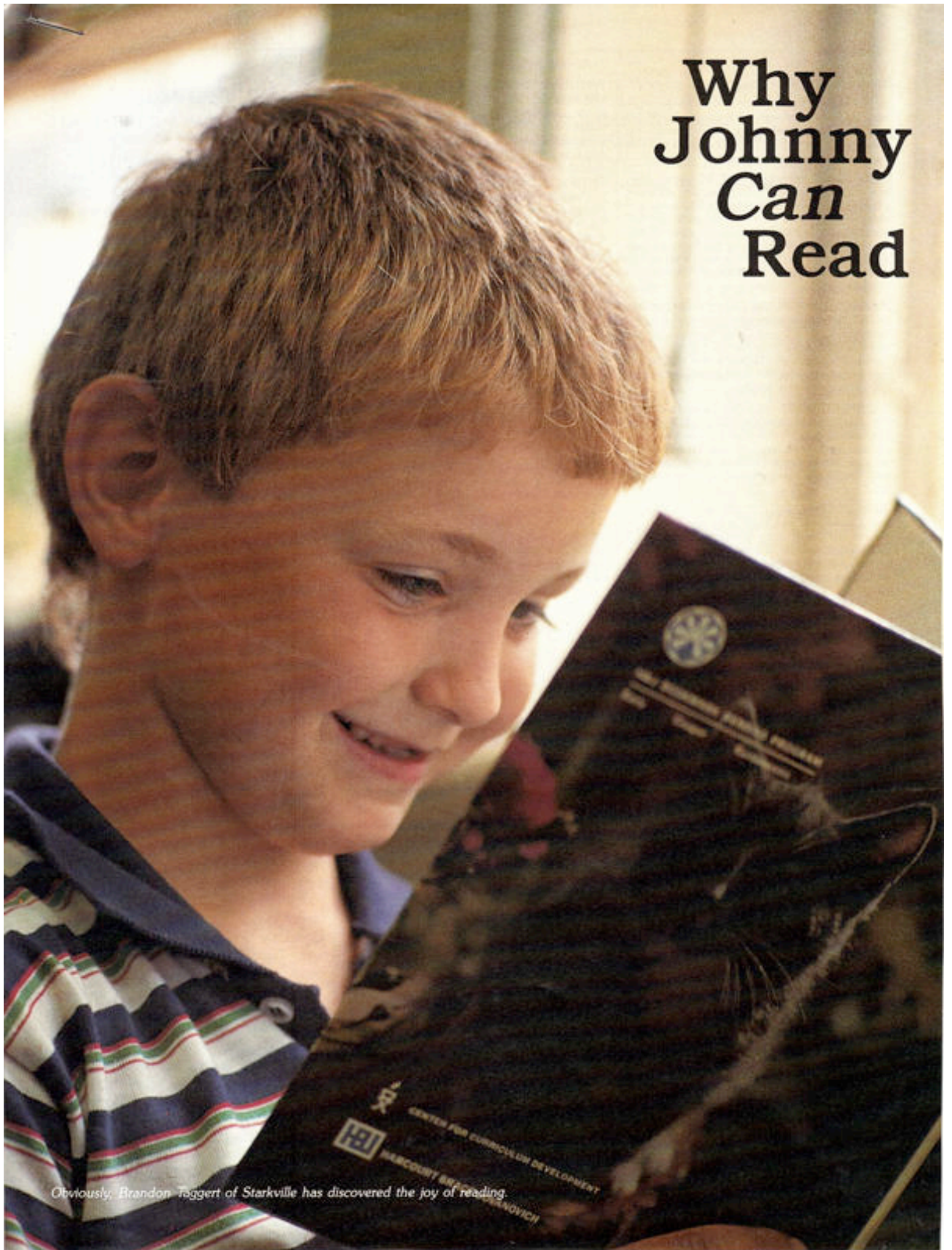


Why Johnny Can Read



Obviously, Brandon Taggart of Starkville has discovered the joy of reading.

Last fall Education Secretary William Bennett and the National Association of Elementary School Principals honored Jannette Peugh ('65) of Aberdeen as one of America's finest grade-school administrators. Among her accomplishments is fostering a program that gives Johnny an early start on reading and learning.

