

Implementing and Sustaining an Effective Reading Program

A CORE Briefing Paper
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What Does It Take?

“The best practices of any profession are not gained in a vacuum, but implemented and sustained in environments that intentionally support, enhance, and sustain those practices and include several dimensions.” (Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools 1999, p. 11)

An effective reading program develops reading competence in all students and is based on proven practices. Three components are critical to the design, implementation, and sustainability of powerful reading instruction: professional development that equips educators with a solid knowledge base; effective instructional tools that are aligned to the knowledge base; and school systems that support and nurture implementation.

Professional Development

Professional development is critical in equipping teachers and school leaders with the research-based knowledge they need to design their reading program, select the right tools, and develop support systems. The most effective school implementation designs will take into account the need for ongoing professional development in order to create and sustain a culture of continuous learning and continuous improvement. To facilitate ongoing learning, teachers need time to learn. Professional development needs to be multidimensional to be effective. It can occur in traditional workshop settings and seminars, at school during collegial meetings, and within the classroom.

In *The New Structure of School Improvement: Inquiring Schools and Achieving Students*, Joyce, Calhoun, and Hopkins (1999) describe an approach to staff development that is vastly different from the workshop-training packages employed by most schools. They argue for five major components:

- **Presentation of Theory**—Participants do need to learn the theoretical underpinnings of the teaching approach, which is the traditional workshop and consists of readings, lecture, discussion, and interaction. Because reading instruction is complex and because research-based reading practices have not been the norm in many schools, 20–30 hours may be required to provide teachers and school leaders with the necessary knowledge (Joyce and Showers 1982, 1995); however, if this is the sole component of training, as few as 10 percent of the participants are likely to be able to implement the new approach (Joyce et al. 1999, p. 120).
- **Modeling and Demonstrations**—Modeling of instructional procedures and demonstration lessons increases the likelihood of implementation. Demonstrations and modeling can be presented live or through the use of videotapes, but it is crucial that teachers expected to implement a new procedure or strategy see effective illustrations. Demonstrations can take place in the workshop sessions with students brought in for special lessons. Modeling and demonstrations can also take place during visits to actual classrooms. The model lessons may be provided by outside experts as well as by skilled teachers from the school itself. When this component is added to the theoretical training, an additional 10 percent of the participants are likely to be able to implement the practice (Joyce et al. 1999, p. 120).
- **Practice in Workshop Setting and Under Simulated Conditions**—In addition to seeing models and demonstrations, participants benefit from simulated practice, both in the workshop setting and in classrooms. Such practice, done with peers or students brought in for the session, provides participants with a controlled environment for learning without worrying about managing their whole class of students. Teachers can make mistakes and improve.
- **Structured Feedback**—Structured feedback helps all new learners to correct and adjust their behaviors. To provide such feedback, a system for observing participant behavior must be in place. Those giving the feedback need to know what to notice. Feedback can be self-administered, or it can be provided by the outside trainer or others trained in the approach. It can be combined with the simulated practice in the workshop setting or offered during classroom visitations and observations. Joyce et al. state that even with a combination of practice and feedback, they would be surprised “if as many as 20 percent” of participants could transfer their learning to their classrooms on a regular basis (1999, p. 120). When structured feedback is combined with theory, modeling and practice, the total implementation rate can go up to about 40 percent.
- **Coaching for Classroom Application**—For sustained, consistent use, the most important component of training appears to be direct coaching in the classroom. In an earlier study

of transfer of training to classroom implementation and consistent use, Showers (1982) found that *no* teachers transferred their newly learned skills without coaching. Coaching involves helping teachers plan and deliver lessons using the new approach and involves helping teachers reflect upon their own teaching and make improvements. Coaching also includes side-by-side coaching and co-teaching. Coaches, whether outside experts or peers, must themselves receive training and support in the use of observation tools and feedback techniques. When coaching is added, implementation rates go up significantly.

Instructional Tools

Teachers need the best possible instructional tools. Not all reading programs are alike. Many published programs claim to be based on research; few, however, actually live up to that claim. Research clearly supports the need for explicit instruction in phonemic awareness skills, and decoding skills, vocabulary, and comprehension, all supported by appropriate texts and good literature. A recent study investigated the impact of various approaches to beginning reading on Title 1 student achievement. This study concluded that programs utilizing an explicit phonics approach result in higher achievement, especially for students who may be at risk of reading failure (Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, and Mehta 1998). Similarly, there is a strong body of evidence for the use of decodable books in early first grade as children develop insight into the code of written English. The support for the use of decodable books comes from practice theory and several large-scale, reading-program evaluation studies (Adams 1990; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson 1985; Beck and Juel 1995; Chall 1967). The programs studied included materials that featured a “systematic relationship between the phonics strategies taught in the program and the connected text provided for the students to read” (Stein, Johnson, and Gutlohn 1999). A study by Juel and Roper/Schneider identified two factors that contributed to the development of sound/spelling knowledge: “Early use of decodable text and prior literacy knowledge as evidenced by performance on the Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test” (Juel and Roper/Schneider 1985). The study concluded that the type of text that students read influences their word-identification strategies. (Stein et al. 1999) studied several basal reading programs and evaluated the relationship between the program of instruction and the text selections supplied to the students. They concluded that these two factors were not always aligned:

Currently, many publishers claim to have balanced reading programs that offer both explicit phonics instruction and literature-based instruction... Teachers must look beyond publishers’ claims and marketing strategies and evaluate the instructional integrity of these materials by using research-based criteria. The impact of poorly conceived and ill-designed instruction—instruction not supported by the findings of the research literature—cannot be underestimated. (p. 286)

Joseph Torgesen, Ph.D. and other researchers have identified selection and implementation of a well-designed, research-based core reading program as the first step in a model designed to prevent reading difficulty in most students (Torgesen, 2004). Once a school selects such an instructional program, it is crucial that the program be fully implemented with high fidelity. This falls to the school leadership.

School Support Systems and Leadership

Over the past several years, school reforms have been too numerous to count. All have been well intentioned, but few have resulted in actual improved student achievement. Many of the reforms have focused on processes (site-based decision-making and block schedules), with little attention paid to teaching and learning. Others have focused on instruction but failed to address systemic matters that make it difficult to implement the new approach. The best reforms focus on both these factors—processes and instruction. At the heart of any successful implementation is leadership. Leadership comes not just from the principal or the district superintendent, but also from teacher leaders and mentors. Above all else, leadership requires determination, commitment, and perseverance. Once the school embraces a new curriculum for reading instruction, it must be nurtured by frequent review, regular meetings for collective discussion and troubleshooting, ongoing professional development, implementation monitoring systems, and coaching support for continuous improvement. Assessment systems, planned restructuring of classroom organization, and instructional time and grouping for differentiated instruction are also part of the crucial support package. It falls to the school leadership to ensure that systematic changes are made.

- **School Leadership**—It is the school leadership who must unite the entire staff in support of a collective vision of reading instruction. The school principal must thoroughly understand the elements of a research-based reading program and should establish a school culture that values effective, research-based, proven practices. The school leadership is responsible for marshalling resources, providing time, and staying the course. The school leadership must be “heroic,” able to resist the many forces that may inhibit implementation of an effective reading program. Those forces will include the need to attend to other curriculum areas or to district- and state-mandated reforms. Still other forces will come from within the staff, as teachers struggle with implementation problems. But the school principal needs to understand he or she cannot do this alone. Rather, the skilled school administrator will identify other leaders and use their expertise to build a solid leadership team. This team will be essential to successful program implementation.

The first year of the implementation of a new reading program presents the challenge of changing teachers’ beliefs about reading instruction and initiating the new research-based approach. The second year consists of refining the approach while ensuring consistency and adherence to the program design. The third year, however, poses a new challenge, described by one Sacramento educator as “domestication” (Cooper 1999). As educators become comfortable with a program, they tend to want to alter it, adjust it, and do it “my own way”—

in short, to domesticate it. Unfortunately, tinkering with or changing a well-designed reading program often diminishes its effectiveness. This is because other materials that conflict with the selected program may slip back into use, and important elements of the chosen program may be neglected. It is during the second and third year of an implementation that the school leadership will face its most serious challenges. This is when staying power is essential. During these years the school leadership needs to have the best research to support continued use of the reading program. The principals, who are ultimately responsible for implementation, will serve many roles. Principals need to be able to praise, collaborate, and apply strategic and intensive intervention as needed based on teacher performance as measured by student achievement. **Table 1** describes the principal’s roles.

