



Published September 10 2009

Viewpoint: Developing reading skills is critical to academic successes

As children return to school this week, we should all be encouraged that our state and local schools are going the extra distance to ensure our youngest students reach that first major milestone of success: learning to read.

By: Kathy Saltzman, Woodbury Bulletin

As children return to school this week, we should all be encouraged that our state and local schools are going the extra distance to ensure our youngest students reach that first major milestone of success: learning to read.

Being able to read by third grade is a critical indicator of academic success and when over 30 percent of Minnesota children cannot read proficiently, we must seek out programs that we know work.

Children learn to read; then they read to learn. This explains why the development of early literacy skills is so critical to ongoing academic achievement and success.

Once children fall behind, it takes extraordinary efforts for them to catch up, and most do not. And what is truly disturbing is the growing evidence that too many children are referred to special education not because they have a disability, but because they did not have access to early intervention programs that incorporate scientifically based reading instruction.

Research shows that when we identify children who are at risk of failing to read earlier; provide them with intensive, high quality reading instruction; and monitor their progress frequently to evaluate their response to instruction, the results are amazing. Children who were failing are learning to read.

For the past three years, my work on the Senate Education Committee has focused on literacy. I have sponsored legislation that has led to stronger reading standards, ensured new teachers are better prepared in the most effective reading strategies, provided professional training and support for schools implementing earlier identification and intervention models, and expanded the Minnesota Reading Corps.

But I didn't do it alone, and partnering with Sen. Gen Olson, of Minnetrista, an eight-term Republican, made this a bipartisan effort. And we had help. Parents who arrived at the Capitol to help with this effort had experienced firsthand the pain of watching their own bright children struggle to read. They had also seen real success when their children received instruction based on scientific based reading strategies.

Our bottom-line was this: No child should be required to experience the trauma associated with failure in reading—learning to read is every child's right. For some children, even an enriched environment is simply not enough. After reviewing over 115,000 reading research studies, the National Reading Panel concluded that the most effective reading strategies for struggling readers include five strands: phonemic awareness (breaking apart sounds in words), phonics (teaching that letters represent sounds and blending them together creates words), fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

However, in visiting schools across the state, we heard from too many young teachers that they were not prepared and did not have the skills to identify and teach the over 30 percent of children in their classrooms who struggle to read. School districts must often send new teachers to literacy workshops before they enter the classroom.

Working with national reading experts and Minnesota literacy professionals, we sponsored legislation that will put real meaning into state statute that requires teacher colleges to incorporate these effective reading strategies into their curriculum. To ensure teachers develop these critical skills and have every tool in their tool belts when it comes to teaching a child who struggles, new teachers will soon need to pass a new reading instruction assessment and demonstrate competency before being granted a license.

The Minnesota Reading Corps is committed to helping every Minnesota child become a successful reader by the end of 3rd grade and places AmeriCorps members in classrooms across the state to implement a researched-based early-literacy effort. The program has demonstrated remarkable success and our state dollars leverage significant federal and private funds. By increasing funding, 1,000 AmeriCorps literacy coaches will work with 25,000 children at sites across Minnesota over the next two years.

I am so pleased that next year the MRC will expand from three school sites to eight in the South Washington County School District and the Stillwater Area School District will continue its ongoing partnership with the program. School leaders and teachers should be commended for both expanding this program and for implementing earlier identification and intervention strategies across the district.

Learning to read is a critical indicator of a child's later academic success. In order to close the achievement gap, we must do better when it comes to ensuring children acquire early literacy skills. It's their right, but it's our responsibility.

Kathy Saltzman is the state senator for District 56, which includes Woodbury and 10 other communities in central Washington County. She is a Woodbury resident.