



# It Takes Two

A buddy program boosts reading confidence in Three Lakes

*Jennifer West*

In the heart of Three Lakes Elementary School is a library where sunshine streams in from skylights and bright carpeting covers the middle of the room. Throughout the space, twosomes of students sit cross-legged with books propped on their laps or held up so they can see words and pictures better.

What's quietly happening in the library on this day is the culmination of decades of experience for two teachers. Mari Lynn Garbowicz, first grade, and Beth Jacobson, fourth grade, have been running their own version of a reading-buddy program at the school for more than 20 years.

It's a program that has, in part, contributed to the school's above-average reading scores. In the 2015-16 assessment tests, 50.6 percent of Three Lakes elementary students scored advanced/proficient in reading and language arts, compared to the state average of 42.4 percent. Scores like that have

twice earned the school a Title I School of Recognition award from the Department of Public Instruction.

## ■ Reading Buddy Basics

At their very core, reading-buddy programs are about fostering an interest in reading through mentoring. Typically, the programs pair a younger and older student, perhaps a grade apart or perhaps even a high school student and an elementary student.

The programs can be as simple as one-on-one reading time or more complex, with follow-up activities and social interaction.

At Three Lakes, the reading-buddy program is successful because of how Garbowicz and Jacobson layer and reinforce reading strategies. And although reading-buddies, now called peer-to-peer coaches or tutors, have become a popular teaching strategy, the two teachers like to point out they've been doing this long before it was trendy.

"Twenty years ago, the connection between language and reading was just beginning to be developed," said Garbowicz, who was a speech and language pathologist before teaching first grade. "Beth and I had done collaborative teaching before, so I came to her and said, 'Let's combine language with reading to facilitate comprehension.' She was game and we were the first ones in the district to do it."

The reading-buddy program started off with students simply reading to each other. A fourth grader (the mentor) and a first grader (the emerging reader) were paired together to practice reading once per week.

"We'd model how to read to a young child, and we'd show the kids how to read to one another," Garbowicz said.

As the years progressed, the program became more sophisticated, and the two teachers began coordi-



nating curriculum and strategies.

“It just naturally evolved,” Jacobson says. “We take [Mari Lynn’s] reading strategies, and we pair them with what we call them in fourth grade. We take the first-grade information, and we translate it to what a fourth grader would call it.”

Today, as the students sit in the cheery, light-soaked library, they practice “Eagle Eye,” which is first-grade lingo for assessing information.

In fourth grade, the students know it as “pre-reading.” And if you listen carefully, you can hear the fourth graders — even those who aren’t confident readers — quietly encouraging their first-grade counterparts as they teach and learn together.

“Anytime you give children the vocabulary and the structure from year to year, it gets reinforced,” Garbowicz said.

### ■ Creating partnerships

The success of the program also comes from very deliberate student pairings. Garbowicz and Jacobson meet early in the year to discuss reading abilities, benchmarks and more.

“We schedule everything else around [creating the pairings] because we feel it is that important,” Garbowicz said. “We look at the previous year’s benchmarks, and we do a task analysis of the first-grade benchmarks and the fourth-grade benchmarks. Then we look at components of reading and assess strengths and weaknesses.”

The pairings are also fluid, changing throughout the year, as students’ needs change. For Jacobson and Garbowicz, that means constantly reassessing the students, which requires a lot of planning, communication and a strong working relationship.

“We’re very careful about the pairings,” Garbowicz says. “We want the fourth graders to feel



Strang, Patteson, Renning, Lewis & Lacy congratulates one of its founding shareholders, Attorney **Kirk D. Strang**, for being selected by the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA) as the recipient of the 2017 WASDA Award of Special Recognition for Service to Wisconsin.



**STRANG, PATTESON**  
RENNING, LEWIS & LACY  
*Your goals • Our mission*

[strangpatteson.com](http://strangpatteson.com)

positive, so we would never pair a first grader who could outread a fourth grader. It's flexible and includes all levels of kids."

It's that type of confidence building that has made the program a hit with the students as well. The first graders thrive and become confident readers while the fourth graders reinforce reading skills and take on a leadership role.

"If you ask my first graders what their favorite part of reading is, 90 percent will say 'reading buddies,'" Garbowitz says. "I think it's because they can see how their reading skills will progress if they work hard at it. The can't wait until they're a fourth grader."

"Oh, that's just the cat's pajamas, to be the fourth grader," Jacobson added. "Some of my students gain a confidence because they're in that teacher role, and they gain self-esteem."

### ■ Planning Curriculum

The two teachers also strategically

plan their curriculum, so the topics align across both grades.

"Common Core says we have to teach nonfiction, so the fourth graders had to pick a nonfiction book to read to the first graders that was appropriate," Garbowitz said. "We also taught text features, such as captions, bold print and diagrams. While they're reading the nonfiction, they have to use the strategies that they've already learned, but they're also looking for specific text features."

The curriculum is spiraled between first and fourth grades so that what students learn before fourth grade is really put into practice when they become the mentor in the reading-buddy program.

"It's an active learning strategy," Jacobson said. "They're synthesizing what they learned and applying it."

By the end of the school year, after weeks of reading to and with each other, the reading buddies have established a friendship. To cap off the

year, the fourth graders plan a surprise: a puzzle based on reading strategies. The mentor students sketch a drawing depicting a reading strategy and then the drawing is sent to the school's Fab Lab, where it's cut into a cardboard puzzle. The parting gift is presented to the first grader at the end of the year as a keepsake.

Jacobson said some of her fourth graders still have the puzzles they received as first graders.

"You're always looking for ways to apply what kids learn," said Jacobson. "It's an age-old difficulty in education."

But at least for today, these first and fourth graders are excited about reading, all because of a buddy program that is helping to create lifelong learners, and perhaps friends. ■

*Jennifer West is the PR/communications coordinator for the Three Lakes School District.*



## Find the right match.

The WASB's Search Services will help ensure your school board makes the right hire.

Our dedicated consultants are your trusted partner, considering your district's long- and short-term goals and how they connect with your search for a superintendent.

Contact the WASB today.



Search Services

| 608-257-2622

| 877-705-4422

| Visit [wasb.org](http://wasb.org)