

Reading Recovery: An Agent of Change and Growth

Frances Whitson, Teacher Leader, Dumas Independent School District, Dumas, Texas

If you travel through the northern Texas Panhandle and the town of Dumas, you will be welcomed by sweeping fields of wheat, beautiful rolling ranch lands, and feed yards producing thousands of head of cattle. On your travels you will be greeted by friendly, caring, hard-working, “salt-of-the-earth” folks who believe in their families, their community, their state, and their nation.

A common occurrence in the Panhandle is wind—sometimes a welcome relief from the hot temperatures—but generally a constant companion. Windmills and wind turbines dot the Texas horizon adding an alternative energy source to gas and oil fields in the area. In the 1970s, strong winds of change were blowing

as Swift and Company built a meat-packing plant near Dumas, bringing new jobs and new workers to our community. This meant changes to our schools that have continued to the present.

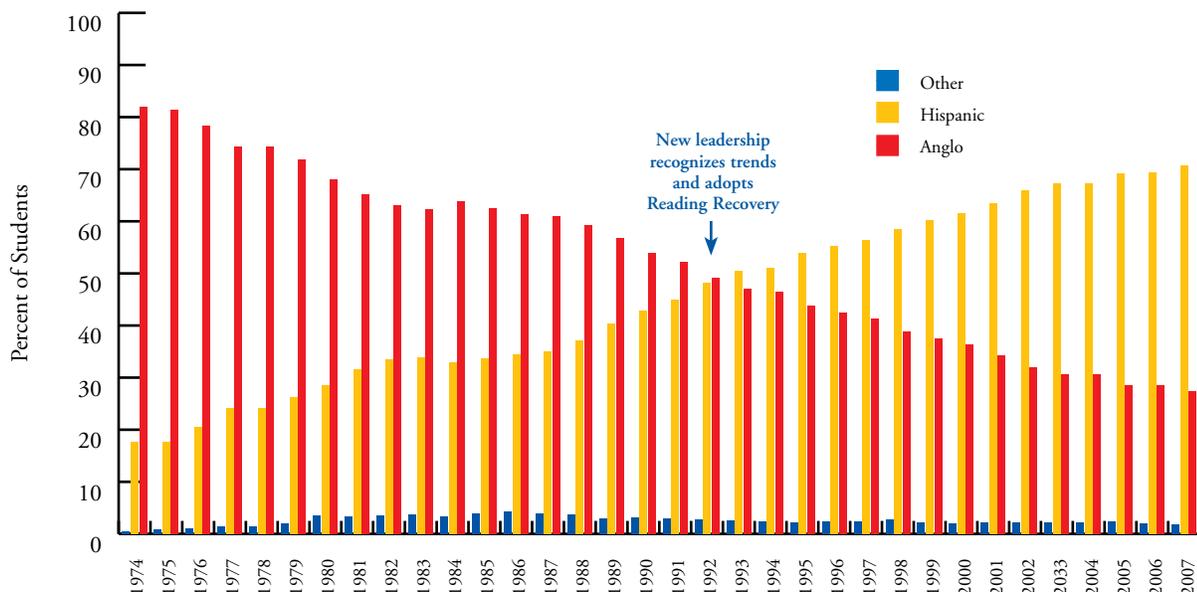
When new leaders took over the helm at Dumas ISD in 1991–1992, Superintendent Larry Appel and Assistant Superintendent Lawrence Bussard were well aware of the winds of change blowing since the mid 1970s. Dumas schools had recorded a steadily rising enrollment of Hispanic students, a rising percent of children qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches, and declining achievement in reading scores. (Figure 1 graphs the steady change in Dumas ISD enrollment from 1974–2008.)

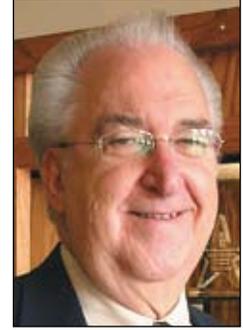
As instructional leaders, this new team knew they needed to look for a better way to address the increasing number of English language learners and children from families with lower income and education levels. Major curriculum changes were needed.

