

What got this teacher on the front page of her local paper?

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Cracking the code

Jolly Phonics gives teachers and students help with reading

BY BILL HENRY
Sun Times staff

Barbara Misener grips an imaginary baseball bat and gives it her best roundhouse swing.

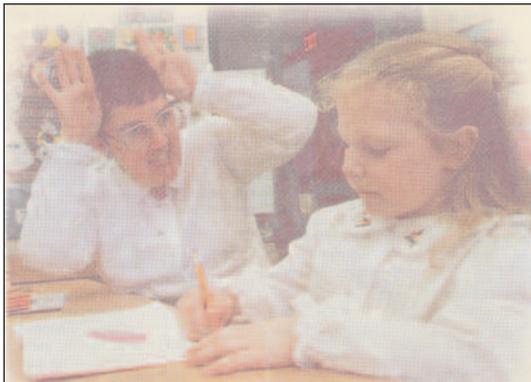
Her 16 eager junior and senior Kindergarten kids ignore their spinning, smiling teacher and quickly mark b's on desktop chalk tablets.

The children now recognize an action for each of 42 distinct sounds in the English language. Fingers crawling up a forearm, that's ants for the a sound. A winged airplane gives you n. A hand wiggled like a snake is s.

With these symbols, part of a new component to Bluewater's early literacy program, these children and others their age in Grey-Bruce are learning this year to read and write as much as a full year ahead of when Ontario educators have traditionally thought appropriate.

"You've got it," Misener encourages her class at Amabel-Sauble school as kids chalk "need," their third and toughest word this morning, along with "see" and "bee".

That almost everyone in class can do this as four and five year olds, while also reading or at least blending sounds to decipher words, till



Kindergarten teacher Barbara Misener uses body language to signal the "ee" sound, helping Cassandra Harris crack the code to reading and writing in her classroom at Amabel-Sauble school.

amazes their teacher, a speech, language and remedial teacher since 1969.

New to kindergarten a few years ago, Misener is now in her first full year using the Bluewater board's new Jolly Phonics, an early literacy phonics program introduced in every Bluewater English JK and Kindergarten class this year, with related training for teachers.

It's a fun program, with just one comprehensive teacher manual, said Misener, one of two Bluewater teachers leading the training sessions.

Jolly Phonics, which Misener and others stress is just part of the board's new approach to balanced literacy, gets "fantastic" results, she said. The children succeed at reading aloud without exception as soon as they crack the code of 42 sounds and learn some tricky words which ignore the rules.

"They're blending words right out of the gate, six days. And they go hysterical," Misener said.

"It's a kick start for your whole literacy program. As soon as they do the first six sounds S, A, T, I, P, N, they can take those letters and make all kinds of words.

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excitement and the effervescence you get at this level is incredible. Helping children at their most critical time and they are so keen,"

Phonics is also an ideal program which to build a parent-school link. A parent volunteer helps in Misener's room, and the work at home with their children is 15 minutes each evening.

Misener, her parent volunteer and high school co-op students work individually with children on letters and words, read aloud, working on a complimentary attention leaves the time so needed in their first year which Misener said are tant as developing liter-

ly, play, sociability, an old routine and some is through word play was as much as was rgarten. Children worked but weren't ing and writing in

an use that word. Misener, whose prompted her when cutbacks large specialists ears ago.

its saying that ping this real e also saying e rest of the ivate thing write and do

change be- in manual dren this said. T, I, P, N. So for ld to be ld new, ional, certainly in

Not yet five until the summer, Demetri is reading words now and looks forward to daily time with his parents, reading together, doing letters, playing with and homework. "He doesn't know it's with mom and dad," Williams said.

Misener's said that's the program's "gift".

It's fun, but also specific enough that parents who've been to the four group meetings during this school year, can easily participate to help their kids enjoy and learn.

Once the program and other aspects of balanced literacy in Bluewater are in place for a few years, Misener expects a huge reduction in the need for remedial reading work, since virtually every child is expected to read and write by the time they reach Grade 1, and she's already seen that's realistically possible.

Already Bluewater is shifting its training to focus next year on Grade 1 teachers, beginning with a session in June to let them know what to expect when this year's Kindergarten students reach them in September.

It means Grade 1 teachers will focus less on phonics and more on reading and writing, expects Bluewater elementary superintendent Mary Anne Alton.

