

Schools using Direct Instruction for 3 years show reading gains

No-nonsense program is phonics-based, gives teachers little discretion

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Direct Instruction, Baltimore's experiment in scripted, no-nonsense education, is beginning to show signs of success in reading instruction after three frustrating years of test results.

Although not all of the program's 17 city schools showed progress in this spring's Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, five of the six schools in Direct Instruction from the beginning had something to brag about.

"We wanted five years ideally to show what we could do, but we wanted to show something after three," said Muriel Berkeley, board president of the Baltimore Curriculum Project, which coordinates the program.

"That's what we've done. We've got a long way to go, but we think we've turned the corner."

Scores at Arundel Elementary, one of the original Direct Instruc-

tion schools, increased by nearly 16 points in the first grade and by eight points in the third grade, among the best showings of any Baltimore school on the nationally standardized test.

Roland Park Elementary-Middle, where some parents had objected to the regimented nature of Direct Instruction, registered gains of nearly seven points in the first grade and more than six points in the fifth.

Three other pioneer Direct Instruction schools — City Springs, Hampstead Hill and General Wolfe — also advanced, although City Springs' gains occurred only in the first grade.

Sun reporters spent much of the 1997-1998 school year at City Springs, near Little Italy, and at a comparison school in West Baltimore, Lyndhurst Elementary, which was using a hodgepodge of reading curriculum. With the new Open Court reading program last year, Lyndhurst's first grade gained 18 points in reading, while its second grade increased five points.

First-grade scores at Robert Coleman Elementary, the sixth original Direct Instruction school,

declined seven points, while Coleman's fifth-grade scores rose five points. Coleman is the city's only school on a year-round schedule, an effort to halt the "summer slide" experienced by many pupils during the vacation.

Berkeley said the seven schools with only a year of Direct Instruction did less well. And Westport Elementary-Middle in Southwest Baltimore, where the program is financed by a generous industrial partner, Baltimore RESCO, has struggled for two years just to hold scores steady.

"It's so frustrating," said Berkeley. "We go to Westport and see the excitement and feel the excitement and expect huge gains, but they just don't materialize. I don't want to make excuses, but our kids aren't wise to these standardized tests."

Direct Instruction teaches reading through a heavily phonics-based program that leaves little to the discretion of the teacher. Created three decades ago in Oregon, it is one of the nation's few education programs with a body of supporting research, most of it financed by the federal government.

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