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Reading Recovery: Early Intervention for At-Risk Youngsters

Identifying first graders who are poor readers and teaching them effective reading strategies that allow them to make accelerated progress and never need remedial work is a commitment the University of Maine has made by providing the specialized teacher training required to implement a successful Reading Recovery program in Maine schools, according to Robert Cobb, dean of the College of Education.

"The intense, early intervention reading and writing program for the lowest achieving first grade readers could be the long-term answer to illiteracy in Maine," said Cobb.

UM will become one of seven university training sites in the country where teachers will be trained to work with at-risk readers in their own school districts and to train other teachers. The ultimate goal is to make Reading Recovery training available to all first grade teachers in the state and to reach all of Maine's most at-risk youngsters.

The University of Maine Reading Recovery Center will be directed by Paula Hatfield, a doctoral candidate at UM and a teacher at Leonard Middle School in Old Town. Hatfield will spend 1991 training at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, where the technique was developed more than 20 years ago. Phyllis Brazee, associate professor of education, will serve as co-director of the Center, handling the organizational phase during Hatfield's absence.

The UM Center, established with the cooperation of various school districts in Maine and the Division of Compensatory Education in the State Department of Education, will serve Maine and the Northeast. It is scheduled to begin operation in January 1992, initially training teachers from the Bangor, Wiscasset, Old Town, Westbrook and Bethel area school districts to be teacher leaders. They, in turn, will be certified to provide Reading Recovery training to first grade teachers in local school districts.

Each of the three levels of teacher

training requires a year of academic work and immersion in Reading Recovery teaching strategies. The center will be certified by the National Diffusion Network, a division of the U.S. Department of Education, which has established academic criteria for Reading Recovery teachers and standards for practices to ensure program consistency and integrity.

"Reading Recovery is just really good teaching," said Hatfield. "What's new is that the teaching strategies and learning activities are packaged together."

The winning combination, according to the veteran first grade and remedial reading teacher, is immediate assessment of difficulties and building on individual strengths through strong one-on-one daily teaching backed up by specially trained educators whose observation and analysis help children make the transition from theory to practice. The goal is accelerated progress and independence.

"Reading Recovery is not a fad," Hatfield said, noting that New Zealand, where the method has been used for years, is one of the world's most literate countries, whose population is

among the largest users of bookstores and libraries.

Introduced to American educators at Ohio State University in 1984, Reading Recovery is steadily gaining supporters across the country as studies show that the lowest achievers are learning effective reading strategies to catch up and maintain progress without further remedial help.

Research indicates that after receiving Reading Recovery instruction for approximately one-half hour a day for 16 weeks, 90 percent of the children whose pretest scores were in the lowest 20 percent of their class catch up with or exceed their class reading average. Since they continue to progress at a rate equal to the class average, they need no further remedial reading work.

The social and educational costs of retaining a child in the first grade extend far beyond another school year, Hatfield points out. But instead of becoming educational liabilities, requiring more schooling and remedial services, former Reading Recovery children are gaining self-esteem and experiencing success in other areas of the curriculum and school life.



Discussing the establishment of the University of Maine Reading Recovery Center are, from left, co-directors Phyllis Brazee and Paula Hatfield, and Robert Cobb, dean of the College of Education. The center will provide the specialized teacher training required to implement the intense, early intervention reading and writing program for low-achieving readers in the first grade. It is scheduled to begin operation in January 1991.