With a clear vision of the needs of Dumas students, Appel and Bussard went on exploration journeys, searching across Texas for better ways to teach their increasingly diverse student body. After one such journey to the Dallas Metroplex, the talk of the trip was an intervention for first graders called Reading Recovery.

“I had rarely experienced the excitement and intensity we saw in the Reading Recovery room,” Bussard said. “The teachers believed they were

Figure 1. Dumas ISD Ethnic Distribution as Percentage of Enrollment 1974–2007





Keegan Voos, the first child to successfully discontinue lessons in Dumas, graduated in 2005 and is now working toward his dream of becoming a fireman.

Dumas Superintendent Larry Appel (left) and Assistant Superintendent Lawrence Bussard were early champions of Reading Recovery.

making a difference in a child's life. It was evident that I should believe it, too!"

Superintendent Appel is a long-range visionary leader who quickly saw the importance of an early intervention rather than the "unlearn and relearn" remediation approach. It was obvious to them both that Reading Recovery was a good fit for challenges they wanted to address, and they returned to Dumas with details. The plan was met with hearty approval from the school board to proceed with implementing the intervention. "It was time to step up to the plate and offer the students an avenue of success," the superintendent said.

The use of local money to fund the initial implementation of Reading Recovery showed the intensity and support with which the project was embraced. With funding in place, this author was chosen to go to Texas Woman's University at Denton for the year of teacher leader training. (See sidebar at end of this article).

Getting Started with Reading Recovery

In the fall of 1993, Dumas ISD began its first year-long teacher training class with nine teachers. The training required a paradigm shift for

many people, and concerns popped up in unexpected places. The idea of intervention and year-long training was new to the teachers. As an outward sign of continuing changes, Reading Recovery teachers did not have teachers' desks in their rooms. Several teachers wondered why they had signed up for so much change and really voiced their concern over the absence of a desk in their Reading Recovery room. Despite turmoil and strife, change occurred and desks did not return.

The adjustments were eased by the fact that teachers and parents began to quickly see results for students. The first child to discontinue his Reading Recovery lessons was Keegan Voos, whose mother wrote to school board members, "When we received the letter regarding Reading Recovery, we were apprehensive. But after a few days ...we saw a tremendous change in Keegan. He was enthusiastic about everything. ...We are extremely proud of our son and his accomplishments and we are excited about the new world he has discovered."

Reading Recovery personnel worked especially hard to let people in Dumas and the surrounding areas know about what they were doing. Reporters, regional leaders, school

leaders, and community leaders came to see Reading Recovery in action. In all, 113 visitors saw lessons and learned why early intervention is a better approach than remediation. In December 1993, the *News Press* published an article with teachers and parents praising their children's progress. Fourteen different groups came to observe lessons and see our professional development behind-the-glass.

As a result of our outreach, administrators in other towns asked to train their own Reading Recovery teachers. Dumas ISD shared my teacher leader responsibilities with other districts in the region. In the fall of 1994, we trained more Reading Recovery teachers and brought the Dumas training site up to 20 teachers. Growth continued in 1995, when the site grew to support 30 Reading Recovery teachers. Dumas wanted to share their resources with the surrounding area so that more children could be served. It was a real challenge to move from a site serving one district to eight school districts. The teachers had to travel to Dumas with students and come to class every Tuesday night. I had to drive many miles and learn about the systems in other school districts. Soon, Pampa, Borger, Stratford, and Friona were a part of the site and later, Spearman,

Gruver, and Panhandle joined our community of learners. The training site took on a distinct personality making all districts seem like one.

Keeping it Going at Dumas ISD

Full implementation of Reading Recovery gave Dumas ISD a strong base for literacy success even as our student population continued to change. In 1991–1992, when Dumas administrators began looking for new curricula, 14% of our student body was English language learners (ELLs). Ten years later (2001–2002), our ELL number had grown to 25%. In 1991–1992, one-third of the student body received free or reduced-price lunches. Ten years later, it rose to one-half.

Reading Recovery continued to help children develop as readers. When the time approached for state testing, we kept careful records of the results of the former Reading Recovery children. We made sure that the principals were aware of the sustaining effects. Scores were shared and celebrations were abundant. In the beginning of the implementation, we used all local money. This served a dual purpose. It seemed to cement the support so that everyone in the community really believed in Reading Recovery. At the same time, the teachers realized that with so much support and faith from the community, there was no way they would fail in their community and district. Later, funding was diversified using federal, state and local funds.

