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One District's Response

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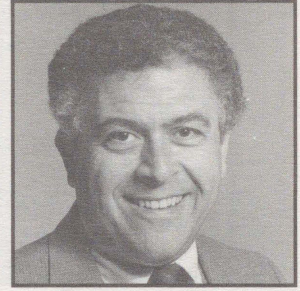
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One District's Response



by Robert J. Ferrera

"The elementary school must assume as its sublime and most solemn responsibility the task of teaching every child to read," states William J. Bennett, Secretary of Education in his latest report on Elementary Education in America.

In Grand Rapids we believe schools are institutions of learning and they should adhere to fair but rigorous standards in all areas. Therefore, to implement various research conclusions we found it necessary to put our house in order and started developing a uniform discipline code which established and enforced a fair and consistent approach to school management. The key within the new code is the early communication with parents regarding any behavioral concerns. Each parent must understand that behavior and academic success go together.

Since research data supports the concept that unexcused absences decrease when parents are promptly informed that their children are not attending school, a component of the discipline policy regulates student attendance in our schools.

Once our schools had a safe and orderly climate conducive for learning, we formed a committee on time allotment.

Time allotment was addressed and updated assuring a well balanced curriculum for children. A significant amount of classroom time was allocated for instruction in the basic skill areas.

A policy dealing with homework was implemented that strongly encourages parental involvement in their children's education. Student achievement rises significantly when teachers regularly assign homework and students conscientiously do it.

Another component our district put into place was establishing essential skills for kindergarten through grade six in the areas of reading, writing and math. In Grand Rapids we believe that virtually all children can meet minimum educational standards if given the time and resources.

With the above policies in place we now were in a position to critically assess any of the curriculum areas needing revision and/or improvement.

At the same time the Michigan Department of Education was developing and refining a new definition of reading based on current research. It was the opportune time to study our own reading curriculum with the assistance of state experts.

We requested in-service by the Instructional Specialists of the Michigan Department of Education to explain the new definition of reading and the implications for our own district. Presentations were designed to lead the participants through activities generating an awareness of how the new definition would produce skilled readers based on principles growing out of contemporary research on reading instruction.

It quickly became apparent that the non-uniformity of our reading curriculum was not affording all students an equal opportunity to learn to read. The varied sequence of skills among the six programs presently in use and the high mobility of some of our students did not insure that all students would be able to continuously practice, develop and refine the skills presented in their reading program without interruption or interference.

A committee of classroom teachers, reading teachers and administrators was

established. They assumed the responsibility of studying the latest research to develop a district philosophy, goals and objectives in reading. The end result would be the recommendation to adopt a district-wide reading program reflecting all the components necessary to develop skilled readers.

Statements from research became the road map by which we developed our own philosophy, goals and objectives. The Grand Rapids Public Schools believe that:

1. Skilled readers develop decoding skills to the point where they are automatic and require little conscious attention.
2. Skilled readers are aware that there are different purposes for their reading and that they must change the way they read in response to these purposes.
3. Skilled readers bring to the reading selection their own prior knowledge and control of their own thinking and learning.
4. Skilled reading is a life-long pursuit.

In order to meet the goals above, the committee looked for:

1. Evidence of a sequential development of decoding skills practice and applied in meaningful situations whereby key decoding skills were in place by the end of second grade.
2. Evidence activities designed to build background information through oral language essential for selection comprehension and related to words or concepts already known.
3. Evidence of questioning strategies enabling each student to integrate the information in the text with their own prior knowledge, resulting in the ability to read critically, evaluate information, make sound judgments and to solve problems.
4. Evidence of teaching strategies instructing students of all the possible rates of reading in relation to their own purpose and own level of comprehension.
5. Evidence of an exposure to a wide variety of reading materials with different purposes.

With the adoption of a program our work has just begun. The reading program selected for use in the Grand Rapids Public Schools is an excellent base or foundation on which all

children can learn to read but the formal adoptions signalled a new "beginning" in the practices utilized in the instruction of reading. Library personnel are available in each building to maintain and build libraries to whet the appetite of all readers interested in exploring a topic, author, etc. Purchase of new library books are coordinated with a recommended bibliography for extension of the basal program. In-services for all personnel are planned to insure that all children are taught by business-like but supportive and friendly teachers confident of their ability to plan, implement and evaluate the best reading instruction to which each student is entitled.

High expectations for all children were established. The enthusiasm exhibited by all staff members encouraged the feelings of being a part of a team working together for all children to reach their full potential to learn.

With these policies in place, our goal is to increase student achievement. Student achievement, in the final analysis, is based on the students' ability to deal with language. Reading is obviously the determiner of that achievement and is of paramount importance if educational reform is to have any real meaning.

Robert J. Ferrera is Superintendent of the Grand Rapids Public Schools.