

EDUCATION WEEK

## SPOTLIGHT

## On Creating Readers

Editor's Note: Reading is considered a bedrock skill in the overall process of learning. This Spotlight explores innovative programs aimed at helping students who struggle with reading.

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# Coaching of Teachers Found to Boost Student Reading

By Debra Viadero  
*Denver*

**A**n innovative study of 17 schools across the country suggests that putting literacy coaches in schools can help boost students' reading skills by as much as 32 percent over three years.

The study, which was presented here on May 1 during the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, is as notable for its methods as for its results. It's among the first of what many scholars hope will be a new generation of studies that offer solid clues not only to what works but also when, under what conditions, and to some extent, why.

The study finds that reading gains are greatest in schools where teachers receive a larger amount of coaching. It also finds that the amount of coaching that teachers receive varies widely and is influenced by an array of factors, including relationships among staff members and how teachers envision their roles.

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“This shows that this initiative can build networks and build social capacity in schools, and you can actually measure these things,” said Anthony S. Bryk, who led the four-year study with current and former Stanford University graduate students. He is currently the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which is located on the university’s campus in California.

The study, which was paid for by the federal Institute of Education Sciences, focused on the Literacy Collaborative, a program jointly developed by researchers at Ohio State University in Columbus and Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass., with assistance from researchers from the University of Chicago.

### Value-Added Approach

Used in more than 700 schools nationwide, the program trains teachers to become literacy coaches, who then work one-on-one with their colleagues on a half-time basis to spread a set of teaching routines drawn from principles of cognitive science.

Teachers in Literacy Collaborative classrooms might, for example, help walk students through decoding processes as they read aloud or lead children in groups as they read progressively more-difficult texts.

The researchers tracked the implementation of the program in K-2 classroom in 17 schools. The total number of 8,520 students included in the study represented a mix of social and economic characteristics. For example, even though 45 percent of the students in the total sample came from low-income families, the percentages of students in each school who qualified for federally subsidized school meals—a commonly used indicator of family poverty—ranged from a low of 19 percent to a high of 86 percent.

To calculate the program’s learning impact, the researchers used value-added techniques to compare students’ progress on various reading-related tests and tasks with how much students would have been expected to gain on those measures with more-typical instruction.

They found that students’ reading skills grew 16 percent beyond predicted levels the first year, 28 percent more than expected by the second year, and 32 percent more than predicted by the third year.

But, as with many school improvement measures, the results varied widely from school to school, and even more from teacher to teacher within the same schools, said Gina Biancarosa, an assistant professor of education at the University of Oregon, in Eugene,

““ The teachers who got the most coaching were new teachers, teachers committed to the school and the reform model, and those who were found, through baseline surveys, to be more likely to initiate work-related interactions with other teachers.”

who co-authored the study with Mr. Bryk, along with Allison C. Atteberry and Heather J. Hough, both doctoral students at Stanford University.

One explanation for that variation, the researchers learned, was coaching. Teachers and schools that experienced more coaching sessions tended to spur bigger learning gains in their students. Some teachers received no coaching over the course of the study, while others had as many as 43 sessions.

The teachers who got the most coaching were new teachers, teachers committed to the school and the reform model, and those who were found, through baseline surveys, to be more likely to initiate work-related interactions with other teachers. “So in some ways, coaching is a voluntary activity,” Ms. Atteberry said.

### Faster Teacher Learning?

The schools where the most coaching took place were smaller, possibly because coaches were stretched more thinly in larger schools. They were also places where teachers felt they had a voice in what went on in their building and where professional networks among teachers were already strong. (Those network connections also grew over the course of the study, one of the papers found.)

And, likewise, teachers who had had more coaching were using the targeted teaching routines more often in their classes by the end of the study. The rate at which teachers picked up the new practices was high-

est for new teachers and those who came to their schools in the later years of the study, which spanned from the 2004-05 school year to 2007-08.

Across the board, teachers went from using Literacy Collaborative practices an average of 2.88 times a week to 3.36 times a week over three years, according to the study.

“I think there’s good reason to believe that having this instructional system in place is accelerating the process of teacher learning,” said Mr. Bryk.

Jennifer Sloan McComb, a policy researcher in the Washington office of the RAND Corp., a think tank with headquarters in Santa Monica, Calif., said the new study adds to a sparse body of research on literacy coaching, a practice that was one of the foundations of the federal Reading First program and is widely used in other school improvement programs.

The only two randomized controlled studies of the technique so far found that it yielded only small or no gains in students’ learning. Ms. McComb said the new study is important because it tracks progress over a long period, drills deep, links students to their teachers, and focuses on a high-quality coaching program.

“You do have quite a bit of coaching going on in this study,” she noted, in commenting on the new research at the AERA conference. Yet, she added, on average only about half the amount of coaching that the model called for actually took place in the schools included in the study.

Despite the findings of positive results from the Literacy Collaborative, half the schools in the study have since withdrawn from the program. Mr. Bryk said the program’s expense was a factor in those decisions.

A report on the study is due out later this year in *The Elementary School Journal*.

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# Schools Test E-Reader Devices With Dyslexic Students

**Educators are turning to e-reader devices to help students with dyslexia and other reading disabilities, but the jury is still out on the impact those digital tools are having on reading skills.**

By Katie Ash

**E**ducators seeking new ways to personalize instruction for students with dyslexia and other reading disabilities are turning more and more to e-readers such as Amazon's Kindle, Apple's iPad, Barnes & Noble's Nook, and the Intel Reader.

But the jury is still out on just how effective those digital tools are in helping struggling readers. And that's largely because educators only recently began testing the tools with students with reading disabilities.

"It's beginning to be looked at very closely," says Alan E. Farstrup, the past executive director of the Newark, Del.-based International Reading Association. "But regardless of what the preliminary research says, and much of it is inconclusive, kids are growing up as digital natives, and we're really thinking about literacy in a different way now."

