



School Improvement Booster: A Focus on Literacy – February 2012

Hearing text from books and talking and writing about books encourages reading. I remember reading a page from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to a bunch of middle school children one day as a guest reader and the librarian told me later that day she'd checked out every single copy she had of *Tom Sawyer*. And believe me it was not based on the popularity of the reader – I was their teacher in another subject at that time and not all of them adored me. Ha. But books open worlds for us we can hardly imagine and that's what happened that day.

This newsletter is all about developing literacy, but before we get to the technical stuff, and there is plenty of that in the following pages, it seemed we should encourage you to think about what reading means to you personally and professionally. We know that you read to survive in your jobs, you read to solve problems, you read to expand your horizons, and you also read for just plain fun. Can you imagine your life if you couldn't read? The doors and worlds that would be closed to you?

My favorite books are mysteries in the Agatha Christie style - all that gentility and then a grisly murder. I also usually have something professional going and try to fit a chapter in regularly among the thrillers. Right now I'm reading *Bury Your Dead* by Louise Penny and I'm plugging through *Visible Learning* by John Hattie, a synthesis of over 800 meta-analysis relating to achievement.

My first serious "stay up all night reading" experience resulted from checking out Nancy Drew mysteries from the Conrad Library. Mrs. Stover, the librarian, thought I might like them. I wonder how many other children she encouraged to find adventure in reading. I don't remember my parents reading to me or taking me to the library when I was growing up, although I suspect my mother occasionally did. They certainly modeled reading – both always had a book or a newspaper or magazine with them. But it was Mrs. Stover who suggested books to me and my teachers that really got me going.

If you have a favorite book you'd like to review, we'd be glad to add that feature to our school improvement newsletter. The folks at ISFIS will also be featured in a regular book sharing part of this newsletter. Also you have to tell us how you became a reader – who encouraged you to discover what could be found in the world of books. So besides learning the skills necessary to get the words off the pages and understand and interact with text, kids need to find the joy and adventure in reading. We can all help with that!

The Politics of Literacy

The Governor's Blueprint proposes early intervention strategies for improving reading achievement, a state level clearinghouse for research-based best practice, and mandatory retention of students not reading on grade level at 3rd grade. The legislation directs the State Board of Education to promulgate

rules including exceptions to retention. There is debate across the state about the retention piece and conversations at the Capitol will take a while to get to clarity. Despite your politics, we at ISFIS believe Iowa schools share the common goal of all students reading well as soon as possible, certainly by the end of third grade. However much we wish that to be true, there are students in Iowa schools that are not yet reading well. Jason Glass, Director of the Iowa Department of Education, notes on the DE website a startling statistic, “61 percent of our schools have not reached the point where 80 percent of students are proficient in reading at the levels.” We believe this means reading at “grade level.”

There has never been a better time to take stock of where the district and buildings are in reading achievement and plan for the future. Some questions you might consider:

- How many and what percent of our PK-3 students are not progressing adequately to read on grade level by third grade?
- How do we know? Do we have multiple measures to make an informed decision?
- Who are the students not progressing?
- Do we have a systematic plan in place to support the learning of all students?
- What instructional practices form the core of our reading program?
- Do all teachers implement those core practices?
- What additional instruction are we providing for struggling readers?
- Are all of our instructional practices supported in the research related to reading?
- Do we have assessments in place that drive our understanding of who is reading? Do they give us the information we need for improvement?

While we know most schools have thought carefully about how they deliver reading instruction to all students, it’s always good to revisit the plan and be sure that the practices, procedures, and instruction that have been decided upon are in place and getting the intended results. This booster is meant to provide a few of the many resources available to help you consider the elements of effective reading instruction and compare those to what’s going on in your school.

We learned over a decade ago from the [National Reading Panel](#) that learning to read consists of mastering at least these skill areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. [Learning Points Associates](#) also provides a nice overview of these five elements.

Comprehension

Child and Family Policy Center, Nell Duke, Michigan State University

The Iowa Family and Child Policy Center held a forum in Des Moines on Dec. 15, 2011, related to third grade retention. The forum was attended by representatives of the Governor’s office, state legislators, the education associations and other interested people. The forum, entitled Third Grade Literacy: Ensuring World Class Readers, featured Nell Duke, whose remarks, *Putting Evidence into Practice: Classroom Components for Improving Reading Comprehension K-3*, helped participants understand what effective reading instruction looks like. She asked participants to consider these three big ideas. All three require significant professional development for teachers.

1. **Focus on teacher professional development, not buying reading programs.** It’s tempting, isn’t it, when those reading sales folks come around and tell you that their program is research based? Dr. Duke cited several studies emphasizing the role effective teachers play in ensuring all

students learn to read well, noting different results of teachers using the same materials. So while it's tempting to invest scarce dollars in flashy materials, the most bang for your buck is professional development, ensuring teachers have a rich understanding of reading instruction. Keep in mind, however, that our libraries and classrooms should be stocked with a bountiful variety of well written text, related to many topics and ideas that are easily accessible to the students. These are necessary materials for an effective reading experience for children.

