

Effectiveness Study Series

Case Study #6

Maritime Head Start Oakland, California

Oakland Head Start Youngsters Gain Confidence Along With Literacy Skills

Maritime Head Start, in a building on the old Army base in Oakland, California, currently enrolls 60 children. Open from 7:00 a.m. to 6 p.m., Maritime's full-day program especially helps the community's working parents, offering child-care and early-learning experiences guided by trained educators.

In July 2000, Maritime added The Literacy Center to its instructional toolkit. Already using a curriculum chosen by Oakland's Head Start program, "we integrated in the LeapFrog [SchoolHouse] curriculum to bring us up to standards for literacy," explains Margaret Taylor, a veteran teacher at the preschool.

The results so far have pleased everyone. "We're having a lot of success with it," says Taylor. "Some of the test results we're getting with this system are just amazing."

Taylor tells of proud parents with glowing stories of how well their children performed in pre-literacy skills when tested for entry into kindergarten. These youngsters had used The Literacy Center for two semesters by the time they went off to grade school. And it showed. One four-year-old girl tested out as having a six-year-old's skills in reading and writing, says Taylor, with many other parents of that group reporting similar good news.

Integrated Solution

Each of Maritime's three classrooms has a Literacy Center, and all eight teachers use it regularly. Every room contains two LeapDesks™, eight LeapPads®, two LeapMats™, plus plenty of books for the LeapPads.

"Our kids love the [Center]," says Taylor. And the teachers like it as well, she says, because it helps them easily deliver the individualized instruction and practice so vital for this age level.

"The Literacy Center gives us a more integrated solution," Taylor notes, "where the kids can get right in there and move along at their own pace. It's great in that regard."

Use of "Centers" Is Pervasive

In her own classroom, Taylor has set up a LeapFrog "lab" by partitioning off part of the room. It has shelves to store the LeapDesks, LeapPads, books and headsets, plus numerous worktables for students. Here, youngsters work with the materials alone or in groups, guided by Taylor.

It's an inviting atmosphere, and the theme of "centers" is extended in many ways. Within the lab area, for example, one table serves as a writing center. Pencils, paper and several LeapPads and books remain at the ready. At another table, which might be termed a listening center, Taylor makes sure that headsets are attached to the LeapPads used there. "I like the headphones because it allows them to really isolate sounds."

The importance of that seemingly small detail, headphones, doesn't escape Taylor. She recounts the difference it has made for one young boy. Tongue-tied and having very poor pronunciation, he worked with her, using the LeapDesk and its letter sound cards. He would listen through the headset, take them off, and repeat the sound back to her. Within just two weeks, she could hear improvement in his conversations with other kids. "He was hitting the hard 't' and 'k' sounds," she relates. Though their work continues, Taylor feels the headset-assisted LeapDesk practice is what turned the tide for this youngster. "I was extremely impressed."

Building on Little Victories

Such little victories, which build to larger accomplishments, abound at Maritime Head Start. In another example, Taylor tells of a boy who tried and tried again to print the letters of his name, copying it from the table where all the children's names are posted. But he couldn't do it. "I watched him try, and he just couldn't do it that way," she says.

By now the youngster was so frustrated that he didn't even want to try. But the LeapDesk is a compelling tool, and he was soon using its writing pad attachment to practice printing his letters. In the exercises, he would choose the letters in his name, stick them on the pad, and then trace over them. It was up to him, as well, to arrange the letters in the correct order to spell out his name.

Again, the improvement in skills was noticeable and quick. "Within a few weeks he was writing his name perfectly," says Taylor, "and now it's beautiful."

Many children in her class have had similarly positive, though less dramatic, experiences. The Literacy Center's specialized components target very specific skills or weaknesses, then deliver remediation and practice. Moreover, only positive reinforcement is employed. The victories come in small, but accumulative, steps, building students' self-confidence along the way. Such beginnings, Taylor knows, must be carefully nurtured in preschoolers.

Across-the-Board Gains

Pre-reading is a huge focus for Head Start programs in general, of course. As a teacher of this age group for 22 years, Margaret Taylor has an equally huge range of appropriate activities. In the "mini office" set up in her room, for example, youngsters go to an index box to get cards upon which Taylor has written short sentences that include sight words. Their assignment is to copy the sentences on a sheet of paper. Or, students can go to the "office" to read the newspaper she brings in every day; a yellow highlighter pen remains on the table for the kids to highlight all the words that they know.

Taylor believes the LeapFrog SchoolHouse curriculum and its Center's multi-modality format are making real differences in the amount and pace of her young charges' learning.

"They definitely seem to be recognizing things quicker as well as retaining them better," she explains. "Whether the activity is one of my home-grown affairs, from LeapFrog or from another source, all of my students are showing noticeable improvements in their literacy skills."