

# RESEARCH *INSIGHTS*

Supported by the Barrie Region MISA Professional Network Centre

## WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO... ...when grade 7 & 8 students struggle with reading

In September 2006, three intermediate teachers at Monsignor Clair Catholic School, undertook an action research project focused on improving student achievement in reading.

The purpose of the project was to identify strategies that improve intermediate students' achievement in, and attitudes towards, reading. Strategies used were those developed by Kylene Beers from her book "When Kids Can't Read."

Approximately 90 intermediate students were involved in the study. Quantitative data was gathered from CASI assessments and reading attitude surveys administered in Term 1 and again in Term 2.

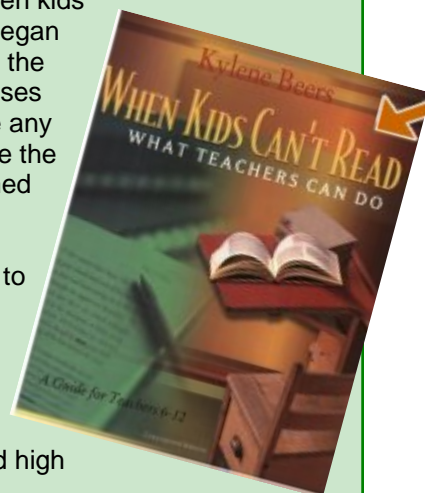
By reviewing CASI scores and report card marks at the outset of the project, the team identified "main idea" and "summarizing" as areas of weakness in their students' reading abilities. The team then selected strategies and activities from Kylene Beers' book that would strengthen students' abilities to make inferences, thereby helping them in identifying main ideas and in communicating accurate, detailed summaries.

Several of Kylene Beers' suggested strategies were used to assist students in making inferences. Students were directly exposed to the concept of inferencing, what good readers do to make inferences, and then given opportunities to apply this skill with two minute mysteries, children's stories, bumper stickers, cartoons and comic strips.



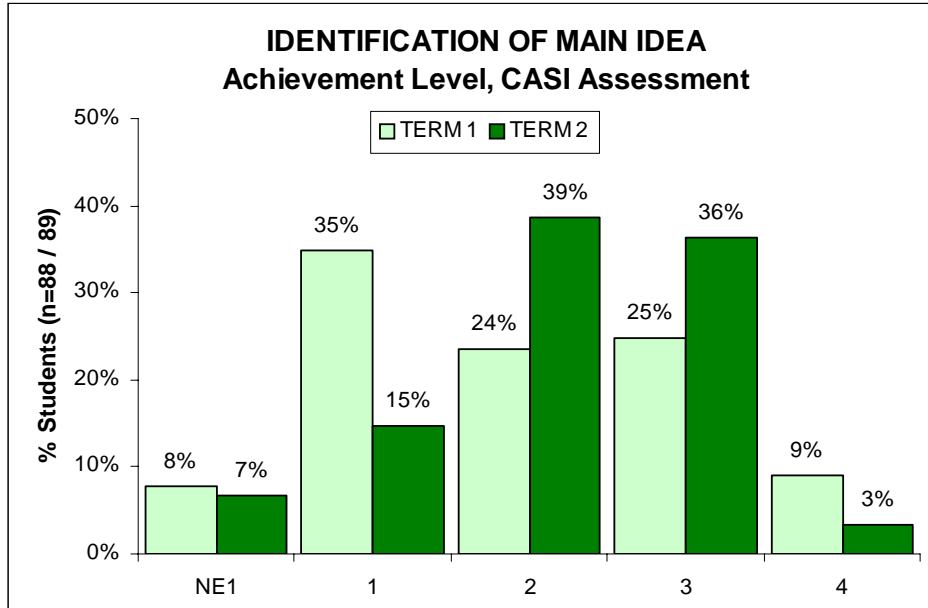
**Action research project... what a novel idea!** Intermediate students at Monsignor Clair Catholic School in Barrie were participants in their teachers' action research project focused on improving student achievement in reading. Pictured above (from left to right) are: Kristen Mahon, Lauren McCarthy, Sarah Benedict, Jessica Godin and Laura Jowett.

