



LEAF Program – Literacy Early and Forever

Overview, 2007

*From kindergarten through third grade children learn to read.
From third grade on they read to learn.*

BACKGROUND

Learning to read raises children's level of understanding in the classroom and encourages them to feel passionate about what they are learning. The primary grades are a critical window of opportunity for children to acquire fundamental reading skills and to develop a love for literacy. Despite the essential role reading plays in and out of the classroom, one in three children experiences difficulties learning to read. Students who have difficulty reading begin to see reading as a frustration and an impediment to learning, rather than a great joy and opportunity to explore new ideas and worlds. On the other hand, children who learn to read are likely to read more often, enhancing their knowledge of other subject areas.

Many schools do not have the resources or supports needed to help all children learn how to read and write at grade level by third grade. Urban schools have particularly significant problems with teacher shortages, large classes, aging facilities, and high numbers of low-income and immigrant families. The inner city Catholic schools within the Archdiocese of Boston reflect the demographics of their communities and are open to students of all races and religions.

HISTORY OF THE LEAF PROGRAM

Established in 1999 by an anonymous foundation, the Literacy Early and Forever (LEAF) program is a long-term investment strategy designed to support schools in teaching low-income and disadvantaged children to read and write successfully. It aims to develop among young children a lifelong love for literacy.

The idea grew out of the donor's strong interest in helping young children develop strong literacy skills, combined with his interest in supporting inner-city Catholic schools in Boston. Initially, this donor asked TPI to conduct some research into what types of literacy efforts were underway in Boston, and how philanthropic resources could make a difference. With TPI's help, the donor learned about two national early literacy models, Reading Recovery and the Literacy Collaborative, both of which involve intensive teacher training and professional development. The donor also identified a couple of elementary Catholic school principals with an interest in bringing the Literacy Collaborative model into their schools. These were some of the building blocks that led to the creation of the LEAF program.

In its first year, LEAF began as a pilot program established at St. Margaret and St. Kevin schools in Dorchester. Now in its 9th year, eight schools located in Dorchester, Roxbury, South Boston and Jamaica Plain are participating in the program. These schools – Cathedral Grammar, St. Mary, St. Kevin, St. Patrick, St. Ann, Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Perpetual Help and Gate of Heaven – are each at a different level of program implementation in the primary and intermediate grades.

Presently serving over four hundred K-2 students in Boston's inner-city Catholic schools, the program focuses on whole school learning, change and professional development. The goals of LEAF are to:

- enhance teachers' effectiveness in teaching early literacy
- improve students' fundamental literacy skills in early reading, writing and comprehension.

The guiding principle behind the LEAF program is the belief that all children can learn to read and write with great success, and should be given opportunities to reach their full potential. Schools in the LEAF program are identified based on the need for literacy improvement in the early elementary grades.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

To meet the needs of participating schools, the LEAF program combines several research-based strategies that enhance schools' instructional capacities and provide resources to implement effective approaches. The primary components of LEAF are Reading Recovery and the Literacy Collaborative – with training and support provided by Lesley University to enable schools in the New England region to implement these national models.

Reading Recovery and Literacy Collaborative

- **Reading Recovery** is a short-term, intensive intervention that targets the poorest performing 1st grade students and provides daily instruction to help them achieve grade level reading performance. The goal of Reading Recovery is to dramatically reduce the number of 1st grade students who have extreme difficulty learning to read and write and to reduce the cost of these learners to educational systems. As a supplement to classroom instruction, selected children receive daily, one-to-one, 30-minute lessons taught by a specially trained teacher for an average of 12 to 20 weeks. Research shows that that over 80% of students who participate in Reading Recovery learn to read at grade-level and are able to maintain their grade-level performance over time¹.
- **Literacy Collaborative** is a professional development model that helps teachers continuously improve their ability to teach literacy skills. The program targets whole school improvement and infuses a literacy focus in grades K-2 through an intensive, long-term, collaborative model based on professional development, program evaluation, research and joint learning. The Literacy Collaborative emphasizes instruction that engages children in meaningful experiences that range from a high level of teacher support to a high level of independence. As part of the Literacy Collaborative, K-2 teachers form a *Leadership Team*, which becomes responsible for building and implementing a school-wide plan for teaching early reading and writing. One of the teachers takes on the additional responsibility and training to become the *Literacy Coordinator* – the in-house resource on early literacy issues. The Literacy Coordinator's role is to support the teaching staff, understand the needs and challenges they face in the

¹ Reading Recovery Council of North America. <http://www.readingrecovery.org/sections/reading/basic.asp>

classroom, and provide guidance and resources to help other teachers in the school improve their instruction and implement the program in their classroom.

Other LEAF Program Elements

Reading Recovery and the Literacy Collaborative have been implemented in thousands of school systems across the US and internationally. At the beginning of the 2002-2003 school year there were 590 Literacy Collaborative Schools in 200 districts and 26 states². Despite the widespread implementation of these literacy models, the LEAF schools are the first Catholic schools in the nation to participate in them. The unique features of urban Catholic education present specific opportunities and challenges for implementing Reading Recovery and the Literacy Collaborative. To enhance and ensure the long-term positive impact of Reading Recovery and the Literacy Collaborative, the LEAF program offers schools a variety of additional resources:

- ***Expanded Opportunities for Professional Development***

The grant provides funds for teachers to attend literacy training and conferences, as well as funding for substitutes while these teachers are out of the classroom.

- ***Access to Additional Books and Materials***

Funding is provided to purchase the specific materials needed for a Literacy Collaborative classroom. The grant also provides ongoing funds for literacy-related supplies and books both in the classroom and school library.

- ***Creative Mini-Grant Program***

The purpose of the mini-grant program is to enhance opportunities for teachers, nurture students love for learning, and strengthen reading and writing skills. The mini-grant provides flexible pools of funds for teachers to design literacy projects for students. Past projects have included:

- A unit on Boston as an ocean city, introducing kindergarten students to sea life through illustrated picture books and a field trip to the Aquarium and a Boston Harbor Cruise.
- A visiting author/storyteller for kindergarten through fifth graders, linking literacy to history, culture, and the community.

² Literacy Collaborative: A Multiyear Analysis; 2003 Research Report <http://www.lcosu.org/files/2gatereschrprt2k3f.pdf>

- ***Program Evaluation***

In collaboration with Lesley University, a comprehensive evaluation of the LEAF program is underway. The evaluation will examine students' literacy skills over time (text reading, letter identification, writing, vocabulary, etc.), as well as school-wide change in literacy instruction.

LEAF is unique as a philanthropic and educational endeavor because of its long-range vision and its commitment to meeting the needs and opportunities presented in urban Catholic schools.

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