

Prevention is Worth Many a Cure

Patricia Cove, Teaching Principal, Perth-Andover Adventist School, Perth-Andover, NS

At a recent convention one of the discussion scenarios was as follows: "A student has received poor reading grades on his report card. The unhappy parents come to you, full of questions about his poor results and your teaching methods. What do you say to the parents?"

It takes tonnes of water to put that kind of fire out. Do your best to avoid that type of situation. Not only does it force you to defend yourself, but it also creates a barrier between you and the parents. They may feel that you don't care about their child, or that you are a poor teacher.

It is far better to be very pro-active. Spend enough time during the first weeks of school to determine where the child is academically. Set up a systematic plan to help the child to recover from any current slump and then begin advancing again. Don't be afraid to go to the parents right away. Get them involved in a daily effort to help the child regain confidence in his ability to read. You will be respected for your interest and concern.

It has usually been my experience that today's busy parents want their children to succeed but need some direction as to ways that they can help. It is my first job to create a formula for success, which will vary from child to child.

I generally set up a homework book for these children, with a simple parent signature or check off box. The starting point for the initial assignments should use basic vocabulary that is not excessively challenging to the children. When children review early readers over and over again, they will learn the sight vocabulary. It will feel good to the child to read material that he has been familiar with for some time. I keep a copy of the reader's vocabulary for use at school, and send a copy home in the homework book. Extra independent activities using the same vocabulary will be welcomed by the parents.

The homework book has: (1) a few pages of assigned reading, (2) weekly spelling words to study, and perhaps a few number facts or other math. I carefully determine what will improve skills without becoming a burden. On Fridays, I may assign a little more if that is the parental desire. That decision is made with the parents.

The school library contains a large number of the Hello Reader series. These small readers are colourful, have a graded vocabulary, and interesting topics which mesh into the curriculum easily. (I use the bonus coupons from our Scholastic book club to purchase new books as they become available).

Children in the early grades are required to choose a book from the school library on a regular basis. The book must be read to several others before it comes back to me for a final reading. The reading may be done to other willing students, to parents or to older siblings or care givers. I have a check-off list of the books to give to the children, with blanks behind each title to be checked each time the book is read. A simple book report form which includes the name of the book, the author's name, number of pages in the book, space to write down what the student liked about the book, the date, and a picture of something that the child liked about the book is also sent home with the children. The book reports may be kept in a

Duotang, a binder or even stapled together if there is no other option.

Another area which improves the student reading ability is through the use of journaling. I use a mixture of assigned topics and free choice ones. When the topics are assigned, I spend a few moments before journaling drawing ideas from all students as well as sharing some ideas with them.

I allow and encourage young students to get assistance with spelling from more knowledgeable students or from me if necessary. I feel that children should be encouraged to use correct spelling and grammar in their early writing. Notice, I said encouraged not forced. I still accept invented spelling. It is most important that the child gets his ideas down on the paper. I also try to take time to go through the entry with needy students and help them to correct errors.

A final way that children can become better readers and writers is to encourage them to create new stories and little books of their own. When I discovered that one of my grade twos was so desperate to get her ideas into a book that she was using scrap paper to create little books, I decided that it was time to purchase a Docubind, a few packages of spiral bindings, a package of colourful cover stock and some high quality copy paper to use as pages within the books. I cut some of the 8.5 /11 sheets in halves. Some students chose to make full size books but others chose to make the half size books (8.5 / 5.5 or other variation). Then the task was not as daunting. One excellent feature of this type of book binding is that if the child messes up a page it is easily replaced. Publishing has become an absorbing and exciting activity for my students.

The bottom line is that we must have an individual game plan that functions well for each student who needs one. Then we will have parents on our side, willing to support and help us to facilitate reading for all students.