



By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

The new reading/language program instituted in grades kindergarten through six at Chase County Schools this fall is already reaping benefits. That's according to Elementary Principal Nathan Vitosh and Reading Coach Angie Dickey.

The program, purchased through National Institute for Direct Instruction (NIFDI), stresses reading and language in every subject in all grades. Students are monitored and tested weekly on what they've learned.

Several years ago, former Elementary Principal Mike Wentz suggested instituting a program to improve reading skills in the school. Last fall, staff began researching programs using guidelines suggested by the Nebraska Department of Education.

Staff and school board members narrowed the search for a program down to the Signature Series through NIFDI. Most traveled to Gering to view the program in action in the Gering Public Schools.

"The teachers wanted something cohesive in K-6," Dickey said, adding that the state was "pushing us to have a structured plan for the kids who are not successful" in reading.

Staff looked over test scores for the last 10 years and found that a good number of CCS students weren't reading at the levels required. In addition, state assessments showed CCS students were lower in math scores that used math story problems, indicating a lack of reading comprehension.

Reading Mastery is the end result of a search in the 1960s by Zig Engleman, who went against current teaching philosophies to develop his own program. It uses both reading and language at the student's level.

Last spring all students in K-6 were tested as to their reading levels. This fall, when the program began, the students were placed in their level with other students at the same level, even if they weren't in the same grade.

Dickey said kindergarten students remain in their own classrooms. Grades one through three are grouped as to their ability level, as are grades four through six.



"We don't go more than two grades above or below grade level," Dickey noted.

Some children who are way below their grade level do participate in a corrective reading program that takes their skills down to the appropriate level, but makes them more age-appropriate.

For instance, if a fifth grade student is reading at a second grade level, material is available to

help him read at a higher level, but isn't the simple reading material used by second graders.

Vitosh said all grades are teaching reading and language at the same time of day, so they're not missing out on any other subject.

A third grade teacher may be teaching reading to levels other than third grade during that time, based upon the needs of the kids, he pointed out.

"It's very structured and all teachers are on the same page," Dickey said.

There is a one and one-half hour reading block each morning, and a one and one-half language block in the afternoon. The rest of the time students are with their specialists or home room teachers.

Vitosh said that, surprisingly enough, when he was looking at the time teachers spent last year teaching reading, phonics, handwriting, etc., they weren't spending much more time than they are now in the new program. Those subjects were just sprinkled through the day, rather than concentrated like now.

Answering a question as to whether or not other subjects are being short-changed due to the time spent in other classrooms, Vitosh said, "We had to cut some time away from social studies and science. In the lower levels some of that is incorporated into the reading programs. Upper grade levels have more literature."

Dickey interjected, "But if they can't read they can't do science."

Vitosh added, "If we build reading skills in students they're going to get more out of the classroom in junior and senior high."

The program differs from teaching reading in the past in that the student isn't moved from, say, grade one to grade two. The student won't move to a higher reading level until he or she has mastered a lower level of teaching.

"We make sure the skills are developmentally appropriate, and we have ways to see if the skills are mastered," Dickey said. "If they haven't, we reteach the lesson."

Monitoring and testing tell if a level is mastered. Dickey called the program "data-driven," with no subjectivity.

This means that test scores determine if a student moves up or down a level to have success, she said, rather than a teacher deciding.

"We monitor every student every week on what they're doing or not doing or how they're doing it," she said. "Student performance is critical. We find out what the problems are so we can fix them."

If a student is new to the school district, she or he is tested for placement by Dickey to determine where in the program they should be. They are then closely watched for two to three weeks to see if they're in the right spot.

Dickey is employed half time as the Reading Coach for the program, and half time as a Title I teacher.

"I've seen a huge improvement already. Kids who weren't working now are," she said.

Vitosh noted, "I've had some parents come and thank me for students who were struggling" last year in reading. The kids didn't want to pick up a book all summer, but now do. "It's a big thing for me," he added.

The school district spent \$76,000 for the program materials, which include textbooks, workbooks and teacher manuals. As with traditional reading programs, the workbooks will have to be replaced every year.

In addition, the district paid about \$70,000 for the NIFDI program for the first year. That includes four days of teacher inservice, assistance with data collection, 24 on-site visits and a

conference call with NIFDI once a week.

Additional costs were incurred for gas and transportation of teachers and school board members to Gering for observation of the program.

Vitosh said some of the costs, about \$60,000 were covered by a Title I grant.

He said there are between 15 and 20 schools in Nebraska now using the NIFDI program, including Alliance, Norfolk, Hyannis and Loup City.

The program isn't a temporary fix, the two said. Both agreed that they plan to use Reading Mastery as long as students need it and as long as it works.

Vitosh added, "My prediction is that when the students get through the program we can add more subjects and time back in."

Both Dickey and Vitosh encourage parents to visit the school to observe the program in action, and to ask questions.

Vitosh said, "I want them to base their judgments (of the program) on what they see in school and the teachers, rather than gossip downtown."

Both are available for questions, or to set up a visitation. In addition, groups are invited to attend school to learn more about the program.