

THE READING LEADER

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INITIATIVE

Profile of an Exceptional Reading Leader

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HASKINS LITERACY INITIATIVE

HLI promotes the science of teaching reading—through comprehensive professional development, coaching and classroom support to make teachers “method-proof” masters of literacy practices; by designing and conducting research; and by engaging in advocacy to inform public policy and improve reading achievement for every child. HLI is affiliated with Haskins Laboratories, a private non-profit research institute, founded in 1935, with a primary focus on speech and language and their biological basis. Since 1965, Haskins has also been involved with reading research, quickly becoming a world leader.



Josie Smith, 2007 winner of the Connecticut Association of Schools’ William Cieslukowski Outstanding First-Year Principal Award, gets it—“it” being high quality instruction for all students, progress monitoring, and data analysis to diagnose problems and prescribe interventions early to accelerate student achievement.

IN FACT, “DATA” IS AT THE APEX OF SMITH’S IMPROVEMENT PLAN FOR

Dr. Ramon E. Betances Elementary School, which had the dubious distinction of being Hartford’s lowest achieving school prior to her arrival in 2006. Smith’s ambitious agenda is presented simply, graphic organizer style—a systematic, explicit scheme for targeting behavior, academics, and professional capacity building.

Smith’s Response to Intervention (RTI) tactic is working. In the most recent Connecticut Mastery Test results, Betances, which is located in one of Hartford’s poorest neighborhoods, reported the highest gains in student achievement of any school in the District. Before Smith, behavioral climate surveys described a chaotic, unstable environment. In Smith’s first year, behavioral referrals dropped more than 80%. These days serious discipline issues are rare and minor infractions are just typical “kids’ stuff.” This dramatic turn-around captured the attention of the Connecticut State Department of Education, which selected Betances as a model school and demonstration site for the Hartford District.

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INITIATIVE works with schools in towns throughout Connecticut, including Cromwell, East Hartford, Hamden, Hartford, Stamford, and Waterbury. Among HLI's other partners are the Connecticut State Department of Education and Achievement First.

THE READING LEADER

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Teaming to Build an RTI System

Josephine Smith, *Principal* and Margaret Marinelli, *Haskins Literacy Specialist*
Dr. Ramon E. Betances School, Hartford

Comprehensive Literacy Instruction is at the Core

Margie Gillis, Ed.D., *Project Director, Haskins Literacy Initiative*

Panel: Administrators Discuss the Many Paths to RTI

Tuesday, July 29-Wednesday, July 30 (\$250) CEUs available

■ Explicit and Differentiated Code Instruction *Haskins Literacy Specialists*

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■ **For further information and to register**, go to www.haskins.yale.edu/hli or call Tammy Ursini at 203.865.6163, ext. 200.

INSIDE HASKINS LABORATORIES

Peering Inside the Brain to Improve Pathways to Reading Performance

Dr. Ken Pugh, newly appointed President and Director of Research at Haskins Laboratories, feels it is a moral obligation for scientists to impact the lives of struggling readers. "It's personally fulfilling to help solve real world problems," says Pugh.



TRAINED AS A COGNITIVE NEUROSCIENTIST, and world renowned for basic scientific research on language, reading and the brain, Pugh lights up when discussing the prospect of someday being able to tailor reading interventions based on individual differences in brain response.

"We're still a long way from that. We have an early scientific understanding of how brain circuitry develops for reading. There is a danger in over-interpreting implications for the classroom because people attempt to use so-called 'brain-based' curriculum prematurely, in a way that is not rigorous," he cautions. "One of the goals of Haskins Literacy Initiative (HLI) is to build teachers' knowledge so they can be informed consumers and skeptical about misleading scientific claims. HLI's evidence-based approach to the science of teaching reading is consistently faithful to the wisdom of the National Reading Panel (NRP) Report, which was based on sound research principles. Teachers can reach lots of students this way."

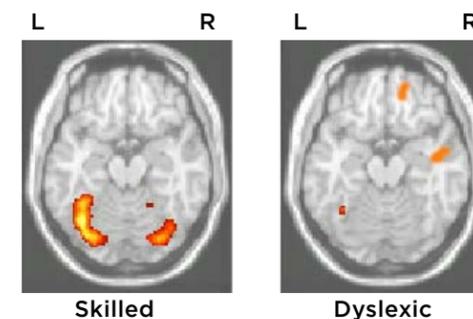
Most of what scientists *can* say today about reading development comes from behavioral research. That is, reading performance in response to instruction. Our understanding about literacy acquisition can be improved if informed by biology. "Neurobiology

is changing the way we think about language and reading disorders. Because of exquisitely sensitive brain imaging measures, researchers are now gaining a better understanding of pathways that need to develop for proficient reading, opening a window into individual differences in populations that struggle to read. For example, two kids might score the same on reading assessments but have different sources of their struggle. Brain imaging helps unpack components of different pathways to similar performance," Pugh explains.

