

Mauriah Swain works on her reading skills under Denise Yokley's supervision.

## Independence stressed

# She finds joy in helping these youngsters learn

By Letha Williams  
staff writer

At story time, Denise Yokley's students flock to the circle of tiny chairs. One boy rocks constantly. Another child rests her head in Ms. Yokley's lap. A third fidgets.

They're labeled "educable mentally impaired." But to their teacher, they're pure, heart-wrenching ambition, struggling for independence.

"They give so much of themselves to succeed," Ms. Yokley said. "So many people have the wrong impression of what a mentally impaired child is."

Named teacher of the year by the Oakland County Educators of the Learning Disabled, Ms. Yokley does her share to inspire her students. She stresses independence — to the child and the parents.

"Denise has tried to get the parents to let these kids go," said Carol Ralston, who with her husband, Jim, nominated their daughter's teacher for the award.

**TEACHING THE** primary unit of special education at Rochester Community School District's North Hill Elementary, Ms. Yokley has spent nine years developing her skills. She learned quickly that parental involvement is vital.

Daily report cards document her students' progress and must be signed by parents.

"So there is at least daily contact with the parents, Ms. Yokley said.

Her classroom is divided into several stations that each child must visit daily. Math, phonics, listening, reading and writing skills are emphasized in separate settings and the seven children are responsible for completing work at each.

"That in itself is a building of independence," Ms. Yokley said.

Afternoons generally are spent in group instruction, concentrating on science, social studies and art.

"Denise is a master teacher," said Rob Roy, Rochester Community School District's director of special education.

"It's hard to take a handicapped child and convince them to try something new," he added. "No one (teacher) can survive if they are (work) 8-to-3."

"You do what is necessary based on the needs of the kids — not by a master agreement or what the clock says," Roy said.

part of Ms. Yokley's individually designed curriculums. She and husband Chuck Bartelbaugh recently purchased a van to transport the special athletes to competitive meets.

"We train all year," Ms. Yokley said. "It gets the parents involved and gives the students a feeling of belonging to a group."

Several of her students will participate in the state Special Olympics, planned for June 1-3 in Mount Pleasant.

"It's very important for skill development," Ms. Yokley said.

Years ago, children like Ms. Yokley's students might have been hidden away in private homes or institutions. Now teachers ask to have such youngsters mainstreamed into their classes.

"I see that as a huge success," Ms. Yokley said, remembering she decided at age 12 to teach the mentally impaired.

She earned a bachelor's degree in mental impairment special education in 1972 at Marygrove College. By 1979, the Avon Township resident had earned a master's degree in emotionally im-

paired education at Oakland University.

**IN HER CLASSROOM,** Ms. Yokley, 30, has seen many successes. One youngster remembered a fire prevention program and six weeks later saved her parents from a fire.

Another child is afraid of clowns. But she's more comfortable with them since Ms. Yokley used make-up and her husband to create one.

"The mentally impaired are really a viable part of our society," Ms. Yokley said. "We shouldn't isolate ourselves from them."

"It could happen to anybody," she added. "It's a fact of life, not a fact of neglect."

During class, Ms. Yokley doesn't permit inappropriate actions.

"I have really high expectations for behavior," she said.

Even in their special circle where songs are sung and books are read, the youngsters can't resist a giggle or two when Ms. Yokley sings.

"One thing I'm not very good at is singing," she said.

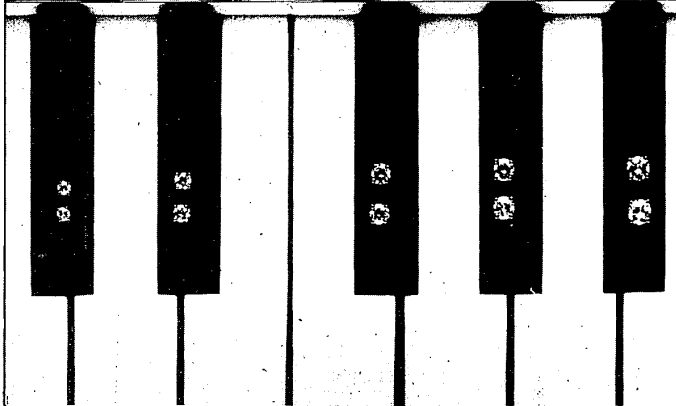


Denise Yokley discusses a situation with Allison Ralston.



Working on arithmetic with an abacus is Allison Ralston.

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"They give so much of themselves to succeed," Denise Yokley says of her students.