

Popular reading program leaving kids behind

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GALVESTON — When Robert Slavin took a guided tour of Galveston Independent School District campuses earlier this year, it was with a dotting entourage of district administrators.

Slavin, a Johns Hopkins University researcher who has achieved superstar status in some education circles, was escorted to classrooms where students were taught reading using a method from a program he and wife, Nancy A. Madden, invented.

Slavin had good reason to visit the school district, which introduced the program in elementary schools in 1996. The district has spent \$12 million in federal funds in seven years for the program that promises to reach preschoolers and have students reading at appropriate levels by the third grade.

Yet, the district has a literacy problem, educators say. The very students Slavin's program was supposed to help may not be able to read and understand these words.

"Reading is a process, not a program," said the school district's superintendent, Lynn Hale, who was hired by the district last year. "I talked to a ninth grade teacher who was just devastated by the level at which her children were reading. It has just got to stop—children falling through the gaps."

In a city where more than 63 percent of the children are economically disadvantaged—a status experts say makes many young students far less exposed to resources and vocabulary than their more affluent classmates—educators had hoped they had found an early childhood elixir to the district's illiteracy problems. Expensive though it may be, Success For All came with extraordinary research results and enthusiastic endorsements few could ignore.

Seeing Firsthand

Used in nearly 1,500 U.S. schools, Success For All has been billed by its creators as "one of the greatest success stories of educational research and reform." Nine island elementary schools are using Success For All, paid for with Title I funds, federal money earmarked for educating disadvantaged students in high poverty areas. To hear some administrators talk during Slavin's visit was to believe the program was doing what everyone had hoped it would.

"The district is truly honored to have Dr. Slavin visit our schools and see firsthand the success of his program at GISD," then interim superintendent E.J. Garcia said in January.

Success For Some

But nearly 10 months after Slavin's visit, Hale has rolled up the red carpet. This year, the district has shaved about \$450,000 of the \$1.7 million it spends a year on Success For All. And Hale is giving teachers, some who greeted the new superintendent with concerns about the program, room to modify the carefully structured curriculum. She also is allowing schools to eliminate SFA facilitators, a move that surprises and concerns Slavin.

Slavin, armed with statistics, counters that SFA students with the greatest risk of academic failure perform better and at a faster pace than their counterparts in schools where the program isn't taught. Schools that don't follow SFA rules closely are probably not going to see results, Slavin said.

"Certainly, getting rid of facilitators is a bad idea," he said. "Some modification is fine. But there's a difference between modification and cutting key elements."

Hale agrees that Galveston schools have seen improvements in test scores. But some students are lagging behind their white peers.

"African-American students are behind; there's an achievement gap," Hale said.

'Mind-numbing'

From pre-kindergarten to first grade, the program emphasizes phonics. Second-through sixth-graders are taught comprehension and critical reading skills. Students in Success For All schools read 90 minutes a day. Second graders up to fifth graders use school-selected reading materials in a structured set of opportunities to read, discuss and write.

Every eight weeks, the schools test students, who then are grouped by reading levels. Those who fall behind get one-on-one tutoring. A "family support team," consisting of administrators, teachers and counselors, serves to increase parental involvement.

As the district re-evaluates its use of the program, SFA also is the subject of a page-turning fight between Slavin and rivals. Slavin has accused at least one of his critics of professional jealousy and staunchly defends SFA, pointing to research that says his reading method works. His critics say that much of the research supporting Success For All has been conducted by Slavin or people associated with him.

If everyone was wrong about Success For All, wrote rival Stanley Pogrow in the September 2000 edition of the monthly *Phi Delta Kappan*, then "we as a profession are guilty of mistakenly pushing a mind-numbing form of learning onto large numbers of low-income students."

Teacher Concerns

Pogrow, who competes with Slavin in the highly competitive industry of school reform, has a program of his own that vies for Title I funding. But he isn't the only critic. Some former Success For All teachers operate a Web site—www.alt-sfa.com—featuring discussions and forums about the program and alternatives to it. The site's logo is the red circle and slash, an international symbol for "no," across the letters SFA.

Even as Galveston teachers voiced concerns about the program, the district forged on with Success For All. In a June 2000 Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts report on the school district, teachers, in an anonymous forum, had some harsh things to say about the program.

"Title I money has been sucked into SFA," one teacher wrote.