By Nancy Dorman-Hickson

The little boy sits, head on his desk, fighting off sleep. After a long, hard-playing morning, Johnny is supposed to be napping along with the other children in his class. But as usual, he doesn't want to sleep and his mind wanders.

He sneaks a peek at the picture of blue sky and purple butterflies he painted for Miss Jannette. Johnny knows she will like it. He just hopes she has enough time for him to read for her. He grins when he thinks of the story he will read, the one about the cat in the funny-looking hat, eating green eggs and ham. Who eats green eggs and ham? It's a funny story.

In a sun-drenched room a few doors down from Johnny's class, an attractive brunette, head bent over her desk, works on a stack of the many stacks of papers before her. The office is pleasantly stuffed with comfortable furniture and piles of books. Children's artwork brightens the walls.

It is just a little after 1 p.m. but Jannette Peugh has already had conferences with two of her teachers, answered a half dozen phone calls, worked on a report evaluating her school's performance, and opened the door to unexpected visitors twice. The last visitor was freckle-faced Johnny, eager to show off his new reading skills.

Seeing the book clutched under his arm, she thinks of all the details she has to attend to this afternoon, including preparation for the PTA meeting tonight. She considers her duties then ushers in the eager child. After all, Johnny and children like him are the reason she's in education.

Miss Jannette isn't a principal whom children fear. Oh, it's true that when students at Aberdeen Elementary School misbehave, they sometimes are sent to her office. However, the encounter isn't likely to be as unpleasant as they expect.

"I take a dim view of spanking," Peugh said, "and we can usually talk out any problems we have. Occasionally I have to contact a parent." But

most of her experiences with the children are agreeable. Peugh has had a while to learn how to communicate with children.

"My most rewarding experience as a teacher was to see students gain enough skills to really enjoy reading," Peugh said. "You could see them laugh out loud. There was just a joy there.



"When they reached it, they weren't worrying about beginning sounds and knowing the vowels and the rules for dividing the words into syllables," Peugh said, a smile showing her delight at the memory. "They were into the world of print and it was an exciting place to be. That's what you want for every child."

And that's what Peugh has been trying to give every child who has come under her charge as principal of Aberdeen Elementary. It is not a responsibility she takes lightly. She believes educators have a mission.

"Our society is based on the need for the populace to be educated," Peugh said, "and the country is only going to be as good as what we are able to turn out." If hard work on the part of school administrators like Peugh has anything to do with it, the country's future looks rosy.

By 7 a.m. each week day, Peugh is immersed in work. Her workload doesn't lessen until 4 p.m. Then she might make it home for a short break

before returning to attend or preside over inevitable school meetings. On weekends, she tries to catch up on her journal reading, but keeping up-to-date in her field is almost a full-time job. And the money in education isn't any better than the hours. The rewards, such as the moment when comprehension unfolds on a child's face, make it worthwhile.

Sometimes rare recognition presents itself.

In the fall of 1986, Peugh was among 58 elementary and middle school principals in the United States recognized as an outstanding member in her field by Education Secretary William Bennett and the National Association of Elementary School Principals. The National Distinguished Principals Recognition program was initiated two years earlier to recognize the role of principals in forming educational programs of quality for the early learning years.

At a regal ceremony and black-tie dinner held at the Department of Archives in Washington, D.C., Peugh and the other principals received certificates presented by Bennett.

The trip was not all glamour, however. Interaction sessions provided the Aberdeen principal with a chance to trade notes on early childhood education with her colleagues. "Early childhood" is a subject with which she is quite familiar.

With federal funds, Aberdeen had kindergarten units even before the full implementation required by Mississippi's Education Reform Act.

"We got two [kindergarten] units or pilot programs in 1985-86," Peugh said. "That year of practice paid off when the law was put into effect the following year." The kindergarten units were for 5-year-olds.

While most of the state initiated kindergarten programs in 1986, Peugh's district was one step, or rather, one grade ahead again.

"Aberdeen has an outstanding pre-kindergarten class this year," Peugh said proudly. Funding for the Pre-K pro-

gram came from the Education Consolidation Improvement Act, better known as Chapter 1, the federally funded program that serves children who score 50 or below on a standardized achievement test. Even before the program was started, Aberdeen was good at finding ways to use Chapter 1 funds.

