



# High school reading lab proves it's never too late to learn

by Melissa Gaskill



Nancy Booth

El Paso Independent School District teacher Nancy Booth remembers a student in the at-risk reading lab at Chapin High School who rarely made eye contact or cracked a smile in class. A reading testing placed the ninth grader at a fourth grade reading level. After two years in the high school's reading lab, however, the student was reading at college level. What's more, Booth says, he joined the school soccer team and became somewhat of a class favorite, regularly eliciting laughter from his classmates.

This is only one example of how literacy can change a life. El Paso ISD is committed to ensuring that all students are reading at or beyond their grade levels, and the Chapin High School at-risk reading lab is an important step in that direction.

The at-risk reading lab has been an integral part of Chapin High School since the campus opened in 2000. It was made possible through a Ninth Grade Success Initiative grant and compensatory funds from Title I and the state. Booth, a middle school gifted and talented teacher, was recruited to head the program.

Offering a reading lab at the secondary level isn't common, but El Paso ISD saw an acute need for one. Non-readers represent approximately 25 percent of Chapin's student population.

Identifying at-risk readers for the program proved a difficult task when it first began, Booth says. The district initially identified at-risk readers by TAKS scores, and then through feedback from reading teachers at feeder schools. Now, Chapin administers a timed reading test to all incoming freshmen during the first two days of school each year.

"TAKS is not timed, so kids who are successful on that may not be successful readers," Booth says. "Not all of life is open-ended. The SAT is timed; college tests are timed. Kids need to be able to do this."

All students identified as reading below a seventh grade level are put into the two-year reading lab. At the end of the first year, if a student has passed the TAKS and completed a software-based curriculum, they are finished with the program. In 2007, 75 percent of students in the program passed the test. After a year in the lab, those who test between a seventh and 10th grade level are placed in a fluency class for one semester to work with a fluency trainer to increase their reading speed.

"Fluency is a separate issue from competency," Booth points out. "Once the kids hit a certain level in My Reading Coach, they move on to fluency exercises, which force them to read faster."

My Reading Coach is the software program that Booth uses in the lab. She learned about it when a sales representative asked her if she would like to try the software in exchange for student performance data. The trade turned out to be fruitful for both parties. High-school-level reading curricula are rare, Booth says. Most educators assume that by ninth grade, students can read.

"[Obtaining the software] was actually fortunate, because we were just looking for things that worked," Booth says. "There is no way I can have a class of 28 kids and tailor a program for each one, and I don't know a teacher who can. But My Reading Coach can."

"It addresses reading in a different way, starting with basic words and progressing to complicated

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Superintendent Lorenzo Garcia



Lab monitor Barry Boetto checks the eyesight of an incoming freshman at Chapin High School. According to El Paso ISD officials, undiagnosed problems with vision are oftentimes at the root of a student's low performance in reading. (Photo courtesy of Leonel Monroy Jr.)

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ones in more than 60 lessons," she continues. "It has an audio portion and teaches phonics."

Booth admits that she and her team are learning as they go, but Superintendent Lorenzo Garcia says he is impressed with Chapin's program.

"The history of the program demonstrates a collaborative effort among administration, teachers and students. They have dedicated their time and energy to investigating creative ways to help and support students in the area of reading," he says. "The results, which indicate that 75 percent of reading lab students completed all software exercises and passed their TAKS assessment, are fantastic."

According to the high school, 120 students participated in the program's first year. This year there are 286 kids in the program.

### **How it works**

The reading lab is a 90-minute class. Students spend half of the period on the computer, and the other half with a text — a schedule that Booth says works well.

"We also spend a lot of time on etymology. Because many of the kids are Spanish speakers, they recognize Latin roots," she says. "For example, I put up the word 'malodorous.' It's a big word, but then I tell them, look at 'odor' and then 'mal.' They know both of those words. We show them that you can take big words, break them apart and figure out what they mean."

The lab also uses SAT-driven vocabulary. Students engage in interactive exercises, such as making flip charts of vocabulary words and reading high-interest novels together.

"The principal gives us the freedom to find literature I know my kids are going to love," Booth says. "Once you get to know your demographic group, you can gravitate toward things that will grab their attention and hold it."

Reading together builds relationships, which is very important with the at-risk population, Booth says.

"Conversations about what we are reading start relationships; if you just hand them something and say 'Read this and answer the questions at the end,' it isn't the same," she says. "We talk about what happens in the things they read, what it means to their generation. And we don't necessarily have to be reading novels to do this; it can be magazine or newspaper articles."

To further motivate students in the program, Booth invites former lab students to visit and share their experiences.

"They can say to the students, 'Hey, I don't worry anymore. Tests are not hard. Reading is not hard. And now I can play sports because my grades are better,'" she says.

Behind any successful program is a supportive administration, and that's definitely the case in El Paso ISD.

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"We have a school that is focused on reading; the principal has been incredibly supportive, as is the assistant principal of curriculum and instruction, who has to do all those schedule changes in a short amount of time," Booth says, explaining that when students are identified as at-risk readers, their class schedules need to be updated to accommodate time in the reading lab.

"Support from teachers is absolutely important too," she says. "Freshmen teachers bring their students down for testing, and every single teacher is grading along with me."

The freshman teachers get a bonus out of the effort: a report detailing the reading levels of all their students.

"If you have a student struggling in social studies and you now know he reads at a third grade level, you can work with him better," says Booth.

Chapin High School Principal Carla Gonzales credits Booth's creativity and hard work for the reading lab's success.

"She really works to combine the elements to create high interest in reading, through the software, vocabulary building, Scrabble tournaments and high-interest novels," Gonzales says.

"You just have to get them to bite and give it a try," Booth says. "Everything we do is done in class, together. We either read novels to them or they read out loud, but no one is ever forced to read."

Once students master reading, Gonzales says, everything else falls into place.

"It's my personal belief, having been a language arts teacher myself, that if students can read at or above their grade levels, they can do anything," says Gonzales. "Comprehension and skill are fundamental to success at any level. It's a no-brainer, as the kids say."

"It's a wonderful thing to see kids become readers; there is nothing like it in the world," Booth says. "Your at-risk reading population is just waiting to drop out. They haven't seen success; they don't think they can do it. If we can reach these kids and make school less difficult, they won't be getting out and they won't be discipline problems. It's all connected."

"We're so fortunate that Ms. Booth walked through our doors. She runs where angels fear to walk," Gonzales says.

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MELISSA GASKILL has contributed to *Texas Highways*, *San Antonio Express-News* and the *Austin American-Statesman*.



Teacher Hillary Vozza leads a session at Chapin High School's at-risk reading lab. (Photo courtesy of Leonel Monroy Jr.)