"Cognitive neuroscience tells us that the more deeply we understand the brain's anatomy, chemistry and circuitry, the earlier we can identify markers of risk for reading disorders. With newly emerging levels of analysis, researchers not only will be able to identify those at risk earlier, but also intervene sooner and more appropriately, *before* risk leads to reading failure," says Pugh.

While teachers aim for lasting improvements in their students' reading skills, researchers can now look for sustained changes in students' brains. Neuroimaging—which measures activity in various areas of the brain at work—is a useful research tool because it can confirm the efficiency and normalization of brain pathways. In studies with young readers, neuroimaging shows that children who struggle to read show activity in different areas of the brain than skilled readers. Following successful reading intervention, effects can be seen inside and out—gains in reading scores are accompanied by changes in the way the brain works during reading. Neurological activity centralizes in left hemisphere regions of the brain, which is home to the more efficient pathways of skilled readers. In a recent study, researchers from Haskins Laboratories and other institutions confirmed that, one year after evidence-based phonological instruction, struggling readers not only maintained their gains in reading performance, but also their development of those fast-paced neural systems that underlie skilled reading.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5



Cognitive neuroscientists' views of the brain while reading. Composite scans of readers, ages 9-17. The image of 16 skilled readers (left) shows activation of a region at the back left brain, the junction of vision and speech, which is considered the signature of automatic word recognition. The image of dyslexic readers (right) show little activation of this key area. Pugh, K. R., Frost, S. J., Sandak, R., Landi, N., Rueckl, J. G., Constable, R. T., Fulbright, R., Katz, L., & Mencl, W. E. (in press). Effects of stimulus difficulty and repetition on printed word identification: An fMRI comparison of non-impaird and reading disabled adolescent cohorts. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*.

Profile of an Exceptional Reading Leader

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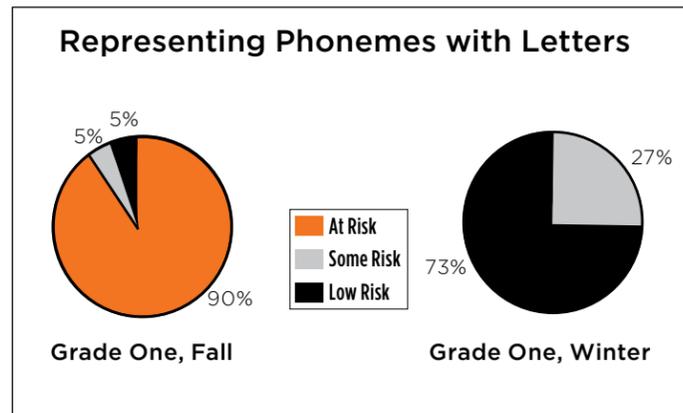
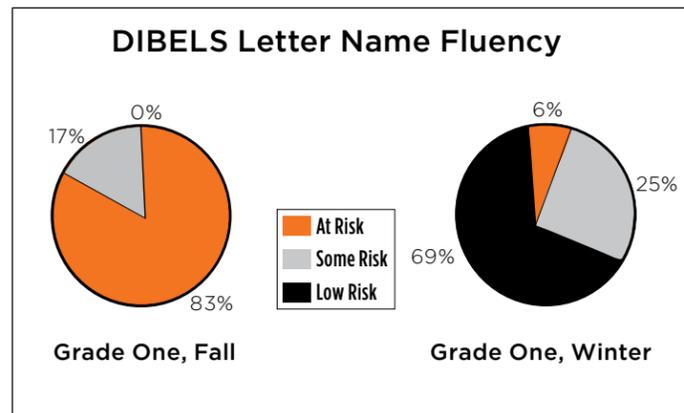
SMITH SAYS “RUNNING A SCHOOL IS LIKE RUNNING A classroom. I started out as a teacher in a self-contained special ed classroom of students with severe problems. I understand the purpose of RTI. By diagnosing academic issues and providing quality instruction early, we can accelerate the rates of learning. So much so, that Betances may well have the lowest percentage of special education students in the district—less than 9%.”