For Kylene Beers, the question of "what to do when kids can't read" surfaced abruptly in 1979 when she began teaching. That year, she discovered that some of the students in her seventh-grade language arts classes could pronounce all the words, but couldn't make any sense of the text. Others couldn't even pronounce the words. And that was the year she met a boy named George. George couldn't read. When George's parents asked her to explain what their son's reading difficulties were and what she was going to do to help, Kylene, a secondary certified English teacher with no background in reading, realized she had little to offer the parents, even less to offer their son. That defining moment sent her on a twenty-three-year search for answers to that original question: how do we help middle and high schoolers who can't read?

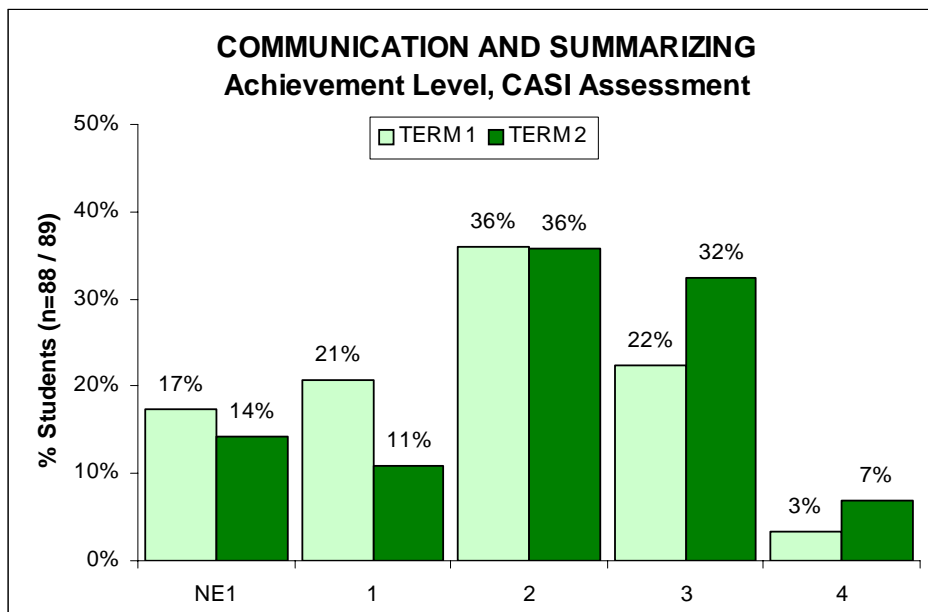


## Results of CASI Assessments

CASI assessments did not reveal statistically significant increases in reading level achievement among the entire sample of intermediate students. However, results on CASI Questions 2 (Main Idea) and Questions 8 & 9 (Communication) pointed to progress made by struggling readers. [Note: A struggling reader was defined as a student achieving Level 1 or below.]



The chart above illustrates a general pattern of improvement in terms of students' abilities to identify the main idea from text (CASI Q2), particularly among students who struggled with this skill in Term 1. While **43%** of students were below Level 2 in Term 1, by Term 2 only **22%** were below Level 2.



The chart above illustrates another pattern of modest improvement in terms of students' abilities to communicate accurate, detailed summaries (CASI Q8&9). While **38%** of students were below Level 2 in Term 1, by Term 2 only **25%** were below Level 2.

## Other Findings

While CASI assessments were used as a means of measuring progress in achievement, a survey was used to gather information about students' attitudes towards reading.

Overall the survey revealed that students were positive about many aspects of reading. For instance, on both iterations of the survey, students responded with a high level of strong agreement to statements such as "It is important to me to be a good reader" (**64%** in Term 1 and **67%** in Term 2) as well as "I like reading fiction" (**56%** each term).

At the other end of the spectrum, students responded with a high level of strong disagreement to the statement "I read with my family" (**54%** in Term 1 and **60%** in Term 2), indicating that reading was viewed as an independent activity among intermediate students.

Overall, no significant changes in student attitudes were evident from one administration of the survey to the next.

In the classroom, all three teachers indicated that they observed increased participation by students. In their view, all students showed an increased ability to use appropriate terminology and to apply it to their understanding of literary works. Further, teachers commented that activities engaged the students to look deeper into the text and find the underlying message in text.

*"The pre-reading strategies allowed my students to make connections with previous knowledge and reading experiences." (Marnie Durst)*

In summary, teachers felt that the strategies from Kylene Beers' book would continue to assist all readers with inferencing and comprehension. Teachers felt that verbal strategies, in particular, appealed to struggling students, as these enabled students to succeed in expressing the main idea, summarizing text and communicating their thoughts.