Table 1. Roles of a Principal

Function	Activities
Training with others	Provide needed training on assessment instruments, frequency, and use
Supervising/monitoring	Visit classrooms, analyze periodic assessments, debrief with teachers, monitor pacing
Coaching	Observe and provide constructive feedback; provide opportunities for visits and peer support; get assistance from guides and district coaches, if any; arrange for video models
Collaborating and facilitating	Set up regular grade and staff meetings with a clear purpose and support teachers to stay focused on data; support collaborative conversations during staff meetings

The principals and school leadership will need to support and intervene with teachers based on differentiated needs. Richard Elmore, in his article *Building a New Structure of School Leadership*, refers to this as “differential treatment based on practice and performance” (Elmore, R. 2000). In addition, he indicates that autonomy is increased or decreased based on practice and performance. In other words, schools that perform well have more discretion than schools that do not. Thus, in an ideal model, the levels of assistance, supervision, and scrutiny will vary based on the status of a school’s implementation, as derived from assessment data and classroom observations.

- **Assessment**—Student achievement information is crucial. The best assessments will be aligned to the reading program, tracking student progress, and monitoring teacher pacing and program use. In an effective reading program, assessment is used to inform instruction for both large groups and individuals. Different assessment instruments serve different purposes. For example, statewide achievement tests serve to inform the public about system-wide instructional efficacy. Individual diagnostic tests enable the classroom teacher to plan

instruction and to inform parents of student needs. Regular assessments are necessary to guide grouping decisions, instructional pace, and individual need for support.

In the early grades, it is important to assess the specific skills and strategies that provide the foundation for long-term outcomes such as comprehension and fluency. Because students need to master these precursor skills, reading assessment in the early grades must be frequent and specific. In the upper grades, assessment is necessary to monitor progress but also to identify causes of reading weakness. Unlike primary-grade assessment, which starts with discrete skills, upper-grade assessment often starts with reading comprehension and then becomes more discrete in order to pinpoint particular sub-skills that are causing reading difficulty. In this way, assessment in the upper grades becomes increasingly diagnostic.

Schools should organize their assessment toolkits around four broad categories: screening assessments (assessments that provide information about the student's existing knowledge and skill base); ongoing progress-monitoring assessments (assessments most useful to monitor and adjust instruction); summative assessments (assessments at the end of a time period); and diagnostic tests (assessments to pinpoint specific skill needs in individual students; usually administered after screening or progress-monitoring tests reveal weakness). In all cases, teachers need to understand the expected targets of mastery for individual skills in order to identify students at risk of difficulty and to tailor instruction to meet identified needs.

Assessment information will provide the evidence not only that students are learning, but also that teachers are teaching skillfully. Assessment information should provide the guidance necessary for grouping students for special intervention and added support. The leadership can use four levels of students to provide organized instructional intervention and focused support. The categories are *advanced*, *benchmark*, *strategic*, and *intensive*. Table 2 shows the categories and their descriptive characteristics.

Table 2. Four Categories of Learners

Learner	Characteristics	Curriculum and Assessment
Performing at Advanced Levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ May already know much of the content ■ At or above grade-level standards ■ Benefits from opportunities for elaboration ■ May appear bored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Advanced classes ■ Extended opportunities within the regular program ■ Enrichment
Performing at Benchmark Levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can generally meet standards ■ Average learner ■ Can adapt and adjust to teacher’s style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Regular program (about two periods) ■ “Well-checks” every 6–8 weeks ■ Occasional in-class modifications ■ Proven vocabulary and comprehension strategies instruction
Performing at Strategic Levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Typically tests between the 30th-49th percentile on normative measures or below proficient on state tests ■ Gaps in skills and knowledge ■ 1–2 years behind ■ Can basically read but not with depth ■ Does not apply self and may appear unmotivated ■ Content-area work may be challenging ■ May not complete homework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ May be in regular core program (usually two periods) with added support class ■ Targeted intervention ■ Separate reading intervention of 1–2 periods, replacing English class, but for a short time (semester) ■ Added tutoring period ■ “Well-checks” every 3–4 weeks
Performing at Intensive Levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Tests below the 30th percentile on normative measures or well below proficient on state tests ■ Very low performance ■ Reading skills are very limited ■ Very frustrated and unmotivated ■ Demonstrates behavior and absentee problems ■ Cannot handle content-area work ■ Doesn’t turn in homework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Separate intensive intervention of at least two hours replaces traditional reading/English class for 1–2 years ■ “Well-checks” every 1–2 weeks ■ Explicit, systematic instruction and direct instruction

