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Giant strides

Program at West Ashley High that teaches English as if it were a foreign language really works, may spread to other schools

By [Diette Courrégé](#)

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A reading program given a trial run last year at West Ashley High School has been so successful that other Charleston County and neighboring Dorchester 2 high schools have taken notice and may begin using it.

In Charleston, the curriculum had been used exclusively with special education students. School Principal Mary Runyon saw those students' reading scores improving and decided to experiment and see whether it also would work for students who didn't have a disability.



Photo by Brad Nettles

West Ashley High School teacher Natalie Kluttz works with ninth-graders Daniesha Smalls (left) and Erika Wesolek on building prefix words during language class Thursday.

The research-based curriculum, Language!, teaches English as if it were a foreign language; it breaks down its rules and explains them to students. The class focuses on the five components of reading -- from identifying sounds in words to developing

vocabulary -- and the goal is to give students the foundation they need to become better readers.

The school began the pilot program last spring with one class that included 14 of its weakest freshman and sophomore readers. Many students made strong gains, and Runyon quadrupled the number of intensive reading classes this year. They targeted incoming freshmen with the lowest reading scores; most read at a fourth-grade level or worse.

After one semester in the class, 81 percent of the students saw improvement. Ten students' scores increased by more than 15 points, while most students reading at this level improve by three points during an entire school year. Eighteen students improved by six to 10 points.

"We don't have all of the answers here, but we know what we are doing is sound," Runyon said.

High school educators too often are looking for a Band-Aid for their poor readers, and there are no Band-Aids, she said. While no quick fix, this program can fill in the gaps and help children, she said.

The program's results have been documented nationally, with at least two states adopting the program and multiple studies proving its effectiveness.

In Charleston, Lou Martin, the district's associate superintendent for high schools, said the reading curriculum piloted by West Ashley High is one of three that principals can use with their struggling readers this fall. Some schools already have been using the program, but not in the same way as West Ashley High.

Baptist Hill High, Burke High, Lincoln High and Wando High are among the schools planning to implement it, he said. The training for each teacher costs more than \$1,000, and the kits for students are \$60 each.

Dorchester 2 Deputy Superintendent Barbara Stroble took a group of her high school teachers to West Ashley High last week to observe the program and get a better understanding of the way it works. Although Dorchester 2, which includes Summerville area schools, is one of the state's higher-performing districts, nearly 13 percent of its freshmen can't read better than a fourth-grader, according to an analysis requested by The Post and Courier.



Photo by Brad Nettles

West Ashley High ninth-grader Erika Wesolek works on a grammar lesson Thursday.

Stroble said the research-based program appears to be a good one that teaches students the basics of reading, and she hopes her district's educators who saw it in action will support adopting it as another intervention option. They plan to make a decision soon, and if they move forward with it, it would be one of four programs offered to high school-aged, struggling readers this fall.

"It's the old way we used to teach English," Stroble said. "A kid who's having difficulty in reading and he or she doesn't know the rules of the game, they get lost."

Freshman Amber Armstrong is in the West Ashley High program this year. She always thought her reading was fine, but after being in this class, she said she feels more confident because she's learning skills that none of her previous schools taught her.

She used to skip words she didn't know, but now she tries to figure out what they mean. It's easier for her to skim through notes and pick out important points, and vocabulary isn't as much of a challenge, she said. She doesn't use slang and she uses correct verbs when speaking. She said she'd like to take the course again next year.

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Without this program, "high school would be harder," she said. "This program is a good program to have. It has helped me. It gives us opportunities to learn more."

West Ashley High plans to triple the number of classes next year, and school leaders want to do more diagnosing in terms of the specific areas of reading that trip up students. Although some students are earning higher grades as a result of the reading classes, Runyon said she's more concerned about students learning the life skill of reading.

"This is the best gift we could give them," she said.

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