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Garfield earns top award for reading program

Strategies show teaching fundamentals helps struggling readers

By **KATIE DREWS**
Editor

Students at Garfield School learn rabbit words, bandit words and "gotta know" words. Sticky sounds, blends and the "Buzz off Miss Pihl" rule. Though the monikers sound strange, this reading program works.

In fact, in recognition of its reading strategies, Garfield was recently named the winner of the "It Takes a Village of Readers Award" by the Illinois Branch of the International Dyslexia Association. The award is handed out annually to only one school in the state that provides an "exemplary program for children struggling with learning to read."

Along with a plaque, trophy and other prizes from the dyslexia association, another organization called CSC Learning awarded Garfield \$25,000 for the computer reading program, Lexia. Principal Jamie Stauder said Garfield has never received an award of this caliber in the 20 years that she has been there.

"It was very exciting," Stauder said. "We spend a lot of time on reading here. We are very honored that we are the recipients."

The reading program, called SLANT, was implemented at Garfield in 2005 and was later adopted district-wide. It focuses on phonemic awareness, breaking words down and differentiating the sounds that the letters make.

"It breaks reading down into such little pieces," Stauder said. "Children really need to learn that letters have sounds and blend together to create words, which then form sentences and ... together you get a story."

In years past, memorization was the main method that was taught to kids learning how to read. That approach not only made spelling more difficult, but it was also harder for students to truly understand how reading works.

With SLANT, on the other hand, "it makes more sense to them because there's a process," said Rose Bottorff, reading specialist at Garfield. "They understand what they are doing and how they are doing it."

Students have "SLANT time" for about an hour everyday. The children are broken into three tiers based on their reading levels and then separate into smaller instructional groups. Kindergarteners focus on identifying letters and making their sounds, while first graders learn how to blend the letters together for words. District 91 teachers have been certified to teach SLANT in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade.

Stauder also said they create a plan for each child based on his or her needs and decide how they are going to teach reading to that specific individual. Teachers and reading specialists then meet once a month to talk about how they are doing.

"We discuss every single child in that grade level, charting their progress to see what we can do to make them better readers," Stauder said.

Though the award was from IBIDA, based in Glen Ellyn, students at Garfield are not necessarily labeled "dyslexic." According to IBIDA's website, dyslexia is a learning disability that makes it difficult to read, write and spell. Affecting about 10 to 20 percent of the population, dyslexia is not rare, the website said.

Though SLANT was not created specifically for dyslexic children, IBIDA selected Garfield's program partially because of the way they can tailor their instruction to help both strong and struggling readers.

"The way our reading program is structured, it really lends itself to helping them find success whether they are dyslexic or not," Stauder said.



Sound it out: Rose Bottorff, reading specialist at Garfield School, teaches the reading program SLANT to second graders.
KATIE DREWS/Staff

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As this year's winners, representatives of Garfield will present the details of their reading program at the IBIDA conference next year.

"For teachers that meet the needs of our reading challenged students, it's not easy," said Sally Parsons, IBIDA executive director. "Learning to read is hard work."

Garfield Elementary, 543 Hannah Ave., enrolls approximately 185 students in early childhood through second grade with 10 classroom teachers.

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