AS AN ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL AT A MASTERING READING Instruction study school, Smith was impressed by the success of Haskins evidence-based approach to literacy instruction. Thanks to funding from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving as part of its Brighter Future’s Initiative, Haskins Literacy Specialists were placed in five Hartford elementary schools. They arrived at the start of Smith’s second year as principal at Betances. “One of the many things I love about the Haskins Literacy Initiative is that it’s both diagnostic and prescriptive, and aligned with how children’s minds and skills develop. I’m so grateful to have the opportunity to work with Haskins. One teacher told me that her students love it so much, they think that it’s recess,” Smith adds with a laugh. “The gifts HLI mentors are giving students and teachers will be with them for the rest of their lives.”

CASES IN POINT. GRADE ONE STUDENTS—WHOSE teachers receive HLI professional development and in-class mentoring—are expected to surpass third-graders in their spelling and decoding skills by the end of the school year. Smith is especially proud of the progress made by bilingual first graders (who were Spanish speakers in a dual-language kindergarten). On mid-year assessments for representing phonemes with letters, none were categorized as “high risk,” compared with 90% in the “danger zone” at the start of the school year. Similar results were found for mid-year letter naming fluency. (See below) “Our target is to have no more than 5% of students who require tier 3, intensive intervention. We’re right on track,” explains Smith.



HLI SPECIALISTS MARGARET MARINELLI AND Teresa López-Lebrón are thrilled to be working with a true instructional leader who makes sound, informed educational decisions. “As soon as we bring in reading data, Ms. Smith immediately responds. With effective, early instruction, she has wiped out risk indicators for most grade one students. And it’s all the little things—not canceling meetings, providing release time for classroom, special ed, and English Language Learner teachers to attend professional development and team meetings,” says Marinelli. López-Lebrón adds, “Support is the difference. We’re welcomed into the classroom and Ms. Smith is learning alongside the teachers. Their knowledge has grown and their teaching behavior has changed. It is the willingness of the teachers to embrace new knowledge that will impact and affect the way that they teach and the way that the students learn.” That’s building professional capacity. ↗



AWARDS

Connecticut Association of Schools Honors HLI

SMITH’S STRATEGY, REMOVING THE “FICTITIOUS enabler,” sounds more like the title of a psychology lecture than an approach to instructional leadership. Yet, by dismantling obstacles, Smith builds accountability. “I do everything in my power to create a level playing field for teachers and students. When a struggling teacher tells me that s/he has all the special ed kids, I pull out class lists and data to prove that’s not the case. I make up the classes each year with a fair mix of kids, so that’s not an issue. Not enough supplies? What do you need? No time to assess a student? Then I’ll do it.” Smith replaces “fictitious enablers” with genuine empowerment—teacher knowledge, support, availability, and budget-stretching savvy. That’s leadership.

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT: Born in Hartford, Smith entered kindergarten with Italian as her first language. So she understands how it feels to be an English Language Learner (ELL). Smith is living proof that ELL students can make the grade; she was Valedictorian of her college class, and maintained 4.0 averages in her Masters and Six-year programs.

PHILOSOPHY: Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

FAVORITE CHILDREN’S BOOK: “Clifford and the Stormy Day Rescue.” What’s at stake? The library!

FUNDING: Creative juggling and grant writing. “When I went beyond my materials budget, I dipped into field trip money. The kids still went on field trips, but I got bus transportation for free.”

CONNECTICUT MASTERY TEST (CMT): “The way to fix CMT scores is by teaching kids to read. My CMT plan is to invest early in kindergarten–grade 1 kids. If I pull out their support, we’ll never break the cycle.” ■

Margaret Marinelli and Teresa López-Lebrón claimed an Outstanding Program Award from the Connecticut Association of Schools on behalf of Haskins Literacy Initiative. HLI aims to make teachers “method-proof” masters of literacy practices by translating three decades of reliable literacy research, framing findings in meaningful ways so teachers can make informed decisions about *what* to teach *when* to *which* children. In addition to providing a solid knowledge base, HLI mentors offer classroom support, modeling, and coaching, and suggest a wealth of ways to create explicit lessons, engaging activities and centers that work.



Dr. Caitlin Dillon engages parents in a game of Latin Root Jeopardy at Minds in Motion, an event sponsored by the Connecticut Association for the Gifted at Hebron Elementary School. Following Dillon’s presentation on The Science of Reading, parents experienced firsthand how reading research translates into practice in the classroom and at home.

