USU ArtsBridge Moves Students to Read

Students from Mrs. Merkley’s morning kindergarten class at Sunrise Elementary School in Smithfield, Utah, are spread out across the classroom, lumbering around as big purple “frookles,” looking under desks for their chocolate “whomples” after pretending to break their favorite toy — their own very special “stroiper.”

Frookles? Whomples? Stroiper?

These made-up words are part of “The Nonsense Word Blues,” one of a series of songs and musical games that are a part of USU ArtsBridge’s “Reading in Motion” program. The games are designed specifically to reinforce the basics of early reading skills in a fun and engaging way.

With a 25-year record of success in Chicago public schools, Reading in Motion is now part of the Utah State University’s ArtsBridge service learning program. It is a grades K-3 arts-based reading curriculum that allows children to get out from behind their desks and use their entire bodies and minds to master the challenges of learning to read, according to USU ArtsBridge program coordinator Laurie Baefsky.

USU ArtsBridge scholars are in three Cache County kindergarten classes this spring piloting the Reading in Motion curriculum. USU ArtsBridge scholars are USU students who get hands-on educational experience in the public schools environment. With Reading in Motion, scholars visit classrooms twice a week where they dissect the earliest elements of reading using the natural connections between reading and the arts to engage the
whole child, Baefsky said.

And the curriculum is fun. It uses dance-based activities that encourage children to use their bodies, voices and brains to build phoneme awareness, phonics and other basic skills widely recognized as critical building blocks in acquiring reading skills.

“In today’s classrooms, the children are given many opportunities to work pencil and paper tasks,” said Judy Merkely, host teacher at Sunrise Elementary. “This program teaches the same concepts through music, movement and literature. For many children, this is the best way for them to learn and retain information.”

Lynn Jemison-Keisker is a faculty member in USU’s Department of Music and is a USU ArtsBridge faculty mentor.

“I am impressed with how easily the Reading in Motion curriculum can be integrated into existing classroom and district reading programs,” Jemison-Keisker said. “It’s a great tool for our ArtsBridge scholars as well as our partner teachers in the classroom.”

This year USU ArtsBridge is piloting the kindergarten curriculum at Sunrise Elementary and Millville Elementary schools in Cache County. Mrs. Merkley’s students have been involved since the fall and will soon share their learning at the end of March in a short performance for family and friends. All classrooms will have their final sharing March 30-April 1.

And while the test scores aren’t in yet, Sunrise Elementary principal Kathy Toolson has already noticed results.

“Reading in Motion has had a very positive impact on every student in our kindergarten class,” Toolson said. “It is an enjoyable way to help new reading skills stick.”

“We expected the ‘reading’ in Reading in Motion to be the primary focus,” said Maren Reeves, ArtsBridge scholar. “In fact, it has been the ‘motion’ element that brings the incredible transformation that we have seen in child development and early literacy skills.”

Tami Auger is another ArtsBridge scholar and elementary education major at USU.

“I have seen improvement in reading and singing from all students, especially the English language learners,” Auger said. “I like to sit close to those students to hear their phoneme sounds incorporated into the songs to assess individual development.”

In May [2010], USU ArtsBridge student scholars will travel to University of California, Irvine for the ArtsBridge America national conference to be trained in the first grade Reading in Motion curriculum for next year.
Schools that are interested in participating in the kindergarten or first grade *Reading in Motion* curriculum during the 2010-11 year should contact USU ArtsBridge.

USU ArtsBridge is an affiliate of ArtsBridge America, a consortium of research universities providing key service learning opportunities for university arts and education students. Now in its third year at Utah State University, ArtsBridge scholars work with students, grades K-12, to create and implement interdisciplinary arts projects in elementary and secondary schools throughout Cache Valley. More information is available online.

**Related links:**
- ArtsBridge America
- Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art

Source: USU ArtsBridge  
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