Today's students, whether they have a reading disability or not, are comfortable with technology and may prefer to read text on an e-reader rather than from a printed book, says Farstrup.

In fact, a recently released survey by Scholastic found that a third of 9- to 17-year-olds said they would read more books for fun if they had an e-reader.

Yet there is little research to support anecdotal claims that e-readers help improve reading skills.

One Israeli study, however—by Ofra Korat, the head of the Early Childhood Program at Bar-Ilan University—found that a small sample of kindergartners and 1st graders using digital readers showed greater progress in word meaning and word reading than students using traditional texts.

## 'Liberating for the Teachers'

Typically, teachers who don't use e-readers

electronically scan textbooks and other reading material for students with visual impairments or reading disabilities, then use software to turn the text into an audio file the students can listen to.

While effective, the process is cumbersome and time-consuming, says Ben Foss, the director of access technology for the Santa Clara, Calif.-based technology company Intel.

Foss, who himself has dyslexia, created the Intel Reader, a mobile e-reader that can take pictures of text and then convert the text into an audio file within seconds. Students can also change the size of the text on the screen and the speed of the voice that reads the text aloud.

"The really exciting thing about it is you can grab any text," Foss says, from the words on a sign to the latest handout from a teacher.

Karen Ann Breslow, a program specialist for special education at the 7,500-student Sequoia Union High School District in California, piloted the Intel Reader with one 8th and one 9th grade student last year.

The technology allowed the students to become more independent of their teachers and parents, she says, by allowing them to read text on their own without adult assistance.

"It is not only liberating for the kids, but also liberating for the teachers," says Breslow.

## Benefits and Drawbacks

Robyn Rennick, the program coordinator for the Dyslexia Research Institute, in Tallahassee, Fla., received a Kindle as a gift last Christmas. Rennick, who has dyslexia, points out that being able to change the size of the type may help some struggling readers.

But not having a physical book to flip through might be a challenge, Rennick warns. Some students with reading disabilities depend on being able to quickly skim the headings and subheadings in a textbook to orient themselves and organize their thoughts, she

“ “[E-readers] have the most amazing potential, but they're so new in terms of formal studies that there isn't a whole lot that has been done yet. Within the next year or two, we'll have some more evidence.”

LOTTA LARSON

Assistant professor, Curriculum and Instruction, Kansas State University

says, and “when you don't have the ability to move through those really quickly, that's going to be a bit of a drawback.”

Even so, e-readers could become powerful tools for re-engaging some students with reading, says David H. Rose, the founder and chief education officer for the Wakefield, Mass.-based Center for Applied Special Technology, or CAST, a nonprofit research and development organization that promotes universal design for learning.

“The worst thing is if [students] stop reading altogether,” he says. Also, because e-readers are not specifically designed for students with disabilities and do not have a stigma attached to them, struggling readers may feel more comfortable using the devices in front of their peers, says Rose.

However, the true potential for e-readers in education has yet to be tapped, he says.

“There are a lot of things that e-readers could do that would be much more powerful,” says Rose. For now, it's imperative to bring together the manufacturers of e-readers, as well as educators, policymakers, and experts in educational technology, to determine what

## E-READER TIPS:

1. Changing the font size of the text and the number of words on the e-reader screen can help students customize the text to their preferences, which can be especially helpful for struggling readers.
2. Using the built-in dictionary function of some e-readers may help students quickly define words they don't know and provide pronunciation information that can help them sound out unfamiliar words.
3. Having students record their thoughts or respond to specific questions with the "notes" feature of some e-readers provides individualized insight to their comprehension of the text for teachers.
4. The text-to-speech feature of some e-readers could provide the scaffolding for struggling readers to better understand a text by reading aloud the words that cause them the most difficulty.
5. Most e-readers can convert books into audio files quickly for students who struggle with reading, a process that previously was more cumbersome and time-consuming.

features e-readers could and should include, he says.

Andres Henriquez, the program officer for the national program and urban education at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, agrees.

"People should start talking about e-readers more than just the fact that there's going to be less weight in [students'] backpacks," he says. "I think there's huge potential for value-added instruction in terms of working with youngsters who are struggling readers who might need the kinds of scaffolding necessary for deep comprehension of text."

More research needs to be done to inform schools of how e-readers are best

used and if they are a worthwhile investment, he says.

"There are a number of technologies that creep into the classroom without adding value," says Henriquez. "What we know from our digital past is that schools and districts will start buying new technologies without knowing what the impact on learning is going to be."

That look-before-you-leap cautionary note is something that Lotta Larson, an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at Kansas State University, in Manhattan, Kan., also expresses about e-readers in education.

"There's a huge sense of urgency right now," she says. "This [technology] is starting to enter our schools very rapidly, especially as the prices come down, and before that happens, we have to inform people."

### Fluency and Vocabulary

Indeed, there's a real need for professional development to accompany the reading devices, says Larson. "I don't think the e-reader in itself is going to make a difference, but if it's used with effective instruction, then it can make a huge difference," she says.

Through her research using e-readers with 2nd graders and special education students, Larson predicts the devices could help facilitate fluency and vocabulary development.

For instance, Larson noticed that some of the students in the classes she studied used the e-readers' built-in dictionary feature not just to look up definitions of words, but also to view pronunciation and chunking, which is the way the word is broken up into syllables.

"Right there, that's a fluency tool," she says.

The ability of some e-readers to insert notes into the text could also be a helpful teaching tool, says Larson.

"If you take the time to actually look at the notes [that students make in the digital readers], you know what they're thinking, and you can accurately assess what they really understand," she says. "It's almost like having a glimpse into their brain."

Still, much more research must be done before the devices are ready for mainstream use in education, she says.

"[E-readers] have the most amazing potential, but they're so new in terms of formal studies that there isn't a whole lot that has been done yet," Larson says. "Within the next year or two, we'll have some more evidence."

