

# Saving Michael

## Mom scrambles to turn things around for at-risk 2nd-grader

By Deborah L. Shelton

TRIBUNE REPORTER

Second-grader Michael Delaine Jr. emerged from Joplin Elementary School in Chicago with shoulders slumped. Dragging a book bag, he seemed to be moving in slow motion.

As his mother, Sandra Delaine, stared at the school's glass doors, worry lines formed across her forehead.

"How was school today?" she asked anxiously.

"OK," Michael said.

Michael kept walking, head down, saying little.

Delaine already knew it had been another bad day for her son. A classmate had just darted up to present her a breathless, unsolicited report: "Michael was really bad — a lot. Michael's been bad all day."

His mother knows that even though her son is just 7, she's running out of time to save him from a life of failure and, potentially, street violence. Since he entered kindergarten, Michael has been struggling with behavior problems and academic issues. He has trouble with reading, writing and some of his other core subjects, routinely getting D's.

So Delaine has drafted others to her cause: helping him find safe passage to adulthood. She pesters school officials. She has enlisted the help of a mentor. She signed Michael up for tutoring.

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One of the most critical issues facing children Michael's age is their reading ability. In third grade, children transition from "learning to read" — learning the ABCs and identifying sounds that make words — to "reading to learn," or using their language skills to tackle more advanced subjects such as social studies.

Research has found that children who cannot read well by third grade are at risk of losing interest in school, which can lead to a future of skipping class, dropping out

and getting into trouble. The children are less likely to feel capable and in control of their lives — something experts call self-efficacy.

"Once they reach pre-puberty and puberty, there are many negative ways to deal with their feelings: gang membership, substance abuse and risk-taking behavior," said clinical psychologist Margaret Nickels, director of the Center for Children and Families at Erikson Institute in Chicago.

Education expert G. Reid Lyon says learning to read well can hold the key to children's futures.

"Reading problems don't just constitute an educational problem, they constitute a public health problem because of all the downstream consequences," said Lyon, former chief of child development and behavior at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Children from low-income homes, single-parent families and violence-prone neighborhoods can face additional hurdles.

Delaine is separated from Michael's father and is raising their son on her own. This year she was laid off from a clerical job at a downtown law firm. Her Woodlawn neighborhood has witnessed its share of violence.

But she has not allowed those challenges to sidetrack her from seeking the best for her son.

Delaine still remembers the troubled boy at her own school in Alabama who

would run from the room and disrupt the class. The boy's grades were poor, and he couldn't read. He dropped out of school and eventually landed in prison.

"I don't want that for Michael," Delaine said.

In first grade, Michael often bolted from the classroom, running in the hallway or out of the building. He climbed on tables, ducked under desks, argued with other kids. He was expelled multiple times.

A neuropsychiatrist diagnosed Michael last spring with a type of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Medication was prescribed, and it seems to be helping. With his behavior settling down, Delaine's focus has turned to Michael's studies.

Her son got extra help this year with reading through an after-school program at Joplin. Delaine recently withdrew him from that in favor of a tutoring program through her church that she says provides more one-on-one help.

She works closely with Michael's school, has a good relationship with his teacher and reads with him regularly. But Michael has a lot of ground to make up. His teacher and doctors say he has trouble connecting letters to words and hasn't learned the phonics behind the sounds.

He is working at a first-grade level, Joplin school counselor Jeanine Howard said in an e-mail that relayed the perspective of his teacher, who declined to be inter-



viewed. "Michael exhibits the ability to learn, but requires structure and routine," the teacher had said.

Dr. Michael Msall, chief of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at the University of Chicago, agreed that Michael possesses potential. Msall met Delaine after she went online in search of an expert to help her son. Msall met Michael in March. He found that Michael liked to draw and do math and "has strong core intelligence."

But, he also wrote in his notes: "There are problems with school grades which may be linked to behavior and not having the behavioral supports for academic lessons."

The doctor recommended that Delaine seek an evaluation from the school called an Individualized Education Plan. She did, but the school counselor recommended developing a behavior intervention plan first, since Michael's outbursts and lack of focus detracted from his schoolwork.

Joplin Principal Alene Mason said Michael does not show signs of a learning disability. His teacher is developing an academic plan for him, and Mason said he will undergo regular testing to identify areas of weakness and determine if he is making adequate and timely improvement during the year.

"If he doesn't improve, he might be referred (for specialized evaluation) at some point to find out what's going on," she said. "His success will depend on his ability to focus, academic interventions and positive reinforcement. I definitely think he can do it."

Delaine also is getting help for Michael through a mentoring program for boys at Apostolic Church of God in Woodlawn. The program stresses the importance of God, obedience to parents, education, respectability, responsibility and accountabil-

ity to boys ages 4 through 13.

Darryl Dennard, a mentor at the Apostolic program, said many of the boys do not have a father at home to provide direction and yearn for a father figure in their lives.

"There's a lot of anger here," said Dennard, father of two grown daughters and vice president of a Chicago public relations firm. "I think we as men, African-American males, really have to stand in the gap and reach out to these young boys, even if you only touch one."

At the end of one recent mentoring session, Dennard called Michael over and silently read the report card from his first grading period — mainly D's, including one in reading. He searched for words of encouragement.

"What do you like to read?" he asked Michael.

"SpongeBob," a subdued Michael said, perking up.