"Political reality is that GISD can't afford to say SFA doesn't work," said another.

"GISD was told that no child could fail SFA," said one teacher.

Evidence of Improvement

To be fair, Slavin never promised the school district perfection, said Rick Tullis, the district's chief performance officer. When the program was launched here, Slavin told educators that only about 80 percent to 85 percent would grasp it, Tullis said.

"There is a cluster of kids not getting it and it's more kids than you care to think about," Tullis said.

Last year, only 66.8 percent of African-American third graders passed the reading portion of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test, one gauge of literacy for the district, compared with 89.8 percent of their white classmates.

Still, there's evidence of improvement. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, which third graders must pass before entering fourth grade, has replaced TAAS. Last year, students had three chances to pass the TAKS test, and about 95 percent of third graders did. While TAKS is a new test, old patterns have emerged in island schools. On the first chance to take TAKS reading last year, 82 percent of the African-American students passed third-grade reading, while 96 percent of the white students passed the test.

Impressive Credentials

The Success For All Foundation, a Baltimore-based nonprofit organization with nearly 500 employees and a \$50 million budget, offers up dazzling credentials and impressive recommendations.

The program has some friends in high places.

In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court urged its state's Department of Education to implement the program in 28 impoverished districts. While the state court said other school reforms would be permitted, Success For All was its preference.

The Obey-Porter Bill, a federal program that offers \$145 million in incentive grants for schools that undertake proven school reforms, specifically cited Success For All in the legislation, a move that pretty much secured federal dollars for the program.

The Results

No one argues that Texas Assessment of Academic Skills scores have not improved in the island school district. African-American students are scoring significantly higher on TAAS reading tests since Success For All was introduced here. In 1996, when the program was introduced, only 54.1 percent of all African-American students here were passing the reading portions of the TAAS test compared with 87.1 percent of white students. In 2002, that gap narrowed, with 83.5 percent of the district's African-American students passing the reading portion of the statewide test compared with 96.1 percent of their white peers.

Against The Ceiling

But what role Success For All is playing in rising TAAS scores is hard to tell, say educators. TAAS scores across Texas have been steadily improving through the years, even in schools where Success For All isn't taught.

"The same gains were realized by every other school with improvements across the state, and they weren't using SFA," Tullis said. "Do I think SFA helped? Yes. Was it a panacea? I think not."

Narrowing Gap

To look at TAAS scores in higher-grade levels, it would seem that the district's high school would have something to celebrate. The achievement gap between African-American students and their white classmates at Ball High School significantly narrows in the reading portion of the test.

In the 10th grade, 91.4 percent of African-Americans passed the reading portion of TAAS compared with 99.5 percent of white students. But how much does that narrowing gap have to do with SFA? Only seventh graders in the district have been exposed to SFA since its inception.

Bubble Trouble

The fact that low TAAS performers drop out of or fail ninth grade, leaving academically stronger students to take the 10th grade TAAS test, plays some part in improving scores, educators say. There is no TAAS test in ninth grade.

The island school district enrolls slightly more than 2,500 high school and alternative school students. Educators have long been concerned with what's been dubbed the ninth grade bubble, where a disproportionate number of students are stuck in the first year of high school.

Ninth grade, educators acknowledge, may be one of the toughest transitions for students and it's also where a large percentage of island and Texas students either fail, drop out or essentially are warehoused until they're 21, when they're no longer considered the school's or the state's problem.

In the 2001-2002 school year, there were 823 ninth graders, but only 681 eighth graders and 686 10th graders.

But the bubble effect doesn't explain why achievement gaps in reading are closing in lower grades. For instances, in eighth grade, 96.1 percent of African-American students passed the reading portion of

TAAS compared with 98.9 percent of their white classmates.

Yet, at the same time reading scores among African-American students were improving, so were their math scores, in fact even more so, and by greater percentage points, a phenomenon that can't be attributed to Slavin's program.

Hooked On Reform

Ruby Thomas, who retired from the district last year after 30 years of teaching, has seen a parade of school reform programs march into island schools. None stay long.

Before Success For All was taught in Galveston schools, Thomas, president of the island chapter of the Texas State Teachers Association, traveled to San Antonio and Pasadena, where Slavin's program was being taught. Thomas said she and other teachers were impressed with Success For All, but didn't know enough about its success rate.

