

Seizing the day

By [Rebecca Macfie](#) | Published on July 5, 2008 | Issue 3556

Meeting school students' health and literacy needs can have a remarkable "booster" effect.

Bleck. Greck. Preck. Dack. Skick.

Thirteen-year-old Adam Siepkes reads aloud from a column of nonsense words in a small, thick, red book. He's practising short vowel sounds ending in "ck". Linwood College literacy teacher Judy Hutchison utters gentle words of encouragement, and puts a stroke through a box alongside each word that Adam reads correctly.

Turning the page, he works through a series of nonsense sentences that enable him to practise some of the phonetic patterns he has been working with.

"Take the truck to the docks for a crate of fish, but do not bring back a haddock; Dash to the pitch to catch the hat before it gets too dark in the stand."

A page further on, Adam encounters columns of real words ending in "y". Hutchison reminds him that this can signify either an "i" sound at the end of a word, or an "e" sound. "Happy, hungry; spry, satisfy." It looks as dull as ditch water, but Adam is focused and attentive. Toe by Toe is working well for him, he says.

Advocates of the "whole language" method of reading instruction – which emphasises the meaning and context of text and is the dominant reading philosophy in New Zealand schools – would be horrified at this phonetic dissection of words.

But the whole language method has largely failed Adam: he started high school this year with a reading age of about 10 – three years behind his chronological age. In his primary school years he went through early literacy intervention programme Reading Recovery, and after that his teachers led his parents, Robyn and John, to believe he was doing fine.

It wasn't until this year, when he started as a Year 9 student at Linwood College, a decile 2 Christchurch school, that they were advised he needed help.

He was enrolled – along with about 40 others this year – in a highly structured, UK-designed phonics reading programme called Toe by Toe (see box page 26), and each day he spends about 15 minutes working with Hutchison through the little red book.

If Linwood's experience with the programme over the last three years is any indication, within a few months Adam will probably be reading at around the level expected of someone his own age, if not better.

That was the experience of Simon Burgess and Brent (BJ) Cooper. They did Toe by Toe two years ago; both were assessed on entry to Year 9 at Linwood with reading ages of about 9½-10, and by the time they finished the programme a few months later they had progressed to 13-13½.

Simon recalls that he used to be "real bad" at reading; it was something to be suffered or avoided. Now he reads for pleasure – Stephen King is a favourite writer – and says his spoken language has improved, too.

"I used to say words like 'bro', but now I just try and speak normally." Like BJ, he feels his school work across all subjects has improved as a result of learning to read properly.

For Adam, it's not just Toe by Toe that is turning the key to learning. He has also had his eyesight tested and been prescribed and equipped – free of charge – with a pair of glasses, thanks to the school's intervention. Neither he nor his parents had been aware he needed them.

Again, he's in good company: in the past three years dozens of Linwood students have similarly discovered that they needed glasses and been kitted out with them. Many of them, like Year 12 students Cameron Scott and Clare Schultz, and Year 11 student Rebecca Carroll realised only after they were prescribed, how much they had been struggling to see.

Ryan Scott-Fellows and Johnny Tukuniu (Year 12) already had glasses, but when they were tested at school it was discovered their eyes had deteriorated and they needed stronger lenses.

Melanie Hunter, now in Year 11, had felt throughout her primary school years that something was wrong with her eyesight, but was told everything was fine. But when she was assessed after starting Year 9 at Linwood, she found she'd been right all along, and was prescribed coloured lenses to correct a condition that makes it difficult for her to read black print on a white page. She also struggled with reading, but caught up after going through Toe by Toe.

"I never used to get very good grades, but now I do. It's really boosted me," she says.

Often distracted in class during her primary school years, she now wonders – with an understandable hint of frustration – how much more progress she might have made if all this had been detected years ago.

Indirectly, all these students, and many others at Linwood, have former Christchurch mayor Garry Moore to thank. After his re-election in the 2004 local body elections, Moore issued a challenge to get all young people in the city literate and numerate, and everyone under 25 either in work, training or at school.

That seeded a major undertaking at Linwood, dubbed Lane (Literacy and Numeracy Empowerment), that has resulted in dozens of kids getting glasses, around 160 students receiving intensive reading tuition through Toe by Toe over the past three years, and others getting urgently needed dental and medical help.

It has also resulted in a substantial boost in students' academic achievement.

Moore's challenge led Linwood College principal Rob Burrough and head of maths Alan Parris to the Wayne Francis Trust, a private philanthropic agency with a focus on youth work, of which Moore is a trustee.

The trust, which has about \$1.5-\$2 million available for distribution each year, was set up by Christchurch entrepreneur Wayne Francis before he died of cancer in 1999.

With the trust's financial and moral support, Parris led a research team looking into the effects that physical and mental health problems can have on student learning, while Hutchison scoured the international research for a literacy programme capable of reaching the 33% of kids turning up in Year 9 at Linwood whose reading ages were between two and nine years behind their chronological ages.

They decided that every student in Years 9 and 10 at the beginning of 2006 – about 450 – would undergo a detailed check of their eyes, ears, teeth and aerobic fitness, as well as taking part in a survey of their mental health and home lives.

In addition, tutors would be hired to deliver the Toe by Toe programme – which had already been successfully trialled with a handful of Linwood students – to struggling readers. Any student found to be in need of help as a result of the medical assessment would get access to free treatment. Says Parris:

“We realised there were things about students’ lives that we couldn’t change – we couldn’t influence how many books they had at home or the economic circumstances of their parents – but we could have an influence on the medical barriers that were affecting their learning.”