- 2. Operate with a sophisticated understanding of reading comprehension (and writing).** Dr. Duke noted this statement from a group of reading researchers of which she was a panelist that emphasizes why reading comprehension must be a significant part of K-3 reading instruction, "Successful decoding undergirds successful reading comprehension and it certainly should be taught, but the panel believes decoding instruction alone will not produce desired levels of reading comprehension for all students." Unless teachers have that sophisticated understanding of reading, the instruction provided may not focus where it needs to be focused. This idea also has significant implications for professional development.
- 3. Address the many contributors to reading comprehension (and writing), including world knowledge, motivation, and other often-neglected contributors.** Dr. Duke cited 11 elements of effective reading instruction, which can be found [here](#).

What Works Clearinghouse, Improving Reading Comprehension in K-3

"The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) publishes practice guides in education to bring the best available evidence and expertise to bear on current challenges in education. Authors of practice guides combine their expertise with the findings of rigorous research, when available, to develop specific recommendations for addressing these challenges. The authors rate the strength of the research evidence supporting each of their recommendations. The goal of this particular practice guide is to offer educators specific evidence-based recommendations that address the challenge of teaching reading comprehension to students in kindergarten through 3rd grade." The panel was chaired by Tim Shanahan of the University of Chicago and included reading experts such as Nell Duke, David Pearson, Joe Torgensen, and others. All of these concepts were included in Iowa's historic work in Every Child Reads and Reading First.

- 1. Teach students how to use reading comprehension strategies.** Many Iowa teachers were introduced to reading comprehension strategies through the structures of Every Child Reads and Reading First, but whether the professional development model implemented at each school allowed all of them to have executive control of the strategies is not known. This handbook points out what strategies are not: "1. Instructional activities such as completing worksheets. Worksheets rarely include instruction in what students should do actively in their heads to improve comprehension, and 2. Exercises that are aimed at giving students practice with skills such as sequencing or drawing conclusions, but that lack explicit instruction in how to think in these ways during reading." (p. 11)
- 2. Teach students to identify and use the text's organizational structure to comprehend, learn, and remember content.** Students need to learn to connect the elements of narrative (fiction) text. These are identified as characters, setting, goal, problem, plot or action, resolution, and theme(s). Students should also be taught the text structures of non-fiction text. This also was an integral part of Iowa's Reading First effort. This practice guide identifies five structures of informational text: description; sequence; problem and solution; cause and effect; and compare and contrast. (pp. 19 and 20)
- 3. Guide students through focused, high quality, discussion on the meaning of text.** High quality discussions generate from questions that cause students to think deeply about the text they're

reading. Also the conversations are real, like the ones adults have in book clubs. These aren't surface conversations where the teachers ask questions that a few successful students respond to dutifully.

4. **Select texts purposefully to support comprehension development.** Find text that is interesting, well written and is centered on ideas and content interesting to the students reading it. While districts may have reading series from which reading is to be taught, this should never prevent teachers from bringing real text into classrooms from books and other sources as their study of reading and other disciplines like science, social studies, math, and the arts unfolds.
5. **[Establish an engaging and motivating context in which to teach reading comprehension.](#)** Use text to solve problems and learn more about what's being studied. For instance if the content being studied is insects, then real text about insects can be used to support the unit, not just a text book. The teacher will need to model how the real text answers questions, generates more questions, shows contrary views, etc. This does not mean just handing out additional resources. It means if the students are doing hands on work, the texts support their learning and the teachers models how it supports her and the students' learning. Additionally, students should have text they are interested in reading. This will require a library rich with text and easy access to students as they work to connect reading to their everyday lives.

Vocabulary

CIERA researcher JoAnne Carlisle from the University of Michigan discusses concrete methods for increasing student word knowledge:

- Lots of talk in the classroom (about books, about events and experiences, and collaborative learning opportunities in classrooms)
- Listening to stories and books read aloud
- Word games
- Teacher modeling of curiosity about words
- Strategies for word learning employed by the teacher
 - Prereading vocabulary instruction
 - Context analysis strategy
 - Word analysis strategy (structural analysis)

Additionally, vocabulary is built through wide reading.

Read more detail related to Carlisle's work [here](#).

Fluency

Melanie Kuhn and the late (and great) Steven Stahl write about fluency. They note, "Fluency instruction seems to be a promising approach to teaching children especially those in late first and late second grades, but also older children with reading problems who are disfluent." Kuhn and Stahl also reached these conclusions:

1. Fluency instruction generally seems to be effective, although it is unclear whether it is successful because of specific instructional features or because fluency instruction involves children in reading increased amounts of text;
2. Assisted approaches, such as reading-while listening, seem to be more effective than nonassisted approaches, such as repeated reading;
3. Repetitive approaches do not seem to hold a clear advantage over nonrepetitive approaches; and

4. Effective fluency instruction moves beyond automatic word recognition to include rhythm and expression, or what linguists refer to as the *prosodic features of language*.

Read Kuhn and Stahls entire report [here](#).

