



Ready, set, read

Marquette's speech-language pathologists
boost literacy for hundreds
of Wisconsin preschoolers

The odds were against 3-year-old Miguel. He was growing up poor, with few books at home and a limited grasp of English. Instead of participating in his preschool class, he stared at the ceiling or fell asleep. But then Miguel was enrolled in an intensive literacy program offered through Marquette. He received bilingual instruction that snuck

vocabulary and phonics into every part of his school day, from snack time to the playground. A year later he was speaking both Spanish and English — and he was excited about reading.

Learning to read can be especially challenging for children from poverty or non-English-speaking homes. Fortunately, the Wisconsin Reading Acquisition Program, developed by speech-language pathologists in Marquette's College of Health Sciences, offers a solution. A new \$4 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education is helping the program reach more students like Miguel than ever before.

WRAP is led by Drs. Maura Moyle and Brenda Gorman, assistant professors of speech pathology and audiology, and Sue Berman, clinical instructor of speech pathology and audiology. Of the 31 Early Reading First grants awarded in 2008 by the U.S. Department of Education, theirs is the only project headed by speech-language pathologists. "We've always known about the connection between language and literacy," says Moyle. "It just makes sense that speech-language pathologists, with their training, would be uniquely qualified to improve literacy."

The newly expanded program serves 300 at-risk, low-income 3- and 4-year-old children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds each year. The goal: to improve children's oral language, written language awareness, alphabet knowledge, verbal reasoning abilities, analytical thinking and English language skills.

The Marquette team reviewed other approaches and found that many existing programs boosted alphabet knowledge but failed to

improve vocabulary and phonological awareness. Their approach, which includes a research-based curriculum and focus on teacher training and parental outreach, has seen results in all three areas.

Children receive more than two hours of formal literacy-related instruction every day and two hours of informal instruction infused into day-to-day activities. For example, a class might reenact a book from storytime using props related to new vocabulary. For snack time, teachers might choose a snack that starts with the letter of the week, and tell the children that those whose names start with a particular sound can get up and play. Even on the playground, teachers reinforce vocabulary by making comments such as "You're jumping on the line" or "That's a long swing."

After working with Marquette on a smaller scale for three years, Day Care Services for Children, a Head Start agency in Milwaukee, had seen early results. Participating preschoolers scored in the highest category for all literacy benchmarks on Head Start's assessments. "It was so successful with those kids we thought, why don't we expand it to all Head Start kids?" says Mike Poma, the agency's executive director.

Nearly all of WRAP's students come from poverty, and research shows a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and literacy. The need often becomes apparent to Gorman after the first house call. "Families I work with wouldn't have a single book in the house," she says. And yet research also shows that children who succeed in kindergarten

have 1,000 hours of book experience. One well-documented study showed that children of professional families are exposed to 45 million words by age 3, compared to 15 million words for a child raised in poverty.

"Parents starting out at a lower economic level have more challenges," Poma says. "What this program does is it assures when the child is in childcare, they're getting the developmental stimuli that they need. It's helping parents get their children prepared for school while they work on getting the family financially secure."

The need is acutely felt in Wisconsin, where African-American children have the worst reading test scores in the nation and where there is the largest achievement gap between black and white children. WRAP targets a diverse group: 90 percent of participants are minorities,

roughly half speak English as a second language and nearly 10 percent have special needs.

"We have a very challenging group of kids, with multiple, multiple needs," Berman says. "But they come with multiple strengths, too, which we try to acknowledge."

Participating Head Start teachers receive 100-plus hours of training every year. "Teachers often don't know how to interact with English-language learners, so sometimes those kids don't get as much attention, even when they sometimes need it the most," Gorman says.

Strong first-language skills help enhance a child's success in a second language, so WRAP offers some materials in both English and Spanish. The program also uses tiered instruction, which means that

before struggling kids fail, they're identified and given extra support in small groups or one-on-one.

Parental outreach is also key. Teachers make quarterly home visits and work on a Family Development Plan to help parents and kids continue the learning at home. The program also offers monthly parent training sessions and incentives for parents who participate. Five Head Start sites include Family Literacy Centers, which feature a mini-library with books, computers and training videos. The grant also funds family-support workers who try to get parents more involved and who offer resources for parents to improve their own literacy.

"We wanted more parents to get involved," Gorman says. "If parents are using these practices in the home as well, that will be huge."



From left to right: Dr. Maura Moyle, Sue Berman and Dr. Brenda Gorman. The trio won a \$4 million Early Reading First grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the largest three-year grant in Marquette history, for the Wisconsin Reading Acquisition Program.

