



# FOCUS

## on Literacy

**Bloomer School District partners with local library to  
set up children for success in school**

*Shelby Anderson*



Lorna Margenau, special education director for the Bloomer School District, wanted to offer learning experiences outside of the school's walls to some of the district's younger students and also reach out to children and families not yet enrolled in the district. Research shows that young students — students in the pre-K age group — learn best when they're in a setting in which they are the most comfortable. For many students, this would be home. While teaching students in their individual homes was not an option for all students, Margenau thought

the library might offer a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere for young students and their parents.

Margenau says the library was supportive of the idea from the very beginning.

"From the minute we threw the idea out there, they were on board," Margenau said.

For the past three school years, the school district and the GE Bleskacek Family Memorial Library in Bloomer have teamed up to provide comprehensive early literacy intervention, including speech therapy and language support, through

library-sponsored story time.

Story Hour is led and taught in collaboration between the school district and the library. Meggan Bixby and Lynn Hammond, speech and language pathologists in the Bloomer School District, and Kathleen Larson, the library director, lead and direct Story Hour and related activities as a team.

"It's a true co-teaching model," Margenau said. "They collaborate on what objectives and lessons they want to teach. They have specific lessons and goals for each Story Hour."



## Gaps Persist in State's Reading Scores

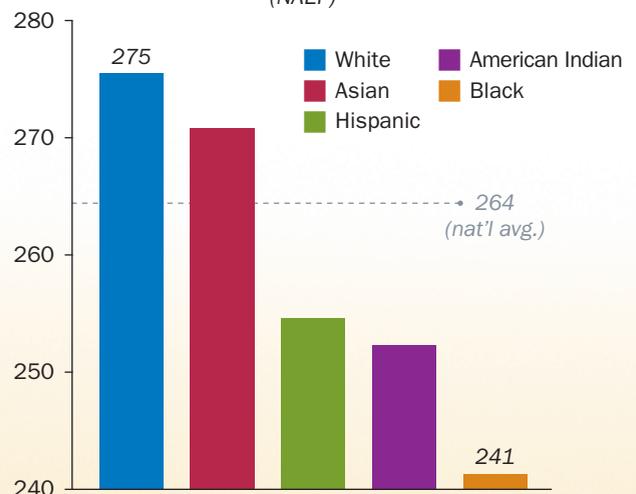
**Results from the 2015 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP)** showed that reading gaps continue to persist in the state's public schools. Wisconsin eighth-grade white students had an average reading score of 275, compared to 241 for black students. The national average is 264.

Among the state's fourth graders, white students had an average reading score of 231, and black students had an average score of 193. While the reading gap continues to prove challenging for the state, there were some gains. Hispanic students at the fourth-grade level and black students in eighth grade had slight improvements in reading scores.

As a whole, reading scores for Wisconsin made a slight improvement and ranked slightly above the national average. In 2013, Wisconsin fourth graders scored 221 in reading, which was exactly the same as the national average score. In 2015, Wisconsin fourth graders improved slightly, scoring 223, compared to the national average score of 221.

Eighth-grade scores improved as well. In 2013, Wisconsin eighth graders scored 268 in reading. The national average was 266. In 2015, the state's eighth-grade average reading score improved to 270, compared to 264 for the national average. □

**Wisconsin Eighth-Grade Reading Scores**  
2015 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP)



A typical Story Hour includes three stories read by the librarian, a couple of active sing-alongs, and a craft activity. It also includes a sound bag. Bixby or Hammond pull different toys or objects out of a bag and ask the children to name them. Each object is tied into the sound of the day. In addition, each Story Hour ends with play time. While it may seem like fun to the students, a lot of learning and development takes place.

“The goal is to provide an environment for the children that is more natural and more closely resembles what other three and four-year-old children are already doing,” Bixby said. “Instead of having the kids come to school for speech therapy in a setting that most other three and young four-year-olds are not going (public school), we are able to meet their IEP goals in an environment that has already shown to be successful for kids this age.”

It is also important to have a mix of students at different skill levels and from different backgrounds.

“Typically developing peers are already in attendance and often are able to act as positive role models,” Hammond said. “Children this age learn a lot by imitating other children, so it is important to us that our students with disabilities have typically developing children to imitate.”

Not only are the children learning, but parents are also getting ideas and strategies to help develop their children’s literacy and communication skills when they’re at home. Parents are able to participate in the 60-75 minute activities and practice using the strategies to improve their children’s language skills.

