Project aims to build literacy in elementary schools

By Darrell Clem
staff writer

School principal Sylvia Whitmer smiles and casts an approving glance at a row of desks.

It's not that she's happy because the desks form a neat line. She's just not used to seeing so many library books stacked on top of them.

"You didn't see that before," said the Oakley Park Elementary principal.

It's not by accident or coincidence that students at Oakley Park and the other 10 elementaries in the Walled Lake Consolidated School District are reading more. The breakthrough stems from a new language literacy project aimed at improving pupil skills in reading, writing and spelling.

The district includes northwest Farmington Hills.

THE PROJECT'S startup cost was $70,000, and school officials have committed to continued funding, Whitmer said.

National studies have shown that students fail to understand much of what they read and that they have difficulty putting their thoughts on paper. Walled Lake educators are trying to change that.

Teachers are incorporating reading and writing with all subject areas and are helping their students develop the critical thinking skills they need to analyze what they read and write.

Whereas many young pupils once read "The Three Little Pigs" without analyzing it, they now are learning that there are two sides to the story. For a different perspective, they are reading "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs," as told by an author named, well, A. Wolf.

"The kids are learning that from the wolf's viewpoint, it was dumb for these pigs to build houses out of straw and twigs," Whitmer said.

Walled Lake School District

AT HIGHER grade levels such as Michael Behrmann's sixth-grade class, students are engaging in group discussions of such books as "Sounder," about a dog and the poor black family that owns it.

"I'll ask the kids questions about the book, and they have to put themselves in the role of the characters," Behrmann said. "Sometimes they will discuss the books in groups. When you think about it, that's what adults do when they see a good movie or read a good book."

As 11-year-old Melany Gambee pointed out, "It's more fun in class when you can talk about it with your friends."

Though group interaction has increased, Walled Lake teachers also set aside a certain time each day so students can sit quietly at their desks and read independently.

TO BOOST writing skills, many teachers also have begun having their students keep a journal about their thoughts and school studies. "They're writing more," Berhmann said, "and they're writing better."

In grades four through six, pupils learn 20 new spelling words — and their meanings — each week. Students also are encouraged to keep a list of new words that they learn in such subjects as science and social studies.

Language literacy project guidelines were developed by a 29-member committee of educators representing each Walled Lake elementary school. The panel reviewed exemplary reading and writing programs in other districts and studied recommendations of national experts.

"We're trying to help the students build independent reading and writing skills," Whitmer said. "We're trying to prepare them for the 21st century."

THOUGH STUDENTS in every class must read certain materials, those who complete the work are encouraged to read library books — often for extra class credit.

Educators hope they will be able to measure the results by improved student scores on achievement tests. But Julie Janosz, a writing program coordinator, noted that test scores are only one indication of success.

"The children are more apt to go to the library now, get a book and then come back and talk to you about it," she said. "They are learning that reading and writing can be fun."

CHIROPRACTIC OUTLOOK
By Dr. Philip McCarty

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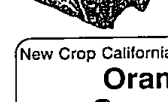

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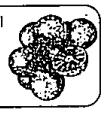

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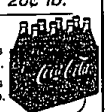

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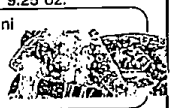

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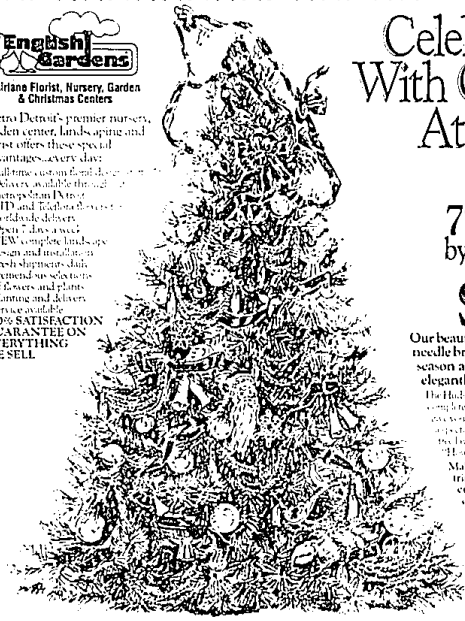

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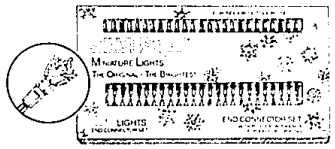

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