

What At-Risk Readers Need

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We could teach almost every student to read by the end of 1st grade. So why aren't we doing it?



Few students in the United States read at a desirable level. According to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, roughly one-third of U.S. students read at or above the proficient level, one-third read at the basic level, and one-third read at the below basic level (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). In other words, two of every three students in U.S. schools have reading proficiencies below the level needed to adequately do grade-level work.

At the same time, studies have shown that virtually every student could be reading on grade level by the end of 1st grade (Mathes et al., 2005; Phillips & Smith, 2010; Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider, & Sweeney, 2010; Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, et al., 1996) and that the cost of achieving this goal is substantially less than the current system of remediation, special education, and grade retention. This raises the question, Why are so few schools doing what they need to do to help their at-risk readers?

The RTI Breakthrough

Although Congress can share the blame for creating the education system we now see in almost every U.S. school, we should also recognize that in 2004, Congress provided educators with an option that just might help us undo some of the mistakes of the past and close the current reading achievement gap: the Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative.

The legislation and accompanying regulations have a dual focus: (1) to provide increasingly intensive expert reading instruction to ensure that students having difficulty learning to read are not simply getting too little or too inexpert reading instruction; and (2) to locate students who exhibit difficulties even after receiving intensive reading instruction (Johnston, in press), who will now be identified as students with learning disabilities.

Although the federal law doesn't mention tiers of instruction, a three-tiered model has become the most common form in RTI initiatives. The first tier is the classroom reading lessons that the student receives. The second tier is additional expert reading instruction typically offered daily in a small group. The third and final tier provides one-on-one daily tutorials. Participating in high-quality reading lessons in each of the three tiers as needed should dramatically reduce the numbers of students experiencing difficulties in learning to read.

What I like about this legislation is that it allows school districts to use up to 15 percent of a district's total budget for special education to support the RTI process. However, the legislation makes it clear that RTI is a *general education initiative*; this funding is turned over to a general education team to fund the general education effort to teach everyone to read—in other words, to fund the three tiers of the RTI intervention. I also like the fact that Congress left almost all implementation decisions up to the local education agency. At the same time, this creates the possibility that in too many schools, no one will take up the responsibility of providing three tiers of high-quality, expert reading instruction.

When Must We Begin?

All the federal legislation says about identifying students for involvement in the RTI process is that schools must have a screening process in place. According to Scanlon and Vellutino (1997), all a school needs to do to identify students who may become struggling readers is assess kindergartners' letter name knowledge. Pearson and Hiebert (2010) note that two-thirds of entering kindergartners already know the names of the letters of the alphabet and that one-third also know the consonant sounds. It's the one-third who *don't* know all the letter names who seem most likely to become struggling readers.

So we begin screening for letter name knowledge in kindergarten to identify students at risk of becoming struggling readers. And as soon as we know which students don't know their letter names, we begin our intervention process.

But really, how many schools have intervention programs that begin serving at-risk students so early on? Virtually none. We could know on the second day of kindergarten who is at risk of becoming a struggling reader, but we typically do nothing with this information.

If kindergarten teachers were well trained for this job, this wouldn't be such an issue. Professional development has proven successful in helping kindergarten teachers address the needs of at-risk students (McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi, & Brooks, 1999; Scanlon et al., 2010). Evidence also indicates that better trained kindergarten teachers can solve the reading problems of at-risk students at the same rate as expert tutorial programs. In fact, the evidence suggests that perhaps one-quarter of primary-grade teachers are able and willing to teach these at-risk students (Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007).

Unfortunately, that also suggests that three-quarters of our primary teachers may either not feel qualified or not feel the responsibility to teach at-risk students (Scharlach, 2008). In addition, some kindergarten teachers may believe that this work is developmentally inappropriate.

The bottom line is that most U.S. schools have no plan to provide the sorts of classroom instruction that at-risk kindergartners need. Neither high-quality, extensive professional development for kindergarten teachers nor expert tutorial instruction for at-risk kindergartners is on the agenda at this point. This means that most schools deliberately create a pool of students who will become struggling readers.

I say *deliberately* because, unfortunately, that's just what it is—deliberate ignorance of what we should do to address the problems of at-risk kindergartners. As Vellutino, Scanlon, Zhang, and Schatschneider (2008) note, we could change the futures of roughly one-half of the students who begin kindergarten at risk of becoming struggling readers by providing expert tutorial services; 1st grade teachers could do the same by providing expert tutorials or "very small" group lessons (with three or fewer students). In their studies of the RTI process, Scanlon and colleagues (2010) found that researchers have typically provided at least 50 30-minute tutorial sessions for at-risk kindergartners and 75–150 30-minute tutorials or very small group sessions for at-risk 1st graders. When layered on top of 90 minutes of high-quality classroom reading lessons, expert tutorials (Phillips & Smith, 2010; Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, et al., 1996) or very small group reading instruction (Mathes et al., 2005) result in 98 percent of all 1st graders reading on level.

