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## Classroom tests techniques for teaching deaf children

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In an argyle vest and hearing aid, James Redmond followed right along with the students he was in charge of assisting. At 35, Redmond took on both the role of teacher and student in Jennifer Washington's mixed kindergarten-through-first-grade class for deaf and hard-of-hearing students at Nathan Hale Elementary School in Lansing.

After graduating from the Exceptional Children Have Opportunities Joint Agreement program at Tinley Park High School in 1992, Redmond was one of hundreds of thousands of deaf students whose disability severely limited his reading.

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**Autumn Smith (left) and Alonzo Howard use sign language and sound out words during a reading lesson.**  
*(Carol Dorsett/SouthtownStar)*



**ECHO learning**

But a group of teachers led by Washington is on a mission to shatter the barriers that have held deaf students back.

"All of the children that passed through our classrooms before this, we grieve," said Washington, who has been teaching deaf students for 23 years. "We sent them into the world without this."

What the teacher from Richton Park is referring to is a groundbreaking method of teaching deaf and hard-of-hearing children how to read developed by Beverly Trezek, a special education professor at DePaul University.

She combined visual phonics - where students can "see sounds" - and direct instruction - an SRA/McGraw-Hill scripted reading curriculum.

"In the most simplistic sense, deaf children struggle with reading because they can't hear the sounds," Trezek said.

Redmond, for example, never understood the concept of the silent "E."

"I wish I had this program when I was in school, but I'm learning now," he signed.

"Those were things we didn't know how to teach," said Donna Carraher, principal of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing program for ECHO, which draws from 32 Southland districts.

After Carraher first learned of Trezek's method, she figured she had been doing the same thing for 30 years and the results had been the same for the last 100.

"The philosophy was 'Why not?' It can't hurt," said Carraher, who has taught in the field for 36 years.

About three years ago, ECHO was the first in Illinois to pilot the program, and a month into the instruction, teachers saw results. First-graders were doing things juniors in high school hadn't previously accomplished.

"It was like a light bulb went off," Orland Park teacher Sarah Lasky said.

Until then, students were memorizing the words instead of reading them, explained fellow teacher Marissa Noble.

For Washington, who wears a microphone in her ear and an FM transmitter around her neck synced with student receivers, the progress is astonishing.

"It's easy to get tears in your eyes because they're not supposed to be able to do this," Washington said. "But they are, and the future is bright."