

## Wis. district's stimulus dollars target early literacy

2-year program also saves teachers' jobs

By Wangui Njuguna

The Sheboygan Area (Wis.) School District targeted two problems with its federal stimulus dollars: reading problems among its low-income students and looming layoffs of some of its English teachers.

The district directed federal dollars to modify an elementary school program to target first-graders struggling with emergent literacy.

Winnie Huebsch, SASD's coordinator of elementary education, said she originally wanted to launch the Early Literacy Intervention program in all elementary schools, but federal requirements mandate that Title I stimulus dollars target low-income students.

Thus, SASD created a new program for first-graders in its five Title I schools — and then expanded it to second-grade students — whose reading proficiency was at or below the 25th percentile.

The schools already had reading interventionists and used the Reading Recovery program, so the goal was to add another dimension by providing the lowest-performing students an additional 30-45 minutes of daily intervention through small-group instruction.

Specialist teachers work with no more than four students at a time with the hope that intervening now will save the district remediation costs later.

Further, because the stimulus dollars had a two-year window, the district also identified six English teachers who were going to be laid off to sign a two-year contract to teach in the ELI program, Huebsch said.

Literacy intervention programs are popular, and "the greatest bang is from when you intervene early in the first grade, because children are beginning to read," Huebsch said.

But "things fall apart when it comes to monitoring and assessments," she said. "You need to do this daily. This can't be just another little program. We're holding everybody accountable; your jobs are also on the line. It makes a difference when you are asked to be a good teacher and told you only have two years to do it."

### Teacher training

Under the ELI program, each of the five schools receives a reading interventionist who is trained in emergent literacy and how to keep a running record of students' progress.

Based on the Reading Recovery and Leveled

Literacy Intervention programs, the interventionists were provided three days of professional development on how to understand students' strengths and weaknesses, including by using the state assessments and data from *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement: Concepts of Print*.

During the pull-out sessions, students are introduced to a new book selected to match their individual reading levels. The following day, they reread the book while the teacher observes and records the child's reading behavior.

Students also write words and sentences and break them up to reorganize them. Information from this running record is used to target areas that need further development.

Based on the Rigby Benchmark PM, the 94 first-grade students who participated in the program last year are making great strides toward proficient and advanced levels.

At the Washington School for Comprehensive Literacy and Jefferson Elementary School, all participating first-graders are now proficient or advanced. Students are also making progress in Sheridan (94 percent), Longfellow (80 percent), and Grant (71 percent) elementary schools. Similar progress is seen at the second-grade level.

ELI's focus is mainly on first-graders, Huebsch said, because that's when they're beginning to learn how to read. This fall, the group of upcoming second-graders will review last year's material for two to three weeks with the reading interventionists to make up for any summer reading loss, she said.

### Sustainability

Classroom teachers surveyed about the benefits of ELI laud the program for helping students become confident readers. Teachers also say the interventionists make it possible for them to cover reading comprehension in the classroom when they are with the students, instead of focusing mainly on fluency and decoding skills.

Some teachers have requested training for other staff and an extension of the program to third grade. The schools hope the program can continue once the stimulus dollars are depleted.

Huebsch said the school board is excited about the program and the schools will try to reorganize Title I funds to maintain it.

Her hope is that there will be adequate funds to launch it beyond Title I schools. "We ran a very successful program," she said.