

Jolly Phonics

98% of these kindergartners
excelled in a DIBELS test.

Teachers at Valley School, Elgin, IA describe how
Jolly Phonics revolutionized their literacy teaching



A Case Study



By Angie Boehm,
Kindergarten Teacher

We want to show everyone just how good our students are

The teachers at Valley Elementary School, Elgin, Iowa realized they had to drastically change their method of literacy teaching when the majority of their students were failing in *DIBELS* tests. Angie Boehm talks about the introduction of *Jolly Phonics* and how it turned their students into confident readers.

When I first began teaching over ten years ago, our school didn't have a specific curriculum. It was assumed if you were a "good" teacher, you naturally knew what to teach, when to teach it, and how. Phonics was imbedded and not taught systematically. There was no real testing for our kindergartners besides our report cards and we created those to reflect our teaching. Of course we thought we were doing a great job. Unfortunately, after a number of years our Title One Reading population was quite high in our school and our students weren't scoring well on standardized tests. In the spring of 2003 we began using *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* or *DIBELS*. *DIBELS* is a set of standardized,

individually administered tests. They are good predictors of later reading achievement. After testing our students, the data showed that a large percentage of our students were not meeting benchmarks in specific pre-reading skills. From this data we knew we had to change our teaching methods.

Around this same time, I attended a dyslexia conference and watched a presentation on a program that focused around teaching the letter sounds rather than letter names. That was the first time I had begun to think of teaching reading in a different way. I had always taught letter names directly and assumed the children would naturally learn the associated

sounds. I was now realizing that the sounds needed to be directly taught. After the conference our Title One teacher began to research what programs were available. From the data and research we discovered *Jolly Phonics*. The idea of 42 key sounds made a lot of sense to us and sounded concrete. *Jolly Phonics* is a synthetic and explicit phonics program. This is the key. Synthetic means it focuses on letter sounds and teaching children to identify them in any position within a word. Not exclusively the initial position, which is typically the focus with letter of the week programs. My main issue with letter of the week programs was the fact that I could never find a program that seemed to have a solid rhyme or reason for the order that the letters were taught. The pacing was way too slow and the learning didn't seem long lasting. I always believed my students were capable of so much more, but could never quite figure out how to consistently get them there. One year I would really get into the writing and have great writers and one year maybe the focus was on read-alouds and I didn't do as extensive focus on the writing aspect. I know I can teach *Jolly Phonics* each year and know without doubt that every child in my classroom will be successful and will learn the same things.

The summer before we started *Jolly Phonics*, I read *The Phonics Handbook* at least twice. I soaked up the knowledge it presented to me. I worked with my kindergarten teaching partner to prepare notes for parents, sound books and writing books for our first day of school. On the first day of kindergarten we introduced the

's' sound. I read the story straight from the big book and sang the song with the corresponding action. The sound books were sent home to parents for review and we continued with a new sound each day. By the third day of school we sounded out our first word! How exciting! For the students that were ready to read, this fulfilled their desire to learn. For the students that were just beginning to explore reading, the actions helped solidify their learning of the sounds. Each day brought more and more excitement as we reviewed and added sounds to our classroom wall. We finished our 42 sounds by November. We were very pleased with

the students' progress. As we met with parents we soon found their excitement to be very high as well! Parents would share stories about how their children were constantly pointing out words in their environment. My favorite comments are from parents where their children are

continuously segmenting words like, "I want some m-i-l-k." It is so rewarding to hear and see such excitement for learning. Our true test would come as *DIBELS* was administered in January. We were flabbergasted when our students met end of year benchmarks at mid-year! What a change from the previous year! The *DIBELS* administrator commented on how solid the students' knowledge of the letter sounds was. This is the result of *Jolly Phonics*. It is different from the most other phonics programs as it introduces the sounds at a quick pace so the students are able to use that knowledge. It also introduces blending right away. Our main

We were flabbergasted when our students met end of year benchmarks at mid-year! What a change from the previous year!

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)

The spring test at the kindergarten level has three components, each with benchmarks provided to show students' progress:

Letter Naming Test

Consists of the student naming as many letters as they can in one minute. The letters are arranged in random order and a mix of upper and lower case letters.

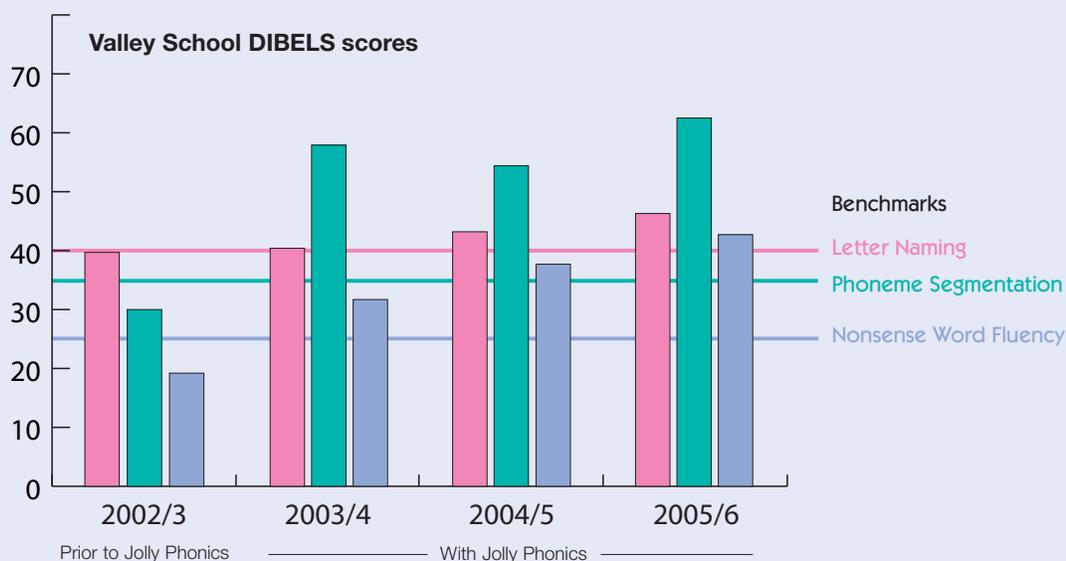
Phoneme Segmentation Test

Measures the student's ability to segment three- and four-phoneme words into their individual phonemes fluently. This test is oral.

Nonsense Word Fluency Test

Tests the letter-sound correspondence and ability to blend letters into words in which letters represent their most common sounds.

(Dynamic Measurement Group, Inc. 2002)



Students are ranked into three levels of achievement in each category: at risk, some risk, low risk. Letter Naming continues to be our weakest area, however, *DIBELS* information states,

"letter naming does not correspond with the big idea of early literacy skills and does not appear essential to achieve reading outcomes." (Dynamic Measurement Group, Inc. 2002)

Number of Valley students scoring At Risk

(02/03 is prior to *Jolly Phonics*)

| | 02/03 | 03/04 | 04/05 | 05/06 |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Letter Naming | 7 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Phoneme Segmentation | 5 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Nonsense Word Fluency | 15 | 4 | 3 | 0 |

Percentage of Valley students reaching benchmark

(02/03 is prior to *Jolly Phonics*)

| | 02/03 | 03/04 | 04/05 | 05/06 |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Letter Naming | 41% | 45% | 64% | 56% |
| Phoneme Segmentation | 54% | 100% | 94% | 98% |
| Nonsense Word Fluency | 30% | 67% | 76% | 81% |



Jolly Phonics has brought excitement and enthusiasm to our kindergarten classrooms and our entire school.

Another aspect of our curriculum that has changed with *Jolly Phonics* is our handwriting. Our school has seen a myriad of writing programs through the years. We have gone from no lines, believing it wasn't developmentally appropriate at that age, to *Hand Writing Without Tears*, where there was just the base line. I feel *Jolly Phonics* is a step more formal using all three lines from the start and it focuses on neat and correct formation of letters. We feel it starts good habits right from the start and our students seem to have no trouble adjusting to the more formal handwriting and actually we think it has improved their overall writing. For the digraphs, *Jolly Phonics* has the children connect the letters to help them remember that they make one sound. This is kind of exciting for our children, as they feel pretty important using cursive writing. We focus on the idea that two letters make the one sound.

