



Building school leaders: *Boosting student literacy*

School renews

Growing up in a family who loved to read, Dr. Patricia Reeves, professor of educational leadership, research and technology, recalls taking that ability to read for granted.



Reeves

Surely every child loved plucking a book from the book shelf and sitting down with it to become immersed in the power of words.

It was only when Reeves began tutoring children with learning disabilities and teaching elementary school that she began to understand the problem of illiteracy among children.



Shen

“No one loved the written and spoken word more than my mother,” says Reeves, a three-time WMU alumna. “She was always reading to my sister and me. I thought that’s how it was for all children, but when I taught in the classroom, I began to see what kids were missing.”

Through her career as a teacher and leader in education, her focus has become ever more concentrated on literacy. After serving as superintendent at Vicksburg (Michigan) Community Schools, where she undertook a successful literacy

program, Reeves came to WMU 14 years ago to work on literacy programs alongside Dr. Jianping Shen, the John E. Sandberg Professor of Education and the Gwen Frostic Endowed Chair.

And then it happened. “I call it stars aligning. Yes, the stars aligned around this project,” Reeves says.

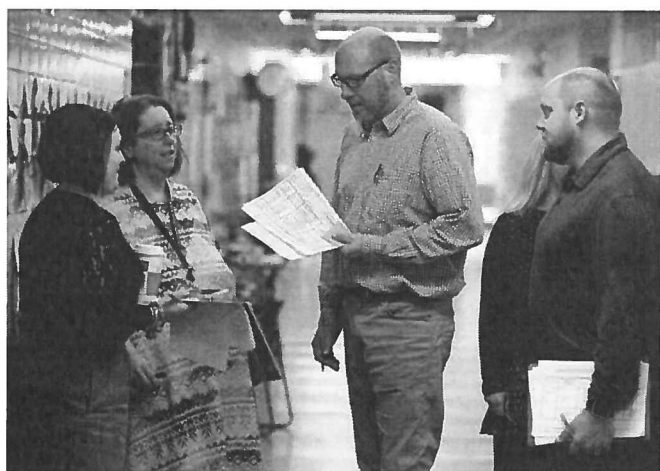
In October 2017, Reeves and Shen were awarded one of the single largest grants received at WMU. A \$12.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education funded the High-Impact Leadership—HIL—for School Renewal Project.

“The HIL Project was funded for three years and put in the queue for the next two,” Reeves says. “Which means we won’t have to reapply, depending on the results we achieve in these first years.”

The HIL Project goal is to develop strong school leadership for school renewal with a focus on literacy. The project supports the principals and teacher leaders—

high-achieving teachers who may become principals at some point—in 76 schools in 20 Michigan counties. Supported by 54 implementation facilitators and six field coordinators, the HIL Project is a collaborative effort with two Michigan state initiatives, Reading Now Network—RNN—and the General Education Leadership Network—GELN.

“Our team goes into these schools to work with school leadership and staff and develop a mission, or purpose, around literacy,” Reeves says. “We involve the



Debriefing: From left to right, Theresa King, a HIL Project facilitator; Kim Jankowski, second-grade teacher; Chad VanDyk, third-grade teacher; Justine Boniface, second-grade teacher; and Shaun Sportel, Galesburg-Augusta Primary School principal, discuss their observations of a third-grade classroom.



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To learn more about the HIL Project, visit hilwmu.org.

GOAL 1:
increased
literacy achievement
.....
for all children

76
SCHOOLS
in Michigan counties

STUDENTS
SERVED
29,000

WMU
Experts
15

whole school to generate excitement. We work toward a multi-layered understanding of what the school is currently doing and how to improve upon that, digging deep into school data, how the school is using its resources.”

They also aim to understand the students, the community around the school, staff capacity, and they assess where schools are in terms of literacy.

The 76 schools in the initial cohort will be compared to a second cohort of 76 schools as a control group. The second cohort will be eligible to participate in the HIL Project, with the extension of funding, after the initial years of the project.

