

A little independence takes pupils a long way

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Fifth-grade teacher Jennifer Stairs singled out humiliated on a card of vocabulary words.

"Have you ever felt humiliated?" she asked the boy sitting next to her.

"Yes," said Harry Schuman, a student at Baltimore County's Chase Elementary. "My friend told somebody something that I didn't even do."

"It's a good thing or a bad thing?" Stairs pressed.

"Bad," Harry said.

Stairs nodded, taking notes as he spoke. Humiliated is one of the words the fifth-grader should recognize and understand at his reading level.

The conference was part of the **100 Book Challenge**, one of three programs the school system is using to incorporate independent reading - an essential component of balanced reading instruction - into elementary and middle schools and, ultimately, create self-motivated readers.

School officials say they've already seen the benefit of the **100 Book Challenge**, documenting improved reading skills among their students. The program, also used in schools in Baltimore City, Washington and Prince George's County, began as a pilot about five years ago and has since expanded to more than 20 schools.

This school year, the county has also launched what are called "**reading research labs**" in nearly 40 elementaries, as well as a Web reading pilot, TeenBiz3000, in 10 middle schools.

"They all offer the feeling of giving children an opportunity to read at their appropriate levels ... and then build on those levels," said Barbara Dezmon, assistant to the superintendent for equity and assurance. "Children bring so much motivation ... when they are allowed to select their reading materials."

Reading programs in general give children access to "a much larger supply of books than you'll find in most classrooms," said Richard L. Allington, professor of literacy studies at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. "Access to books is the first step to choice, and then to actually reading."

The county programs also help with early intervention among students, which "is key - absolutely key," said Sonja Karwacki, executive director of the district's department of special programs.

Reading independently for an hour each day throughout the school year - with proper instruction - can translate into a growth rate of about 2.5 years of improvement for **100 Book Challenge** participants, according to an evaluation based on the 2006-2007 school year.

Among the six pilot schools in the report, students on average saw eight months' growth over the course of 4 1/2 to six months. At Deer Park Elementary, six months yielded one year of improvement among students who receive free or reduced-price meals. Gifted and talented stu-

dents at several other elementaries, including Chase, posted more than a year's improvement in the same time.

The evaluation also noted a "significant increase in family and community involvement."

In the **100 Book Challenge**, teachers present a short lesson, then give their classes independent reading time with a specific objective. Instructors spend that time conferencing with students to monitor their needs and progress. Kids take reading home, keeping a log of the time they read with or are monitored by family members - a vital component, Karwacki said

Reading research labs involve nonfiction reading but also help develop writing skills, as students publish their research in books. The labs are being used in 37 Title I schools, which serve large numbers of poor children, and are connected to the social studies and science curricula, Karwacki said.

And with TeenBiz3000, middle-school students have access to thousands of articles - on a variety of subjects, such as this year's election and video gaming systems - tailored to the reading level of the individual, as are accompanying assignments.

"The wonderful thing about programs like this is you are involving the children in the decision-making," Dezmon said.

Self-motivated, voluntary reading is "the most powerful kind of reading that we have," Allington said.

To create young adults who will read "for their own survival and pleasure, we need to develop school programs that help young adults, one, at least find ... what kind of stuff they like to read - and then try to work with them as they're reading that material," said Allington, who advocates two to three hours of reading a day.

The use of reading programs is also linked in part to the federal No Child Left Behind Act, under which schools must back their practices with scientifically based research - something commercial programs provide, said Kathy Lauritzen, a curriculum specialist with the reading and language arts team of the Maryland State Department of Education.

"It needs to be part of everybody's program," Lauritzen said of independent reading, although "it does not replace instruction."

At Chase Elementary, which is in its third year of the **100 Book Challenge** and first for research labs, Harry Schuman said he enjoys selecting books that interest him.

"It feels good because we actually get to read and pick what we want to read about," said Har-



Chase Elementary's John Benjamin and Fatimah Swiney pursue their interests through reading. (Baltimore Sun photo by Elizabeth Malby / October 13, 2008)



ry, who has read about volcanos, insects and motorcycles. "It's fun because we get to learn about new stuff."

By reading at their own levels, Stairs said, her students don't get stuck on unfamiliar words, and are able to enjoy the activity.

Parents, too, can participate with the help of "coaching skills cards," sent along with the books their children bring home.

"Some of our children like them so well, they don't bring them back," Sharon Whitlock, principal of Chase Elementary, said of the books.

The **research labs** were introduced in a condensed format during the summer and started in Chase classrooms this fall. Three students have sold nonfiction books they wrote and illustrated to **American Reading Co.**, which provides both elementary programs.

Heather Insley, who taught **the summer labs**, said the project motivated students, including some who struggled with reading, and spurred them to further delve into their chosen topics.

Middle-school students have also begun receiving new reading material to match their individual levels, in the form of TeenBiz's online articles on current events and other issues.

"Part of the reason that students lose interest [in reading] is schools have the 'pat' texts, the 'pat' books," said John Foley, principal at Dundalk Middle. ■