

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2004

LOCAL NEWS

WWW.PHILLY.COM

## A sound beginning for successful readers

By **Connie Langland**  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Research that links listening to reading is spurring schools to find time in the kindergarten day to train young children in the sounds of standard American English.

While many children enter school with strong skills as listeners, many others have significant deficits, educators say. For reading success, a child's ear needs to catch each bit of sound, called a phoneme.

In the word *cat*, for instance, there are three phonemes — /k/ /a/ /t/. Coached by their teachers, students learn to notice the beginnings, middles and ends of words and how *cat* sounds both similar to and different from *pat*.

This is not phonics, but phonemic awareness, and the approach has long been taught by dyslexia experts and reading specialists.

But now educators — alarmed by stagnant showings on state reading tests — are giving over class time to phonemic-awareness training. School budgets are also being tapped for software programs and training systems that support instruction and remedial help in the spoken word.

*“We know that good readers get better when they get phonemic-awareness training”*

— LINDA LARRIVEE,  
WORCESTER STATE COLLEGE

“The emphasis in the younger years is new,” said Joanne Bobiak, a language therapist in the Upper Darby School District. “We now realize there’s a win-



©2004 Cognitive Concepts, Inc. All rights reserved.

dow, between the ages of 3 and 6, for children to acquire the ability to work with sounds.”

Federal studies indicate that 20 percent of all schoolchildren — 10 million among 50 million students nationwide — have some type of reading disability. And reading specialists say teaching phonemic awareness in kindergarten could reduce reading failure in fourth grade by nearly 50 percent.

Teaching young children about word sounds started in a few schools in the 1990s and now counts as “a paradigm shift that is rather late in coming,” said Linda Larrivee, a researcher in communication disorders and an associate professor at Worcester State College in Massachusetts.

“We know that good readers get better when they get phonemic-awareness training,” Larrivee said. “In the past,

educators have leaped at unproven programs that sound good. This one is so evidence-based, there is really no denying it.”

Phoneme instruction is a key component of Reading First, the federal initiative that has distributed more than \$900 million annually to the states to improve reading achievement since 2002. In Pennsylvania, the 35 districts that have won \$71.5 million in Reading First grants are required to track progress in students' phonemic skills.

“Being able to manipulate the sounds of English is critical to learning to read,” said Barbara Mintzer, a reading specialist in the Bordentown, N.J., Regional School District. “That’s why nursery rhymes should never go away. Those Mother Goose stories were made for alliteration and rhyme.”

In Karen Dunlap’s kindergarten class-

room at Hancock Elementary School in Norristown, the morning lessons in phonemic awareness begin with “Hickory Dickory Dock.”

The children repeat the rhyme, line by line.

“Clock. Dock,” Dunlap says slowly, enunciating clearly and drawing attention to how her mouth works as she says the words.

“Clock, dock — do they rhyme?” she asks.

There’s a chorus of “Yes! Yes!”

Another rhyme — “Little Bo Peep” — offers the students a chance to listen for lip-popper sounds — p’s in particular.

Then the class practices putting sounds together to make words.

“T,” says Dunlap, pushing the sound through her teeth, and the children respond.

*“Our kids leave kindergarten further along — higher up the ladder toward reading.”*

— KAREN DUNLAP,  
HANCOCK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

“Oo,” she says, pursing her lips. “T — oo — too.”

This is basic stuff, and the 5- and 6-year-olds catch on quickly. Later, they take turns at the classroom’s bank of computers, scoring points each time they pick the correct sound on the Earobics software program.

Norristown teachers expanded instruction in phonemic awareness when the district adopted full-day kindergarten two years ago, setting aside at least 30 minutes a day.

(Not that traditional reading instruction is neglected. The kindergartners also learn to link sounds to the letters of the alphabet, listen as their teacher reads storybooks, and even try journal writing.)

“Our kids leave kindergarten further along — higher up the ladder toward reading. Our first-grade teachers see a

difference,” Dunlap said.

The district aligned its instruction with findings of the congressional National Reading Panel, which concluded in 2000 that teaching students phonemic awareness significantly improves their chances of learning to read.

That conclusion has been buttressed by findings based on brain imaging published in the last two years. Images show that there is increased activity in regions of the brain associated with reading after children have phonemic-awareness training.

“Some kids come to school richly wired up with synapses in that part of the brain. They learned to distinguish phonemes at an early age,” said Earl Oremus, an expert on reading remediation and headmaster of the Marburn Academy, a school for children with learning disabilities in Columbus, Ohio.

For other children, early diagnostic testing and phonemic training are key, he said.

Reading experts have long backed preschool for all children and have urged parents to read to their children daily. Now parents are also told to engage their child with rhymes, rhyming sounds, tongue twisters, and other wordplay.

But many children arrive at kindergarten from homes where English is not the first language, where television or computer screens occupy the child’s time, or where the dialect, drawl, accent or patois of conversation vary dramatically.



©2004 Cognitive Concepts, Inc. All rights reserved.

For these children, confounded by sounds that do not match the written word, phonemic training can solve the mismatch and draw the student toward reading.

“It absolutely can change a child’s personality,” said Maryanne Hoskins, who oversees early-childhood instruction in Norristown schools.



©2004 Cognitive Concepts, Inc. All rights reserved.

Parents attest to the program’s success. Deborah Fritz said that her second-grade daughter, Nicole, races through books and reads three- and four-syllable words without apprehension. Meanwhile, her son, Charles, who started at Hancock before the new emphasis on phonemic awareness, struggles and gets remedial help.

“I thought she was just gifted. Then I found out the entire class is doing that well,” Fritz said. “They are paying attention over there.”

Contact staff writer Connie Langland at 610-313-8134 or clangland@phillynews.com.

Reprinted with permission from The Philadelphia Inquirer.

For more information about Earobics, call 888.328.8199 or visit our web site at [www.earobics.com](http://www.earobics.com)