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## Pre-K Lessons Linked to TV Produce Gains in Literacy, Study Says

By Mary Ann Zehr

Video and interactive games are effective in teaching disadvantaged preschoolers some of the literacy skills they need for kindergarten, according to a large-scale evaluation financed by the U.S. Department of Education and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

The randomized controlled study looks at a technology-supported literacy curriculum that involved video from "Super Why!," "Sesame Street," and "Between the Lions," programs that are produced by PBS as part of the Education Department's Ready to Learn Initiative. The study also includes online games developed by the programs' producers, which targeted some of the same literacy skills as the shows themselves.

Researchers found that the 398 low-income children picked to participate, from 47 preschool centers in New York City and San Francisco, on average made significant gains in acquiring skills such as naming letters, knowing the sounds associated with those letters, and understanding concepts about stories and printed words. The study compares the children's performance with that of preschoolers taking part in a technology-supported science curriculum. Each set of children received 25 hours of activities over 10 weeks.

"What's really powerful here is the combination of media, digital content, and professional development," said Bill Penuel, the director of evaluation research for SRI International, a research organization based in Menlo Park, Calif., that conducted the study along with the Boston-based Education Development Center. "Particularly when you put these things together, preschool teachers can implement something that is powerful, and it can have effects that help to close the gap between low-income students for school readiness, compared with more advantaged students of this age group."

### 'Engaged Viewing'

Shelley Pasnik, the director of the Center for Children and Technology for the EDC, added that though video clips from public-television programs

are an important part of the literacy curriculum, the study's findings don't imply that parents can get the same effect simply by exposing their children to those programs.

It's "engaged viewing" that counts, she explained. "It's not simply turning on a program and letting it go on the screen unattended, but pausing the video and asking questions."

Preschool teachers in the study got coaching on how to reinforce lessons in digital media, such as pointing to objects in the classroom that begin with a particular letter after a television character has talked about that letter.

Ms. Pasnik observed that the use of technology has been particularly controversial in the preschool classroom. She and other researchers for the study encountered some resistance on the part of the preschool centers against using TV, she said. "This isn't simply about the use of television," Ms. Pasnik said. "What's different here is that the curriculum began with literacy skills that teachers needed to teach, and then the appropriate digital content was pulled in."

The study concludes that "the fact that the curriculum studied proved effective in a randomized controlled trial with this population makes it among the few preschool curricula with strong evidence of a positive impact."

Mr. Penuel said that a review last year of 15 randomized controlled studies of preschool curricula by the Institute of Education Sciences found that only two, Bright Beginnings and the DLM Early Childhood Express, had a significant positive effect on student achievement. Only one of the 15 included a technology-supported curriculum; it showed no positive effect.

### Limits to Findings

The research methods in the new study appear to be sound, said David K. Dickinson, the chairman of the department of teaching and learning at Vanderbilt University's school of education. But, he cautioned, it hasn't yet appeared in a peer-reviewed journal.

Moreover, teachers received much more professional development than preschool teachers typically do, he noted in an e-mail message. On average, they received eight on-site coaching sessions and had access to a coach throughout the intervention.

Mr. Dickinson also wrote: "It is disappointing that the outcomes examined were strictly limited to code-based learning—letter knowledge, letter-sound associations, and concepts of print."

Those are skills that children quickly acquire in kindergarten, he contended. The early-childhood-education field has been much less successful, Mr. Dickinson said, in figuring out how to teach students to read sound units within words, acquire vocabulary, and use and understand sentences and stories.

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# 'Striving Readers' Tough to Measure

By Mary Ann Zehr  
Chicago

**R**ayshad Harris, a 7th grader at Edward Coles Model for Excellence World Language Academy here on the city's South Side, disliked reading, but that changed with his participation in the federal government's first reading program focused solely on adolescents.

Through after-school reading lessons Rayshad took last school year with a literacy-intervention teacher at Edward Coles, paid for by the Striving Readers program, the boy learned strategies that helped him overcome his frustration with reading.

"I used to read the story, and I didn't know what the story was about," Rayshad said. "Now, we know how to break the story down. We'll read a paragraph and then ask what the paragraph is about."

Plenty of students here at Edward Coles or Rachel Carson Elementary School, another Chicago school that takes part in Striving Readers, say they came to enjoy reading for the first time or became better readers through the program, now in its fourth year.

More difficult to gauge is what impact the small federal program has had in the eight sites nationwide where it has been implemented, and thus, whether President Barack Obama's proposal to double funding for it in the fiscal 2010 budget, to \$70.4 million, is a good idea.

### Expansion Planned

Members of Congress have also drafted a comprehensive literacy bill that would greatly expand funding for adolescent literacy, and includes many of the same components as Striving Readers.

The federal program supports the implementation and evaluation of "research-based" reading interventions for schools that are at risk of not making adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act or have large proportions of students who are reading below grade level. Grantees select their own curriculum.

"There needs to be intervention within

“You have to take note of the reading achievement of the students who were in this intervention. We're talking about a very low level of achievement.... I hope that people aren't anticipating that with one year of instruction, we're going to get all these kids up to grade level.”

### BRADEN GOETZ

Group leader, High School Programs,  
U.S. Department of Education

secondary schools, and we know there needs to be funding for it, but we're not at the point of saying this particular program is effective because we haven't seen the data yet," said Marcy Miller, who as a senior policy associate for the Washington-based Alliance for Excellent Education, co-wrote a recent policy brief on lessons learned from Striving Readers.

The brief was based on a meeting of Striving Readers literacy coaches and teachers convened by the alliance, an advocacy group, after the federal program's first year.