Moreover, these students remain on level at least through 3rd grade with no additional support. This means that once we ensure that all students have access to sufficient high-quality reading lessons, few will meet the federal definition of students with learning disabilities or dyslexia.

It's now up to the schools to fulfill this promise in the primary grades.

What Doesn't Work

In far too many schools, at-risk kindergartners and 1st graders receive no expert additional instruction. A shortage of money isn't the problem. Schools already spend enormous amounts of money on a variety of approaches that don't work.

Using Paraprofessionals

Schools probably waste more money on employing paraprofessionals in the primary grades than on any other expenditure. I say *waste* because a long history of education research demonstrates that although paraprofessionals certainly do provide some benefits, they don't provide high-quality reading lessons to struggling readers (Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain, 1998; Gerber, Finn, Achilles, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2001; Rowan & Guthrie, 1989). That is, paraprofessional assistance never accelerates reading progress enough to remove the struggling-reader label. Working with a paraprofessional may add two months growth in reading for a struggling reader, but that reader needs 10–15 months additional growth to be reading on level with his or her peers.

Using Computer-Based Instructional Programs

Given that federal research (Institute for Education Sciences, 2007) has illustrated that none of the computer-based reading products actually works as well as a teacher in fostering reading development, one wonders why these expensive nonsolutions are so popular in schools.

And it isn't just computer-based reading lessons that are ineffective. On the website of the federal What Works Clearinghouse (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>) only one of the 150-plus commercial reading programs listed received a "strong evidence" rating.¹ Four other programs were rated as having "possible evidence" of their effectiveness. Only 20 had any evidence that they improved

any aspect of the reading process (reading rate, phonemic segmentation, and so on), but these programs had no evidence that they improved actual reading achievement.

Using Core Reading Programs

One reason that struggling readers receive fewer high-quality reading lessons is our fixation on one-size-fits-all core reading programs. The What Works Clearinghouse found no research that supports their use. Connor (2009) noted "an overreliance on the core curriculum" in her study of Reading First classrooms. In addition, Dewitz, Jones, and Leahy (2009) pointed out that although core reading programs do offer the same needed sets of skills and strategies, the way those programs are implemented in schools rarely matches how researchers implemented those skills. For example, no researcher attempted to teach a skill, such as finding the main idea, in a single week; rather, researchers typically scheduled many consecutive weeks of main idea lessons to foster growth of that ability. However, few comprehension skill or strategy lessons in core programs last for more than one week.

The same could be said for the vocabulary or decoding lessons that core reading programs offer. Yes, they mimic the research in name, but the substance of the research—the instructional method—is left hanging out to dry.

In addition, a study of core reading programs in Florida found that

approximately one in four students failed the FCAT [the state reading assessment] regardless of program, and the majority of these failures were in high-poverty schools. Obviously, mandated core programs did not provide sufficient support to teachers of low-achieving poor children. (McGill-Franzen, Zmach, Solic, & Zeig, 2006, p. 84)

Core reading programs fail for three reasons:

They require little actual reading. Across the six core reading programs that Brenner and Hiebert (2010) studied, students needed to spend only 15 minutes per day reading. That leaves 75 minutes of every 90-minute reading period for students to engage in something else. Most often, this other activity is skill lessons or workbook page completion. If we wanted to design reading instruction that was highly ineffective, this would be a good plan. If we added in some time for test preparation, we could make the lessons even less effective (Guthrie, 2002).

They don't promote high-success reading. "High-success reading" typically refers to independent reading or reading with 98 percent accuracy or better, reading phrases with expression, and reading with 90 percent comprehension (Betts, 1949). Hundreds of studies demonstrate the power of Betts's advice, but two recent studies point out just how crucial high-success reading is.

One study of struggling readers who were also second language learners noted that the key factor in how much progress students made was the number of texts each student read at 98 percent or higher accuracy (Ehri, Dreyer, Flugman, & Gross, 2007). The researchers also noted that students who worked with teachers, as opposed to paraprofessionals, read far more of these high-success texts and therefore were far more likely to make accelerated progress in reading.

O'Connor and colleagues (2002) provided tutoring to struggling 6th graders. These students were typically reading at the 3rd grade level or below, and about half had been identified as having disabilities. Half of these 6th graders were tutored using classroom texts—for instance, the 6th grade core reading texts or 6th grade social studies texts. The other half were tutored using reading materials matched to a 3rd grade reading level.

The researchers observed few gains in students who were tutored using classroom texts and accelerated gains in students tutored with materials at their reading level. Texts that students can read at a high level of accuracy spur reading development. