

Schools look to solve early reading issues

Reading, the cliché goes, is fundamental.

It's not always easy, however, and the Archdiocese of Baltimore has joined with the University of Maryland to address the problems facing young students.

The five-year partnership, called the Reading Research Project, will begin its third year of studying the reading development of first- and fourth-graders.

Funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the study is the first of its kind locally and aims to find students who have trouble reading, to determine if intervention is successful.

"It's an absolutely wonderful program," said Leslie Andrathy, associate superintendent of curriculum and professional development for archdiocesan schools. "This partnership is one of the better ones we've had in higher education. They really keep me informed."

Debbie Speece, the study's director and a Maryland professor of special education, said 1,000 parents in 17 participating schools gave permission for their children to participate during its first two years. New consent forms will be sent home with children during the first week of the new school year.

Ms. Speece's staff of graduate assistants will begin administering tests in October, hoping to find children with reading difficulties. During a 10-week stretch in the spring, a three-day-a-week intervention program will be implemented to attempt to correct issues with selected students who are having difficulties.

"We work with teachers and principals and try to interfere minimally," Ms. Speece said. "That's a challenge because schools are very busy places."

First-grade reading, Ms. Speece said, is dealing with how letters make words, while fourth grade becomes more about comprehension. Intensive topics like social studies

and science develop as road blocks for some, she added.

“It’s really a matter of, how do you make sense of all that you’re reading?” Ms. Speece said.

Students observed in first-grade classes are tracked through third grade, while fourth-graders are analyzed through the sixth. The fourth grade program is also part of a larger reading project directed by The Johns Hopkins University’s Kennedy Krieger Institute.

Data from the second year is still being analyzed for the project, but archdiocesan officials believe it will have long-term ramifications.

“At the end of this,” said Ms. Andrathy, “our teachers are going to have some real intervention strategies with early readers.”