

Turning Kids Into Readers

How The Elgin Foundation is Transforming Education in Tazewell County, VA

The signs scattered throughout Tazewell County, Virginia, read like 21st Century holy writ. Encouraging parents to read to their children at least 20 minutes or more every day, they are everywhere—schools, parking lots, retail stores, restaurants, and in libraries. Brenda Lawson, Superintendent of Tazewell County schools, says that her staff “has a mission to see that 100% of students read at grade level before 4th grade, when children begin to read to learn.”

Lawson knows school business from the ground up and inside out. She literally came up through the ranks working as a teaching aide, bus driver, and secretary. After finishing her Masters of Education in 1975, Lawson took additional postgraduate work at Virginia Tech and gained supervisory experience serving as principal of both Dudley Primary and Richlands High School. After completing a doctorate, Lawson became the first female superintendent of the Tazewell County schools—a position she has held for the last 10 years.

The critical time for children is between Kindergarten and 3rd grade. If they haven't grasped reading by the end of their third year, it's not a stretch to say that, as adults, they could be placing leaflets under windshield wipers for a living. Experts say a focus on reading in the early years is vitally important because progress in all other subjects, including math, depends on it.

International competitors like South Korea,



Finland, and China make early reading and math top education priorities, and the U.S. is struggling to keep up. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tested 470,000 15-year-olds in 34 countries. Results from the study ranked the United States 14th in reading, 17th in science, and a disappointing 25th in mathematics.

According to the official blog of the U.S. Department of Education, *Homeroom*, the U.S. hasn't seen additional improvement in reading since the year 2000. President Reagan saw the problem coming 30 years ago. “Our students are falling behind their international rivals,” he said. “. . . America's economy will suffer if schools don't step up their game.”

When the War on Poverty came to Southern Appalachia in the 60s, the poverty warriors believed that economic disadvantage was responsible for poor

May 21, 2014: Update on Tazewell County's Performance

By applying its newly developed “Cost of Reading Failure” [online calculator](#) to the Tazewell, VA's improved learning outcomes, the Education Consumers Foundation determined that the project will reduce the lifetime tax burden generated by dropouts and unprepared graduates by \$3.6 million per year. \$1.2 million of that reduction will be in state and local taxes. The improvements in 3rd grade reading cut dropouts, unprepared graduates, and tax burden per student virtually in half.

learning and a host of other social ills. Poverty had to be cured before school outcomes could be improved. Today, researchers can point to schools all over the U. S. that are taking the opposite approach; they are working to relieve poverty by improving education—the pathway to better jobs. Public schooling was founded on the idea that education is the road to success and improved reading is step one.

It's already working for one school in Tazewell County, Virginia. Educator Christina Welch has committed 27 years to education and currently serves as Elementary Reading and Title I Supervisor in Tazewell. Like many far southwest Virginia counties, she describes Tazewell as a high-poverty coal mining county. "It's mostly rural," she said. "About 60% of our children qualify for free and reduced lunch."

Enter the Elgin Foundation, a Knoxville, Tennessee, based non-profit whose mission is to serve the dental, medical, and educational needs of 10 Appalachian counties in Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia. Known originally as The B.R. Thompson Charitable Trust, it eventually became known as The Elgin Foundation, named for Mr. Thompson's birthplace in Elgin, Tennessee. The elder Thompson's son, B.R. Thompson, Jr. is now C.E.O. of the Elgin Foundation.

Thompson, a philanthropist, made his money in coal. But, unlike many others who've become affluent through the coal business, he was born in coal country and is putting his money to work helping "his people." Thompson's passion was fired by two personal experiences:

"Mr. Thompson didn't feel prepared to take an entrance exam for the Air Force during the Korean War," said Tim Rogers, Vice-President of The Elgin Foundation. "He was also 17-years-old before he ever saw a dentist."

Eligibility for Elgin's *Breaking the Cycle* grant

required Tazewell County to meet three criteria according to Lawson. "The grantee had to be in the coalfields, it had to meet certain economic conditions, and the children must need dental care. A primary concern was dental care. We screened 97% of the children and assisted in proper care. But treatment has been met with resistance," she said, with some dismay.