Schools are in part chosen based on their literacy performance and how many students are using free or reduced lunches.

The project began with more than 350 volunteers statewide making

instructional rounds, each spending a full day in each school to develop an individualized assessment of the school and its “growth edges,” those areas where growth can and should happen. Literacy essentials, a tool developed by GELN, were used to identify areas on which to focus. The literacy essentials are a set of 10 research-supported coaching practices that help teachers meet the challenges in their classrooms that can lead to improved literacy.

“Our approach is one of integrity and fidelity,” Reeves says. “Integrity means the implementation of the essentials are those that best fit the schools based on our assessment. Fidelity means adhering to that essential research-based, sustainable-literacy model.”

Going for growth

Julie Scott is a principal at Sand Lake Elementary. Her school was chosen to participate in the HIL Project because state assessment scores were in a range



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—Julie Scott, principal



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—Shaun Sportel, principal

that signaled a need for help, and about 60 percent of her students receive free or reduced lunches.

“Right now, only about 30 to 40 percent of our student body rates as proficient on state assessment tests,” Scott says. “Our goal is to achieve 50 to 75 percent. Of course, 100 percent is a dream we would love to achieve. There are schools that have accomplished this—we fall into the average range—and we are studying best practices in those schools so that we, too, can become leaders.”

Scott learned that one of the growth edges for Sand Lake Elementary was parental involvement.

“Our students fall below national poverty lines, and they need basic resources,” she says. “We partner with area churches to get them meals on weekends. Apathy often comes with poverty. Communication strands between everyone can be challenging, too. When the HIL people did a walk-through to identify our areas for improvement, they saw that we have the books, but getting books into the hands of students is more difficult. We are also looking at the learning gap that happens in summer—we need parental help for that.”

The value of working with the HIL Project, Scott says, is to have an accountability partner to keep a busy principal on task to achieve goals.

“It’s easy to get distracted when you have a whack-the-mole school day,” Scott says. “HIL keeps us focused.”

Shaun Sportel, principal of the Galesburg-Augusta Primary School, learned about the HIL Project from his superintendent and was eager to get involved. The school, on the cusp of academic performance and low income, fit both categories required.

“When the implementation facilitators came through for an instructional round, they gave us three suggestions where we could improve,” Sportel says. “We put together a leadership team from our staff to work with a facilitator on a weekly basis, and we developed a staircase to success by looking at literacy essentials to see what we were missing.”

The school’s plan for improvement included designated time for students to read, an uninterrupted literacy block of time with consistent materials across classrooms and grades. No matter where the students moved throughout the school, they now find plenty of books awaiting them. Another growth edge identified was about engaging students by making small, purposeful reading groups that use phonics.

“We’ve been missing that joy of reading, and the HIL Project is helping us to restore that,” Sportel says. “You have to learn to read, then read to learn. Reading is the foundation for all learning.”

Sportel says what he values most about the HIL Project is that the team is developing his best teachers into literacy experts, giving the school a strong foundation to build literacy long after the program ends.

Theresa King is one of the implementation facilitators who provides support to school principals. She is a literacy consultant and coach from the Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency, or K-RESA. Every Wednesday, she visits Shaun Sportel at Galesburg-Augusta Primary School.

“I’m always thinking about sustainability,” King says. “This is a 3- to 5-year plan, but the school teams must continue after I’m gone. A powerful part of the HIL Project is that it builds leadership inside the schools that doesn’t apply to one person, but to many, so that no one burns out. We are going to change outcomes by focusing on teacher expertise and a system approach.”

Michigan is in crisis, King says, citing scores of 44.4 percent literacy among third-grade students, putting the state in 41st place in the nation.

“One of the ways we instill love of reading among children is to enhance the classroom environment,” King says. “The children are taking ownership of their own libraries, choosing their own books. And teachers are learning, too. Our walk-throughs are not ‘gotcha’ moments. If at first teachers are thinking about how students learn, they come to realize they need to learn, too.” ■