"Jolly Phonics gets them reading more quickly, it gets them writing more quickly," she said. "We're seeing now that young children have the capacity to develop these skills earlier in their education than we might have thought before."

A renewed interest in phonics, however, is not new to the Bluewater board. Both the former Grey and former Bruce

boards, which amalgamated some 14 months ago, had been tackling early literacy issues and trying several new programs.

Jolly Phonics, recommended by Toronto literacy consultant Dale Willows, the board's view, she said. Willows has been working since 1997-98 with five pilot literacy projects in former Grey schools.

Willows quickly keyed on phonics as an area to emphasize, and rather than add more pilot projects, the board short-circuited the plan this year and jumped right to full introduction of the Jolly program at all schools. Alton said.

Misener, whose classroom has become a rural case study for English publisher Chris Jolly, who visited there last month, and others teaching Kindergarten in Bluewater agree completely; children succeed at reading using the program.

Jill Scott teaches at Derby school. She recently wrote the board about the program.

"I taught Kindergarten two years ago without Jolly Phonics. A few children learned to read. Some children learned recognizing letters and beginning to associate a sound with letter symbols."

This year, she wrote, all her junior and senior Kindergarten students recognize all 42 sounds and can read and write words. And they enjoy it, Misener said.

"See it's a complete game. Jolly Phonics is a game right from the get go. The whole thing. They're wild, they're crazy, eat it up, and they don't know they're learning. It's our little adult secret. That's the pleasure."



Sun Times photo by Bill Henry
Parent volunteer Susan Williams works with Jakob Pilz during Jolly Phonics class at Amabel-Sauble school.

Susan Williams, whose son Demetri is in junior kindergarten, volunteers a morning each week in Misener's class. She marvels at the children's progress.

"He's come a long way this year," Williams said. "It's fantastic. I didn't realize how much they could change in one year, and they're enjoying it."

A Jolly Phonics Case Study

How was this school's approach to early literacy changed forever?

Let Amabel Sauble School, tell you in their own words...

Discovering *Jolly Phonics*

by Barbara Misener, Kindergarten Teacher

In the Spring of 1997, a *Jolly Phonics Handbook* was made available in each school in the Bluewater board enabling a total phonics programme to be carried out with this one professional tool.

Over that summer, I reviewed the handbook and made a decision to begin the programme in my blended Junior/Senior Kindergarten in the fall. These children were 3, 4 and 5 years old. In actual fact, it was not until January of the next year that I actually began instruction exclusively using the

Jolly Phonics programme.

I have a background as an itinerant speech and language teacher and was immediately in agreement with the phonemic component of *Jolly Phonics* (i.e., teaching of all the 42 phonemes, including the digraphs). To teach just the sounds of the 26 letters in the alphabet never satisfied my need to give children all the information needed to crack the code for reading the English language.

From 1971 to 1995, I was engaged in various forms of remedial teaching. I found that the most debilitating learning

block confronting children in their later elementary education to be the lack of a strong foundation in reading. Enthusiasm and skill in reading is the basis of all learning. Lack of it erodes self confidence, which begins the vicious circle of failure and discouragement that many young learners face. The pleasure of reading is lost to them, seemingly forever.

During the six months from January to June of 1998, I followed the programme laid out in *The Phonics Handbook* and my approach to early literacy teaching changed forever! *Jolly Phonics* is, and will continue to be, my stepping off point to early literacy. I see it as a win,

win, win solution for a much larger majority of students, parents and teachers. Rather than see children falling through the foundational cracks and so often being sentenced to chronic remedial instruction, *Jolly Phonics* instruction equips children with the tools to become lifelong readers. All components of early literacy are sequentially covered by following the

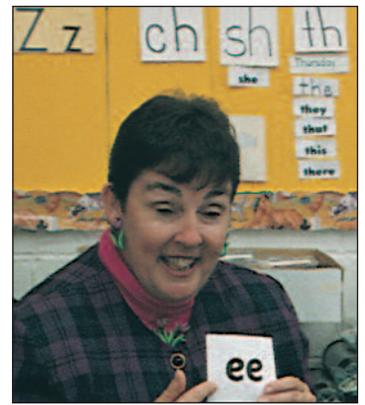
suggestions and extensions in *The Phonics Handbook*.