"No one [at the meeting] was saying, 'I think this is a waste of money.' They were saying, 'We really need this in schools,'" said Ms. Miller, now a graduate student in school psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Last week, the U.S. Department of Education released evaluations of Striving Readers' effect on student achievement during the initiative's second year of implementation, the 2007-08 school year. The evaluators concluded that students in Striving Readers programs in five of the seven participating districts, including Chicago, did not improve

significantly more in reading than did their peers in those same districts who didn't take part in the initiative.

In the Portland, Ore., and San Diego school districts, Striving Readers had a statistically significant effect on student achievement, according to at least one test. The reading program implemented in juvenile-correction facilities by the Ohio Department of Youth Services also showed a significant impact, the study says.

But even where Striving Readers demonstrated an impact on student achievement, the effect was small, Michael L. Kamil, a reading expert at Stanford University, pointed out after a quick examination of the data released last week.

"The significant differences are not encouraging," he added. "For struggling readers, particularly those in high school, this is simply insufficient to make a substantial difference in academic achievement for these students."

### Early Days

But Braden Goetz, the group leader for high school programs for the Education Department, said he views the study results as "encouraging," particularly since only five or six years ago, many reading experts weren't sure it was possible to have an impact on adolescent literacy.

"In fact, we can have an impact, and we can help kids," he said.

Mr. Goetz noted that the evaluation covers only one full school year of implementation, since the first year of the program was spent on getting it up and running.

"You have to take note of the reading achievement of the students who were in this intervention," he said. "We're talking about a very low level of achievement. ... I hope that people aren't anticipating that with one year of instruction, we're going to get all these kids up to grade level."

Some of the Ohio students, he said, fall in the 11th percentile in reading on standardized tests, which shows they are in great need of reading help.

### Teacher Strategies

Just because Striving Readers didn't have a significant impact on student achievement in Chicago doesn't mean that the test scores of participants aren't improving, according to Jonathan Tunik, a senior associate for Metis Associates Inc., a New York City-based consulting group, and the author of the Chicago impact study.

The principals of the Edward Coles and Rachel Carson schools credit Striving Readers

with helping to increase their middle school students' scores on Illinois' standardized reading test.

"All of the other schools are doing their own thing in literacy," Mr. Tunik said. "We're not comparing the impact of Striving Readers to business as usual but to other kinds of efforts."

Elizabeth Cardenas-Lopez, the Striving Readers manager for the 408,000-student Chicago district, said students there who were once reading two or three years below grade level are showing growth with Striving Readers. Still, she said, "we're not capturing that by the standardized measurements yet."

The Chicago impact study does show, however, that Striving Readers succeeded in changing content-area teachers' practices in classrooms across whole schools. In year two, for example, the impact study says, "a substantially greater proportion of treatment classrooms were observed using small groups and/or pairs." Reading-comprehension strategies were used more frequently in treatment classrooms than control classrooms during both the first and second years of the program, with a "marked increase" in the second year, the study says.

Meanwhile, some teachers were using good practices to improve adolescent literacy in control classrooms as well as treatment classrooms, according to the study. For example, the reading strategies of inferring and predicting were more evident in control classrooms than treatment classrooms.

Unlike some participants in Striving Readers, the Chicago district did not rely on a commercial program, such as Read 180. Instead, with the help of consultants from the city's National-Louis University, it created a home-grown model aimed at increasing teacher capacity to teach literacy at the middle school level.

That model includes ongoing professional development for content-area teachers, financing for a literacy-intervention teacher in every participating school, and support for after-school reading lessons for students who are at least two grade levels behind their peers in reading.

Teachers receive classroom technology, such as sets of Palm Pilots, and \$1,000 a year to buy books for their own classroom libraries; the schools receive \$5,000 annually for the school library.

Joe Becker, a social studies teacher at Rachel Carson, said the professional development gave him "a ton of strategies" to teach reading, something he didn't get from his preparation program in college.

One approach promoted by Striving Readers in Chicago that has taken off at Rachel

Carson is Partner Reading and Content, Too. Students take turns reading a book aloud to each other and asking each other questions about the book.

"It gives them a systematic approach to reading with a partner," Mr. Becker said. "Before that, one would read, and the other would zone off."

### Pondering Words

Both at Rachel Carson and at Edward Coles, teachers employ an approach to vocabulary instruction developed by researcher Robert J. Marzano, a founder of Marzano Research Laboratory, an Englewood-Colo.-based company that provides educational consulting. Teachers direct students to put a definition for a word into their own words, draw a picture to represent the word, and write a synonym.

Audrey Mason, a science teacher at Edward Coles, recently used that approach to help students learn words, such as "hypothesis," related to the scientific process.

Then she asked her students to work in small groups to write a hypothesis and steps for a couple of experiments, such as comparing how fast different kinds of mints dissolve in water.

Reflecting later on the lesson, she observed that her students move more easily into an interactive activity after she's helped them understand the vocabulary involved.

"They are thinking and discussing," Ms. Mason said. "They were getting a bit rowdy, but they did get to it."

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## COMMENTARY

# Reading: More Than an Academic Issue

By Rhonda H. Lauer

For over 30 years, I have worked alongside dedicated educators, community members, and civic leaders to help the nation's most vulnerable children learn to read. Early literacy is closely linked with both academic and lifetime success: Numerous studies show that a child who reads at grade level by 3rd grade is more likely to graduate from high school, go to college, and secure a living-wage job.

Yet despite such knowledge, far too many children and youths in the United States fail to achieve this crucial milestone, and even those who do achieve it can quickly backslide unless literacy remains a priority. One reason for this shortfall may be that, as a nation, we persist in believing that reading is an academic issue only, the responsibility of schools and school districts, legislators and education departments.

But reading is also a socioeconomic issue, particularly for the 14 million American youths under age 18 living in poverty. (That's 19 percent of all children in this country.) Unlike their more privileged peers, young people in poor families face a host of nonacademic obstacles that can impede their ability to learn. For these children, high-quality classroom instruction is essential and provides a solid foundation for learning, but without additional supports, it is not nearly enough.

