading comprehension —

a crucial factor in doing well on Alabama’s high-stakes accountability tests. “First grade is really going to be our screener in comprehension,” says Kelley. “We’ll be watching closely. But we do know that if we can make them fluent readers, their comprehension scores will be much greater. That’s basic.”

The teachers and leadership team members at Southside Primary have a wry appreciation for their emergence as a “Cinderella story” among schools in the Alabama reading initiatives. Kelley says a State Department of Education staff member told her that “when an ARFI school in another part of the state found out we were number one at mid-year, they said, ‘What? Well, dad-gum, if that school can do it, we can do it, too.’

Southside is happy to help raise the bar, Kelley says, “but we didn’t set out to be a model. We just knew we needed to do more for these kids. We had been working hard on reading for years. We thought we were doing well. But never did we dream that once we got a comprehensive program in place, and a strong one, what the results could be.” ❖

THE POWER OF SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION

When Shaunda Fleeton accepted her first teaching job two years ago, she was eager to try out small-group instruction with her second graders. She'd heard of the concept, although she received no training in its use during her undergraduate teacher education program. "I wanted to do it, but I'd never seen it in action," she says.

With whole group instruction, she explains, "you're teaching the whole class the same skill and everybody is working on the same objective." In small groups, you have children divided into a number of different groups. The groups work independently at various classroom centers or learning stations while the teacher pulls in one small group at a time – a strategy that allows more targeted, intensive instruction.

Fleeton soon discovered that most teachers in her first school had little or no interest in the small-group strategy – despite reams of research touting its effectiveness. "A lot of teachers in that school didn't like small group. We had an Alabama Reading Initiative person come out and tell us we needed to do small groups, and he showed us how important it was. A lot of the other teachers just didn't want to do it, and even though they were told to do it, they didn't."

Fleeton says she experimented with the strategy. Although her students made significant progress, "I wouldn't say it was totally effective, since I was trying to figure it out on my own." It wasn't until Fleeton moved to Southside Primary for the 2003-04 school year – switching from second grade to kindergarten – that she received substantive small-groups professional development.

Mixing whole and small group instruction is a key concept in the comprehensive reading program adopted by Southside, an Alabama Reading First Initiative (ARFI) school. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers are expected to have small groups in place within a few weeks of the start of school.

Traditionally, kindergarten teachers have been among the most resistant to adopting small group instruction strategies. Many believe that five-year olds cannot be trusted to work in a model that requires them to spend part of their day learning without constant supervision.

"A lot of people think kindergarteners can't do small groups," says Fleeton. "But they can. You can just look in my class. Of course, there are things second graders can do that I don't let my five-year-olds do. I don't let them move out of a group, for example. You give directions and tell them what you expect out of them. I pull each activity out of the bag and model each one, so they'll know exactly what they're supposed to be doing. After the first three weeks or so, they start to get it. I set my expectations high and I motivate them with prizes."

Fleeton believes the small-group strategy is a major reason for the program's effectiveness and Southside's higher achievement. Teachers gather feedback from regular DIBELS assessments and use the information to select the program activities each student needs. Trying to deliver the individualized instruction in a whole class setting would be impossible, but it's relatively simple to do in small groups.

"You won't meet everybody's needs if you don't do small groups," she says. "Your smartest students are going to be the ones who get the most benefit from whole group instruction. Your slower ones are going to sit there and say everything they see the smart ones saying. Until you get children in a small group, you cannot really do any assessment that's not on paper. I can truly assess what's going on with a child in a small-group setting. I can see if they're getting what I'm teaching or if I need to re-approach it in a different way."

Why don't more teachers use the small group strategy? "A lot of teachers are afraid to change from their old ways," says Fleeton, who is still in her mid-20s. "It's hard work. But I really do believe that teachers have to be change agents. If research says that this works, we need to be willing to change. Because you're not in that classroom to suit yourself."

Fleeton says her college program has asked for feedback from recent graduates, "and I let them know that we really need to be trained to do small group instruction and assessment. They need to take the college students on-site and let them work with real students. Because my college had not really prepared me to go into a classroom and teach reading in a way that really reaches all our students." ❖

Data-Driven West Jasper Educators Make Sure “Kids Come First”

In the City of Jasper, there's new-found appreciation for a little elementary school on the poor side of town.

ON THE WEB

Creating a Culture Shift

Read about a high-poverty school in Harlem where “Everything the teachers and administration do is based on results, not programs.” The article is one of a dozen (scroll to bottom) stories profiling successful data-driven schools to be found at Douglas Reeves’ Center for Performance Assessment website.

<http://snipurl.com/reeves>

THERE WAS A time — and it wasn’t too many years ago — that the faculty at West Jasper Elementary just couldn’t get any respect.

The little PreK-5 school, tucked away in a shade-tree neighborhood just a few blocks from Jasper’s main street, serves a racially mixed group (about 50/50 black and white) of nearly 300 students, three-fourths of whom qualify for the federal free lunch program.

“In our community we’ve been considered the school on the poor side of town,” says a 20-year veteran, one of two dozen educators in the school. “The stigma from that has made it hard for some people to believe a child could get a good education here.”