As we ended our first year of *Jolly Phonics*,

our Title One teacher did the yearly running records before our children moved on to first grade. She was absolutely amazed at the reading ability of these children! It was the first year she had seen kindergarten children actually reading the stories, not relying on picture clues or merely guessing. The children had the tools to read and it showed. Our running record averages have steadily increased as we continue to implement *Jolly Phonics*. Our average reading level for our kindergarteners at the end of the year is around a middle of first grade level.

Jolly Phonics has brought excitement and enthusiasm to our kindergarten classrooms and our entire school. Our Title One and Special Education programs utilize *Jolly Phonics* for their students with great success. The parents of our students have become our greatest cheerleaders. They can see what their children are capable of doing thanks to *Jolly Phonics*.

goal is for our students to fluently blend letter sounds so they can figure out unknown words. We work on doing this at a quick pace so reading is easier and they don't forget the sounds by the time they have sounded the entire word. Our favorite part of practicing blending is saying the words slowly so they may hear every sound within a word. Some children need extra practice with this skill. One technique is to say the first sound a bit louder. The word cards with the dots under each sound are a great tool to help the children visualize the letters and their associated sound. Another activity is miming the letters in a word. This gives all children a chance to process what sound is associated with that particular action and they are able to blend the word in their head. Our goal is to sound the word in their head and just say the word out loud. This miming gives each child a bit more "think" time. Word boxes are also good practice for blending. I have sent these home as lists on strips of paper copied from *The Phonics Handbook*. These again start with simple, regular words and work toward longer and irregular ones. The *Read and See* books are a definite must have! They are excellent practice in sounding words and make it fun at home. I wait to introduce beginning readers until after the first quarter and usually closer to Christmas time when we have a good start on tricky words and are a bit more confident in our blending skills.





By Veronica Prouty,
Kindergarten Teacher

When Angie Boehm first approached me with *Jolly Phonics*, I was beginning my first year as her kindergarten teaching partner. I found it not only new, but also refreshing. Many of my experiences had been with whole language and letter of the week programs. With those programs I felt I was not giving my students the tools to succeed in reading. *Jolly Phonics* incorporates multiple intelligences such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. The action associated with each sound is of high interest to students. The story makes even more connections between sounds and words. The writing extends the idea of letter/symbol association. Putting all these elements together seemed to be a natural progression for each student. *Jolly Phonics* is the toolbox for the foundation of my students' learning.

Upon the start of teaching *Jolly Phonics*, I felt overwhelmed, but in a positive sense. While teaching a new sound each day, my students kept me fueled with their enthusiasm, confidence and thirst for more knowledge. This base knowledge that I had taught them carried over into their reading as well as their writing. In years past I was overjoyed to have a student or two who would leave kindergarten writing four and five letter words. The majority of my students now leave writing sentences and even stories. What a celebration to have as a teacher!

Angie and *Jolly Phonics* have allowed me to share something different with children, parents, staff members, and other educators from various school districts. Our children have proven that they are ready

and willing to meet high expectations if given the opportunity. Parents have shared their amazement and gratitude for allowing their child to be a success.

With *Jolly Phonics*, the results speak for themselves. Whether you examine student performance, verbal and written feedback, or test scores, you will come to the same conclusion I did three years ago. *Jolly Phonics* is the path to take in your own classroom.



By Amanda Smith,
K-5 Resource Teacher

Using *Jolly Phonics* has been one of the most positive teaching experiences I have ever had. My special needs classroom is a place of learning and success instead of somewhere children that have failed are placed. I teach skills that children are not able to grasp through regular education instruction. Every year it is a challenge to find programs, materials and methods that will help each child that is struggling. Since the implementation of *Jolly Phonics*, my job has been easy.

Songs and dictation, actions representing

each sound and colorful books, posters and flashcards are just a few ways that *Jolly Phonics* facilitates learning no matter what each child's strength is. Working as a team with classroom teachers, I have been able to support classroom learning and build on what my students already know with a great deal of success.

Students are taught the 42 sounds, they also learn rules. I have kindergarten and first grade students that will challenge me on the spelling of a word because "that's not the way it sounds!" It is also amazing how my students learn the names of letters incidentally during this process. Instead of teaching letter names to begin with, we are teaching the meaning of the letters.