Also, it wasn't a walk in the park to convince teachers to get on board with The Elgin Foundation's Reading Initiative. At the time of the grant, Tazewell

County had no district-wide reading programs. Elgin's program was very systematic, research-based, and different from the approach used by most teachers. "It took training, a LOT of training, but the grant supplied four coaches and books," said Lawson. "No money was involved."

Although the coaches did all of the training, teachers had to implement the program's specific curriculum requirements, and the implementation of the reading initiative was the tough part. Everyone had to be trained – including the

teachers, the principal, and the school board members.

Lawson called the Elgin Project's training for school board members key to its success. "If a disgruntled schoolteacher wanted to bring up something before the School Board, it was important that they (the board members) be trained in the program, as well," she explained.

The reading curriculum included two programs: *Imagine It* and *Direct Instruction*. *Imagine It* is a widely-used comprehensive reading and writing program and includes a special focus on vocabulary building. Teachers instruct the whole class for an hour and then divide the students into work groups to read for another hour.

Children needing additional instruction are taught for an additional hour per day using the intensive *Direct Instruction (DI)* program. *DI* was created by Siegfried Engelmann nearly 50 years ago and is arguably



the most effective and highly researched reading instruction methodology ever developed. It requires teachers to follow a carefully developed script in which reading skills are learned in a step-by-step fashion. It has been demonstrated as effective with students ranging from disabled to gifted. “In a 10-year, federally funded project called ‘Follow Through’, *DI* was shown to be the clear winner,” said East Tennessee State University Professor J.E. Stone. Stone is also President of the Education Consumers Foundation (www.education-consumers.org).

Lawson estimates that nearly 90 percent of the children are now reading on grade level. And how did the children react to the reading program? First grade teacher Sheree Hurley, a veteran of 30 years, had this to say: “It’s rigorous, but the children like order and structure. It’s a team effort, and they think it’s fun.”

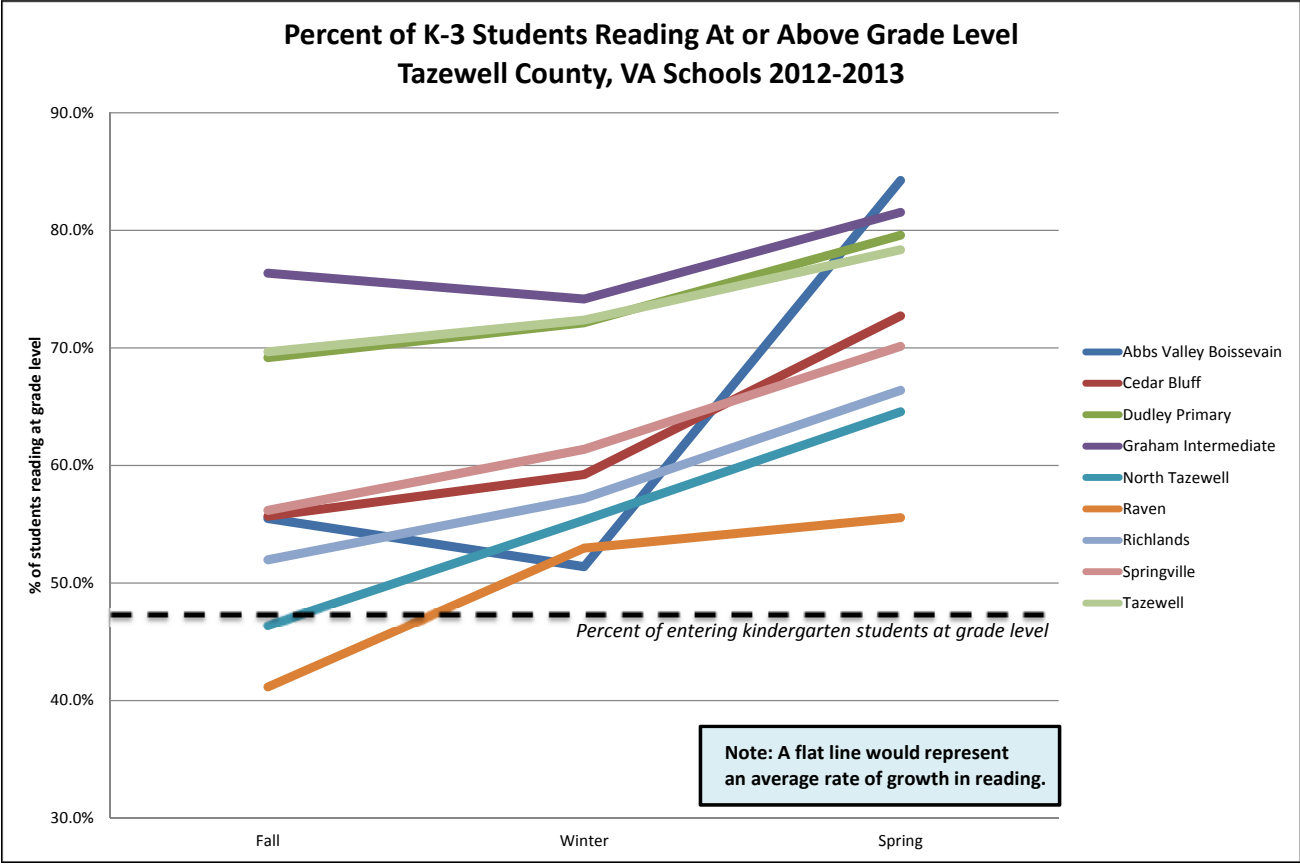
But it was not an easy task to teach a program that is highly structured and scripted. Maintaining “fidelity to the program” is the phrase often heard when teachers and supervisors discuss the Reading Initiative. Lawson said that she felt as if everyone stepped forward.” The teachers have been magnificent the way they received

