

Fast Start

*Ladysmith Elementary School
Ladysmith, Wisconsin*

Ladysmith Elementary School did not reinvent the wheel when it decided to implement a program that involves parents in their children's early literacy experiences. Instead, Ladysmith leaders adopted and enhanced Fast Start, a commercial program published by Scholastic, Inc., which encourages families to participate in children's first steps on the road to reading.

Fast Start is research-based and grounded in the principles of effective fluency instruction. It is a set of poems and word-play activities that engages parents and children in word recognition and comprehension, and promotes fluency. Every week parents receive a set of activities on phonemic awareness, word families, decoding and sight vocabulary. The classroom teacher monitored the families' work on these activities, and the reading specialist produced Fast Start Family Reports to give parents regular feedback.

The school made Fast Start available to all first-graders and their families. Each Monday the classroom teacher sent home a poem, a series of activities relating to that poem and a log sheet. Families were asked to spend 10 minutes each night on the activities.

Ladysmith enhanced Scholastic's program by adding its own after-school component. Community members served as volunteers to assist students who needed extra reading support. These additional reading sessions took place twice a week after school, especially for students whose parents worked evening hours or were otherwise unable to be involved in the at-home portion of Fast Start. Current and retired classroom teachers volunteered to help with the after-school program.

Many school leaders and teachers contributed to planning and implementing Fast Start. The school's reading specialist proposed the program to first grade teachers,

who were instrumental in setting it up. All teachers received introductory information to share with parents, mid-year family letters, assessment of progress for parents and end-of-year surveys.

Teachers not only promoted the program at parent-teacher conferences and through newsletters, but also encouraged and supported participating families in the year-long process. The school's reading specialist monitored progress, provided incentives and made a variety of weekly lessons available for families.

The goal of the practice was to involve families in their children's literacy learning. It supported several school improvement goals, including promoting partnerships with parents and enhancing early literacy skills.

Implementing this program cost about \$1,000. Costs were covered by a 21st Century Grant and by the Ladysmith-Hawkins School District. In total, 60 students, 120 parents, 6 teachers and 5 community members participated in Fast Start during the 2006-07 school year.

"Family involvement in this program goes a long way toward helping the entire class become successful readers," said a first-grade teacher. Children enjoyed learning to read. That, in turn, helped them develop positive attitudes toward reading in general and about themselves as readers.

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