Some teachers grumbled about the program when it began here, saying its highly structured lessons are stifling to teacher creativity, but that wasn't unusual at the start of a new program, Thomas said.

What Thomas has learned through the years, she said, is one size doesn't fit all when it comes to teaching students to read.

"No one program meets the needs of all students," she said.

Casting Ballots

Before Success For All is implemented, 80 percent of the school's staff must approve it in a secret-ballot vote. And many island teachers, especially the new ones who had no experience in reading instruction, embraced the program because it gave them a guide, Tullis said.

All along Slavin has said implementation of the program is key. Most of the money the district spends on Success For All doesn't go directly to the organization. Training and materials cost about \$70,000 the first year, and tapers off after that. The bulk of Title I funds are spent on personnel, tutors and facilitators who are employed full-time to train staff and provide instructional support among other responsibilities.

One District's Story

In 1999 the Miami-Dade County public school district, which had spent more than \$6.5 million annually on SFA, released results of its own evaluation of the program.

That district's independent analysis of the program found that Dade third-graders in Success For All who had been in the program since pre-kindergarten or kindergarten were scoring an average of 20 percentage points below the national median on the Stanford Achievement Test. Also, according to the analysis, second-graders in schools that use other reading programs scored higher than Success For All students on the reading portion of the same test.

Slavin countered that the district hadn't hired enough tutors to handle the number of students that needed them. Slavin said buy-in procedures had not been followed at the Miami-Dade schools and program implementation there was poor.

"The superintendent was so eager to get us in there, he didn't go through the usual buy-in process, which is the 80 percent vote," Slavin said.

The schools were some of the lowest performing in some of the most impoverished schools, Slavin said. The superintendent promised to make up for bending the rules by ensuring quality implementation but left before doing so, Slavin said.

Dade-County, which at one time used Success For All in 51 schools, now uses the program in about nine schools.

A Critic's View

Pogrow, a professor of education at the University of Arizona College of Education who specializes in school reforms, is one of Success For All's most vocal critics.

And Slavin has accused Pogrow of personally attacking him in the *Phi Delta Kappan*.

Pogrow relentlessly has questioned why a large percentage of all new federal grants are going to Success For All and its related activities. Since 1998, when Success For All left Johns Hopkins University and became an independent foundation, it has received \$30 million in federal grants, \$12 million of which went to the development of a new four-subject program for middle school students.

And the *Phi Delta Kappan* has published a lengthy and government-funded rebuttal from Slavin and his supporters.

Most of Success For All's budget is derived from fees from schools for training and materials, supplemented by grants and loans from charitable foundations and government agencies.

Slavin dismisses criticism of the federal funding it receives. The program, Slavin said, has evidence of a great deal of effectiveness. Because it's not-for-profit, the foundation has to have a way to raise money, he said.

HOTS Headed

Slavin said he stands by the body of research he and his associates have conducted.

On numerous occasions, Pogrow and other critics have questioned how independent some of the third-party evaluations of Success For All have been.

But Slavin said Pogrow and critics have ignored positive studies by researchers not at Johns Hopkins because they claimed that the researchers were friends of the program's developers.

Of 52 researchers who have written about SFA, five have said the program failed to consistently improve student achievement, and 47 have written primarily evaluations in which SFA has improved student achievement. Yet the critics, Slavin has said, have glorified the negative and ignored the positive.

Some researchers, Slavin has said, were colleagues of Success For All's developers before they began their research, but most were not. Even among those who were, SFA didn't want anyone to misrepresent data, he said.

Pogrow, who in the 1980s created the Higher Order Thinking Skills, or HOTS, a program that also competes for Title I funding, suffers from envy, Slavin said. Higher Order Thinking Skills, a computer-based program for at-risk students in grades fourth through seventh, is in 2,600 U.S. schools.

"His program was popular in the late 1980s," Slavin said. "For some reason, he decided that the advent of Success For All pushed him out of the limelight and he's dedicated the rest of his career to attacking Success For All."

Pogrow denies being jealous, asserting that as Success For All is increasingly favored, it restricts the choices schools have to help economically disadvantaged students.

Slavin also said that during his visit here, he told local administrators that there was nothing wrong with modifying the program to meet students' needs.

"In every indication I know about, it is making a difference in Galveston and in Texas," Slavin said.