

Marietta tries unique strategy to prepare young kids to learn to read



Credit: Miguel Martinez

EDUCATION

By Ty Tagami, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Every Georgia elementary school will soon have to reconsider how to teach reading. One metro Atlanta system has a head start.

Marietta has been training teachers to put phonics and related strategies at the core of elementary school curriculum, as new state laws and standards will require by the fall of 2025.

The city of fewer than 9,000 students in northwest metro Atlanta has also been doing something that will not be required: helping toddlers, even babies, prepare to read.

Explore [Politicians enter fray on best way to teach Georgia kids to read](#)

Marietta has been quietly coordinating with several organizations to build a foundation for literacy in children before they enroll in kindergarten. The public school system has been training teachers in private preschools. And other organizations in this closely watched experiment have been doing similar work at early care centers, doctors' offices and a local hospital.

The ultimate proof of concept will be gains on the [state-based Milestones tests](#) that start in third grade.

Influential people are pointing to Marietta as an act to follow.

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"They're the best model I've seen of everything that was presented to us" at the state Capitol, said [Sen. Chuck Hufstetler](#), R-Rome, who voted for the new literacy laws.

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Credit: Natrice Miller/AJC

Amy Sharma, who was among the advocates and experts to testify to lawmakers, said in an interview that Marietta enjoys a "Cadillac" approach that other school districts might envy.

"I would call this the full hog literacy intervention," said Sharma, executive director of Science for Georgia, which uses comedy and other approaches to promote interest in science.

As an independent and smaller city system nestled within much larger Cobb County, Marietta can draw support from business and philanthropy for an experiment with literacy in a way that might be more challenging in a sprawling suburb, she said. "Marietta is going to be hard to replicate because it's expensive and it's a whole community effort."

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Another challenge for statewide implementation of birth to age 5 literacy programs outside a small city like Marietta: Staff shortages and turnover in early learning centers are long-running problems that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and by inflation, said Gary Bingham, an early education professor at Georgia State University who is evaluating Marietta's program. That could make it difficult to maintain a trained cadre of child care workers across the state, he said.

Marietta is spending a mix of its own money and a portion of a \$2.5 million grant through the United Way. That money is shared by other organizations working on literacy there, including Quality Care for Children.

The organization has educated two of its Marietta-based trainers in the new literacy approach, said Ellyn Cochran, the group's president and CEO.

They are, in turn, training staff at a dozen private early care centers in Marietta, Cochran said.

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Credit: ALYSSA.POINTER@AJC.COM

Marietta's Emily Lembeck Early Learning Center, which houses the public system's pre-K school, is also working with private preschools.

One morning last winter, a literacy coach from the Center, Sally Miller, visited a local Head Start school to work with teachers on [phonological and phonemic awareness](#) — the ability to recognize and manipulate sounds in language.

She came equipped with a mini monster: a plastic cup with googly eyes styled like a trash can.

Momo only eats "m" words, she told the children. Will Momo eat a ball?

"No," they responded.

What about this (tiny replica) milk carton?

“Yes!”

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Results last school year on a proprietary test called MAP Growth indicate Marietta kindergartners and third graders who attended pre-K at the Lembeck Center tended to score higher in reading than students who did not.

The Lembeck Center started rewriting its approach to literacy in 2018, several years before the system’s elementary schools got on board.

This citywide approach includes a local hospital.

Wellstar Health Systems hired three administrators to manage a literacy program for newborns in Marietta, said Dr. Avril Beckford, who recently retired as chief pediatric officer there.

Nurses, doctors and parents at Kennestone Hospital — and at nearby pediatric offices — are learning about the developing brain and “the importance of a very scripted, very carefully designed program of speaking to children,” Beckford said.

Both the hospital and Marietta have been collaborating with the Atlanta Speech School in Buckhead. The private school’s training arm — the Rollins Center — has developed an online literacy platform called [Cox Campus](#) that they’ve made available for free to teachers and everyone else. (The development was funded in part by the James M. Cox Foundation, which is affiliated with the owners of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.)

Before they can understand text on a page, children must know the words that the letters represent, said Ryan Lee-James, the Rollins Center’s director. That means developing both vocabulary and an understanding of the sounds that comprise words.

Christa Payne, who was until recently the center’s public health director, said babies and toddlers must develop and then connect the regions of the brain that are hard-wired for speech and vision.

“And we know that every adult has the power to strengthen those networks through our interactions with children,” she said, by reading to them and speaking with them.

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Back at the Lembeck Center, Tricia Fox was leading her pre-K students in a second reading of “The Little Engine That Could.” Rereading books is a strategy they learned from Cox Campus: on the first read, orient kids in the storyline and introduce new vocabulary; on the second go-round, graduate to more complicated concepts such as the emotions of the characters.

Fox propped up nearly identical cloth dolls during different portions of the story. The only difference was their expressions. When the train was chugging along, it felt happy, the kids observed, prompted in part by the smiley doll. But when it got stuck and no one would help?

“Bad,” offered one boy, noting that Fox had swapped in the sad-faced doll.

Fox said that on other days, they work on the sounds of words, clapping them out one at a time.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Credit: Miguel Martinez

Cynthia DuBose, whose youngest daughter attended the school three years ago, has noticed that she is more eager to read than her older sister, who attended a private pre-K and didn’t get the same kind of training. Plus, her younger daughter’s reading scores have remained strong.

DuBose noticed her younger daughter tapping on her arm while sounding out words.

“One day I said, ‘What are you doing?’ And she was like, ‘This is what Ms. Fox does, this is what you’re supposed to do.’ And I was like, ‘Oh, OK, alrighty then.’”

Cochran, from Quality Care for Children, said lessons learned from Marietta will help leaders elsewhere make their next steps toward increased literacy. And there are so many groups involved in Marietta that can help spread the knowledge, like hers plans to do with the rest of its staff.

“And that’s what makes Marietta so exciting,” she said. “You’ve got so many partners at the table.”

Reading in Georgia

Georgia students as a whole are underperforming on standardized reading exams, which troubles many educators and state lawmakers. Just 36% of third graders scored proficient or better on the 2022 Georgia Milestones tests for English language arts, which measure reading and writing. The Atlanta Journal-

Constitution is taking a closer look at reading in Georgia's schools after lawmakers demanded a new approach to literacy.

About the Author

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Ty Tagami is the state education reporter for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Since joining the newspaper in 2002, he has written about everything from hurricanes to homelessness. He has deep experience covering local government and education, and can often be found under the Gold Dome when lawmakers meet or in a school somewhere in the state.

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