For example, by the third term, after having taught

all 42 sounds, I am very pleased with the letter sounds and group spelling work that the children can do. We have progressed through the *Jolly Phonics* word lists and have spelled 3 words a day as a group, including individually printing them on our chalk boards. The children are sounding and blending well as a result. Spelling errors are VERY interesting! It is amazing to see how they use their *Jolly Phonics* awareness to sound out. I find myself being proud and pleased with their errors! By using the Schonell Spelling Assessment, some of my children tested out of the 7 years old plus level of spelling skill (i.e., spelling 50+ words before being asked to stop). An amazing feat! During this assessment, I think one of the most interesting results was that there was very little noticeable difference in the assessment results of the Junior and the Senior Kindergarten children! Certainly a major

"I see it as a win, win, win solution"

"Jolly Phonics instruction equips children with the tools to become lifelong readers"



accolade for those who believe “the younger the better” when it comes to literacy development. I suspect the real “proof of the pudding” will be recognized in two to three years, when the solid foundation has had a chance to settle and mature.

Their comfort in personal writing will be a delight!

I have used a new “printing” language with the children as we worked on individual, mini-chalkboards. The language from the *Jolly Phonics* videos has allowed me to encourage the children to effectively learn the flow of printing to further enable them to write with speed and accuracy in Grade one and two. I have also been more focused on pencil grip.

In addition, I have found value in using parent volunteers to sequentially blend words daily with the children, using the words listed in the *Jolly Phonics Handbook*. By working one on one with each child, and

maintaining an ongoing information binder of their progress, any volunteer who comes in can carry on from where the children are without delay or regression. The parents

can make comments in the margin for the next time and that also encourages the children to succeed.

As the school year progressed, the children involved in this programme continually blossomed and progressed. My expectations have been surpassed. I also see many ways in which I will adapt and adjust my programme. The exciting potential of the programme is still to be tapped! The unique way in which a teacher “learns by doing” is one of the most exciting facets of the programme. You can constantly see new ways to approach the pieces to the code and make it easier and easier for all children to succeed.

Jolly Phonics is organized by beginning with the most used letters to create as many words as possible early on for blending. I do not wait to teach all the sounds before beginning

spelling. I slowly integrate children into the literacy programme as they show ability. I also introduced the “tricky words” adding two or three words per week. I track the progress of each child, as with the word blending and I assess and increase their quantity of words as they are able. Constant, daily exposure in a quick activity makes reading of these tricky words not so tricky! Suggestions in the videos for these tricky words certainly helped.

I look forward to continuing to learn and grow with my students through the use of *Jolly Phonics*. I strongly encourage you to allow all young learners to reap the benefits through its use.

“the younger the better”

“the children involved in this programme have continually blossomed and progressed”



The vowel forest tree in Barbara's

It is exhilarating to provide leadership in a project that truly makes a difference in the lives of children

by Mary Anne Alton, Superintendent, Bluewater District Schoolboard



TWO Bluewater teachers read an article in the FWTAO Newsletter showcasing the impact of the “Balanced Literacy Diet” on student performance. These teachers set up a visit to Beaumonde Heights in Etobicoke and shared their excitement upon their return. As part of a new superintendent orientation programme I was also able to visit Beaumonde Heights and through Margo Dixon, a teacher there, was able to make contact with Dr Dale Willows of OISE/UT.

Through a series of fortunate events, Dr Willows agreed to embark upon a literacy project in Bluewater. Based on written proposals, five schools were selected as project schools. Primary teams from each school engaged in staff development sessions with Dr Willows, completed extensive professional reading, attended weekly in-school literacy meetings and used District-provided literacy resources including *Jolly Phonics*.

The assessment completed at the end of year one of the project, demonstrated that the most significant student gains had occurred at the Kindergarten level. *Jolly Phonics* was seen as a key factor in improved student performance.

Jolly Phonics was purchased for every school in Bluewater and placed in Kindergarten classes for the 1998–1999 school year. Sue Lloyd, author of the *Jolly Phonics Handbook*, visited Bluewater in October 1998 when educators spent a Friday evening enhancing their understanding of *Jolly Phonics*. In March 1999, Chris Jolly of Jolly Learning visited Bluewater and shared the evolution of *Jolly Phonics* with

educators. Two Bluewater teachers provided after-school sessions to support the implementation of *Jolly Phonics*.

During the 1998–99 school year, Dr Willows provided literacy staff development sessions for all Kindergarten teachers. In June 1999, Grade one teachers were included in these sessions to prepare them to adjust their programmes to accommodate the higher stage of literacy development they could expect from their students.