Peering Inside the Brain CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

By third grade, students are expected to move from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” so most research efforts have focused on reading programs and interventions in the early grades. Statistics suggest that nearly 70% of eighth graders do not read at a proficient level, yet surprisingly little research has addressed the causes and characteristics of reading problems in adolescents or scientifically demonstrated the effectiveness of reading interventions used with older students. Since the plasticity of the brain declines as children age, it isn’t clear whether certain types of interventions could lead

to sustained neurological changes in older struggling readers. Haskins researchers, in partnership with the Kennedy Krieger Institute, are working to find out by studying high school students with persistent reading difficulties. Students are randomly assigned to one of three evidence-based treatments. The ultimate goal is to identify which method works best over the long-term for which type of adolescent struggling reader. With the help of neuroimaging studies like this one, the circuitous path to proficiency may become more direct for thousands of students who struggle to read. ■

MEET OUR MENTORS

Wendy North Promotes Classroom Practice, Practice, Practice

Haskins mentor Wendy North likes to tell teachers that teaching reading is the same as teaching any skill. “Students must start at the beginning, be given plenty of time to practice, but not move ahead until they’ve mastered the step they’re on.”

While “walk-before-you-run” wisdom holds true for simpler tasks, like tying a shoe, it is especially relevant for more complex, developmental undertakings like literacy acquisition. In order for readers to derive meaning, their brains must be able to pick words off the page accurately, and at a fluent rate. If their processors become overloaded trying to crack the code, they won’t have the mental RAM to plumb passages for connection, context and understanding. Step-by-step practice builds mental “muscle” memory, revving up the automaticity auto pilot, so readers on decoding “cruise control” can take in and consider the scenery rather than only the road.

North brings high-wattage intensity and laser-like focus to her work with teachers, and her pursuits as a cyclist and mountain climber. She has also transferred similar attributes to her teenagers. Son Taylor is an accomplished sailor and daughter Sara, a gifted musician, singer, and dancer. “At her first music lesson, Sara learned how to open the case so that the violin didn’t fall out onto the floor. It took nine years and thousands of hours of practice before I could play the flute concerto that had inspired me to take up the instrument. When it comes to music, no one questions that students move sequentially through each lesson book. Then why is there such a disconnect between the way reading skills are taught in isolation, then practiced in context?” she wonders.

Two decades ago, as a newly minted Special Ed teacher for learning disabled fifth graders, North experienced the “Aha!” moment that ultimately led her to Haskins Laboratories. After delivering a carefully prepared lesson on reading comprehension, North was approached by Susan Santora, who had sat in to observe a student she was tutoring. Santora, founder and Director of Learning House, didn’t mince words when it came to the lesson’s effectiveness. “She pointed out that comprehension lessons alone wouldn’t move the students along. I needed to step back to meet them where they were—for some, beginning with basic phonological awareness, which is the launch pad for reading success,” remembers North. “Susan was the catalyst—and the vehicle—for my training in Orton-Gillingham,” a language-based, multisensory, structured, sequential, cumulative,



Picture clues, hand motions and songs help “plant” short and long vowel sounds in kindergartners’ brains. Wendy North helps students practice the short /a/ sound by holding an imaginary apple, then sweeping her hand to one side, while saying aaa. Then plunk, she drops it in a basket, separating out the final pulll. Together they sing jingles for each vowel.

approach to literacy. In the ‘90s, North discovered her true professional passion when working with adults and middle schoolers who couldn’t read. “My husband is dyslexic, so I live with the problems of a struggling reader. But when I heard my students’ stories, I really felt their pain. It finally occurred to me that if we catch kids early, we can save them.

Circumstances and serendipity guided North’s next steps. Santora was too busy to take on a position bringing best practices to Bridgeport Public Schools, so North jumped in working alongside Dr. Margie Gillis. Gillis was her stepping stone to Haskins Laboratories and an interview for an Early Reading Success Initiative opening. North landed the job thanks to her knowledge of reading research and her experience putting it into practice—both of which she credits to Santora’s admirably demanding standards.

Since joining the Haskins team, North has mentored K-2 teachers in New Haven, East Haven, and Hamden, as well as Elm City and Amistad Academy, two Achievement First (AF) charter schools. This year North can be found in kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 3 classrooms in Cromwell, and has expanded her scope to include professional development for several of AF’s Brooklyn, NY sites. North savors working with AF teachers, many who are Teach for America corps members. “AF teachers are receptive, clean slates.