Approximately one in 10 kindergartners and 1st graders miss 10 percent or more of school each year—equivalent to a full month. And such chronic absenteeism is more prevalent among children living in poverty. For each absent child, we must determine the reason for missing school and implement a practical solution. In some cases, this means providing reliable transportation, arranging for before-school care, or making sure a child has a clean uniform to wear. Because, no matter how good our schools are, if we can't get students in the front door, they won't learn a thing.

Inadequate health care also prevents many

poor children from reaching early reading milestones, because sick children are inefficient learners. For them, reading success may hinge on a new pair of eyeglasses, so they can see the chalkboard clearly, a trip to the dentist to fix a persistent toothache, or a checkup that reveals a previously undiscovered hearing problem.

Children of all socioeconomic classes also read less as they move through the grades. According to one study, the top two reasons kids give for not reading more are that they can't find books that interest them and they would rather do other things (like watch television, play video games, or text their friends). Another study notes that nearly half of all dropouts say that boredom is a major reason they dropped out of school. And we are all too familiar with the other problems boredom can lead to, such as criminal behavior, drug use, and teenage pregnancy.

One of the greatest gifts we can give children is to instill in them a love of reading—not just because being able to read leads to academic success, but also because reading allows young people to explore other cultures and countries, travel vicariously to imaginary and historic worlds, and pursue areas of personal interest. Let's discover the types of books children like best, put those books in front of them, and, most importantly, provide time for them to read every day. For students who are bored or disengaged, let's move beyond traditional subjects taught in traditional ways and provide them with stimulating, hands-on learning experiences in history, science, art, technology, and music.

As Congress and the Obama administration prepare to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind, we need to acknowledge that obstacles to learning come in a variety of forms, particularly for children from low-income families. If we truly desire widespread literacy in this country, we must address the social, economic, physical, and behavioral factors that prevent our most vulnerable citizens from learning how to read.

“ If we truly desire widespread literacy in this country, we must address the social, economic, physical, and behavioral factors that prevent our most vulnerable citizens from learning how to read.”

Caring adults—not just teachers, but also community members, business people, parents, and everyone—must work side by side to evaluate students individually and holistically and give them the personalized attention they need to learn to read early, learn to read well, and learn to read for a lifetime of enjoyment and success.

*Rhonda H. Lauer, a former schools superintendent, principal, and teacher, is the president and chief executive officer of Foundations Inc., a nonprofit organization headquartered in Moorestown, N.J., that works to provide educational opportunities for underserved youths nationwide.*

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## INTERVIEW

# Responding to RTI

**Early-reading expert Richard Allington believes response to intervention is possibly “our last, best hope” for achieving full literacy in the United States. So why does he sound so unhopeful?**

By Anthony Reborá

Richard Allington, a professor of education at the University of Tennessee and the author of a number of prominent books on reading policy and instruction, is one of the country's most recognized experts on early literacy. A former president of the International Reading Association and the National Reading Council and co-editor of *No Quick Fix: Rethinking Literacy Programs in America's Elementary Schools* (Teachers College Press, 1995), Allington has long advocated for intensifying instructional support for struggling readers, and he is often credited with helping lay the groundwork for the response to intervention concept. But while he believes RTI is “our last, best hope” for achieving full literacy in the United States, he is critical of the way it has been conceptualized and implemented in many schools. Allington's most recent book, tellingly, is titled *What Really Matters in Response to Intervention* (Allyn & Bacon, 2008).

**Q** In *No Quick Fix: The RTI Edition*, you describe response to intervention as an “old wine with a new label.” What do you mean by that?

Well, I'm 62. And literally, since I entered the education field at 21 and became a reading specialist the following year, the promise has been held that we're going to teach all kids to read. The good news is that, in the past five or 10 years, we've had large-scale demonstrations that show that in fact we could do that if we wanted to. We have studies involving multiple school districts and hundreds or thousands of kids demonstrating that, with quality instruction and intervention, 98 percent of all kids can be reading at grade level by the end of 1st or 2nd grade.

So it's not a question that we don't know what to do. It's a question of having the will to develop full literacy in this country, and to organize schools and allocate money in ways that would allow us to do that. Instead, we've tended to come up with flim-flam excuses for why it's not possible.

**Q** So you see RTI as a way of building on the research that's been done on successful literacy instruction?

I'd like to think it could be. I've called it perhaps our “last, best hope.”

**Q** Why do you think it holds promise?

If for no other reason that, for the first time in many years, the federal government wrote a law that is not very prescriptive. It simply says: Take up to 15 percent of your current special education allocation and use that money instead to prevent the development of learning disabilities or reading disabilities. And do it in a way that, while there's no mention of specific intervention tiers, incorporates increasingly expert and increasingly intensive instruction. It's just telling schools to stop using money in ways that haven't worked over the past half-century and start investing at least some of that money in interventions that are designed to actually solve kids' reading problems.

**Q** So it's not so much the specific framework of RTI that you see as promising as the emphasis it puts on intensive reading instruction?

Yes. For me the most important part of the proverbial three tiers is the first one: regular classroom instruction. In my view, RTI works best if it's started in kindergarten and 1st grade—we know how to solve those problems. Unfortunately, we have good evidence that a lot of kindergarten and 1st grade teachers in this country are just not very skilled in teaching reading. They may offer solid social and emotional support, but when it comes to delivering high-quality academic instruction, they just don't do it. And a lot of them also assume that if a kid is struggling and is way behind in reading, he must have some neurological problem, and therefore it's not their job to teach him.

So you can do a lot by strengthening instruction. The evidence is there in the research literature. We can reduce the number of kids who have trouble in the 1st grade by half just by improving the quality of kindergarten. And by 2nd grade, we can reduce the number of kids who are behind by another half just by improving the quality of 1st grade instruction.