Visiting Kindergarten classes in Bluewater borders on a spiritual experience! Teachers, principals and parents constantly express their elation at what they have observed Kindergarten children accomplishing. *Jolly Phonics* raises our literacy expectations of young children in a stimulating and child-friendly environment. As a superintendent, it is exhilarating to provide leadership in a project that truly makes a difference in the lives of children. I can provide additional information for interested educators through my e-mail at maryanne_alton@bwdsb.on.ca

An excellent foundation in English skills with *Jolly Phonics*

by Pam MacDermid, mother of three

AS the parents of three young children, we are amazed at the head start that the *Jolly Phonics* programme has given to our two youngest.

Our oldest son, Lane, is in Grade 4. He did not attend Junior Kindergarten, but did go to Kindergarten where the focus was mainly on socializing and following a daily routine. *Jolly Phonics* was not part of that programme and although Lane has done extremely well thus far, we believe that had he been exposed to *Jolly Phonics* he would have started reading at a much younger age than he did. He himself has made comments about how much his younger sister and brother have done in Kindergarten compared to what he did when he was their age.

Our second child, Leah, is in

Grade 1. She attended Junior Kindergarten and *Jolly Phonics* was introduced to her class in Senior Kindergarten. Once underway, we noticed how quickly she progressed learning sounds while associating them with unique actions. We think that these associations allowed her to

grasp how words sound

phonetically at a very early age.

She came out of Kindergarten

with an excellent

foundation in English skills which she continued to use for sounding out words and for spelling. Leah reads above her grade level right now and really loves reading books out loud and practicing spelling. We are very happy with her progress and what she has accomplished.

We have seen the benefits of *Jolly Phonics* at an even earlier age with our youngest son, Kurtis.

He is in Junior Kindergarten and has been exposed to *Jolly Phonics* since he began the school year. We noticed a real difference in Kurtis around November when he started to catch on to matching sounds to their actions. It was very exciting as parents to watch our four year old recognise letters and know their corresponding sounds. He loved the fact that he had "homework" too! Each night we would spend a few minutes reviewing what he had done at school that day and reading together. Since we had done this routine with Leah, she would sometimes help her brother if he was stuck. Kurtis is well ahead of the stages his siblings had reached at his age and already recognizes some simple words by sight. We believe that *Jolly Phonics* gives children a

fun and exciting way to learn some very important skills that will be the basis of their reading and writing in years to come.

The *Jolly Phonics* programme works so well at our school because of the hard work, dedication and enthusiasm of our Kindergarten teacher Barbara Misener. We have been extremely fortunate to have had her teach our two youngest in their Kindergarten years and believe that she is a big part of the success of the *Jolly Phonics* programme.



The excitement among our students as they use their phonemic awareness is contagious

by Lillian Cottrill, Principal of Amabel Sauble School, Bluewater

the richness of a balanced literacy program. As I came to realise that the focus of *Jolly Phonics* was on phonemic awareness, an area where many of our Primary and Junior students were struggling, I became interested in learning more about it.

It has been exciting to see the impact of this programme on our Kindergarten students as they master the forty two phonemic sounds and make the next steps from sounding out to blending to creating meaning with words. The excitement among our students as they use their phonemic awareness as a key to unlock the puzzle of reading is

contagious.

Of course, not every child has become a reader...yet. But the involvement in the *Jolly Phonics* programme and exposure to rich literature within the classroom has moved everyone well along the road

"What is particularly appealing is that Jolly Phonics involves all of the learning modalities"

to becoming a successful reader.

And the earlier this exposure begins the better. In the 1998/1999 school year our Kindergarten students received only six months of *Jolly Phonics* and we have seen a difference in their reading and writing levels at Grade one. This school year the

programme began in September 1999 and now many of our Senior and Junior Kindergarten students are reading quite comfortably. We have begun using *Jolly Phonics* with struggling readers at the late-primary and early-junior level and can see it making a difference for these students. What is particularly appealing is that it involves all of the learning modalities, for example, it is tactile and colourful. In addition, it is a straight forward, easy-to-follow programme for teachers and easy for parents to support at home for just a few minutes a night along with reading.

We are pleased with the *Jolly Phonics* programme and the difference it is making for our students.

MY first thought when I initially heard about the *Jolly Phonics* programme was skepticism, that it was just one more backward step to an overemphasis on phonics and teaching phonics in isolation. My fears were that we might be returning to the days of filling in phonics pages and abandoning