Well, here’s a note to Jasper citizens: Find your copy of *Aretha Franklin’s Greatest Hits* and turn up the volume. Because West Jasper Elementary has erased all doubt that its students, faculty and administrators deserve a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

On August 12, when State Superintendent Joe Morton released the first statewide results from Alabama’s new accountability system, West Jasper was one of only 319 Alabama schools (out of 1,361) to reach its Adequate Yearly Progress goals for 2003-04 — known in education circles as “making your AYP.” Schools that miss AYP two years in a

row face sanctions under the *No Child Left Behind* law.

Included in Morton’s data release were results from the new Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test (ARMT) — given for the first time in April 2004. The new ARMT aligns with state standards and is a key component of Alabama’s NCLB accountability system. The test was given in grades 4, 6 and 8 this year — grades 3, 5 and 7 will be added in 2005.

In math, about 95 percent of all West Jasper fourth graders met or exceeded state academic standards, and more than 75 percent scored at the highest level (IV). Among students “in poverty,” 96 percent met or exceeded math standards, as did 94 percent of minority students.

On the reading portion of the ARMT exam, more than 97 percent of all West Jasper fourth graders met or exceeded academic standards. Among students in poverty, 100 percent met or exceeded standards, as did 94 percent of minority students.

In both math and reading, West Jasper’s students “in poverty” far outpaced the average performance of similar students across Alabama. For example, in math, West Jasper had 78 percent of ‘poverty’ students at the highest level on the test, compared to the Alabama average of 30 percent.

The impressive ARMT performance of West Jasper’s fourth graders

(see page 13) is the culmination of five years of concentrated effort, as faculty and staff strove to live up to the school motto: “Kids Come First.” How did they do it? How has West Jasper transformed itself from a school where hard work and dedication once produced only modest results — to a school where students in every category are excelling?

Last April during spring break, six West Jasper teachers joined the principal, the school reading coach and the district’s director of elementary programs for a lengthy interview with *Working Toward Excellence*. Our decision to visit the school was based not on its ARMT scores (the tests had not yet been given) but on an analysis of the school’s performance by an independent evaluator. After comparing the school’s progress on SAT-9 and SAT-10 to similar Alabama elementary schools over a four-year period, the evaluator found that West Jasper was particularly effective at helping poor and minority students reach academic proficiency.

Here is some of what we learned during our visit.

West Jasper began accelerating their achievement gains after joining the Alabama Reading Initiative.

“It was the Alabama Reading Initiative that really kicked things off

Working Toward Excellence

Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test (ARMT)
Performance of West Jasper Elementary School Compared to State Averages — 2003-04

| 4th Grade Math | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Category | Percent of Students in Each Achievement Level | | | | | | | | Percent | |
| | Level I W. Jasper | Level I Alabama | Level II W. Jasper | Level II Alabama | Level III W. Jasper | Level III Alabama | Level IV W. Jasper | Level IV Alabama | Percent in Group W. Jasper | Percent in Group Alabama |
| All Students | 0 | 6.51 | 5.41 | 21.49 | 18.92 | 28.74 | 75.68 | 43.26 | – | – |
| General Education | 0 | 3.32 | 5.41 | 19.69 | 18.92 | 30.01 | 75.68 | 46.98 | 100 | 89.13 |
| Male | 0 | 7.79 | 0 | 21.95 | 22.22 | 27.00 | 77.78 | 43.26 | 48.65 | 51.38 |
| Female | 0 | 5.15 | 10.53 | 21.01 | 15.79 | 30.57 | 73.68 | 43.26 | 51.35 | 48.61 |
| Black | 0 | 10.10 | 5.56 | 31.64 | 38.89 | 32.50 | 55.56 | 25.76 | 48.65 | 36.89 |
| White | 0 | 4.18 | 5.26 | 15.14 | 0 | 26.45 | 94.74 | 54.23 | 51.35 | 58.82 |
| Fully Paid Lunch | 0 | 2.61 | 10 | 12.49 | 20 | 25.08 | 70 | 59.82 | 27.03 | 44.31 |
| Poverty (Free/reduced) | 0 | 9.48 | 3.70 | 28.64 | 18.52 | 31.72 | 77.78 | 30.16 | 72.97 | 53.32 |

| 4th Grade Reading | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Category | Percent of Students in Each Achievement Level | | | | | | | | Percent | |
| | Level I W. Jasper | Level I Alabama | Level II W. Jasper | Level II Alabama | Level III W. Jasper | Level III Alabama | Level IV W. Jasper | Level IV Alabama | Percent in Group W. Jasper | Percent in Group Alabama |
| All Students | 0 | 1.65 | 2.70 | 21.40 | 51.35 | 40.55 | 45.95 | 36.40 | – | – |
| General Education | 0 | 0.48 | 2.70 | 17.05 | 51.35 | 42.63 | 45.95 | 39.84 | 100 | 89.18 |
| Male | 0 | 2.32 | 5.56 | 25.22 | 38.89 | 40.23 | 55.56 | 32.23 | 48.65 | 51.32 |
| Female | 0 | 0.94 | 0 | 17.37 | 63.16 | 40.88 | 36.84 | 40.81 | 51.35 | 48.67 |
| Black | 0 | 2.43 | 5.56 | 32.79 | 72.22 | 45.94 | 22.22 | 18.83 | 48.65 | 36.88 |
| White | 0 | 1.13 | 0 | 13.92 | 31.58 | 37.39 | 68.42 | 47.56 | 51.35 | 58.94 |
| Fully Paid Lunch | 0 | 0.61 | 10 | 10.45 | 30 | 35.44 | 60 | 53.50 | 27.03 | 44.36 |
| Poverty (Free/reduced) | 0 | 2.44 | 0 | 30.06 | 59.26 | 44.72 | 40.74 | 22.78 | 72.97 | 53.34 |

