

Extra dose of reading assistance offered

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Friday, 08 November 2013 13:57 -



District 20 hires specialist to help.

Before Emily Thompson started meeting with Claudine Kennicutt in a former computer lab turned into classroom, she struggled with reading.

“I was reading really fast and making lots of errors,” said the Gothenburg High School seventh grader.

Often, Kennicutt said she couldn’t hear the end of Thompson’s sentence when she read aloud.

“It would just fade off,” Kennicutt said.

Since she started working with Kennicutt at the beginning of the school year, Thompson said she’s slowed down her reading and understands it more.

Ditto for Austin Macek.

Before coming to Kennicutt’s room, Macek didn’t know that pointing a finger at a word while reading could help.

“I found out that’s a way to sound out a word,” he explained. “I keep my finger on the word so when I blink, I don’t lose it.”

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Speech pathologist Carol Keiser described pointing at words as a visual to keep students focused on what they're reading.

Kennicutt, who taught fourth grade at Dudley Elementary until the last school year, was hired last summer to help junior high and upper-elementary students improve their reading skills.

Kennicutt said reading is involved in "everything we do."

"We use it in every area of curriculum," she said.

Comprehension is of utmost importance, she said, which can happen once students learn how to slow down their reading.

"Often, we want to read at a talking pace but we need fluency because that's when comprehension takes place," Kennicutt explained. "One of the program goals is to stress reading at a talking pace so it's controlled."

The Big Five of reading that Kennicutt stresses includes:

Phonemic awareness—The ability to focus on and manipulate sounds in spoken words.

Comprehension—The ability to get meaning from text.

Vocabulary—The ability to understand and use words.

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Fluency—Reading-connected text with speed, accuracy and expression.

Phonics—Matching sounds to letters to form words.

Although Kennicutt works primarily with grades seven through nine, she also monitors the reading progress of fourth graders and keeps in contact with the paraeducators who teach corrective reading to fourth, fifth and sixth graders.

“Everyone can learn how to read and be successful,” she said. “But sometimes we need to go back to basics.”

Kennicutt uses a corrective reading series for a 45-minute block of time (a class period) to help students.

She described the hiring of a reading specialist as a proactive approach to helping students.

Results from the beginning of the school year show the approach is working.

After the first nine weeks of school, Kennicutt said 76% of students in the program increased their fluency rate and 94% decreased their error count.

“Fewer errors equals better comprehension,” she noted.

Collectively, junior high students challenged by reading and tested in the summer showed a 76% fluency rate.

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After testing in mid October, student scores revealed fluency at 94%.

“This program is working and these kid are gaining confidence,” Kennicutt said. “They go to their other classes and feel good about their abilities.”

Asked if her reading ability had improved and Jada Wilson gave a resounding “yes.”

“I’ve slowed down my reading and have learned new words I didn’t know,” Wilson said. “I’m now saying words I didn’t know how to say.”

Kennicutt, who has a master’s degree in elementary education, received a reading specialist endorsement in 2009.

“I’ve always liked reading and chose to concentrate on an area that would help the school district,” she said.

Junior high principal and data coordinator Ryan Groene said the district hired a reading specialist to help students not reading at grade level.

Through data analysis, he said the district identified students that needed such help with reading.

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