High Fidelity—

Its not About Music or Marriage

It's all about Instructional Materials

An Interview with Linda Diamond of CORE

Linda Diamond is the Executive Vice President of CORE, The Consortium on Reading Excellence. Linda was one of the original founders of CORE and developed their basic training and leadership materials. She continues to develop CORE's professional programs, school change models, and professional products. Linda was formerly the Director of Curriculum, Staff Development and Evaluation for the Alameda City Unified School District as well as an elementary and middle school principal. She worked as a policy analyst with RPP International, an education research and public policy forum. Linda served on the California State Superintendent's Task Force on Reading and was co-author of *Building a Powerful Reading Program*, which helped establish the foundation for reading policy and legislation in California. She is the co-author of *CORE Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures* and the nationally acclaimed *CORE Teaching Reading Sourcebook.*

We talked to Linda about the importance of high fidelity implementation of instructional materials.

InDepth: It seems like the phrase "high fidelity implementation of instructional programs" has become commonplace. Can you tell us what the term means?

Diamond: High fidelity implementation means that you get a program with an internal design and follow that design. That would include using the materials in a particular sequence, adhering to the amount of time and practice called for by the program and following the recommendations for grouping or re-teaching students. It would mean using of all the essential components as they are designed, including differentiated instructional time and program assessments.

InDepth: And why does this matter so much?

Diamond: I think it helps to make the comparison with a medical treatment protocol. If you follow the treatment for a particular drug you have a greater likelihood of getting well than if you don't follow it. If you have [a program] that's supposed to work a certain way, the idea is to follow it as designed. It's pragmatic. And we know a couple of things related to any program: any program, *if* designed according to certain principles derived from research (i.e., the reading program includes effective phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, etc), has a higher likelihood of success. If we leave out key pieces, the likelihood of success is diminished.

InDepth: You mention success. Can you summarize the evidence that high fidelity implementation works?

Diamond: There is national evidence emerging now that high fidelity implementation is making a difference in the achievement of students. We have a year's worth of Reading First data; the charge for Reading First schools was to follow the programs the way they were designed. The evidence is emerging, especially in Idaho, where they have just finished their first year of implementation. Idaho only allowed two programs—Houghton Mifflin and Open Court—and they had quantum leaps in their achievement.

InDepth: If we walked into a school that was implementing with high fidelity, what would we see?

Diamond: That would depend on the program, but there are some general things you'd see: you would see teachers using the teacher manuals and following them closely. You'd see materials out of

their packaging and in students' hands. You'd see teachers following the program methodologies. You'd be able to track the unit or lessons that each teacher was currently using—and teachers at the same grade level would be on pace with each other. You'd have live data from internal program tests that showed students were successful with mastering the material, and you'd see that teachers were responding to the data by offering differentiated instruction to meet the individual needs of students

InDepth: You hear a lot of teachers talk about "adapting" their adopted programs. How much adaptation is okay? And at what point does implementation cease being high-fidelity?

Diamond: For the first year of any program we say, "Follow the program!" because we can't ferret out where the holes are until teachers give it a shot the way it's designed. By the second year, we know enough about holes that we know where to supplement. Lots of people ask me, "Are you still maintaining fidelity if you bring in other things?" And the answer is yes—as long has you maintain the basic fidelity to the program, you can enhance it with other things. But it's not really adaptation as much as it is enhancement.

But again, fidelity to program design is what gets you the results. *If* a program is designed tightly and engineered well and has the right sequence and is taught by a skillful teacher, the theory is that at least 80% of your kids should be meeting benchmark. And if you see that after you've used the program as designed, enhanced it with supplemental materials, and it's still not working for some students, then other more intensive interventions are necessary. So I don't think "adapting" is the right word. You're enhancing, supplementing or switching to more intensive programs.

InDepth: It's increasingly obvious that high-fidelity program implementation can have great effects on students. Can you comment on the professional benefits of high-fidelity implementation for teachers?