Level I – Does Not Meet Academic Content Standards
 Level II – Partially Meets Academic Content Standards
 Level III – Meets Academic Content Standards
 Level IV – Exceeds Academic Content Standards

here,” says Steve Woods, a fifth grade teacher who has also taught first grade. “The ARI training made you focus more on the micro side of things and really pay attention to the particular needs of each individual student.”

West Jasper was in ARI’s second “cohort.” The entire faculty joined brand-new principal Eric Smith for summer ARI training in 1999. ARI’s emphasis on individual student assessment and comprehensive professional development around very specific teacher needs “really started us thinking about the meaning of ‘comprehensive school reform,’” says Lynn Aaron, who moved from first grade teacher to reading coach that summer.

In 2002-03, West Jasper went through the ARI “retooling” process,

which further emphasized a model of professional development that had teachers learning new strategies, seeing them modeled, trying them out with real students, and then spending time debriefing and fine-tuning — all in the same day and week. “We could take the ideas right back to our classroom,” says 3rd grade teacher Lisa Roberts. “We could work with the children immediately after going through the retooling workshops and training. That was really beneficial.”

The positive impact of this “job-embedded” approach to professional development wasn’t lost on school or district leaders. The school rapidly shifted away from one-shot staff development workshops to regular visits by consultants who spent

time in classrooms with teachers, modeling and critiquing as they tried out new teaching strategies — not only in reading but in writing and other content areas. When West Jasper had to replace all three kindergarten teachers in a single year, the school contracted with several UAB professors to provide regular, intensive support.

“The consultants really guided those first year teachers throughout the whole year,” says principal Eric Smith. “Not only did they mentor them in their classrooms, they took them to observe other schools and let them see really good teaching. They were able to come back to their own classrooms and really fly.”

“ARI has given us a lot of tools to make change,” Smith says. “I really believe that if we hadn’t become an ARI school, the changes here wouldn’t have come about — certainly not nearly so fast. It showed us how to teach more effectively, not just in reading but in everything we teach.”

West Jasper has a long tradition of data-driven instruction and decisionmaking.

Long before “data-driven” became a phrase on every

Continued on page 14.

principal's lips, West Jasper was paying attention to the numbers. "Even before Mr. Smith came," says Lynn Aaron, "we were a school that really dug into its data." Aaron says the school's previous principal organized grade-level meetings where teachers "pulled our own kids out of the data and figured out where the weaknesses were. We really individualized the data."

Like other successful ARI schools, teachers at West Jasper use DIBELS and other reading assessment tools to "progress monitor" students on a frequent basis and analyze the results to plan future instruction. This key ARI principle has spread into other areas of the curriculum over the past five years.

"We look at data all the time and use that as a measuring stick to determine how teachers are performing in the classroom," says Smith. For example, he and his faculty have identified assessment tools that produce regular feedback about math performance at each grade level. Most recently the school has begun implementing the Lightspan comprehensive school reform program, which allows for quick online assessments of individual student progress in an array of subjects and skill areas.

"Data is driving our accreditation now, our school improvement plan, our classroom instruction," Smith says. "Everything in education is becoming data-driven. We're constantly looking for better data."

Although Lynn Aaron's official title is "reading specialist," she is the de facto "assessment queen" in the school, says Jean Lollar, Jasper City's director of elementary and federal programs. Aaron organizes what could be a bewildering pile of data from many different sources into easy-to-understand, color-coded charts and graphs for each teacher. Aaron's

compilations are "so accessible," Lollar says, that they've been used as models for other schools in the district. "It's easy for the teachers to just glance at (their data notebooks) and say 'Oh, Donnie came up here, or isn't progressing there,'" Aaron says.

Teachers also examine data together, looking for big picture trends. "In our grade level meetings, we comb the data out and we look at it," Aaron says. "If we see they are making progress, we talk about why. If we see places where students are not making progress, then we get busy looking for answers and other strategies we can try. Instead of hitting and missing at things, we're looking at the data."

Roberts says the data can actually make teaching more exciting. "At the beginning of the school year we do baseline assessments, and it's kind of frustrating to see kids in places where you would not like for them to be. But I think we're motivated by the excitement of seeing where we can take them. We all put forth a lot of effort because we want to see them achieve and come up to grade level — and the data helps us see that."

West Jasper puts a lot of store in teaching reading comprehension.

Success with early literacy is critically important, West Jasper's teachers say, but it's not enough. Students may become established "early readers" and then falter in later grades because they do not develop the comprehension skills they need to decipher textbooks and other non-fiction material. Students without these skills have trouble in science and social studies and are unlikely to perform well on state-level accountability tests, which require students to read and analyze text.