Tables 3, 4, and 5 explain assessment information at three levels: individual student, whole classroom, and whole school. The most important consideration is to determine the overall program and instructional effectiveness. If at least 75–80% of students in a classroom are meeting benchmark targets on multiple measures, this is good evidence, along with classroom observation, that the program is effective and that the teacher is providing solid instruction. In this kind of classroom, the focus of support would be on students who need intensive or strategic assistance. If the program being used has a record of success but fewer than 75% of the students in a classroom are meeting the targets on multiple measures, the individual teacher might benefit from assistance with program implementation. The focus of support becomes working with the teacher or groups of teachers on skill challenges. It is also important to understand the organization and initial make-up of the classroom. If the class is leveled, the teacher with large numbers of strategic or intensive students will need additional support to use their program's reteaching and extra support materials, to plan for extended time for targeted, small-group instruction, and to understand how to use diagnostic and frequent progress-monitoring tests. That teacher may also need more supplemental materials.

Table 3. Differentiated Support for Students

	Individual Student Performance in a Well-Implemented Classroom
Advanced Levels of Performance	<p>Students at this level consistently exceed the targets and can handle advanced materials.</p> <p>Intervention: Need challenge, extension, and enrichment</p> <p>Assessment: Every 6–8 weeks</p> <p>Materials: Standard</p>
Benchmark Levels of Performance	<p>Students performing at this level are generally making good progress; there is an occasional need for reteaching.</p> <p>Intervention: Generally, none is needed; reteach as problems show up</p> <p>Assessment: Every 6–8 weeks</p> <p>Materials: Standard</p>
Strategic Levels of Performance	<p>Students performing at this level are not meeting benchmark targets on one or more important indicators.</p> <p>Intervention: Direct instruction with teacher or one-on-one instruction in the form of reteaching, preteaching, adjustments of pace, and complexity.</p> <p>Assessment: Every 3–4 weeks use diagnostic tests to pinpoint problems and target intervention.</p> <p>Materials: Special materials provide a supplement to the regular program.</p>
Intensive Levels of Performance	<p>Students performing at chronically low levels in otherwise effective classrooms need intensive assistance.</p> <p>Intervention: K–3 students can use the intervention components of the existing program during teacher-directed, independent work time and small-group time. These students will regularly need at least 30 minutes focused on their targeted areas of weakness. Some may require a change of program and outside support. Grades 4–8 students will need a separate, intensive intervention replacing their base program.</p> <p>Assessment: Assess every 1–2 weeks and use diagnostic tests to pinpoint areas of weakness.</p> <p>Materials: Special supplementary materials will be needed. Students placed in an intensive replacement program will need specialized programs.</p>

Table 4. Differentiated Support for Classrooms

	Aggregate Student Performance in the Classroom
Advanced Levels of Performance	<p>Almost all students in the classroom are exceeding the benchmarks; the teacher is teaching the program with fidelity. These teachers are models and resources for others.</p> <p>Intervention: Use the enrichment and challenge components of a program. Classroom can be videotaped.</p>
Benchmark Levels of Performance	<p>75–80% of students are making good progress, and there is evidence that the teacher is skillfully instructing all students and probably using materials well. The teacher can benefit from assistance with the few students who are strategic or intensive.</p> <p>Note: This pattern may be seen even in a leveled or homogeneous classroom of students who begin the year at the strategic or intensive level, if all appropriate targeted instruction occurs.</p> <p>Intervention: Videotaped lessons to serve as models for others. Good classrooms for demonstration visits.</p>
Strategic Levels of Performance	<p>About one-third of the students are not meeting benchmarks on multiple measures.</p> <p>Intervention: Teacher of this classroom may need assistance to teach program components effectively or to implement supplemental materials and added support for struggling students. An assigned coach should collaborate with this teacher to uncover the issues and needs. The coach can support the teacher with model lessons and side-by-side teaching.</p>
Intensive Levels of Performance	<p>Over half of the students are not meeting benchmark indicators on multiple measures.</p> <p>Intervention: It will be important to observe this classroom and work with the teacher to uncover needs. The teacher will benefit from support to use the program skillfully, especially the extra support or intervention materials. Especially important will be supportive coaching and model lessons provided by site, district coaching staff, and external experts. If the teacher resists to using the expected materials, an administrator will need to address the situation.</p>

