

Our Success Story

How direct instruction can change the lives of juvenile delinquents

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In our basic English and basic mathematics classes at Ferris School for Boys, Delaware's male juvenile correction facility, students are using their "jail time" to become school successes instead of failures. In basic English classes, they are mastering a hierarchy of word decoding skills and are applying these skills to become effective, functioning readers. In basic mathematics classes, they are learning computational skills that will enable them to be independent. Using SRA's *Corrective Reading Program* and *Corrective Mathematics Program* in small homogeneously-grouped classes results in accelerated achievement, as measured through precision teaching methods and performance on mastery tests.

The students assigned to basic English and basic mathematics classes have reading and mathematics scores between second and fifth grade level as measured by the Wide Range Achievement Test. They are usually, but not always, identified as special education students, with either learning disabilities or serious emotional disturbance being the primary handicapping condition. They have hated school since third or fourth grade when classmates mastered a written symbol system that, for a variety of reasons, made no sense to them. Some have used disruptive behaviour to get them excluded from the educational setting. Others have hidden in the anonymity of the back row of over-populated classes.

In the basic English classes, as the first group of students progressed from Decoding B2 to Skills Applications, Decoding C, it became obvious that the reading level of the material increased quickly. Using the Fry Readability Scale, groups of lessons were evaluated and appropriate grade levels noted. Those numbers gave us confirmation of the rapid progress being made by most students. Discussions with the math teacher yielded reports of similar progress in math. At this point, we realized that we had a true success story. Two specific cases illustrate it well.

Mike, a 17-year-old, entered Ferris School for Boys in March of 1993, reading on a second grade level with few decoding skills and unable to read or write cursive writing. His math scores were also in the low elementary range. He was evaluated by the occupational therapist, and she and the classroom teachers planned a co-ordinated approach to remediate Mike's weaknesses while building on his strengths, greatest of

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which was his motivational drive. By the end of his six-month stay, Mike was reading at a fourth grade level, writing in cursive, and struggling daily with the morning newspaper. While he didn't show as much growth in math skills, he did master some basic computation skills. At last report, this young man was employed as an auto mechanic, something he dreamed of doing but feared that he lacked the basic literacy skills to attain.

Richard, one of Mike's classmates, has had even greater academic success. When Richard first came to Ferris School, he had almost no reading or math skills and very weak verbal skills. When given three nouns, he was unable to compose a sentence. At the close of the school year, Richard had attained an oral reading rate of 150 words per minute at a seventh grade reading level, a growth of five grade levels in one academic year, as measured on the Fry Readability Scale. His math progress was also impressive, showing achievement of two grade levels in one academic year. Currently, Richard is carrying a full academic load and is accumulating science credits through independent study. It is anticipated that he will receive his high school diploma in August of 1995.

The academic growth of Richard, Mike, and their classmates is only part of the success story. The emotional changes in these students surprised many staff members in the facility, including their classroom teachers. Initially, these boys had been negative in attitude and behaviour, frequently using evasive tactics to avoid attending classes. But as they experienced small success upon small success in their reading and math classes, their attitude towards learning began to change. As their self-confidence grew, the young men in this group accepted new challenges both academically and socially. Some were placed in regular English and mathematics classes. Some took on leadership roles on their housing tiers and within the school setting, earning the highest level of privileges given in the facility. Some returned to the community and are maintaining a crime-free life.

Did all this growth happen because they mastered basic reading and math skills in our classes? We, their classroom teachers, will never know the exact degree of our impact on these young lives. Yet the acquisition of these basic skills, gained from consistent instruction through an effective curriculum is an achievement that will remain with these students throughout life. Their sense of accomplishment, combined with their knowledge that they can now function in society, may be enough to convince them to choose to be law-abiding citizens.

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