Since 1991–1992, more than 4,100 children in the Texas Panhandle have had Reading Recovery lessons with teachers who are part of the Dumas site. The site statistics are strong over 15 years, with a 70% discontinuing

rate for all children taught, and 84% for the 2,800-plus children who were able to complete their full series of lessons (see Table 1).

In 2006–2007 when Assistant Superintendent Bussard retired, this author became the primary curriculum director, Reading Recovery site coordinator, and teacher leader. In this capacity I have been able to see the big picture of literacy; it has given me a better appreciation of how all the pieces work together. It allows me to coordinate literacy processes and continue to keep Reading Recovery a viable and successful program. On the annual evaluation questionnaire

sent to all Dumas principals, one person wrote, “Reading Recovery is the one single thing that I would fight hardest to keep if we were made to give up programs because of budget cuts. Reading Recovery saves many children from failure and gives them confidence to be successful.”

Reflecting on the Reading Recovery choice they championed, the early leadership team is proud of their decision made 15 years ago. “We are in the kid business. It’s our responsibility to serve the needs of all children so they will become productive members of our society,” Superintendent Appel said. Now retired but still in touch

Table 1. Dumas Reading Recovery Site Results: Fifteen-Year Summary

Year	Number Teachers	Total Number Children Served	Perent Children Successful Discontinued (N)	Number Complete Intervention Children Served	Percent Complete Intervention Children Discontinued (N)
2007–2008	26.5	282	76 (215)	258	83 (215)
2006–2007	27	291	68 (199)	241	83 (199)
2005–2006	27	291	67 (194)	240	81 (194)
2004–2005	27	304	72 (224)	262	85 (224)
2003–2004	31	330	68 (225)	273	82 (225)
2002–2003	31	330	72 (238)	277	86 (238)
2001–2002	32	336	69 (223)	277	84 (223)
2000–2001	30	289	73 (210)	247	85 (210)
1999–2000	29	289	65 (189)	227	83 (189)
1998–1999	33	319	73 (233)	268	87 (223)
1997–1998	33	275	70 (193)	214	90 (193)
1996–1997	34	301	70 (211)	240	88 (211)
1995–1996	30	250	66 (164)	194	85 (164)
1994–1995	20	89	63 (120)	147	82 (120)
1993–1994	9	73	68 (50)	65	80 (50)
15-Year Summary		4,149	70%	3,340	84%

Successful discontinued = All students served, even for one lesson.
Complete intervention discontinued = Students who received a full series of lessons.

with the school, Bussard says, “This is a positive program for all children. In fact, the top readers in the classrooms want to go to Reading Recovery. Everyone believes.”

At Dumas ISD, we remain constant and steadfast in teaching our children to read. Smiling children who are reading and understanding books are never taken for granted.

The Dumas Training Site Today

Throughout the years, the Dumas teacher training site has been remarkably stable and presently has 27 teachers which serve eight districts in the Texas Panhandle. We are an extremely close group of professionals with a strong work ethic and very low turnover of Reading Recovery teachers.

Because of the low turnover, we made the practical decision to ask the nearby Amarillo Reading Recovery site if they would be willing to train the few teachers each year for the Dumas site. The two Amarillo teacher leaders, Laura Ramos and Mary Ann Marquez, graciously accepted this responsibility to train teachers. I attend training class sessions in Amarillo when Dumas site teachers have behind-the-glass. I am responsible for site visits, continuing contact at the Dumas site, and National Data Evaluation Center records for the Dumas teachers. It allows the Dumas site to add new teachers, but does not add additional responsibilities to Amarillo. While this kind of networking is unusual for Reading Recovery training and implementation in the U.S., it has been a great asset in a rural area such as ours.

Winds of change came to Dumas and spread throughout the Panhandle of Texas. By now, change is the norm



Dumas ISD schools continue to receive recognition by external evaluators. Among them is Hillcrest, recipient of the International Reading Association (IRA) Exemplary Reading Award for the state of Texas in 2005.

(Photo courtesy of Moore County News Press/Blake Laceywell)

in our districts. Unwavering support continues for Reading Recovery where most of the districts have 75–100% implementation coverage.

