

The Journal News

SERVING THE LOWER HUDSON VALLEY SINCE 1850



Photos by Carrucha L. Meuse/The Journal News
First-grade student Dajion Richards works on phonics by writing words at Grimes Elementary School in Mount Vernon. The Reading Reform Foundation of New York has been working with the school to help students become better readers.

Reading gains at Grimes

Mt. Vernon elementary integrates language arts through Spalding Method

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The Journal News

MOUNT VERNON — Students at the Grimes Elementary School are learning that reading and writing are a simple as seeing and talking.

The school is teaching first- through third-grade students to read and write through the Spalding Method, a total language arts approach that integrates speaking, spelling, writing, listening and reading comprehension.

Teachers at the school are trained by the Reading Reform Foundation of New York, which provides instruction on the method to teachers throughout New York City.

“Having the Reading Reform program in the school has made a significant difference,” said Principal Frances Lightsey. “This is an opportunity for teachers to become truly masterful at what they do.”

The nonprofit foundation was created in 1981 by teachers seeking better ways to teach students. Sandra Priest Rose, one of the co-founders and chairwoman of the group, said teachers supported through hands-on training and coaching are better equipped to teach their students.

The method relies heavily on phonograms — the written forms of sounds. This way, for example, students learn to write and read 70 symbols that represent 45 common English speech sounds. Spalding also has a writing component that teaches students sentence formation.

Other aspects of the method include reading instruction through literature and text structure. Students are encouraged to read materials at higher vocabulary levels.

“When you make English logical, kids love it,” Rose said. “This is the beginning of an intellectual approach for these children.”

The program is in 95 classrooms in New York City. Reading Reform staff go to schools at the invitation of the principal and visit throughout the year to provide coaching. This is in addition to summer training sessions on how to prepare lesson plans. During the school year, trainers meet with teachers twice a week and even teach in the classroom with them during the first few months.

At Grimes, the program is being taught in one first-grade class, two second-grade classes and one third-grade class. The program stops at the third grade. Grimes is the only school in Westchester County participating in the program.

The foundation charges schools 20 percent of its operating costs, roughly \$12,500, and works on fundraising to sup-



Left: Wilson Cain works on a sentence.



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plement the rest.

Ellen Elkamp, a second-grade teacher at Grimes, is undergoing her first year of training. To participate in the program, teachers must voluntarily do the training. “I already see how this program helps,” Elkamp said. “This method gives the students the tools they need to read.”

In the classroom, students repeat after their teachers while the educators display flash cards with letters, some in combinations. Teachers dictate sentences to the students, who dutifully write them down with no spelling errors and pin-straight penmanship.

Lightsey, Grimes’ principal, said proof of the program’s success can be seen in students’ reading levels. The school’s data show that children in the first-grade class are reading at a second- or third-grade level. One student is reading at a fourth-grade level. The other classes have similar results.

“It’s just wonderful,” Lightsey said.

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