Diamond: With adequate professional development, a well-designed program can help a novice teacher know how to teach reading. And a well-designed set of materials, in the hands of a knowledgeable, highly-skilled teacher, can assist that teacher to reach even more children. Unfortunately, many teachers have not had adequate preparation. They've learned from doing, but there has not been consistent information provided in a way that made much sense to them. With a well-designed program, teachers can pay attention to students instead of designing their "equipment" (i.e., the lessons). In other professions, professionals don't design their own equipment. They focus on delivery. High fidelity implementation allows teachers to focus on delivery, to become experts on how this piece of "equipment" works for this student.

Another advantage is that you have coherence and consistency across the school and district. And when you have that, you've got the basis for a professional learning community. If teachers at a grade level are focused on the same concepts and skills at the same time, they can practice, reflect and solve problems together.

InDepth: Many teachers argue that implementing today's programs with high fidelity means they'll have no autonomy or creativity.

Diamond: That's right; they do raise that concern. Teachers are concerned that high fidelity implementation will suck the life out of their teaching and that all classrooms will look exactly alike. And that's a valid concern. But the creativity comes in by becoming an astute diagnostician and figuring out what your kids need more and less of, and how to adjust each lesson to meet each child's needs. And teachers always do add their own style and flair to it. The important idea, however, is that we have a common metric. The system will run more effectively if we all have common research-based teaching practices and can learn together about how to make them work for all students. Having a common curriculum allows a whole system to improve, not just selected classrooms. It also makes delivery of professional development more efficient.

InDepth: What about the concern that the adopted programs take away from student creativity?

Diamond: This is another legitimate concern. Yes, some creativity may be hampered. The up side, however, is the students are learning to read, and as a result they are having incredibly rich book discussions and are better prepared to take on more complex and creative activities. Both of California's adoptions include many internal and extension activities that foster creativity and higher level thinking skills.

InDepth: So is there such a thing as teacher-proof curriculum?

Diamond: No there isn't. That's a faulty concept. And here's why: you can have a well-designed product or program, and it will fail by virtue of the user. You can have great tools, but if the teacher doesn't understand why she's using them or know what to do when they don't work, or know how to enhance or supplement them if necessary, you won't see the results in student achievement. There is no way to take the thinking out of teaching!

InDepth: Many teachers describe struggling to carry out all the components of Houghton Mifflin or Open Court. Some seem to think there's too much there and that it truly isn't possible to accomplish with fidelity. What are the most challenging aspects of high-fidelity implementation?

Diamond: In any program the small group portions for differentiated instruction seem to be the most challenging. It takes many teachers a lot of instructional time to teach the whole class portions, and sometimes the differentiated portions of the program are put on the back burner. But the differentiated portions are critically important if we are going to close the achievement gap and improve achievement for all students. Including them is part of faithful implementation. It's challenging also because classroom management is an issue universally, especially for beginners. To have small group work time, it means you have good classroom management. And differentiation is challenging because early on teachers aren't familiar enough with the components of the program to differentiate because they don't know what is available to them within the program to support struggling students.

InDepth: So, differentiation is a challenge. What else?

Diamond: Pacing is the second big challenge. Teachers have to become fluent with the program, and they're teaching it and learning it at the same time. That's very hard.

InDepth: This makes me think that support for teachers—both in their first year of implementation and beyond—is critical.

Diamond: Absolutely. And that support needs to be comprehensive. First, teachers need professional development in the program that's of sufficient depth and duration. They need to really know their programs well enough to start. Second, teachers need to have all their materials ready before the school year starts. And they need professional development and guidance on how to set up their rooms. Room arrangement supports instruction. Finally, they need ongoing coaching. Schools need systems in place so that coaches can go in quickly and offer support when a teacher is struggling. Side-by-side teaching, modeling and demonstrations are also important to help teachers become fluent in a rigorous program. It's important for teachers to practice and re-practice routines with each other, to watch each other, to get feedback from each other and from coaches.

InDepth: So, when we see, as we often do, that a district has adopted the program, had them delivered to the schools and hired the publisher to do a one-day training, that's not sufficient?

Diamond: No. Definitely not. That is setting your teachers up to fail.

InDepth: You've been working intensively on this issue of high fidelity implementation for several years. Have you learned anything new in that time?

Diamond: The message is the same as it has always been, and our work in the field has confirmed it: if you offer adequate professional development, implement the research based program as designed, collect and analyze data, and provide necessary enhancements or interventions for students who need them, you will see results. We know this takes time and hard work, but it can be done.