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## Students do a 180 as a result of reading program

By Michelle Hatfield

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Johansen High teacher Joy Koski leads a writing discussion with students Carlos Stevens, Fabiola Corona, Carolyn Warren and Ricky Curiel (back to camera) during a Read 180 class on Thursday, October 30, 2008. Ted Benson/The Modesto Bee - Modesto Bee - Ted Benson

Eduardo Garcia was never a lover of books and his reading ability reflected that. He entered high school at a second-grade reading level.

A year after an intensive reading program at Johansen High School, the 15-year-old climbed to the fifth-grade level.

The best part -- he enjoys reading. Eduardo's parents take him and his two younger brothers to the county library a few times a week.

"I'm reading more since I've been in this class," said the sophomore and Read 180 graduate. "I like action and mysteries."

Of the three R's, many educators argue that reading is the most important.

"There's no way students can be successful in other subjects if they can't read," said Lynn Lysko, director of instruction at Modesto City Schools.

Thousands of Stanislaus County students are reading far below their grade level. Some in high school are testing as low as a first grade.

To stem this tide, Modesto City Schools officials started using the Read 180 program last school year. Described as "a short-term accelerated reading intervention," Read 180 gives high school students intensive instruction and reading practice. The program takes students who are at least two grade levels behind.

After Read 180's pilot year in 2007-08, the average grade-level gain by students was a year or two higher.

### **In the classroom**

A Read 180 class is the equivalent of two class periods, about two hours; the maximum class is 21 students. Divided into three groups, students rotate time with the teacher, reading along with an audio CD and computer work. They have access to several paperbacks and use workbooks for assignments and homework.

The computer program is the favorite among most students. It tailors instruction to individual students, tracks their progress and provides immediate feedback.

Students complete sections in the spelling zone, reading zone and word zone.

When it was her turn on the computer recently, Johansen freshman Fabiola Corona, put on her headphones and logged on with her name and password. In the spelling zone, the computer said words, such as "built" and "demanding," and Fabiola typed the correct spelling.

In the reading zone, she watched a video about the fall of the Berlin Wall. Afterward, she answered multiple-choice questions about the video. Later, she read a passage aloud -- a microphone recorded the track for teacher Joy Koski to analyze later.

Corona said she likes the computer program better than textbooks because it combines visual and audio skills. The 14-year-old has noticed an improvement.

"Sometimes, I didn't know how to read the big words, but I can now and it's only been two months," she said.

There's a variety of reasons students struggle, Koski said. Some come from poorer families that don't have books or magazines at home; some have parents who don't speak English or who have left the family; some haven't taken academics seriously, she said.

"They end up behind the ball when they start," Koski said. "And even when they can read it, it sounds great, but they can't comprehend it."

## **Costly but worthwhile**

In 2007-08, Read 180 was piloted at Johansen, Davis and Downey high schools with 140 students. This school year, the program expanded to 560 students in all Modesto high schools, including Elliot, the continuation high school.

Read 180's success is evident in many Modesto students, said director Lysko.

"At Elliot, we have students who've asked to take books home for the first time in their lives," she said. "These are students who never thought they'd do anything or learn to read."

Lysko didn't have the cost of the Read 180 program -- buying extra computers, headphones, books, rocking chairs for the reading with audio, computer program licenses, paying for the small class sizes and teacher training.

Johansen Principal Thor Harrison said Read 180 is expensive, but that the demonstrated success of students far outweighs the cost.

Schools have used vouchers for the computer equipment, the result of a Microsoft Corp. anti-trust case settlement, and each campus uses some of its site money to cover other expenses.

Scholastic makes the computer software, audio books and workbooks.

Read 180 is about 10 years old and is in use at 12,000 U.S. classrooms, about 1,000 of them in California. The program is for freshmen and some English learner students in all four grades.

After they graduate the program, students are placed in college preparation English classes, sometimes with a supplemental course.

Two months into his sophomore year, Read 180 alumnus Eduardo said he's keeping up in his 10th-grade English class.

Before Read 180, Eduardo didn't see college in his future. Now he does and wants to become a firefighter.

"It helped me get closer to college," he said. "It changed my academics. It changed my life."

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