**Q** How do you do that? I mean, if you were an administrator who was implementing RTI, what would you do in terms of professional development? How do you help teachers so they can deliver that high level of instruction?

I think it takes someone who knows what they're doing to start with, and virtually every school system already has those people on their staff. Again, we know from the research literature that, while a lot of kindergarten and 1st grade teachers might not be that strong in academic instruction, at least 25 percent of kindergarten and 1st grade teachers are in fact very skilled. So that 25 percent is out there whose expertise can be built on. The problem is they're just typically ignored.

But, yes, the most successful training models are those that involve teachers who are actually

working with each other, where the teachers who don't know what to do in delivering reading instruction are given a few days each to observe a teacher who does know what to do. The skilled teacher, that is, becomes a mentor-teacher who helps others acquire those types of skills.

And the effects of a little high-quality training can be significant. One of the studies on reading professional development that the [U.S. Department of Education's] What Works Clearinghouse has rated as having strong evidence—actually I think it's the only one—was done by my wife [University of Tennessee Professor Anne McGill-Franzen] in Philadelphia with kindergarten teachers. This program primarily involved using mentor-teachers and some staff from an organization called the Children's Literacy Initiative. And it really only required about three days of work before the school year started and about three hours a month of professional development and, for some teachers, a little in-class support. But the difference in performance was dramatic: Students in the classes of the teachers who got the training ended the year in about the 45th percentile in reading, while those with teachers who didn't get the training ended the year at the 13th percentile.

And I'll tell you, I actually went down to help my wife with some of the debriefing interviews at the end of the year. We had veteran teachers—people my age—breaking down in the interview and starting to cry, saying, "Why didn't anyone ever teach us this before? Why have I been teaching for 30 years and never knew how to teach kids to read?"

### **Q** What mistakes do schools commonly make in implementing RTI?

Letting the interventions be done by paraprofessionals or parent volunteers or special education teachers who have limited reading-instruction expertise. If you want a kid to remain illiterate and ultimately end up in special ed., send him out to work with someone who lacks expertise in teaching reading. If you want him to develop literacy, put him with someone with expertise in teaching kids at that age to read.

The idea behind RTI was for a district to actually take some of its special education budget to fund reading specialists, but in most cases, they haven't done that. In too many cases, they simply have paraprofessionals work with those kids. So the amount of expert reading instruction the kids are getting under RTI is typically very slight.

My question to superintendents is always, "Would you let me randomly select one of your paraprofessionals to be your assistant superintendent for finance, or to be the head football coach, or teach AP chemistry?" No, of course not, because those jobs require that you know something. But when you take people who are not reading experts and put them with the hardest kids to teach, and then blame kids when they don't make progress, you penalize the children for the rest of their lives because of your decision.

### **Q** You've been critical of the use of so-called packaged reading programs in schools. Why?

Well, the problem is that the concept of a packaged reading program doesn't have any scientific validity to start with, because we know that if you take 100 kids or even 10 kids, there are no prescribed programs that will work with all of them. What kids need are teachers who know how to teach and have multiple ways of addressing their individual needs. And the evidence that there's a packaged program that will make a teacher more expert is slim to none.

### **Q** So the alternative would be to focus on building on teachers' expertise and knowledge?

Right. And one good example of how to do that is the much-criticized Reading Recovery program, which isn't a scripted program in the sense that most commercial programs are. Instead, it's a year long—or even life-long—professional development plan. Of the 150 reading-intervention programs that the What Works Clearinghouse looked at, it was the only one determined to have strong evidence that it worked. And I've been telling principals for 20 years that the good thing about a program like Reading Recovery is that, if your district ever decides not to continue funding it, your teachers still have that expertise, and you can't take that away from them. You can take away the one-to-one tutoring that's part of the program, but even more important than that is the expertise of the teachers. Another example of a large-scale program that schools ought to be looking at is the Interactive Strategies Approach, developed by researchers F.R. Vellutino and Donna Scanlon. That is also a kind of extended PD plan.

### **Q** When schools implement RTI, they often use digital screening and monitoring tools for assessment ...

It's idiotic.

### **Q** Those tools aren't effective?

No. We don't have any evidence that any computerized screening and monitoring tools are related to reading growth. It just doesn't exist. In fact, I think we have enough evidence in the opposite direction with the problems of Reading First.

### **Q** So what do you advise schools to use to determine where a student is in his reading ability?

Well, I tell them, if the student is in kindergarten or 1st grade, to listen to the child read. And you have to have some sense of the difficulty level of the books, and you need to be expert enough to know what strategies students at different stages should be demonstrating in their reading.

### **Q** OK, say I'm a principal, and I say to you, "Listen, I'm not sure my teachers have the expertise at this point to make those kinds of judgments without the help of available tools."

I'd say you're a principal who doesn't have a clue, and you probably need to go off and develop some expertise yourself. Or maybe find another job.

Look, the problem isn't that teachers don't know which students are in trouble and need help. I mean, you could try an experiment: Call 100 1st grade teachers around the country and ask them, "Do you have any kids who are in trouble in learning to read?" They're not going to say, "Gosh, I don't know. I haven't DIBELd them yet." Teachers know who needs help. If they don't know, they shouldn't be teaching.

### **Q** But you just said that many teachers aren't skilled in teaching reading?

But that doesn't mean they don't know who's in trouble. They just don't know what to do with a kid who's in trouble. The point is we need to free teachers up from spending their time using an assessment program on kids every few weeks, or having a reading or LD specialists going around doing it. Educators need to be working with kids and teaching them rather than continuing to document that they can't do something.

### **Q** Do you have any guidelines for the amount of intervention time that should be provided for a struggling reader?

