State Of The Art In Literacy Instruction

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On a January morning at the Ziegler Elementary School in the Lower Northeast, art teacher Regina Feighan-Drach was dressed like a Native American shaman. For an hour and a half, two classes of 30 kindergarten students were magically transported to another era and culture.

How can this be?

It has to do with teaching kids to read.

And with local restaurateur Rob Wasserman.

Wasserman, who is interested in literacy and technology, raised money for a $930,000, four-year grant to the District. It is allowing Ziegler and Andrew Jackson Elementary School in South Philadelphia to adopt the curriculum and methods of AIM Academy in Conshohocken, a private school founded for learning-disabled students and acclaimed for its success in literacy development.

What is AIM?

AIM was founded by two mothers whose daughters had learning disabilities. In eight years, it has grown to 280

students, from grades 1 to 12, and carefully honed its program.

“It is a very intentional model in building foundational skills,” said Fran Newberg, District deputy chief for educational technology and a friend of one of AIM’s founders and Wasserman. “They integrate interventions for all students,” not just for those with learning disabilities like dyslexia.

So when Wasserman said he wanted to “do something bigger” than simply help schools buy iPads and other digital tools, Newberg suggested a partnership with AIM. The grant will pay for hardware, but also for extra teacher time and supplies. The money is being donated by the Burger Brawl and the Olitsky Foundation.

Jackson and Ziegler were chosen from among 20 District schools that submitted applications. The first year concentrates on kindergarten and 1st grade; 2nd and 3rd will be added one at a time, with year four meant for refining and maintaining the entire sequence.

Jackson principal Lisa Ciaranca-Kaplan said that AIM program is among the best she has seen. “I’ve been around for a long time. I think that it hits on all the styles of learning, and it really teaches the brain what to do,” she said.

The AIM approach focuses on systematically building skills around reading like phonics, decoding, and

comprehension. Its core program for young students is Fundations from Wilson Language Training, originally designed for students with learning disabilities. It is recognized for its precision in diagnosing student roadblocks and giving teachers strategies for overcoming them.

"It's about routine, and it's about structure," said Kate O'Reilly, AIM's 1st-grade teacher. She adapted her curriculum for Philadelphia kindergarten teachers.

She is aware that Philadelphia has many more students per class than AIM, where the average is eight to 10. Still, "it's absolutely possible" to do it," said O'Reilly. "It's a great structure; it helps students dive into texts and understanding. With 10 kids or 30 kids, they can get so much meaning out of it. Do I think it will take time? Yes."

While focusing on skills, the curriculum also emphasizes rigor. When the teacher reads Little Red Riding Hood aloud, she writes three words for students to look out for and define: "scoundrel," "gratitude," and "cottage." The kindergarteners have to figure out their meanings in context. They get clues from the teacher, who constantly asks about everything from the meaning of illustrations to the moral of the story.

Nancy Hennessy, AIM's Director of Academic and Professional Practices, said that the vocabulary words are continually reinforced.

“Words like ‘scoundrel’ won’t be used once, but multiple times this year,” she said. It’s not a good idea to just give a vocabulary test and then forget” the words, which is what happens in many schools.

Wilson and programs like it, such as Orton-Gillingham, have established that there is a scientific approach to teaching the complexities and irregularities of the English language. While developed for students with specific learning disabilities, the approach helps all students learn to read, Hennessy said.

AIM teacher Nichole Pugliese visits each Philadelphia school once a week to coach Ziegler and Jackson instructors in the curriculum. She focuses on helping them recognize why children are making mistakes.

For instance, a child might have a phonological problem – unable to distinguish the similar sounds of “p” and “b,” for example. That requires one kind of intervention.

But it could also be that the child has not yet been taught a rule of the English language, for instance, that a "ph" combination can represent the same sound as "f.”

For teachers, having a detailed diagnostic model is crucial. That way, they know what students need to reach a goal "before going on to the next one,” Pugliese said.

Stephanie Conaghan, a Ziegler kindergarten teacher, described the program as “amazing.” “This is the best

that's out there," she said. "Students are using material that is meaningful and developmentally appropriate, and their success is evident in the assessments. It differentiates instruction, so they use all parts of their bodies to understand the letters inside, outside, and upside down."

Reading comes alive

Ziegler is serving a rapidly changing community that has seen an influx of immigrants and increasing transience. And like other District schools, it has seen its budget shrink as it tried to cope with more challenging conditions.

Paul Spina, principal of Ziegler, said that he applied for the grant as a way to get extra resources and expert help to meet his school's challenges. His staff, he said, has fully embraced the model. "It will only work if everybody is on board," he said.

Which brings us back to the shaman.

Besides the finely tuned curriculum around skill-building for literacy, AIM's program is also multidisciplinary and arts focused. It creates conditions where students use all their senses, practice creativity, and understand interdisciplinary connections.

To do this, AIM uses "clubs" to teach history, geography, and literature. Each "club" transports students and teacher in time and space. Feighan-Drach took the

initiative at Ziegler to adapt this “interactive history” portion of the AIM model, creating four time periods: the Stone Age, Native Americans, sailing to the New World, and colonial Philadelphia.

After the 30 kindergarten students were settled into Feighan-Drach’s room, she started the lesson. “I want you to stand behind your chair, close your eyes and rub your medallion. Turn around once. Turn around twice. Click your heels together three times (‘I got that from the Wizard of Oz,’ she confided), and jump in the air,” she said. The children dutifully obeyed. Repeat after me, she said “Back in time we travel, to see what history unravels.” You are now, she announced to the children, thousands of years in the past in North America. And so they were. The sound of drumming emanated from her new MacBook. The room was dark. The children were into it. They put on their own “animal skins” – actually, cloth tunics that the children decorated themselves.

Now they were ready to enter the candlelit teepee that Feighan-Drach had created in the back of the room. “Take your shoes off,” she said. “We treat the customs with reverence.” There, she showed them a headdress she had made, full of feathers – a war bonnet. “Who would wear this?” she asked. One little boy knew. “Someone who did a lot of brave things,” he said. After the lesson, they used their art supplies to decorate their headbands, copying Native American symbols from paper.

Feighan-Drach, a 23-year District veteran, is not new to role-play in her classroom. She did it when she taught literature to middle schoolers, dressing up like Edgar Allan Poe and others. “But I didn’t do it like this, “she said. “This is using art and literature to teach history. It’s a great combination.”

The children, she said, are totally immersed. "Club is a special part of the day, they can use their imaginations. They’re totally entertained and they don’t know that they’re learning. They are definitely more engaged.”

Spina, who watched the lesson, agreed. “They’ll remember this far more than if they just read it in a book,” he said. “I wish I was one of these kids.”