As children move to first and second grade, *Jolly Grammar* continues to reinforce the sounds taught in *Jolly Phonics*. This portion of the program also teaches spelling, vocabulary, comprehension along with introducing the basics of grammar. With this component as an extension of the phonics program, children are not only able to read better, but they have stronger writing skills.

The most significant difference that I see with my students is their willingness to take risks. My students are able to write words because they know how to write the sounds in words. This has given them an incredible base from which to begin spelling correctly. As students get older, they are taught rules and exceptions based on the 42 sounds they began with. These tools have given my students the skills and confidence they need to read and write!



By Wendy Larson,
Parent

It's so exciting to see the fun *Jolly Phonics* has brought into our home. Our oldest son, Noah, did not have *Jolly Phonics* when he was in kindergarten, but our youngest son, Colby, did. Colby came home so early in the school year being able to read to me. He was always so proud of what he was accomplishing. He loved sharing the actions, sounds and little stories that went with each letter. Mrs Boehm really captured the kids' enthusiasm with the *Jolly Phonics* program. They were learning without even realizing it. Each day was fun.

Colby was so proud the day he beat Noah in a spelling contest. Colby came home from school and said he could spell auditorium. That seemed like such a big word for a first grader, but he spelled out the letters, not missing a beat. He asked Noah if he could spell it. Noah sat down with a piece of paper, but spelled it incorrectly. He did not have the confidence to sound out the word. Colby could see a word and know automatically what sounds to put together. Noah is also a good speller, but requires more study time and really has to memorize words. I remember sitting at the kitchen counter with Colby and my niece, who was also in kindergarten. Her school did not have *Jolly Phonics*. I made

up some flash cards and asked them both to read me the words. My niece could recognize and name each individual letter, but she struggled putting the sounds together to form a word. Colby was able to sound out each word and read them to me very fluently. I always thought it was strange how he learned the sound that the letter made before he learned the actual name of the letters, but it's amazing how those sounds have stuck with him.

To see the excitement and pride on Colby's face is really neat. *Jolly Phonics* has had such an impact. He entered first grade with such confidence in reading and spelling. Reading is homework for Noah, but entertainment for Colby. Thank you *Jolly Phonics* for making everyday learning fun.



By Kathy Koether,
Principal

Jolly Phonics makes a difference! As a former third grade teacher, when the new school year began, I was really excited to discover the reading levels of the third grade students and their interests in literature. Rarely were all students reading at the same level and many were not reading grade level materials.

Currently, as an elementary principal, I hear about how well students can read in kindergarten and in first grade. Our reading scores are more homogeneous and most students are reading at or above grade level. During discussions about whom should be placed in Title One classrooms, it is obvious that those students selected are placed for support to maintain their reading levels, not to remediate their reading. How wonderful it is for grade level teachers to plan instruction for students who are reading at grade level or beyond!

When I observed the new kindergarten students this year, learning with *Jolly Phonics*, each student was delighted to demonstrate sounds they had learned and the action that accompanied it. Their enthusiasm resonated throughout the rooms. Later, I had the opportunity to read with the same kindergarten students, who were confident, successful and risk takers about sounding out new words and reading!

A principal from another school in the area mentioned that a staff member had come to the office to boast about the class knowing all of the letters of the alphabet. It was March. But the principal knew that the students at Valley, however, would be reading books by this time in the year! On another occasion, I witnessed a student who was working with a teacher and was stuck on a letter sound. The teacher then proceeded to make the action from the *Jolly Phonics* program and the student instantly made the sound connection and pronounced the word!

This is Valley's third year of participation in the *Jolly Phonics* program. We have gathered a significant amount of data to show that the program has been effective. The students show considerable progress and continue to be significantly ahead of students who have not participated in *Jolly Phonics*.

It seems simple to teach young children to read by teaching sounds and then by teaching them to sound out and blend the word from the very beginning. It is simply wonderful to watch children place those sounds together to make one-syllable words and begin to read books! It is simply rewarding to watch students become independent readers and writers and to be so enthusiastic and energized by reading. The quote from Hodding Carter comes to mind, "There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other wings." Valley students have the opportunity for both.