

alumni insider

A BENEFIT FOR MEMBERS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON ALUMNI ASSOCIATION



"STICKS AND STONES may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is one adage that is likely to go by the wayside as modern commerce and society demand a higher level of literacy than ever. Words may wound, but the lack of words can signal tough times ahead for today's children, making literacy critical.

Here at the University of Oregon, the College of Education is playing a lead role in helping the nation's children read. Dr. **Ed Kame'enui M.S. '77 Ph.D. '80**, a national expert in reading research, heads the National Reading First Technical Assistance Center, one of just three of its kind in the country.

"Dr. Kame'enui and his colleagues are enabling our nation's schools to develop teachers' capabilities, and children's capacities, to become successful readers," boasts **Martin Kaufman**, Dean of the College of Education. "Their scientific research and assessment tools are helping teachers to monitor student reading progress in their classrooms, identify children needing their attention and significantly help improve their learning performance."

The Reading First Technical Assistance Center serves 22 western states and helps schools choose reading programs and set up procedures to screen students, diagnose problems and monitor results.

It operates from a \$1.67 million federal grant and focuses its assistance on helping schools meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. The final goal of all the Center's work — and literacy efforts in general — is to be sure that children can read at grade level by the end of third grade. Research consistently shows that those who don't learn by that point in their development are dramatically less likely to ever become proficient, says Kame'enui.

Technically defined by the federal

Leading in Reading

UO College of Education
spearheads nation's literacy efforts

government's Workforce Investment Act as "an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society," literacy is a critical element to life success. This definition is much more sweeping than more traditional definitions that focus solely on the individual's ability to read and that, experts say, is indicative of the elevated importance of literacy.

Combating literacy is no small task. Even finding agreement on the best way to teach reading has been a challenge. None of this is for lack of trying, however.

The National Institute of Health has

had reading on its agenda for more than 35 years, the National Academy of Sciences has studied how to teach reading, and there have been a number of congressional committees on the subject. Since 1966, there have been 100,000 studies on teaching reading. Yet according to Kame'enui, less than 4,000 of those studies were scientifically acceptable and the debate of best practices continues.

One thing that has come out of all this work is that a series of elements have been defined as critical to reading success. They are 1) phonemic awareness; 2) alphabetic understanding; 3) fluency; 4) vocabulary, and 5) comprehension. This series may sound familiar to those who have studied a

second language and know just how challenging the fifth step — comprehension — can be. Yet comprehension is the final — and only acceptable — goal. It is essential for children to become successful adults, even if success is measured as simply as the ability to read the directions for a prescription, or to fill out a job application.

This is not the first time that someone has attempted to provide coordinated literacy support for the nation's schools. Yet success has been elusive. Kame'enui hopes to change this.

INDICATIONS ARE THAT the Reading First efforts will succeed because of careful planning and integration into federal regulations. For example, if a teacher wants to use federal funds or grants to buy curriculum that is not already approved by Reading First, it must be approved by the Technical Assistance Center. That regulation might seem heavy-handed to some, but Kame'enui thinks that time will prove the wisdom and "it's already been well-received. Teachers are happy to have the help."

"At first, we were a little nervous," admits **Jim Zaworski BA '75 MA '78**, who teaches third grade at Beaverton's William Walker Elementary School. Now, he says, "As we learn and get familiar with the programs, it's not that difficult. It's a pleasure to be working with kids and seeing that it works."

Whether the Reading First Center is successful will be clear, says Kame'enui. The program is designed with a measurement system that is woven into each state's testing programs. "Reading First puts in place assessment, screening, monitoring, diagnosis and defines the desired outcomes," he points out. "Simply by having those steps, our success will be good. We better be having an impact. But it's a big job."

Beyond the testing and processes, the

A Dark and Stormy Situation

The National Assessment of Educational Progress estimates that 40 percent of the nation's students cannot read at a basic level and specific groups of students are struggling even more:

- Almost 70 percent of low-income fourth grade students cannot read at a basic level. In other words, these children struggle with foundational reading skills like summarizing and understanding a story.
- Almost half the students living in urban areas cannot read at a basic level.
- Average-performing students have made no progress over the last 10 years, and the lowest-performing readers have become less successful over this same time period.

The University of Oregon's College of Education is playing a critical role in improving how today's children are taught to read. Among the many programs in which it serves a role, one of the most exciting efforts is Dr. Ed Kame'enui's National Reading First Technical Assistance Center.