this program and the efforts they extended to it,” she said. That dedication is paying off according to Welch. “Although we have met our 90% reading goal in some schools, we have not in all schools. However, we have made substantial gains towards the goal,” she said.

“The first year was totally foreign,” said Suzanne Grindstaff, current principal of Tazewell Elementary. “There were some learning spots [for the teachers] that were very difficult. But the coaches gave such outstanding personal support. We have real confidence this year,” she said, at the close of the program’s third year in operation.

Children who can read at grade level by grade 4 have a better chance of educational success than two-thirds of their peers. The real pay-off will be seen as they progress through school and graduate ready for college. Tazewell County’s graduation rate will in time become higher than other school districts in the region.

According to Welch, Tazewell County school children can read almost any word because they have now learned how to decode the printed page. “These students learn language determinants” (phonological awareness, knowledge of alphabet/letters, and other



pronunciation markers) “things three-fourths of the people in America don’t know,” she said.

Not only do the reading signs scattered throughout the area remind parents to read to their children, but, to also read with them—in their practice books. “In fact,” said Dr. Lawson, “parents have their own webpage that helps them keep up with their children’s progress.” It underscores the seriousness of the county’s reading program—which has now been christened the **Tazewell County Reading Initiative**.

“Whether through programs or school board policy, it sends a message to the community,” she said. “This is all about serving others, our children.”

According to the Elgin data, only 47% of Tazewell’s entering kindergarten students were at or above grade level in fall 2012. In spring of 2013, however, 73% of third graders reached that mark. Programs delivering average growth would have approximately the same percentages at their beginning and end (see the chart accompanying this article).

Principal Grindstaff indicated that the one weakness she saw in the first year of the program was student comprehension. “But they really begin gaining comprehension in the third year,” she explained.

Given their observations and test scores, teachers



and principals recognized that they needed to upgrade the fourth grade curriculum and lessons to build on the improved reading skills of the rising third graders. Said Dr. Lawson, “We purchased material for the fourth and fifth grade to bump up the rigor at the middle school and the high school level. Then we don’t have to focus on remediation.”

The change from teacher-made reading lessons to county-wide use of *Imagine It* and *Direct Instruction* was a real challenge, but one that produced exceptional results. Clearly, Tazewell County’s educators are pleased. Grindstaff seemed to speak for the entire school district when she said, smiling, “It’s all been so beneficial for our students. I can’t think of a negative thing to say.”

Written by Helen McCoy. All photographs provided courtesy of the Tazewell County (VA) School District.