

OLEAN TIMES HERALD

November 21, 2011

Focusing on the brain

School district working to help struggling readers succeed with new program

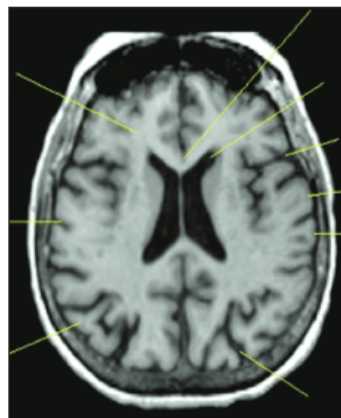
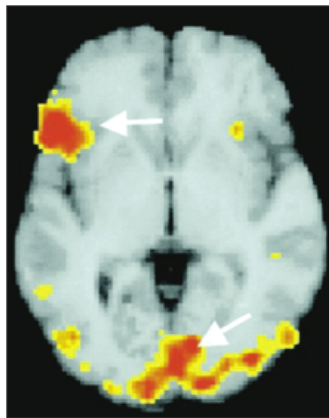
By Megan Sorokes
Olean Times Herald

OLEAN — Six steps from sound to text are helping struggling readers succeed in "Language!"

"Language! is a comprehensive literacy program that we started two years ago," said Katie Ralston, Olean Middle School language arts teacher, noting the program is based on over 25 years of research. "It's all brain-based, focused on the function of the brain."

Ms. Ralston explained, in the brain of a proficient reader, the right and left sides of the brain work together, which is not the case in the brain of a struggling reader.

"In the brain of a struggling reader, one side of the brain is doing all the work, so we have to restructure the path of communication," Ms. Ralston said. "We use cross-lateral activities that happen over 90 minutes to strengthen communication between brain hemispheres. It's training the brain to know what you need to do to comprehend. With strategic practice, you can retrain the brain, which is why the six steps are included



Images submitted
One is the brain of a proficient reader. The second is the brain of a struggling reader. In the brain of a proficient reader, the hemispheres work together while one side of the brain does the majority of the work in the brain of a struggling reader.

everyday."

The six steps begin with phonemic awareness and phonics, where students focus on sounds and symbols, and move

to word recognition and spelling; vocabulary and morphology; grammar; read-

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ing and listening comprehension; and speaking, listening and writing.

Marcie Richmond, director of special education in the Olean City School District, said the steps are repeated in every lesson, which is scheduled for 90 minutes each day. She and Ms. Ralston noted that some teachers do not have a full period, so the lesson may be continued over the course of two days.

"It's every day, either 45 or 90 minutes," Ms. Ralston said. "They're on task the entire time. There's no time for students to do anything off task. It moves so quickly. It's so interactive." She said the stories corresponding to the unit contain spelling words throughout, and the writing pieces use the same spelling rules because "concepts that are continuously brought up in small parts are more likely

to be retained."

"One of the challenges is the pacing of the program. Teachers move on understanding a student is not going to master the skills the first time they're introduced," Ms. Ralston said. "They realize, the first time (a concept) is taught, it's not guaranteed (students) will understand, but it keeps reoccurring in each lesson, providing for new generalization and application."

Ms. Richmond added, "It's the most effective teaching time I've seen. You don't teach, learn and it's done. It's a spiral curriculum. It's put into long-term memory rather than short term."

When the district first implemented Language! in its fourth through eighth grade classes, it focused on its 12:1:1 students.

"They're our academically challenged students who are more than two grade lev-

els behind," Ms. Richmond said. "In those classes, there are 12 students, one teacher and one aide." She and Ms. Ralston explained that placement in the program is based on assessments, which are "imbedded in the lessons."

"They're ongoing, so that's where (educators) determine where re-teaching and regrouping needs to happen," Ms. Ralston said.

This year, educators are excited because the high school implemented the program as a credit-bearing class. Ms. Richmond said the high school instructor is familiar with the curriculum and common core standards, so she can interject when needed to make sure students are still on track.

"The goal is that all students will take the English regents," Ms. Richmond said. "It gives (students) the opportunity to go for a higher level diploma, which holds

more weight following high school." She also said the district has a goal to "have all students with a disability reading on the same level by eighth grade, so by the time they reach high school, they are reading on-level."

To help attain this goal, the district also implemented a primary program called "Read Well." Ms. Richmond said the program "bridges reading gaps even earlier."

"The thought is, by the time (the students) hit fourth grade, we'll know who is two grade levels behind," she said. "Our hope is that they won't need Language! past middle school, that they'll be ready for the general education program. Read Well is an early intervention piece."

For students enrolled in Language!, grades are improving, and Ms. Richmond said educators are continually "building skills and bridging gaps." Neither she nor

Ms. Ralston are aware of any students falling behind as a result of the program.

"Since I've started, no student has gone backward," Ms. Ralston said. "The assessments show progress on all steps. One student made two and a half years of progress in one year. Each time I teach it, I think I'm more amazed."

While educators teaching Language! are not able to specifically teach to state assessment tests, they are able to provide the skills necessary to succeed on the exams and in other courses.

"We can give students the necessary skills to improve scores," Ms. Ralston said. "We can't teach to the test, but we can give them the skills they need to be successful. Hopefully, we'll continue to see bigger gains each year."

(Contact reporter Megan Sorokes at msorokes@oleantimesherald.com)