"Reading comprehension is one of our biggest focuses," Aaron says. To expand their toolbox of comprehension strategies, teachers in

West Jasper's upper grades have studied the book *Strategies That Work* together, while lower grade teachers dissected *Reading With Meaning*. Teachers discussed key strategies proposed by the authors, tried them out in their classrooms, and met regularly to discuss their results.

"For example, we worked a good bit with helping our children make connections," says third-grade teacher Deborah Harbin. "They would connect one book to another, or the text to themselves. Or the text to the outside world. That was one of the first strategies we worked on, and they really caught on to the idea. They were making connections everywhere — even in the lunchroom!"

Over time, Aaron says, "I would go into different classrooms to read with students and I could see that they were getting better and better at connections." Fifth grade teacher Steve Woods says it's a key comprehension skill. "The text is no longer just a bunch of words on a page. By connecting what they're reading to what they already know, the words start having real meaning in their own world."

Aaron frequently models comprehension strategies when teachers are unsure of how to use them. Several teachers asked for help in the area of effective questioning. "Lynn's demonstrations really gave us more confidence to use the strategies, because some of the ideas are really new to us," says Roberts.

Aaron says she and her faculty continue to look for better assessments of comprehension. The DIBELS assessment package used in early grades can offer some clues, she says, "but it doesn't go in-depth enough to help us analyze individual progress." The school uses the Dominic assessment in the upper grades, "but it's tough and takes a lot of time. So we're still looking for a comprehension assessment that's teacher-friendly, that doesn't take forever to give."

DIBELS Summary Report 2003-04
West Jasper Elementary • Jasper City • Alabama Reading Initiative School
Not a Reading First school; did not have comprehensive reading program – Medium High Poverty (70%+)

| Kindergarten | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| | Beginning of Year | | | Mid-Year | | | End-of-Year | | |
| Initial Sound Fluency | Low Risk 68% | Some Risk 26% | At Risk 6% | Established 58% | Emerging 35% | Deficit 6% | Not tested after mid-year | | |
| Phoneme Segmentation Fluency | Not tested until mid-year | | | Low Risk 90% | Some Risk 2% | At Risk 8% | Established 96% | Emerging 2% | Deficit 2% |
| Nonsense Word Fluency | Not tested until mid-year | | | Low Risk 71% | Some Risk 10% | At Risk 19% | Low Risk 83% | Some Risk 11% | At Risk 6% |

| First Grade | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Beginning of Year | | | Mid-Year | | | End-of-Year | | |
| Phoneme Segmentation Fluency | Established 75% | Emerging 17% | Deficit 8% | Established 92% | Emerging 3% | Deficit 5% | Established 95% | Emerging 3% | Deficit 2% |
| Nonsense Word Fluency | Low Risk 57% | Some Risk 17% | At Risk 26% | Established 57% | Emerging 26% | Deficit 16% | Established 79% | Emerging 16% | Deficit 5% |
| Oral Reading Fluency | Not tested until mid-year | | | Low Risk 57% | Some Risk 28% | At Risk 15% | Low Risk 59% | Some Risk 15% | At Risk 16% |

| Second Grade | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Beginning of Year | | | Mid-Year | | | End-of-Year | | |
| Oral Reading Fluency | Low Risk 49% | Some Risk 29% | At Risk 22% | Low Risk 51% | Some Risk 23% | At Risk 26% | Low Risk 57% | Some Risk 20% | At Risk 24% |

SOURCE: State Department of Education DIBELS summary reports. Used with permission of school. Some rows may not total 100 percent due to rounding.

West Jasper educators are always in the hunt for better ideas

West Jasper principal Eric Smith isn't shy about looking outside his school for good ideas and effective practices. During our interview, teachers cited many examples of "road trips" they had made to other schools with similar demographics where they observed promising strategies, including small-group instruction, classroom centers, and purchasable programs.

"I've found this to be one of the most effective ways to test out new strategies and get teacher buy-in around new ideas," Smith says. "Let them talk to people who are doing it every day — and people who have students that our teachers believe are like our students."

One such trip confirmed the decision to adopt the Lightspan comprehensive school reform model (with the help of a \$300,000 federal

CSR grant), which includes interactive software, school and home learning activities, on-site and technology-based professional development, and the *eduTest* online assessments.

Lightspan makes use of PlayStation game-oriented computers and standards-based software (developed with Disney) that students find highly engaging. "Technology is something they use at home all the time," says 5th grade teacher Woods. "I didn't have to show them how to use the PlayStation. So we're taking advantage of something they've already learned outside of school."

Smith and Lollar like the program's parent involvement piece. Parents come to school and train in the use of the portable electronic devices and CDs (which students can take home for specified periods of time). Students with Internet access can also sign on to the Lightspan website and work on skills there. "The kids are excited so the parents

are excited," says Smith. "And we're excited about anything that builds more parent involvement in schoolwork at home."

While Lightspan is wildly popular in the school, and aligned to Alabama's state standards, Lollar says "It's just another tool. It's does not replace explicit instruction."

West Jasper has spent lots of time working on writing.

