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

Professional Development

Professional development is critical to equip 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. Some professional development will occur in traditional workshop settings and seminars, some will take place at the school during collegial meetings, and some will take place 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 vastly different from the workshop training packages employed by most schools. They argue for five major components:

- ***Presentation of Theory*** Participants need to learn the theoretical underpinnings of the teaching approach. This component is the traditional workshop and consists of readings, lecture, discussion, and interaction. Since reading instruction is complex and research-based reading practices have not been the norm in many schools, 20 to 30 hours may be required to provide teachers and school leaders with the necessary understandings (Joyce and Showers 1982, 1995). Generally, 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 the instructional procedures and demonstration lessons will increase 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 the outside experts as well as by skilled teachers from the school itself. When this component is added to the theoretical training, another 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 is critical. 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 may go up to about 40 percent.
- ***Coaching for Classroom Application*** When the first four training components are combined, the implementation rate is strengthened considerably. However, 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. It involves helping teachers to reflect upon their own teaching and make improvements. It 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

In addition to a training design that should include the components listed above, 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, 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 Chapter 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 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)

Once a school selects 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 building principal or district superintendent, but also from teacher leaders and mentors. Above all else, it 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 that he or she cannot do this alone. Rather, the skilled school administrator will identify the other leaders and utilize 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 their roles.

Table 1. Principal Roles

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 for School Leadership*, refers to this as "differential treatment based on practice and performance." (Elmore, R. *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*, page 30). 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 vary based on the status of a school's implementation 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 as well as 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 need to organize their assessment toolkits around three broad categories: screening assessments (assessments that provide information about the students' existing knowledge and skill base); formative and ongoing assessments (assessments to monitor progress and adjust instruction); and summative assessments (assessments at the end of a unit or time period, used to evaluate). 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. Assessment information should provide the guidance necessary for grouping students for special intervention and added support. Four categories of students will be used to help the leadership organize instructional intervention and focused support. The categories are advanced, benchmark, strategic, and intensive. **Table 2** shows the categories and descriptive characteristics.

Table 2. Four Learners

Learner	Characteristics	Curriculum and Assessment
Advanced	■ May already know much of the content ■ At or above grade level standards ■ Benefits from opportunities for elaboration ■ May appear bored	■ Advanced classes ■ Extended opportunities within the regular program ■ Enrichment
Benchmark	■ Generally can meet standards ■ Average learner ■ Can adapt and adjust to teacher's style	■ Regular program (about two periods) ■ "Well-checks" every 6–8 weeks ■ Occasional in-class modifications ■ Proven vocabulary and comprehension strategies instruction
Strategic	■ Typically tests between the 30th–49th percentile on normative measures ■ 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	■ May be in regular core program (usually two periods) with added support (back-up) class ■ Targeted intervention ■ Separate reading intervention of one-two periods, replacing English class, but for a short time (semester) ■ Added tutoring period ■ "Well-checks" every 3–4 weeks
Intensive	■ Tests below the 30th percentile on normative measures ■ 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	■ Separate intensive intervention of at least two hours replaces traditional reading/English class and something else for 1–2 years ■ "Well-checks" every 1–2 weeks ■ Explicit, systematic instruction and direct instruction

Table 3 shows the way to focus attention and understand assessment information at three levels: individual student, whole classroom, and whole school. The most important consideration is to determine overall program and teacher effectiveness. If at least 75–80% of students in a given classroom are meeting benchmark targets, this is good evidence that the program is effective and that the teacher is implementing it as designed. In these benchmark classrooms the focus of support should be the student. If the program is effective, but fewer than 75% of the students within a given classroom are meeting the targets, this indicates that the individual teacher will need assistance to implement the program. The focus of support becomes the teacher rather than just the students.