Well, let's talk about kindergarten and 1st grade. In kindergarten, amazingly, it takes as little as 15 to 20 minutes a day, working in a

one-on-one or very small group setting with a child. That's it. In 1st grade, most of the studies have recommended either a half-hour or 45 minutes a day, five days a week, usually for a period of roughly 20 weeks, as an initial shot at it. At that point, some kids still may not be up to grade level. But if you give them another 20 weeks, you can be down to 2 percent of kids who aren't reading at grade level. And that 2 percent, according to the large-scale studies, are typically those students who are highly mobile and come in and out of the program, or are part of that very small portion of the school population who have very severe or profound cognitive disabilities. But you have to look around and ask, how many schools do we currently have that have any kind of intensive expert intervention in place in kindergarten, much less 30 or 45 minutes a day of one-to-one or one-to-three expert intervention for up to a year in the 1st grade? The answer is, there are virtually no schools like that in this country.

### **Q None?**

None. And they'll say they don't have enough money to provide that kind of intervention. And I'm saying, wait a second, we're spending between \$5,000 and \$10,000 a year on every child who's identified as having a learning disability, and you don't have enough money to try to prevent that?

### **Q Can RTI work with older students or adolescents?**

Well, we don't have a lot of research on how well it works with older children, but I certainly think it can. The problem is that you really have to ramp up instruction because, as they get older, the kids get further and further behind in the current setting. Let me give you an example: Let's say you have a 4th grader who's reading at the 2nd grade level. So you've got evidence that whatever you've been doing up to this point has produced about a half grade's growth per year. So even if you can provide something that will double his rate of growth, up to a year's growth per year, by the time he gets to 9th grade, he'll only be reading at a 7th grade level. Now, if we can triple his rate of growth—to a year-and-a-half grade level per year—he'd be caught up by 9th grade. If we could quadruple it, he'd be caught up by 6th grade and in even better shape.

### **Q How do you do that?**

I think you could do that, with a substantial amount of high-quality instruction—and that means, in effect, that

his reading instruction has to take place all day long. In other words, if he's reading at a 2nd grade level in 4th grade, this child would need texts in social studies, science, and math that are written at the 2nd grade level but cover the 4th grade curriculum, so he has a book in his hands all day long that he can actually read. If we did that in addition to high-quality classroom reading instruction and then provided 45 minutes every day after school of one-on-one expert instruction, and maybe did something in the summer that wasn't as useless as what we usually see going on in summer school, we might be able to catch him up

### **Q How realistic is that scenario?**

I think it's pretty realistic, and it's not very expensive compared to what we're doing now to keep the child essentially illiterate. If you look at the research on the quality and quantity of reading instruction given to students in special education or Title I classes (some of which both my wife and I conducted), I mean, it's not a rosy scenario. Too often, no one gets worse or less instruction in reading than the kids who need it most. Did you know there are only 19 states that require special education teachers to take even one course in teaching reading? In other words, special education teachers often know less about teaching reading than the regular classroom teachers who turn to them for help.

### **Q When do you think a determination for special education should be made under an RTI framework?**

I think if you've spent most of kindergarten and 1st grade giving a child expert, intensive instruction and he or she is still lagging way behind, it might be time. But I'd be awfully hesitant to classify any child given the lack of expectations for academic growth in special education. If we had evidence that special education programs were actually declassifying a third of their kids each year—in other words that two or three years of treatment in special education could get them caught up—I'd be more optimistic.

### **Q So, in most cases, you'd just continue the interventions and expert reading instruction?**

Yes.

### **Q Even if a student failed to make it to grade level for several years running?**

Yep. Now, you could define special education

such that the whole point was that kids who go into it were getting more and better instruction every day, such that special education was likely to catch them up and perhaps lead to declassification. But I don't see any will in schools to do that. And I worry about RTI, in some states and schools, being run by special ed. personnel. Again, though it was created in a special education law and has potential bearing on how special education determinations are made, it's not intrinsically a spec. ed. program. It's about strengthening regular classroom instruction and general education interventions for students so they can stay out of special ed. But I'm afraid some schools just see it as a way to find more LD kids faster.

### **Q What advice would you have for a teacher who is in a school that is implementing RTI and wants to make it work?**

Well, the best advice is to make sure you know what you're doing with struggling readers in your classroom, all day long. And then work to ensure that, when a student leaves your classroom for intervention, he or she is going out to work with someone who knows as much or even more than you do about what to do with that child.

### **Q Any particular resource or book you would recommend to start with?**

I think one of the most powerful resources is a skinny little book called *Choice Words* by Peter Johnston. I think it's all of 68 pages long, and the subtitle is *How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*. It's simply a careful and close look at how effective teachers talk to their children and how less effective teachers talk to their children. How do you foster a child's sense of agency and identity? Think about it: By the end of 1st grade, most struggling readers already know they're terrible at reading and they think they're the problem. And at that point they start working very hard on any number of schemes to try to hide the fact that they can't read or aren't very good at it. And not surprisingly, they don't do much reading independently. This is a cycle that teachers need to and can break.

In the end it's us, educators, who really matter in the case of struggling readers. We have to understand that and ask the questions about what we are doing or not doing, rather than asking what is wrong with the child.

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## COMMENTARY

# Getting Real Reading to Work

By Ariel Sacks

**B**ack in January, teacher Dan Brown sparked a fantastic conversation in his *Get in the Fracas* blog about reading for pleasure as a key ingredient for student success, especially in the case of standardized tests. Dan drew on research by lawyer and education professor Veda Jairrels, who contends that voluntary reading is the crucial missing piece for many African-American youth and accounts for the achievement gap between black and white students.

Dan teaches high school English in the District of Columbia. I'm an 8th grade English teacher in Brooklyn, New York. Dr. Jairrels's argument really resonates with both of us and our daily classroom experiences.