Several years ago, after disappointing results on the Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing, Smith and his faculty made a concerted effort to improve the teaching of writing through teacher collaboration and intensive professional development. "We'd always done writing, cutesy writing," says Aaron. "But we knew we had to do something across the board that would really have an impact on the whole school. We knew that a strong writing program would help us with thinking and comprehension skills, too."

Professional authors began to visit West Jasper, a step that helped pique student interest in writing. Writing consultants also began to work regularly with teachers. In particular, two experts from UAB helped K-2 teachers introduce regular writing activities in their classrooms. With the help of another consultant, teachers in grades 3-5 held cross-grade meetings to discuss ways to strengthen the upper-level writing program.

"We decided that instead of teachers at each grade level trying to teach all the modes of writing, each grade would take

Continued on page 16.

ON THE WEB**Group Work Has Its Dangers**

Ready to push ahead with teacher collaboration as a key competent of your school's quest for higher achievement? While group work is critical to school-wide improvement, says collaboration expert Robert Garmston, it has its dangers. In his popular *Journal of Staff Development* column (Summer 2004), Garmston describes the skills, structures, and protocols required for educators to work collaboratively toward common goals.

<http://snipurl.com/garmston>

one of the modes and really work on that throughout the year," says third grade teacher Lisa Roberts. "By the time they took the writing assessment in 5th grade, they'd have concentrated exposure to each mode." Teachers in third and fourth grade collect student writing samples throughout the year and pass them up to teachers at the next level.

After several years of following this strategy, fifth grade teacher Steve Woods says he "really saw a difference in writing preparedness." The difference was apparent this summer when the state reported that 70 percent of West Jasper's fifth graders met or exceed the standard for writing composition in 2004 — up from 42 percent the year before.

West Jasper has strong leadership at the top.

When Eric Smith was hired as principal of West Jasper five years ago, he had limited elementary experience (a brief tenure as a physical education teacher) and was moving into his first principalship, after a stint as assistant principal at the district high school.

Despite his inexperience, "he had one of the strongest interviews for the principal's job that I have ever been a part of," says Lollar. "What elevated him above all other candidates was the fact that he genuinely cared about the children."

When asked to list his strengths, Smith mentions positive attitude, high expectations, organization, "the knowledge that I can't do everything myself," and resourcefulness. "I'm always looking. I look for whatever can help me and our teachers and students."

In his first days as principal, Smith says he sought out other elementaries with similar demographic profiles that had reputations as turn-

around schools. He traveled to those schools, talked with teachers, visited classrooms, and interviewed and observed their principals.

"I saw a lot of different principal styles — from very collaborative to very authoritative," he says. "And I took what I could learn and use from each of them."

"I said to each principal I visited: 'This is new for me. I've not worked in elementary before, and I need to learn.' I knew I'd make mistakes, but if I could avoid some mistakes by taking advantage of what other others had learned, then I wanted to do that. So I went to see some of the best."

The West Jasper staff says Smith combines enthusiasm and a collaborative spirit with an ability to project high expectations for faculty and students.

"He's not a domineering person who comes in and says we're going to do it my way or else," Aaron says. "But he's not a pushover, either. He tries to get the whole faculty involved in decisions, and he looks for different views that help him get a three-dimensional picture of whatever he's examining. But he reserves the right to ask for your advice and ignore it!"

Smith says he came to West Jasper determined to help faculty, parents and the community see the untapped potential in the school's students. "The main thing that I wanted to do was to change the atmosphere. I knew that we'd always had a label here as a school that wasn't as good as other schools. I wanted to come in and prove that you can get more parental support and help kids learn more."

Smith is one of many principals in Alabama who have drawn inspiration from the book *No Excuses*, which shares the turn-around stories of more than 20 high-poverty schools in the U.S. "That book helped me become a believer," he says.

The success of the No Excuses schools "started with the principal and the principal's expectation of teachers," he says. "When you let them know that you are going to look at student performance regularly and discuss it with them, then it becomes a high priority." The "No Excuses" school leaders, he says, all combined expectations with positive motivation and support for teachers to change. "You have to help teachers find ways to solve achievement problems."

On the parent front, Smith says that five years ago, many teachers at West Jasper had given up on parent involvement and support. "We didn't get a lot of parents coming to the PTO meetings or for any kind of thing, really. Early on, I suggested we have a fund-raiser. Our teachers didn't believe the parents would buy into it at all. But we gave it a shot and we had the biggest fundraiser ever."

In the wake of that success, he says, "we as a team began to come up with different ideas that could draw parents in. We even did a survey asking parents what we could do to serve them better and get them more involved. Over several years, it's really turned around. When we have PTO meetings now, we have 200 or more parents attend. And this has been a banner year for parents to come in and volunteer to read in classes and do other things for us in the school."

Smith also invited the community to become part of the West Jasper family. Now, "the mayor and his wife come every Wednesday to read, the Rotary, Kiwanis, the Methodist Church all send volunteers. We want the community to see what we are doing here."

West Jasper expects a lot from students and motivates them to meet those expectations.

"When somebody tells me I can't do something, that's a challenge to me," Eric Smith says. "I really believe that if you have the work

ethic and the right attitude, you can change for the better. And I came here determined that we were going to instill that belief in our students. But first we had to believe it ourselves.”