Over 70% of students needed a referral for at least one health problem. Fifty-three students needed glasses and others needed minor help such as eye drops and eye exercises. Urgent dental treatment was needed by 9%.

Lynda Jeffs, the researcher who oversaw the auditory, oral and visual health part of the assessment, concluded that the academic progress of many students was being held up by treatable health problems. For some students, the results were dramatic.

Parris: “One girl was about to go up before the board disciplinary committee and probably be turfed out. She got glasses, and started coming to school at 8.15 in the morning; her reading age went up five years on Toe by Toe, and she went onto the Gate (Gifted and Talented Education) programme. Another mother rang up and said, ‘Thank you, you saved my life.’ She had been about to put her son into care.”

Student behaviour improved across the board. School records showed that the Year 10 students enrolled in Toe by Toe during 2006 had, in their previous year at school, been responsible for a disproportionate share of classroom disruption. After they had completed the programme, their level of disruption was lower than that of their peers. Burrough believes the Lane project is one of a number of factors that contributed to a halving of suspensions at the school last year.

He says students arrive at Linwood with an enormous range of academic abilities, although a “stocktake” undertaken as part of the Lane project showed the average level of attainment in maths and reading among Year 9 pupils is about a year behind the national average. But students who received assistance through Lane showed substantial progress when assessed against the nationally standardised Asttle reading and maths tests. The most significant impact was among those who had received glasses.

Students who completed the Toe by Toe programme improved their reading ages by an average of two-and-a-half years. One student surged ahead by six years, moving from the reading level of a nine-year-old to that of a 15-year-old, and several had gains of four or more years.

But, in a school where 20% of students move on each year, significant obstacles remain. Two of the students whose progress at school was dramatically improved by the Lane intervention have since left.

And for some students, mobility and hardship form the backdrop to their schooling:

n Sixteen students (4%) had attended 10 or more schools.

n Forty-five (11%) had lived in 10 or more homes.

n Fewer than half – 46%, or 199 students – had two parents living at home.

n A third had not had breakfast the day they were assessed.

n A fifth had no lunch.

n Twenty-five students (8%) told researchers they had no books at all at home.

n Forty-two (11%) said they were sexually active.

n Thirteen (3%) said they had been subject to sexual abuse.

n Seventy-four (19%) said they had witnessed or been exposed to family violence.

n A fifth said they didn't have a regular doctor.

n Nearly 200 (46%) didn't have a dentist.

The survey also delivered some good news: almost 80% of students said they had hope for their future, and close to 60% were involved with sport, church or youth groups. Over 70% were rated as having superior, excellent or good physical fitness. Over 90% said they felt safe in their neighbourhood and 95% felt safe at school.

Among those who have been briefed this year on the results of the Lane project are Jane Cartwright, chief executive of primary health organisation Partnership Health Canterbury, and Youth Court judge Jane McMeekin.

For Cartwright, the evidence of a lift in academic achievement as a result of addressing unmet student health needs raises a "red flag" of concern. Although a range of checks are in place for young children, and the Before School health assessments are soon to be rolled out, she now wonders whether "when kids hit puberty, there is a need to give them a bit of a warrant of fitness check, to ensure they are getting their best chance".

She has already undertaken to provide three-year funding for a community worker who will work with Linwood to link students with health practitioners. A similar arrangement is in place with Aranui High School, another low-decile Christchurch school.

Judge McMeekin told the *Listener* that the Lane project confirmed many of her observations about the range of barriers that can cause young people to drop out of the school system. A "significant number" who come before the Youth Court have deficiencies in reading and writing. "If you want to address youth offending, one way of doing that is ensuring that school works for young people."

But early intervention – ideally much earlier than high school – is essential. "When you consider the minimal amount that it costs to rectify many of these problems, it's just astounding that more is not done."

For his part, Parris wants to see all students entering high school given a comprehensive ear, eye, dental and psychosocial assessment, with the results stored on a centralised database so the needs of even the most transient pupils can be tracked.

The Wayne Francis Trust now wants to apply what has been learned at Linwood, to help those who have fallen through the cracks of the education system. It has contracted Linwood to deliver the Toe by Toe programme at the YMCA Education Centre and Te Ora Hou youth trust, and run a trial with about five prisoners at Christchurch prison.

For 20-year-old Rebecca Smith, the YMCA's second-chance education centre in Christchurch's Lichfield St is a second home. She arrived with a reading age of ten-and-a-half; some of her peers can read only as well as five-year-olds. Under the tuition of teacher Julie Alce, she's romping through her Toe by Toe manual. "It's wicked. I love it," she says.

Ironically, this means Linwood itself now lacks the resources to be able to offer Toe by Toe to all those who need it. Hutchison and one other teacher are managing to deliver the programme to about 40 students, but she says a further 30 would benefit from it.

The Lane project has illustrated an important point: that many obstacles to student progress are relatively easy to eliminate, and when they are, kids learn more and behave better. "They have proven that simple things can deal with a great proportion of the challenges for kids," says Moore. "When you think that for the price of a pair of glasses you might keep a kid out of prison, it's not that complicated."

"There is no one panacea," says Burrough. "The Lane project was a response to a local need. But if those needs are here, in this community, then they will also be happening throughout the country."