Part of the power of Story Hour is that it takes place outside of the regular school setting. Children and parents feel more comfortable meeting in a neutral space such as the public library.

“We have witnessed parents connecting with each other in a way we never have,” Bixby said. “In the environment of the library, we have removed the feeling that they are in a ‘school’ and they are able to ask



Mary Randall, superintendent of the Bloomer School District, and Kathleen Larson, director of the G.E. Bleskacek Family Memorial Bloomer Public Library, accept the *Standing Up for Rural Wisconsin Award* from State Superintendent Tony Evers in March 2015.

## Standing Up for Rural Wisconsin

The Bloomer School District’s collaborative work with the GE Bleskacek Family Memorial Library won an award through the Department of Public Instruction’s “Standing Up for Rural Wisconsin” program. Other award winners include:

- **Hunger Initiative Feeds People, Empowers Youth** — Unity School District, Balsam Lake
- **The Food Court** — Galesville-Ettrick-Trempealeau School District
- **Sharing Supper Feed and Read** — Endeavor Elementary School, Portage Community School District
- **Ecovim Digester Project** — Sparta Area School District
- **Agriculture Food for All** — Stratford School District
- **Three Lakes School Fab Lab** — Three Lakes School District

For more information, visit the DPI website at [dpi.wi.gov/rural/awards](http://dpi.wi.gov/rural/awards).

each other questions about their children's abilities or disabilities."

### ■ Leveling the playing field

Story Hour is open to all children in the community but it has been especially helpful in providing opportunities for students from low-income families.

"It helps equalize the playing field," said Mary Randall, superintendent of the Bloomer School District. "Some of the research shows that the achievement gap is partly caused by kids who have been exposed to a lot of learning and kids who don't leave their living room."

Opportunities and activities like Story Hour help students catch up to their peers and develop literacy skills before they enter kindergarten.

"When they come to school, they have the vocabulary to interact

with the world around them," Randall said.

Reading scores for Bloomer Elementary School have improved since the district began its collaborative literacy work with the library. During the 2011-12 school year, Bloomer Elementary School scored a 28.6 in reading achievement on its school report card from the Department of Public Instruction. For the 2013-14 school year, the school's reading achievement score increased to 31.3. Test scores have also shown that the school has made progress in closing its reading achievement gaps.

"I believe strongly that this work is promoting activity time that these children wouldn't have received anywhere else," Randall said "The more language they hear, the more they learn."

### ■ Working together

The partnership the school district shares with the library was built out of necessity. In a small community, Randall says, it is necessary for the two to work together. In addition to the literacy activities at the library, the library and district have collaborated on other projects, such as the story walk — a half-mile nature walk on the school district's grounds that displays a children's story on large, protected story boards. Parents and their children can walk the trail and read a story at the same time. The story is changed several times a year. In addition, the library, led by library director Kathleen Larson, is very active in the community, holding Lego club, movie nights, and arts and crafts activities. The library also holds book talks at local schools, serves seniors at local



nursing homes, and brings books to residents for their enjoyment.

“Our library is integral to the work we do in the whole community,” Randall said.

Another positive outcome of the collaborative literacy work between the district and library is the benefit to children not yet enrolled in the school district. The school district and library are reaching out to and positively impacting young children before they enter pre-K or kindergarten.

“This work has been successful in that community members whose children aren’t receiving speech therapy from the district are able to benefit from the same instruction we are providing to the kids on our caseloads,” Bixby said.

Students from the community are getting the same professional literacy enrichment activities and opportunities as students in the school district.

“Parents can gain developmental information and get suggestions



about their child’s speech and language skills from professionals, without having to do anything ‘extra,’” Hammond said. “Sometimes a child has trouble with a sound or two, but does not have a speech language disability. Their parents can learn how to help them with these sounds.”

Another benefit is that dozens of young children and their parents become familiar with the library and

utilize it.

“It has been exciting to share the library with several families for the first time,” Bixby said. “Many parents are now regulars at the library because they first came to Story Hour with their child for speech. It is fun to watch our children go home with a bag of books.” ■

*Shelby Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.*



## Summer Leadership Institute

JULY 16 — GREEN BAY

**Meet with colleagues from around the state and gain the knowledge** to successfully lead your district and improve board governance.

- All-day event geared toward school board members and district administrators
- Multiple tracks allow you to customize your day.

**Watch [wasb.org](http://wasb.org) and your email for more information.**



Wisconsin Association of School Boards | 608-257-2622 | 877-705-4422 | Visit [wasb.org](http://wasb.org)