

# Effectiveness Study Series

## Case Study #12

### Georgia Academy for the Blind Macon, Georgia

## Youngsters' Early-Reading Skills Soar After Using Braille-Enhanced Literacy Center

When Rachel West first received The Literacy Center, she did a little bit of tinkering. It wasn't because she lacked enthusiasm about these new tools coming to her classroom; she was excited and eager to get started. But as the K-1 teacher at the Georgia Academy for the Blind, in Macon, Ga., West knew that some simple additions to the Center's components would make a world of difference to her young pre-readers.

Since they cannot see to recognize letters of the alphabet and numbers, West's students must rely on their sense of touch to learn how to read. Braille is how they experience written letters and words. So West brailled the Center's LeapDesk™, LeapDesk cards, two LeapPads®, and LeapMat™, thus enabling her students to use the hands-on devices in a distinctively suitable fashion.

"We have a label-maker device that outputs braille," explains West, "so I brailled everything." By attaching corresponding braille letters, numbers and words to the LeapDesk cards, LeapPad books and the LeapMat, her kids can "read" them and learn somewhat independently, guided by the devices' audio feedback instead of visual lights.

"It's sure been a winner with the kids," West observes. "They all love to use it!"

### Reading Comes First for Sight-Impaired Students

Serving some 150 students in PreK through grade 12, the Academy for the Blind offers a multi-disabled program, as well as regular education for its students. Class sizes stay quite small, plus some teachers have an aide for extra help in the classroom.

Joanne Dankel, the Academy's Education Supervisor, which is equivalent to a school principal, notes that the campus enrolls students with varying degrees of visual disability. Some are totally blind, while others have low-vision capability. Regardless, they all require intimate, personal contact with their teachers and aides. "There's a lot of one-on-one time," says Dankel. "Our students need that, and we're staffed to provide it."

The Academy for the Blind is a "Reading First" school, teacher Rachel West points out. That might seem counter-intuitive—a school for the blind making reading skills a priority—but it is all too logical. "It's about giving [our students] the best foundation for learning possible," says West. "We know that reading skills are key to future success, and we want them to have that key. We want to unlock their potential."

Becoming a Reading First campus meant placing more emphasis on phonics and literacy skills, say Dankel and West. And The Literacy Center matched those needs in compelling ways. Overall, the Center has "definitely helped" her special students since its introduction to her K-1 classroom in October 2000, says West, with testing results confirming that belief.

### **Test Scores Confirm Continual Improvements**

According to West and Dankel, The Literacy Center's impact on students' skills is easy to gauge. After its arrival, test scores rose across the board.

Part of the State Schools of Georgia, the Academy for the Blind administers the state's standardized Basic Literacy Test—in a large print or braille format—to students each September, January and May. This exam tests reading skills expressly, covering various phonics-based skills such as short and long vowels and controlled multi-syllable words, as well as the ability to read words, short sentences or paragraphs.

"Everybody improved throughout the entire year," recalls West about the testing results from that first class of Literacy Center users, "and that wasn't the case earlier," she adds, before LeapFrog SchoolHouse came to the Academy.

As important as overall gains are, the pace of each student's progress is perhaps an even more revealing indicator of effectiveness. Her students seem to master skills more rapidly using the braille-enhanced LeapDesk, LeapMat and LeapPads, West comments, with improvements accruing continually, rather than in stops and starts. That's a big advantage, contributing to both the success and confidence levels of these blind and low-vision early learners.

### **Hands-On Practice Occurs Daily**

West's class averages six to eight students, each at the kindergarten or first-grade level. Last year, for instance, four were low-vision youngsters and two were blind. She and classroom aide Cheryl Wideman utilize The Literacy Center with its brailled components "pretty much daily" with students, says the K-1 teacher. In the morning, for example, class time is devoted to early literacy skills. West employs the Saxon program, which the Academy has selected for its phonics curricula, and then integrates practice exercises using components from her LeapFrog SchoolHouse Literacy Center. For instance, the whole class will work on short vowels in Saxon, then students will go to the LeapDesk or LeapPads to work on the same thing, explains West.

This combination has worked quite well. The two packages both emphasize phonics, and The Literacy Center supplies hands-on tools that the kids love to use. In fact, West says she is increasing how much she uses The Literacy Center's components in these morning sessions, chiefly because they have proven so effective with her students.

One popular exercise is a Twister-style game in which the youngsters must find the correct letter on the LeapMat as fast as they can, tracing over the braille to feel each alphabet letter. "There's lots of giggles in those lessons," says West, "because it's so much like playing. Yet they really learn from it."

### **Students "Just Flew With It"**

Parents, West remarks, have been "pleasantly surprised at how well [their children] do and how fast they go" using the braille-enhanced LeapPads, LeapDesk and LeapMat. Her own observations of the Center's effect on students are equally positive. "They all just flew with it," she summarizes.

The Literacy Center has proven so successful at the Academy that West plans more braille enhancements. She will use a special word processor that creates braille to make braille versions of the LeapFrog SchoolHouse storybooks, so students will have actual braille books to read.

Finally, rising test scores plus glowing feedback from parents clearly show that The Literacy Center is helping these special students master early-reading skills. But a casual observation from West's K-1 classroom likely illustrates it best:

"We used to be able to spell out things we didn't want the kids to understand, but we had to stop by the end of the year," explains West, "because they knew what we were saying."