“The number one thing is this,” he says. “As a teacher, you can know a whole lot of stuff, but if you don’t have the right attitude — if you don’t really believe they can all learn it, or if you can’t convince them that you believe that, then all that stuff you know isn’t going to really help kids.”

When West Jasper’s test scores dropped a few years ago, Smith’s campaign to raise expectations got a boost. State ARI leader Katherine Mitchell came to visit and went over the school’s data with teachers. “She said we had to start expecting more of our students,” recalls Lynn Aaron. “And that’s when we sort of stepped up and said, yes, some of them have difficult lives and lots of reasons not to try, but we are just going to expect them to do the work.”

“We came up with a formula: Higher Expectations + Encouragement = Success for All Students,” says Smith. “We just changed our mindset, and we changed their mindset by being positive and motivating. And it made a difference.”

The school instituted a “Tickets for Success” program that offers weekly rewards to students who earn ‘tickets’ for good citizenship, working hard, doing their best, maintaining a good attitude and improving the work. “It doesn’t just reward students with all A’s and B’s,” Smith says. “Everybody has a chance to be recognized.” Another program presents “I Can” certificates to two students per week in each classroom for being resourceful or responsible. “We do everything we can to help them believe in themselves more.”

As annual test time approaches, a schoolwide “let’s do it” campaign begins and “we do a lot of motivational things with our kids,” Smith says. Students also work on test-taking

procedures and brush up on key math skills that are often called upon when taking standardized tests. “We think it’s important to prepare everyone for state testing both academically and motivationally. I’m big into attitude.”

West Jasper has gotten this far, says teacher Lisa Roberts, “because we have high expectations for our students. When kids leave me after third grade, they come back and bring their report cards because they’re really proud of what they’re doing. We’re like a family here. We’re a small school that just really knows and loves our kids.”

Miles to go

West Jasper’s rise toward the top of the school performance charts has not produced a feeling of complacency among its faculty and staff. “We’re not where I want to be yet,” says Smith, “but we’re blessed with a really good staff that’s open to trying new things and is willing to work hard for kids.”

High on Smith’s list of next steps is more teacher collaboration.

“We have been doing some cross-grade meetings,” he says. “We sat down and we asked the first grade teachers to tell kindergarten where they expected the children to be when they came to them. We had second grade communicate with first grade — things that the children really needed to know to be successful in the next grade. We made high-priority lists. It all fitted in with the state Courses of Study, but it was very specific. So we’re collaborating, but we need to do a lot more of it.”

“When you stop improving — when you think you don’t have any more to learn — then you lose your effectiveness as a principal, or a teacher, or a school,” Smith says. “So I’m constantly trying to grow, and we’re trying to create conditions where every teacher here has the opportunity to constantly grow.” ♦

WEST JASPER’S SECRET WEAPON: A STRONG PRE-KINDERGARTEN

In many high-poverty schools, kindergarten teachers can consume precious weeks and months of teaching time simply helping their five-year olds get the hang of a group learning environment.

At West Jasper Elementary, kindergarten teachers have a secret weapon in the campaign to speed up the learning process. Her name is Loretta McCants.

McCants has been director of West Jasper’s pre-kindergarten program since its creation nine years ago. She says her background as a kindergarten and first-grade teacher has helped her set higher expectations for the school’s youngest students than you might typically see in some pre-school programs.

“I think the kids that come to our school have the desire to learn,” she says. “I think they just need someone to say ‘I know you can learn and I expect you to learn.’ And we start saying that to them at four years old.”

McCants works with two aides and typically has about 20 children in the locally funded program. “I try to help them develop a love for reading. We read a lot of stories. I really focus a lot on listening and following directions. And they have many opportunities to learn how to socialize with each other. So by the time they get to kindergarten, they’re ready to listen and work in groups and move on ahead.”

When the West Jasper faculty entered ARI five years ago, McCants went through the initial training with other school faculty. She also participated in the school’s ARI “retooling” process three years later.

“Those experiences have really helped me get a deeper knowledge of what’s going on with our K-1 reading program,” she says. “I also talk with our reading specialist to keep up to date, and I meet with the kindergarten teachers and try to find things I can implement that will help them be further ahead when my students get to kindergarten.”

“My eyes have been opened to what pre-schoolers can do,” McCants says. “We have a print-rich environment. Students from the upper grades come in regularly to read. We do a lot of centers. I have some children each year that are early emergent readers, and I’m encouraging them more and more.”

McCants uses pre- and post-testing to look at her pre-schoolers’ gains over the year and applies what she learns to fine-tune the program. She also sends parents progress reports and shares portfolios of student work. “A lot of the parents of our Pre-K children are in school or at work, but we make a real effort to get parent input. I send newsletters home to let them know what’s going on, and I invite them into our classroom. We want them to get in the habit of parent involvement.”

Does the Pre-K program really make a difference in overall school performance? Principal Eric Smith says he has the data to prove it. “We’ve tracked students over years now — students who did and did not go through our pre-school. And the difference in their Stanford scores is significant.”

READING ACHIEVEMENT

Continued from page 4.

the shortened teacher learning curve provided by a comprehensive program.