"Our district was named an exemplary program in Chapter 1 for the nation. Only two programs in Mississippi were selected," Peugh said. The Aberdeen District includes Aberdeen Elementary, Vine Street Elementary, Aberdeen Middle School, Prairie Elementary, Shivers Junior High, and Aberdeen High School.

"The idea of early childhood [education] is that if you can do early intervention, it will be profitable later because you won't have to do expensive remediation," Peugh explained. She is justifiably proud of the advances Aberdeen has made in this area of education, although the state's best elementary school principal is reluctant to attribute any of these advances to her own hard work. Others, however, are quick to point out qualities in her that helped bring about these successes.

The superintendent of the Aberdeen Separate School District, John Curlee, has called her "a professional person to the utmost. She represents the very best of all of Mississippi's elementary school principals." A colleague described Peugh as "someone with vision. There may be 100 trends for educators to follow and she knows which one to go with."

A native of Aberdeen, Peugh has spent her professional life in that small Mississippi town. She was a student teacher in the same building in which she now presides as principal. After marrying Bill Peugh a week after his graduation from Mississippi State University in 1963, she came to MSU from Mississippi University for Women, where she had spent her freshman and sophomore years. Peugh finished her bachelor's in elementary education at MSU in the spring of 1965 and was Aberdeen Elementary School's second grade teacher by that fall. She received a master's degree from MSU in 1969. In 1970, she became assistant principal and in 1971 she was named principal.

Peugh always knew she wanted to be in education. Her parents grew up during the Depression and never received degrees, but they urged their children to get an education. All her



Like other teachers at Aberdeen Elementary School, Katy Miller (left) often seeks advice from Peugh, who devotes much of her time to helping her colleagues improve their teaching skills.

siblings chose careers related to education: her brother teaches industrial engineering at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; her youngest sister teaches elementary education in Hartsville, S.C.; and her other sister is the payroll clerk for the Aberdeen School District.

Peugh's immediate family is also oriented toward education. Her husband, Bill, a 1963 and 1969 graduate of MSU, is the counselor at Aberdeen High School. Stephen, their son, graduated in 1986 from MSU with a degree in physical education. The Peugh's daughter, Susan, graduated from Aberdeen High School in May of 1987. Susan's mother says she won't be surprised if her youngest child also chooses a career in education.

"That's all they've ever known," Peugh said about her children. "When they were little, they had grade books and they made little scribbles in them, too, because that's what they saw us do."

Peugh said the National Distinguished Principals Award also honors her family, who have supported her through the long hours and hard work. She winced a bit when asked if her children received the benefits of early childhood education.

"I'm sad to say they didn't," Peugh said. "I've been an advocate of early childhood programs for years, and I had always hoped when things looked bleak that I would live to see these types of programs implemented.

"Now I have," she said, "and the next step is to get funding under the minimum program, just like the first grade is funded, instead of by grant and aid."

The battles to be fought in education

seem never-ending, but Peugh is quick to point out that the work is supremely rewarding.

"Teachers are doing something that could make a difference," Peugh said. A good teacher "has to have an interest and desire to see students achieve. They have to have the skills necessary to get that subject matter across. But compassion is every bit as essential as competency," Peugh said.

As for being a principal, the requirements aren't that different. "I still am a teacher," she said simply. "Communication skills are vitally important" because of the many different kinds of people with whom she has to deal.

"The methods of good teaching have not changed," Peugh said. "You've got to know and relate to the students and you've got to know subject matter."

She cited a segment of NBC's White Paper presentation "To Be a Teacher" as an example of the continuity in teachers' problems and solutions.

"Remember the young girl who had just begun her career and was having trouble with the students? She finally got their cooperation when she leveled with them. She told them she had invested a lot of time and money in her education and they weren't going to stop her from teaching," Peugh said. "And after that, they cooperated."

"Beyond turning out students who can achieve, a teacher wants to develop in children a sense of self-esteem, a sense that they are important and have abilities. We want to teach them to believe in themselves and to be responsible citizens of our schools and of our communities," she said. "If we fail to do that, we really haven't accomplished anything, have we?"