### Intrinsic Motivation

Reading for pleasure is such a key factor and indicator of learning and intellectual growth. When a child reads voluntarily, he or she is focused on the reading experience and not on the grade, the desired test score, or the approval of the teacher. Our schools and school systems are built around the idea that kids will respond to extrinsic motivators to learn. Research shows that extrinsic motivators (i.e., incentives, grades) work when the task is very simple and doesn't challenge us. But when the task is more complex and requires critical thinking, the extrinsic motivator has a negative effect on learning. That's because it moves the child's focus to the grade or desired outcome, instead of the content and experience itself. (For more about this research, see Daniel Pink's recent book, *Drive*, which he summarizes in this Ted Talks video.)

In his blog post, Dan Brown argues that the "readers," students who read for pleasure but often do not complete class assignments, are building genuine intellectual experience in their reading; while the "worker bees," those who complete all assignments but understand very little, are just trying to earn the grade and/or please the teacher and other people in their lives. They are far removed from the real process of learning, which requires intrinsic motivation.

I believe that intrinsic motivation to learn is the crucial factor in academic success. Reading for pleasure is not the only way kids can develop and become empowered by intrinsic motivation, but it's a really important and rewarding place to start.

### Connecting with Parents

I agree with Jairrels that including the parents in the process is extremely valuable. Some of my most rewarding experiences as a teacher have been when I've connected with parents around my reading curriculum, so that parents understand their child's reading interests and actually get involved in their reading lives directly, by reading together, or through conversation about the reading. Of course, it is true that some students really do not have family situations that allow for this. Parent involvement becomes more complicated when parents do not speak English or are not readers themselves. Nonetheless, I have not found these issues to be an insurmountable barrier to students developing a love of reading.

Last year I had a student I'll call Jamar. Jamar was a sweet, very sociable kid, who always expressed a desire to do well in school, but who, in reality, was pretty disengaged with his school work. He had a lot of trouble focusing and following through on assignments. His grades in most classes, including mine, regularly hovered between a D+ and a F. His skills more or less matched those grades.

My homework all year long is reading. We alternate between students choosing their own books and me assigning whole-class novels. Every night, students are to read at least 10 pages and write three sticky notes inside the book with their responses. (I also allot class time for this.) I make lots of phone calls home to let parents know what students are reading and especially to alert them when their child is not keeping up.

Jamar was reading very little, especially at home. I had made a few phone calls to his mother. As it turned out, she was out of work on disability and so she had plenty of time to spend with Jamar in the evenings. This time I was calling about a novel—*The Dream Bearer* by Walter Dean Myers—that

“Most of all, we need to venture outside of the limited territory that is typically considered to be the realm of school—exploiting, in the best sense, our students' innate desire to learn and the family and community relationships they already have.”

the whole class was reading. The deadline to complete the book was two days away, and Jamar needed to finish it in order to participate in seminar-style discussions. “That's it,” his mother told me. “He's gonna read this book.”

The next day, Jamar skipped into school early. “Ms. Sacks, you're not going to believe it. I am SO tired. I was up til 2 a.m. reading that book with my mother! But you know what? The book is really GOOD! And you're gonna love reading my sticky notes!”

The following day the book was due, and Jamar came in boasting to everyone that he'd finished. His participation in discussions that week was exemplary. His insights into the book were deep and well-evidenced. A new voice—both knowledgeable and inquisitive—emerged in our classroom that day.

I called Jamar's mother to tell her how wonderfully he'd done and thanked her for her help. She said, “You know, I'm home with him every day. I always ask him what homework he has and he says he already did it. This is the first time I got to really work with him on anything.” She also told me how much she'd enjoyed reading the book with him and asked me what other books I had that might be similar so they could read some more together.

### A Different Student

The amazing thing was that Jamar was not the same student after that moment.

Something had clicked. He became much more engaged with his work, not just with reading, and not just in English class. He had benefited from the real intellectual experience of reading and was able to speak from that experience in an academic context. The power that came from that work of the mind, and the deepening of his relationship with his mother, was great enough to turn him on to learning.

As we continue on the trajectory of high-stakes testing and accountability that NCLB first set us upon when my 8th graders were learning to read in elementary school, the time is overripe to revisit the importance of authentic learning. In our quest to close the achievement gap, we need to draw the readers out of hiding and into the intellectual life of our classrooms. Likewise we need to help the worker bees calm their minds and genuinely connect with academic material. Sustained reading is good for that.

Most of all, we need to venture outside of the limited territory that is typically considered to be the realm of “school”—exploiting, in the best sense, our students’ innate desire to learn and the family and community relationships they already have.

*Ariel Sacks is an 8th grade English teacher and team leader at a middle school in Brooklyn, N.Y. A graduate of the Bank Street College of Education, she is in her sixth year of teaching and blogs at On the Shoulders of Giants. She is co-authoring a book on the future of teaching that will be published by Teachers College Press later this year.*

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*Gina Biancarosa, Anthony S. Bryk, and Emily R. Dexter*

Elementary School Journal, September 2010

## **CAST: Center for Applied Special Technology**

<http://www.cast.org/>

## **International Reading Association**

<http://www.reading.org/General/Default.aspx>

## **2010 Kids & Family Reading Report: Turning the Page in the Digital Age**

<http://mediaroom.scholastic.com/kfrr>

Harrison Group and Scholastic, 2010

## **Reading Electronic Books as a Support for Vocabulary, Story Comprehension and Word Reading in Kindergarten and First Grade**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2009.11.014>

*Ofra Korat*

Computers & Education, August 2010

## **Striving Readers**

<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders/index.html>

## **Summative Evaluation of the Ready to Learn Initiative: Preschool Teachers Can Use a Media-Rich Curriculum to Prepare Low-Income Children for School Success: Results of a Randomized Controlled Trial**

<http://cct.edc.org/rtl/index.asp#studies>

*William R. Penuel, Shelley Pasnik, Eve Townsend, Lawrence P. Gallagher, Carlin Llorente, and Naomi Hupert*

Education Development Center, Inc. and SRI International, 2009

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