Classroom Changes

The site’s Reading Recovery story doesn’t end here. While we watched the Reading Recovery process, learning theory evolved that linked Reading Recovery to good first teaching in the classroom. Changes in classroom curriculum became a requirement—not an option—for teachers as a balanced literacy approach was established in primary classrooms. In 1997–1998, two of the five elementary schools in Dumas became a part of The Ohio State Literacy Collaborative Initiative. When students’ scores for the year were reviewed, the other three campuses trained literacy coordinators at Texas Tech University under the supervision of Dr. Katie Button and Jan Bogard. As a result, Dumas ISD has now designed its own literacy

plan and has curriculum coaches and extensive literacy bookrooms at all five campuses.

Good classroom teaching and Reading Recovery walk hand in hand toward the ultimate goal of teaching all children to read and write. This project could not happen without huge commitments of time, talent, and money. Assistant Superintendent Bussard provided leadership in many areas including writing grants and prioritizing literacy in the school’s local budget. The implementation of Reading Recovery and literacy is not a quick fix. Bussard allowed the process to develop and progress through the years, realizing that results would take time. He remained patient and optimistic with the efforts.

As the needs of the classroom teachers evolved, the literacy coordinators and I wrote a teacher’s manual, *Here to There*, to help teachers implement balanced literacy in the classroom. The consistent and persistent support of our school board, administrators,

teachers, parents, and students have made a journey of success and of continuing change, reflection, and growth awaiting. The district's success is also recognized by external evaluators. One of the Dumas ISD elementary schools, Hillcrest, received the International Reading Association (IRA) Exemplary Reading Award for the state of Texas in 2005. The award states:

Exemplary is an apt word to describe the reading program at Hillcrest Elementary. An established foundation and continuing commitment to sound theory, research, and practice are evident as administrators and teachers share commonality and consistency in their instructional language and practice. Student learning is celebrated throughout the school. Floors, walls, and ceilings are laden with print, while desks, tables, and shelves are overflowing with books. This environment reveals that students are engaging in literacy events across the curriculum. At Hillcrest Elementary, teachers, administrators, and community members converge for a common goal—developing successful, literate citizens of the 21st century.

Additional recognition arrived in 2006–2007, when Dumas ISD was one of only 14 districts with enrollment over 3,000 to be rated as “Recognized” by the state of Texas.

Although we are proud of these awards, both teachers and administrators at Dumas are most proud of individual student success. Keegan Voos' parents are still among Reading Recovery's strongest supporters. Keegan successfully graduated from Dumas High School in 2005, and is now working toward his dream of becoming a fireman. He still loves to read!

A teacher leader remembers start-up challenges

In 1992, Frances Whitson agreed to train as a Reading Recovery teacher leader before she had even seen a lesson.

I was a second-grade teacher in Dumas, ready for change. But I had not a clue about how to get my at-risk learners and nonreaders performing on grade level. When my superintendents asked if I would be willing to move 400 miles away to Denton for a year of Reading Recovery training, I said yes before I had even seen a lesson.

My first experience with Reading Recovery was one of the longest days of my life. The school board, administrators, and I took a “red eye” flight to the Dallas Metroplex area to see Reading Recovery in action.



In 1992

In my teacher leader training year, the most memorable moment came the day I taught my first lesson behind-the-glass. My little boy fell asleep! We ran around the room with me following to try to keep him awake, but to no avail. I was mortified because I was still in the paradigm of evaluation rather than learning. I will always be grateful for how Billie Askew defused my embarrassment saying, “You certainly followed your child.”



Frances Whitson

This meant getting up at 4:00 a.m. so we could travel an hour before reaching the airport, and then spent 8–10 hours at school. We were greeted and treated to a thorough orientation of Reading Recovery — watching behind-the-glass sessions and listening to a teacher leader in training talk about the process. As we flew home, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. Wiped out, you bet! Excited and scared, you bet! Ready to start the adventure, you bet! I saw the vision of change.

When Gari Sue Haddock read an article on the Pampa (Texas) school website, she was surprised to learn that Reading Recovery focused on the most-struggling students.

Read her story and her teacher's recollections on page 24.