The promise of PRESS
Now entering its third year, a partnership to improve literacy is showing results

BY SHONA BURKE

LITERACY COACH ANNE ITTNER gives an example of the encouraging growth she is seeing in her students’ reading skills.

“Last year I worked with a third-grade student who came into the intervention group practicing sounding out words,” says Ittner. “She was well below grade level in her reading fluency. After five months of focused instruction and goal setting in decoding and fluency, she gained confidence and excitement about reading. By spring, she was reading at grade level. She couldn’t wait to get home to tell her mom!”

Ittner works at Best Academy, one of six PRESS sites in Minneapolis. PRESS is a comprehensive approach to early literacy, driven by research-based practices. The program incorporates quality core instruction, data-driven instructional decisions and interventions, expanded support for English learners, and meaningful professional development to support systemic change.

Nearly one in four third-graders in Minnesota today is failing to reach basic levels of literacy. That means 15,000 children each year. Research shows that if students don’t read proficiently by third grade, odds are that they will not catch up.

Such distressing numbers motivated the Minnesota Center for Reading Research (MCRR) to form a partnership in 2011 with the Target Corporation, Minnesota Reading Corps, Minneapolis Public Schools, and two charter schools to examine the issue and act. Together they formed the Path to Reading Excellence in School Sites, or PRESS. Their goal: Getting all students reading at their grade level by third grade.

The PRESS sites include nearly 1,800...
Small groups of struggling students receive much-needed individualized support to increase their proficiency levels.

This multi-tiered approach was welcomed at Pillsbury Elementary School in northeast Minneapolis.

“We work very collaboratively to make sure our children receive the instruction they need,” says principal Laura Cavender. “PRESS was a natural fit for our school. The University faculty shared their knowledge and expertise, and the PRESS coach became an important part of our Instructional Leadership Team, helping to disaggregate data, research strategies, provide coaching for teachers, lead instruction, and provide leadership for tutors that work with our students.”

**Next steps**

The need to “catch students up” in reading is a priority across the nation. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 34 percent of fourth-grade students demonstrated at least proficient reading skills in 2011; among economically disadvantaged students it was only 17 percent. A long-term goal of PRESS is to introduce its model to other schools across the nation.

Now in its third year, PRESS continues to provide support in its partner schools as well as share what is being learned. Twin Cities school districts have shown considerable interest in PRESS, which will likely lead to increased implementation in the upcoming school years and will continue to move the mission forward.

“PRESS is an opportunity for a team of partners to come together to work on a critical educational problem,” says Helman. “As university faculty, we are proud to contribute to this important work.”

Learn more about PRESS at [www.cehd.umn.edu/reading](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/reading).