Phonics

Systematic Phonics Instruction Helps Students Learn to Read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's Meta-Analysis

This 2001 meta-analysis by Ehri, Nunes, Stall, and Willow describes the findings in the [National Reading Panel related to phonics instruction](#). The panel determined that systematic phonics instruction helps students learn to read and that teaching phonics to older, struggling readers is less effective than phonics instruction that begins early, rather than after 1st grade.

Linea Ehri further explained the panel's findings, suggesting that phonics programs should include the following:

- Have a plan for teaching all major letter-sound correspondences.
- Teach students to transfer graphemes (written representations of sounds) into phonemes (sounds) and to blend them to form recognizable words.
- Phonics and phonemic awareness skills are actively taught by explaining and modeling the use of alphabetic principles.
- Phonics skills are embedded in daily activities and worksheets are not used extensively.
- Phonics instruction needs to be combined with other forms of instruction to create a comprehensive reading program (phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.)

Dr. Ehri writes comprehensively about teaching phonics in [this paper](#).

Phonemic Awareness

International Reading Association Position Paper on Phonemic Awareness

The International Reading Association is a respected, literacy advocacy association. Their position statement on phonemic awareness states, "Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to segment and manipulate the sounds of oral language. It is not the same as phonics, which involves knowing how written letters relate to spoken sounds. Activities that develop phonemic awareness in children provide practice with rhyme and with beginning sounds and syllables. Research has shown that a child's awareness of the sounds of spoken words is a strong predictor of his or her later success in learning to read. Teachers of young children can encourage play with spoken language as part of a broader literacy program. Nursery rhymes, riddles, songs, poems, and read-aloud books that manipulate sounds are all effective vehicles." You can read the entire position paper [here](#).

What If Students Aren't Reading Well?

What Works Clearinghouse: Assisting Students Struggling with Reading

Director Glass has recommended that all schools in Iowa move to the Response to Intervention method described below. The DE website notes, “35 percent of our children in grades 4 and 8 have not made at least one year's worth of progress in reading in a year's time. All students who did not make a year's worth of growth should receive targeted intervention, but we lack a way to verify that students received the support they needed.” The website goes on to say, “To that end, Iowa will move to Response to Intervention (RtI) statewide, with the goal of it being in every Iowa classroom.” In Iowa in some places where this has been implemented, it has been called Instructional Decision Making.

This practice guide, which spells out the RtI process was developed for the purposes discussed in the IES guide featured previously about reading comprehension. This particular RtI guide was chaired by Russell Gersten of International Research Group. Among the panelists were Donald Compton of Vanderbilt and Iowa's own David Tilly from Heartland AEA. All of the recommendations require significant teacher training, so the people expected to develop the core program and the interventions have a deep understanding of reading. The recommendations were as follows:

- 1. Screen all students for potential reading problems at the beginning of the year and again in the middle of the year. Regularly monitor the progress of students who are elevated risk for developing reading disabilities.** Iowa schools are required by law to monitor student performance in reading in grades K-3. Not all give the assessment three times annually, though many do. Schools currently use the BRI, DRA and/or other reading screenings in grades K-3. Think about your administration schedule. Should you increase your administrations of your early reading assessment?
- 2. Provide differentiated reading instruction for all students based on assessments of students' current reading levels (Tier 1).** This asks teachers to provide the instruction students need in order to move forward in their reading. Often phonemic awareness and/or phonics are the first skills addressed for struggling readers, but reading isn't linear. All of the elements of reading must be addressed from the beginning of a child's school experience. The focus of instruction must be related to what the assessments show the student needs, which should include comprehension from the earliest levels, PreK – 3.
- 3. Provide intensive, systematic instruction on up to three foundational reading skills in small groups to students who score below the benchmark on universal screening. Typically these groups meet between three and five times a week for twenty to forty minutes (Tier 2).** The writers indicate there must be a high degree of feedback regarding progress to students at this level.
- 4. Monitor the progress of Tier 2 students at least once a month.** Use these data to determine whether students still require intervention. For those still making insufficient progress, school-wide teams should design a Tier 3 intervention plan.
- 5. Provide intensive instruction daily that promotes the development of various components of reading proficiency to students who show minimal progress after a reasonable time in Tier 2 small group instruction (Tier 3).** This instruction is intense, targeted at a limited number of skills, includes explicit feedback and may be provided 1-1 several times daily.

We hope this discussion of reading has been helpful.

Quotes

“To set the stage for students to succeed at reading, teachers can supply ample time for text reading, direct strategy instruction, and opportunities for collaboration and discussion.”

Linda Fielding and P. David Pearson, 1994

“Effective teachers continually assess their students’ engagement, understanding, and behavior throughout the day (Pressley et al., 2003) Also, teachers in effective schools systematically collect and share student assessment data to help them make instructional decisions to improve student performance (Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, & Russ, 2004; Taylor et al., 2000.)”

Barbara Taylor

“The things I want to know are in books; my best friend is the man who’ll get me a book I ain’t read.”

Abraham Lincoln

“We read to know we are not alone.”

C.S. Lewis

Any questions about or ideas for this newsletter are welcome. Contact Susie Olesen via email (Susie.Olesen@isfis.net) or phone (641-745-5284).