Table 3. Levels of Differentiated Support

	Individual Students Within a Well-Implemented Classroom	Classroom Unit	Whole School Unit
Advanced	Students consistently exceed the targets and can handle advanced materials. **Intervention**: Need challenge, extension and enrichment **Assessment**: Every 6–8 weeks **Materials**: Standard	Almost all students in the classroom are exceeding the benchmarks; the teacher is teaching the program with fidelity; teachers are models and resources for others. **Intervention**: Use of enrichment and challenge components of program. Classrooms may be videotaped.	Almost all classrooms have most students exceeding the benchmarks; the school is a model and resource for other schools; school has significant decision-making autonomy.
Benchmark	Students are generally making good progress; occasional need for reteaching. **Intervention**: Generally none needed, reteach as problems show up **Assessment**: Every 6–8 weeks **Materials**: Standard	75–80% of students are making good progress; teacher needs praise and recognition and may serve as a resource to others. The teacher is teaching the program with high fidelity. **Intervention**: Videotaped lessons to serve as models for others. Good classrooms for visits.	75–80% of the classrooms are meeting the targets. Schools are freed from certain regulations and have high degree of autonomy as long as they maintain high achievement. The school will serve as a good demonstration site for others to visit.
Strategic	Those students who are not meeting benchmark targets on one or more important indicator. **Intervention**: Direct instruction with teacher or one-on-one in the form of reteaching, preteaching, adjustments of pace and complexity **Assessment**: Diagnostic tests to pinpoint problems and target intervention. Assess students every 4-6 weeks. **Materials**: Special materials may also provide a supplement to the regular program	Classrooms where about one-third of the students are not meeting benchmarks. **Intervention**: The teacher needs assistance to teach the program as designed. An assigned coach should support this teacher with model lessons and side-by-side teaching.	Many classrooms (at least one-third) resemble the classroom described in the Strategic classroom cell. These schools receive directed assistance from central administration but may negotiate a certain limited amount of autonomy. Principal will need to visit model sites and get expert assistance.
Intensive	Individual students who are in well-implemented classrooms and are chronically low on many indicators. **Intervention**: Students in grades K–3 may be able to use the intervention components of the existing program during teacher-directed independent work time and small-group time. These students will regularly need 30 minutes at least focused on their targeted areas of weakness. Some may require a change of program and outside support. Grade 4–6 students will need a separate, intensive intervention replacing their base program. **Assessment**: Assess every 1–3 weeks and use diagnostic tests to pinpoint areas of weakness. **Materials**: Special supplementary materials will be needed. Students placed in an intensive replacement program will need specialized programs.	Classrooms in which over half of the students are not meeting benchmark indicators. These teachers must be held accountable to teach the program as designed. While students will certainly need added teaching to catch up, the focus is on the teacher who is the root cause of this performance profile. **Intervention**: Intensive coaching and model lessons provided by site, district coaching staff, and external experts at principal's request. Principal provides explicit direction to teacher. Principal arranges for visits to model classrooms.	Most classrooms resemble the classroom described in the Intensive classroom cell. These schools will receive directed assistance with limited or no autonomy from the central administration. Principals seek assistance from district staff. District leadership will provide close supervision and scrutiny of these schools.

In order to have this model take hold, it is critical that progress-monitoring assessments are administered as planned and the data immediately made available to principals, teachers, and supervisors. Principals should be examining the classroom assessments at least every six weeks. This data will then be used in grade-level meetings of teachers to analyze implementation and to work toward improvements. It is recommended that districts use a combination of the adopted program unit assessments and an external assessment, 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 through 3, a minimum of two and a half hours of daily instruction is optimal for language arts; one hour is optimal in kindergarten. In grades 4 through 8, at least two hours of daily instruction is 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 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 related to reading (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole 1999). The moderately 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 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, watch others demonstrate, discuss problem spots, and 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 may be adjusted. To make the best use of small-group instruction, the most effective schools functioned as teams. Title I employees, 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 role for coaches is the 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 need to 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 need to understand what these books are used for and how to help their youngsters to use them. Parents may also fill vital tutoring roles. Children who need additional support may be able to 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 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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