



# THE Literacy CENTER

An interactive multisensory curriculum



## Case Study 13

*Houston Independent School District  
Houston, Texas*

### **Preschoolers with Disabilities Experience Their Own “Aha” Moments with Help of The Literacy Center**

His small face intent, José works on his alphabet letters. On a LEAPDESK™ workstation, he pushes each letter, beginning with A, and traces its shape as lights flash to guide his writing. Unhurried, the young boy seems pleased when he completes each letter. Then he reaches J in the alphabet. “J—that’s me!” He says it loudly and proudly, beaming at the knowledge.

Jackie Hames, Houston Independent School District (ISD) East District Multisensory Reading teacher, explains why this seemingly small event is significant. José is not your average preschooler; he is a preschool individual with autism.

“It’s so wonderful that he made the connection that J was [part of] his name,” says Hames. “We didn’t prompt him; he did it on his own, spontaneously.” He did so while using a LEAPDESK workstation, one component of the LEAPFROG SCHOOLHOUSE Literacy Center.

Teachers and parents always seek these “aha” moments, of course. But for some students, like José and others in Houston ISD’s Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD), they can be hard to come by, and thus, pretty special.

#### **Across the Board Gains for Districtwide Program**

“José’s success with The Literacy Center is just one of hundreds of similar tales that PPCD teachers can readily recount,” says Marcia Freedman, Special Education Elementary Director for Support Services at Houston ISD, who also supports the districtwide Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities.

More than 700 youngsters, three- to five-years old, are enrolled in PPCD. Though the disabilities and special needs vary from child to child, all of these kids have improved their skills by utilizing components of The Literacy Center.

“The gains,” remarks Freedman, “have really run across the board. Every student has benefited in some way from engaging in Center activities.”

Having helped place 80 Literacy Centers into Houston ISD’s special education preschool classrooms, Freedman is gratified by these results. However, she is not totally surprised.

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Deciding to integrate The Literacy Center into the PPCD only came after reviewing a pilot project and receiving support staff input. They evaluated the Center's effectiveness to address the special needs of young students with hearing difficulties, visual impairments and physical challenges, as well as those with developmental disabilities. The support staff agreed, recalls Freedman, that The Literacy Center's interactive components matched up well to these varied students' diverse learning needs.

Equally key, The Literacy Center's curriculum and sequencing also matched the Houston ISD Office of Special Education's recent efforts to boost the literacy foundation of young students with disabilities. This is one component of Houston ISD's Office of Special Education Math and Reading Initiative, explains Freedman.

## **Mixing It Up to Match Special Needs**

After the Literacy Centers arrived in February 2000, the district had LeapFrog SchoolHouse staff come and conduct hands-on training for PPCD teachers and aides, one session in the morning and another in the afternoon. Once familiarized with the basic features and functions of The Literacy Center's unique LEAPDESK workstation, LEAPPAD® platform, and LEAPMAT™ learning surface, teachers were keen to try out these new tools with their special students.

Hames details some of the ways that she has supported teachers' utilization of The Literacy Center. Little José's experience illustrates, for example, how the audio and visual feedback of LEAPDESK workstations, LEAPPAD platforms, and LEAPMAT learning surfaces definitely helps these youngsters recognize letters and numbers. Depending on the type and severity of their disability, of course, some students are able to advance beyond basic recognition to early literacy, while others work on different objectives. Center components can adjust to meet the needs.

The more active children truly love anything that involves a LEAPMAT learning surface, since it means they get to tap, slap, hop or plop. In fact, all the kids seem to especially enjoy using the LEAPMAT learning surface, notes Hames, which PPCD teachers and classroom aides readily utilize. One activity for example, has students tap the mat to pick out the beginning sound of a letter or word. "The LEAPMAT works really well for this, making the sounds so distinct for the kids," Hames says.

For those preschoolers with significant challenges, Hames explains that she employs the LEAPMAT learning surface similarly "not so much to help them learn letters or sounds, because they won't be able to learn that, but to teach them about cause and effect."

## **Benefits Abound for All Students**

Cognizance of cause and effect is quite meaningful in this young, special-needs population, notes Hames. Seemingly small successes tend to add up to a big benefit for these children.

Marcia Freedman agrees. Moreover, she adds, The Literacy Center has helped to measurably raise such skill-development levels among PPCD students. "Where we've seen gains, we've seen a lot, especially in development of cause and effect cognition," she remarks.

Another result of the kids' use of LEAPDESK workstations, LEAPPAD platforms, and LEAPMAT learning surfaces is more time on task, "which is so critical for these youngsters and a big accomplishment in itself," according to Freedman. Time on task relates directly to one's ability to concentrate and keep a mental focus. A preschooler who is developmentally seven-months old won't have the same attention span as an average four-year-old, she explains, so increasing these special-needs students' average time on task becomes even more important to their progress.

After using The Literacy Center in Houston ISD's Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities for only part of 2000, Freedman expects this academic year to yield better results now that teachers have become familiar with its components and explored the adaptability of its materials. She is not at all disappointed, however, with the assessment from this inaugural year:

"Even students with the most significant challenges are experiencing great results using The Literacy Center," Freedman concludes.

