



LAWRENCE JENKINS/Special Contributor

Francesca Jones from the SMU research group used flash cards and puppets to work on reading skills with Ricky Saenz (left) and B.J. Wiggins on Wednesday.

Research team hopes to hone reading skills of retarded youths

SMU gets \$3 million grant for study with Fort Worth students

By **HOLLY K. HACKER**
Staff Writer

FORT WORTH — For too long, educators have practiced "assumicide" on children with mental retardation, as one researcher at Southern Methodist University puts it.

"The assumption has been for many generations that these children just could not learn to read," said Patricia Mathes, director of SMU's Institute for Reading Research. So with a \$3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Dr. Mathes and her colleagues are out to challenge that assumption.

They believe that with the right techniques, children with mild to moderate retardation eventually can read well enough to live more independently. That includes being able to fill out job applications, surf the Internet and read books and newspapers.

Starting this fall, and over the next four years, SMU researchers

will work with 150 children in the Fort Worth Independent School District. Half the students will be taught reading with the district's current methods. The other half will receive an hour of intense instruction daily to help them not only sound out and read words, but also to know what those words mean.

The approach has worked successfully with dyslexic children and other struggling readers, Dr. Mathes said.

Researchers call the study unprecedented in size and scope. The University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Georgia State University also received \$3 million apiece for parallel studies.

If the approach works, researchers say that it could help ensure that all children succeed in the classroom, as the federal No Child Left Behind standards demand.

"When we talk about No Child Left Behind, we mean no child left behind, and that includes this special population," said Robert Patterson, dean of SMU's education school.

Researchers demonstrated their approach Wednesday at Woodway Elementary School in southwest Fort Worth.

Three children sat at a table as Francesca Jones, the coordinator of SMU's research project, held up a big flash card with the letters "Mm" and a picture of a monkey.

"Mmmm. Can you say it with me?" Ms. Jones asked.

"Mmmm," the trio responded.

"Good job!"

Then Ms. Jones, aided by a hand puppet named Mr. Wolf, read a story about a monkey who munched on bananas.

One of the students, 7-year-old B.J. Wiggins, was joined by his mother, Laronda Wiggins. She said she's excited about the project and the hope it brings to B.J. and other children like him.

"Doctors basically told me he would never do what a normal child would do. ... They said he would never walk. He's walking. They said he would never talk. So he's come a long way," Ms. Wiggins said.

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