Table 5. Differentiated Support for Schools

	Aggregate Student Performance in Multiple Classrooms Across a School
Advanced Levels of Performance	Almost all classrooms have most students exceeding the benchmarks; the school can be a model and resource for other schools. The school has significant decision-making autonomy. Caution: If many students enter the school at advanced levels, these schools may not always be instructive models for schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students.
Benchmark Levels of Performance	75–80% of the classrooms are meeting the targets. Schools can be freed from certain regulations and have a high degree of autonomy, as long as they maintain high achievement. These schools can serve as good demonstration sites for others to visit.
Strategic Levels of Performance	Many classrooms have large numbers of students performing at strategic levels. These schools will need directed assistance from central administration but can negotiate a limited amount of autonomy. Principals of these schools can benefit from visits to model sites and get expert assistance.
Intensive Levels of Performance	Many classrooms have large numbers of students performing at intensive levels. These schools warrant intensive and directed assistance; as a consequence, they have limited or no autonomy from the central administration. Principals can seek assistance from district staff. District leadership will provide close supervision and scrutiny of these schools.

In order to have this model take hold, progress-monitoring assessments, including those from the specific program, must be administered as planned, and the data must be immediately made available to coaches, principals, teachers, and supervisors. Principals and coaches should examine the classroom assessments at least every six weeks or even more frequently. This data will then be used in grade-level meetings to analyze implementation and to work toward improvements. It is recommended that districts use a combination of the unit assessments from well-designed, research-based programs and external assessments, such as those that qualify for Reading First. All of this requires time.

- **Time**—Of all the variables under a school’s control, the most important is making good use of time to maximize learning. In grades 1–3, a minimum of two and a half hours of daily instruction is best for language arts; one hour is best in kindergarten. In grades 4–8, at least two hours of daily instruction are necessary. Additional time beyond the two hours is needed for special one-to-one or small-group intervention. Students identified as poor readers face what Kame’enui (1993) refers to as “the tyranny of time” in trying to catch up to their peers. Simply keeping pace with one’s peers is not enough. These students will need increased time and instruction of the highest quality. The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) studied school and classroom practices in effective and unexpectedly high-achieving schools with large at-risk populations and compared them to practices in moderately effective and less-effective schools. In the most effective schools, teachers spent about 134 minutes a day on reading. This included small- and whole-group instruction,

independent seatwork activities, independent reading, and writing that was related to reading (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole 1999). The moderately effective and least effective schools averaged 113 minutes a day on reading.

In addition to student learning time, teachers need regular time to collaborate and plan together, and to analyze and plan from student assessment data. During the first year of a new program's implementation, regular collaboration is crucial. During the grade-level meetings, teachers can observe videos of effective implementation, can watch others demonstrate, can discuss problem spots, and can share ideas.

- **Instructional Grouping**—The CIERA study also found that in the most effective schools, more time was spent in small-group instruction. This can be a powerful means of providing differentiated instruction to meet students' needs. During small-group instruction, both the pace and complexity of teaching can be adjusted. To make the best use of small-group instruction, the most effective schools functioned as teams. Title I staff, resource specialists, reading teachers, and regular teachers all worked together to provide effective small-group instruction. Such instruction tended to be based on reading achievement and skill need. In the most effective schools, movement across groups was common because of frequent and ongoing assessment and early intervention. Often the small-group instruction focused on direct teaching of word-recognition skills and on the application of word-recognition strategies while the children were reading (Taylor et al. 1999).
- **Coaching**—Since coaching is so important to the effective implementation of any new concept, it falls to the leadership to design and implement a system of peer and expert coaching. Such coaching should be supported by clear expectations and guidelines and should be aligned to the adopted reading program materials. Coaches will assist and support teachers as they try a strategy, implement new materials, and engage in the assessment of and planned intervention for students. The most important roles for coaches are modeling of lessons from a newly selected program, side-by-side coaching as a teacher tries the new program, and collegial feedback to refine implementation. Coaches should be trained and mentored as they grow into this role.
- **The Home-School Connection**—For implementation to be effective, there must be a deep connection between the school and the students' homes. Since independent, outside reading is so important to develop reading proficiency, parents must thoroughly understand the school expectations for outside reading, the nature of the reading program, and strategies that they can use at home. Parent education and parent engagement are vital. In the early grades, children will be taking home small decodable books for fluency development. Parents should understand what these books are used for and how to help their youngsters use them. Parents can also fill vital tutoring roles. Children who need additional support can receive it through well-trained parent volunteers.

Conclusion

Designing, implementing, and sustaining an effective reading program is everybody's business. It requires well-designed and ongoing professional development to equip educators with the knowledge base they need for effective reading instruction; it requires the selection of appropriate tools that are tightly linked to the research; and, finally, it requires support systems initiated by the local leadership to ensure smooth implementation and enduring effects.

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