Dennard turned to Michael's mother. "It's important that he reads something he likes. Does he have SpongeBob books at home?"

"Yes," Delaine said, "and he reads them."

"I want you to try harder," Dennard told Michael firmly but warmly. "If you do, I'll have something for you at Christmas. I want to see improvement."

Several weeks later, new grades arrived. It still showed D's in reading, writing, math and social science, but a B in science and A's in art, gym, library science and learning technology.

Michael faces an uphill battle, but it is not an impossible one if he gets the right help.

Prevention studies in reading and behavior show that 70 to 90 percent of at-risk children (those in the bottom 20 percent of their class in kindergarten through second grade) can learn to read in the average range if given high-quality, high-quantity

education, said Lyon, a professor of education leadership and policy at Southern Methodist University.

Getting that help at Joplin might be difficult, given that so many other students there also are struggling.

Msall said he thinks the school could do more for Michael.

"A kid with an average IQ should be reading at a second-grade level. He's not," Msall said. "Difficulties in the first (grading period) are a marker that what we set out to do is not working; we have to do some different things."

In the end, Michael's future may depend at least as much on his opinion of himself, reinforced by the people around him: his mother, his classmates, his teachers.

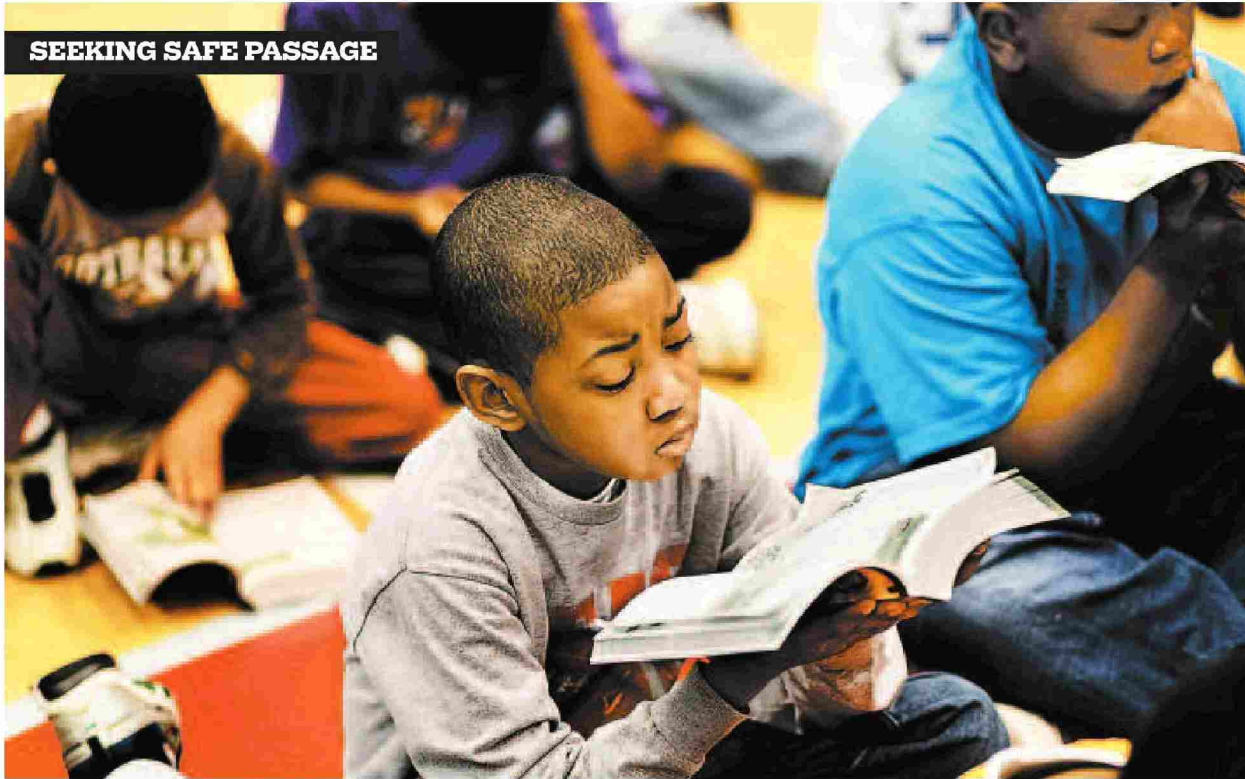
"Children who get a lot of negative feedback from their environment about themselves, it will impact their performance and feelings of competence, even if they can perform," said Erikson Institute's Nickels. "It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Delaine is acutely aware of what can go wrong for her son but feels more positive today than she did a year ago. She sees all that he has going for him, including his ability to dream big. He wants to become an astronaut.

"Of course, you want your kids to do better," she said. "I see all the intelligence that he has, and I'm doing my part to see it isn't wasted."

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## SEEKING SAFE PASSAGE



Michael Delaine, 7, reads the Bible with other boys at a mentoring session at Apostolic Church of God in Woodlawn. ABEL URIBE/TRIBUNE PHOTO



Darryl Dennard, a mentor at Apostolic Church of God in Woodlawn, meets with Michael Delaine and his mom, Sandra, to go over his report card. "I think we as men, African-American males, really have to stand in the gap and reach out to these young boys," Dennard says. ABEL URIBE/TRIBUNE PHOTOS



Michael, a second-grader at Joplin Elementary School, shoots baskets at an Apostolic mentoring session.