HLI IN ACTION

The Mentor is Gone but the Practice Lives On

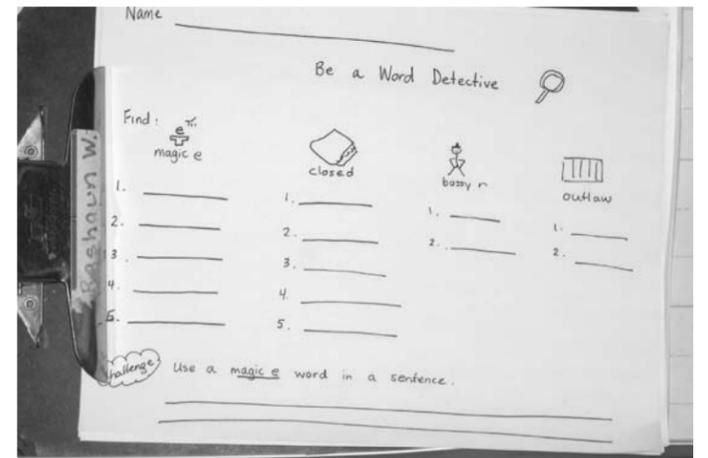
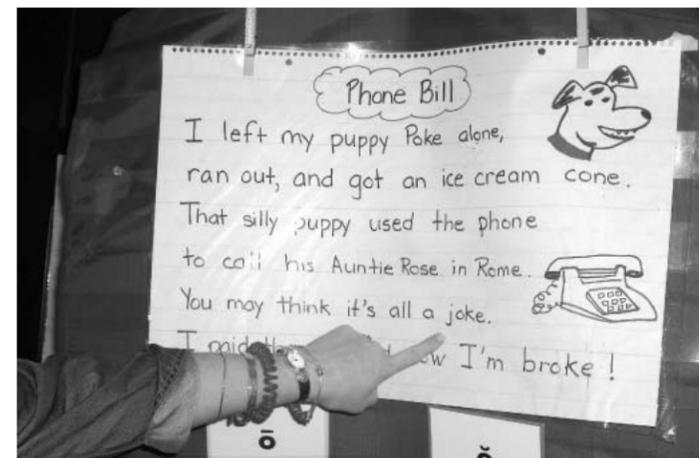
HASKINS LITERACY INITIATIVE MENTOR MARY ELLEN Lavalette’s tenure at Nathan Hale School in Manchester ended with the Mastering Reading Instruction Initiative more than a year and a half ago. But first grade teacher Janice Medynski continues to use research-based reading practices not only because she understands *why* they make a difference, but also because she’s seen *how*.

Medynski kicks off the year “by really honing in on phonemic awareness, what our mouths and tongues do when we make speech sounds. Attuning our ears. Playing our own version of “duck, duck, goose” with picture cards, breaking words into phonemes. The kids love doing sorts, too. First picture sorts, then word sorts. Sounds to letters and spelling patterns.”

“The more I have practiced what Mary Ellen taught me, the more it’s made sense.” The lightbulb went off when Medynski observed a special education teacher use explicit code instruction to help a struggling fifth grade student. “I realized that’s what I’m teaching my first

grade students. If students recognize and internalize patterns from the start, it will follow them.”

Because Medynski sees the reciprocity between spelling and reading development, she uses the Developmental Spelling Analysis (DSA) to monitor student progress, plan small group instruction, and determine activities for centers. A year-end DSA follows students to second grade. “I continue to use Haskins’ lesson plan for word work. Code lessons begin with whole group instruction with a kid-friendly, code-emphasis poem, followed by picture and word sorts, and circling words with the features.” Students practice and reinforce code skills at centers. On-target students are “word detectives,” tackling more developmentally advanced patterns, like magic e, while at-risk students might be striving to master short vowels and closed syllables. By continually linking auditory, visual, and kinesthetic elements in her lessons, Medynski is helping her first graders to build the pathways for faster word processing that will help them become more fluent readers. ■



PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND MENTORS

Research on effective school change has found that it takes an average of 20 to 25 times of trying a new method or technique before it becomes natural.

—Joyce and Showers, 1988

That which we persist in doing becomes easier, not that the task itself has become easier, but that our ability to perform it has improved.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Promoting Classroom Practice CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

They don’t have to unlearn practices that haven’t served them well or be expected to master multiple initiatives. I admire any teacher who is motivated to learn new approaches. While I can provide knowledge, it’s up to them to put it into practice in the classroom.” North captured this essential quality in a videotaped lesson by

Hamden teacher, Dan “the man” Hayden. “Now, what’s that word?” he asks a smiling girl who quickly reads from the card in her hand. “I bet you’ll never forget that!” North calls the clip “Relentless”—the perfect description for how she moves teachers towards mastery of evidence-based literacy practices, one step at a time. ■

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