Even when teachers receive intensive professional development in ARI's research-based reading strategies, she says, "It is so difficult for teachers to conceptually make the change to what they should be teach-

ing. And then to physically have to create the materials they need to teach in these new ways makes it an even bigger step for many teachers."

Using a comprehensive program helps teachers "to be sure that they are covering the basics — that students are testing out on the absolutely critical skills that they need," Stone says. "With any skill, you can't start off with the highest level. In the past we've asked kids to orchestrate skills they didn't adequately have. It's just like playing the piano. Too often, we've been asking children to play Beethoven's Fifth when they didn't have the scales under basic control. Once they have mastered the scales and understand the basics, they can begin to interpret the music and move to doing it for pleasure and deep understanding."

Teachers who use comprehensive programs "don't have to completely let go of their own creativity," she says. "Once a student has benchmarked, teachers can move them into wonderful literature and expose them to books in science and social studies and other subjects that interest them. Once they've mastered the skills, they can give all this their full attention."

Because the comprehensive programs move teachers step by step through proper teaching methods — and provide all of the necessary materials — the Reading First schools have a "huge potential advantage."

Even so, Stone says, some ARFI schools "didn't get the job done the first year." At mid-year and at the end of the year, the ARI state team ranked ARFI schools based on the percentage of their students who had reached expected benchmarks. "Out of the Top 10 schools, we saw five of the six comprehensive programs we use. So we know the problem was not with the particular program a school chose."

Stone says the key factors separating successful and less suc-

cessful ARFI schools were "commitment to full implementation" and the amount of program-specific professional development teachers received. "The schools with the best results had someone coming into the school who could train teachers in the specific program they were using — going into the classrooms, demonstrating and coaching." To ensure all ARFI schools have the training support they need this school year, grants will fund comprehensive-program experts to come into schools and provide intense in-classroom professional development.

Stone points to the Mobile County school system as an example of commitment to full implementation.

When Mobile's 10 Reading First schools had to choose a state-approved comprehensive reading program in 2003, "it was very painful," Stone says. "A lot of the teachers and a number of the principals and the reading coaches were not really convinced that they needed a comprehensive program. However, they committed to giving it a try, even though they were somewhat resistant."

To support "faithful implementation," the district brought in a full-time consultant to support schools as they rolled out the program. "The Mobile school leaders realized early on that they had to get somebody in there who could help these teachers learn to use this program well and stick with it, or it wasn't going to work. And they did."

By the close of the 2003-04 school year, Stone says, Mobile had several ARFI schools "that had 40% more students at benchmark at the end than they had at the beginning. And that's a huge leap."

"There are a lot of things that can influence a program, but it's really the people who are on the bus with you that make the difference. And that was what they had in terms

READY FOR SOME ALPHABET SOUP? TRY THESE TASTY DIBELS ACRONYMS! ISF, PSF, NWF, ORF

The DIBELS measures are designed to assess three of the Five Big Ideas of early literacy: Phonological Awareness, Alphabetic Principle, and Fluency with Connected Text. Taken together, these measures can help predict later reading proficiency.

DIBELS' measures of Phonological Awareness include:

Initial Sounds Fluency (ISF): Assesses a child's skill to identify and produce the initial sound of a given word. Students look at pictures.

Phonemic Segmentation Fluency (PSF): Assesses a child's skill to produce the individual sounds within a given word. (e.g., *mop* has three sounds.)

DIBELS' measure of Alphabetic Principle is:

Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF): Assesses a child's knowledge of letter-sound correspondences as well their ability to blend letters together to form unfamiliar "nonsense" (e.g., *fik*, *lig*) words.

DIBELS' measure of Fluency with Connected Text is:

Oral Reading Fluency (ORF): Assesses a child's skill of reading connected text in grade-level material with fluency.

The developers of DIBELS sought to create quick assessment tools that focus on the Big Ideas of early literacy. But they point out that "Teaching and assessment are related but separate processes. The Big Ideas should drive the instructional program, not the assessment device. The DIBELS measures are an *indicator* of a child's skill development in beginning reading, but are not designed to assess every aspect of beginning reading."

Find out many more details and watch a video of an "established" first grade reader at the DIBELS website: <http://dibels.uoregon.edu/> ❖

Highest Ranking School Systems in 2003-04 Reading Gains (K-3)

Overall percent meeting DIBELS benchmark¹

| Rank | School System | Fall | Spring | Gain* |
|----------------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1 | Montgomery County | 37% | 68% | 31% |
| 1 | Wilcox County | 32% | 64% | 31% |
| 2 | Conecuh County | 45% | 73% | 28% |
| 2 | Pike County | 36% | 63% | 28% |
| 3 | Guntersville City | 61% | 87% | 26% |
| 3 | Alexander City | 51% | 77% | 26% |
| 4 | Fairfield City | 36% | 61% | 25% |
| 4 | Marengo County | 41% | 66% | 25% |
| 5 | Covington County | 47% | 71% | 24% |
| 5 | Geneva County | 41% | 64% | 24% |
| State Average | | 49 | 63 | 14 |

*Gain determined by rounding.

¹ The subtests used to summarize overall district performance are those scheduled for mastery (benchmark) at mid-year. They include initial sound fluency (ISF) in Kindergarten; nonsense word fluency (NWF) in Grade 1; and oral reading fluency (ORF) in Grade 2 and Grade 3.

