
VENICE

Community Central

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SPIRE helps struggling readers climb to new heights

By Jay Roland
Editor

The little cluster of second-graders bounded into the classroom and quickly settled into their chairs, forming a semi-circle in front of teacher Nancy Garland.

She quickly took them through a phonics warm-up with flash cards. In unison, the students pronounced the sounds made by the letter combinations on each card. Combinations such as “ea,” “tle,” and “ck” didn’t phase them, nor did potentially tricky words such as “through,” “doubt” and “dangerous.”

At first glance, you’d never know these were kids who have struggled with reading.

But Garland, who has taught for 17 years at Epiphany, said year after year, she and her colleagues noticed that a handful of students couldn’t quite keep up with the fast pace of reading instruction. The students were often above average intelligence, but something was holding them back.

“In first grade, they’re being introduced to all the phonetic rules they’ll need to read,” Garland said. “That’s a lot of information. A lot of kids were being missed.”

So to give that group of students the tools to succeed, Garland last year began using Specialized Program Individualizing Reading Excellence (SPIRE).

Instead of overwhelming the first-graders, SPIRE spreads out that phonetic instruction across first, second, and third grades.

“By the third grade, it should all even out and these students will be reading at the same level or every close to it as everyone else,” Garland said.

The key is helping students decode words they’ve never seen before to take away some of the intimidation. While the English language has its share of spelling and pronunciation oddities, there are far more rules than I imagined.

Garland’s students, for example, learn the “floss” rule. If a one-syllable word has only one vowel and it ends in f, l, or s, you double the last consonant, hence the pneumatic clue, “floss.”

This kind of focused instruction requires a variety of approaches. Students use little colored disks to represent letters when

learning some rules or use their fingers to quietly tap out the sounds in a difficult word.

“Just to see what they can read now is wonderful,” Garland said. “I’m hoping we’ll be able to put it more into the classroom.”

Proof that the step-by-step method is working can be found in the students’ progress in their reading books. Before SPIRE, students with reading difficulties were still in the early chapters of their textbook by the middle of the year. And whereas before, the thought of reading out loud may have troubled some of the students, there was no lack of enthusiasm for this portion of class.

When a black-haired girl with a sweet smile came to the end of her paragraph and had to relinquish the reading to the boy next to her, she scrunched her face.

Quietly she said to herself, “I want to read more.”

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