SOURCE: Alabama State Department of Education, "DIBELS 2003-04 Gains by LEA," http://www.alsde.edu/general/DIBELSGains_7_04.pdf

ON THE WEB

Focus on the Middle Grades

A new report from the Southern Regional Education Board, *Getting the Mission Right in the Middle Grades*, analyzes the performance of eighth-graders in a group of southern states, including Alabama, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Based on the analysis, SREB's middle grades experts recommend steps that policymakers and schools can take to get middle schoolers ready for high school.

<http://snipurl.com/SREBmiddle>

of their principals and reading coaches. They were on that journey together, with people who were committed to it."

Reaching for the top

Although evaluator Edward Moscovitch had high praise for the Alabama Reading Initiative, his analysis also revealed that the program was making "more of a difference for non-poor white and Asian students than for minorities and/or students living in poverty." ARI, he said, "should make it a major priority to help schools make greater gains with minority students and students from low-income homes."

Moscovitch based his conclusions on 2003 data from ARI schools. But he also noted that his preliminary analysis of DIBELS data for the 2004 school year — looking at both ARI and ARFI schools — found that "gains were considerably larger for ARFI schools, which receive far more prescriptive and intensive intervention than ARI schools" — and have high concentrations of poor and

minority students. (In fact, 64 of the 74 ARFI schools showed substantial reading gains in the first year of implementation.)

Moscovitch said his finding "strongly suggests that ARI needs to be more prescriptive, particularly with schools that fail to make good progress." He suggested specific goals for all ARI schools, and proposed that schools which fail to meet reasonable goals "be required to adopt comprehensive reading programs."

ARI leaders say they are excited about the impact that comprehensive reading programs are having on the reading achievement of poor and minority students in ARFI schools. They realize that Alabama will not become a "Top Five" state unless many more K-3 schools make similar progress..

It remains to be seen whether the state will follow Moscovitch's advice and require schools with many struggling readers to adopt a comprehensive reading program. If that day should come, those struggling schools might be heart-

ened by the comments (page 8) of a kindergarten teacher at Southside Primary, ARFI's most successful 2003-04 school:

"I only regret that we didn't do something like this earlier. Because we've discovered that we can teach any student you bring into this school how to read. No doubt about it." ❖

See our complete list of leadership resources at: <http://www.bestpracticescenter.org/pub/wte4-2-res.html>

What Research Says About Reading

For a variety of points of view about research-based reading instruction, peruse this issue of *Educational Leadership* (March 2004). Some articles are available online to any visitor. To access other articles, you'll need to be a member of ASCD or locate a print copy of the magazine.

<http://snipurl.com/readresearch>

Reading Experts Sound Off About Phonics

Wendy Cheyney and Judith Cohen are reading experts who share their practical approach to teaching phonics, phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle with K-12 classroom teachers across the nation. In this Education World e-interview, they talk about current research in the teaching of reading and answer the questions they are most often asked by classroom teachers.

<http://snipurl.com/EWphonics>

Lessons from High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools

Many principals and school improvement teams in Alabama's high-poverty schools have become "believers" in the possibilities of high performance after reading this study of 21 "No Excuses" schools. Author Samuel Casey Carter defines seven common traits of high-poverty schools that helping all students excel. Download a free copy of the report at this webpage.

<http://www.noexcuses.org/reports.html>

Family Literacy

Educators are well aware that factors outside the school influence their students' success in learning to read. In this "Research Link" article from *Educational Leadership*, John H. Holloway describes some of the factors identified by researchers and some actions schools and communities are taking to develop comprehensive family literacy programs.

<http://snipurl.com/readfamily>

Alabama Accountability FAQs

Find out more about Alabama's new public education accountability system by downloading this PDF file from the State Department of Education website. This Frequently Asked Questions memo (August 2004) describes the latest developments in Alabama's evolving accountability system and outlines future requirements.

<http://snipurl.com/AcctFAQs>

Check School and District Test Performance

This accountability search engine at the ALSDE website allows any visitor to examine school and district performance on an array of state accountability tests, including the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Tests, the Stanford-10 Achievement Tests, the High School Graduation Exam, and the Direct Assessment of Writing Exam. The software produces easy-to-print reports that can be tailored by various accountability subgroups, including gender, race, poverty and special education.

<http://snipurl.com/8r13>

Deciphering DIBELS

DIBELS assessments are now used by teachers and schools across Alabama to take a quick measure of student progress in developing various pre-reading and early reading skills. If you're hearing the word "DIBELS" a lot and would like to learn more about the "Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills," visit the DIBELS website and browse the helpful (and colorful!) explanations.

<http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>

Principals and Reading

G. Reid Lyon shares recent reading research "that principals need to know" in this article from *Principal* magazine, a publication of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. This article is available to the public. Members of NAESP can access more than 40 articles about elementary and middle school reading at <http://snipurl.com/NAESPindex>

<http://snipurl.com/ReadNAESP>

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Share your stories!

Has your school developed strategies to address the achievement gap? We'd like to share what you're learning. Email us at: comments@bestpracticescenter.org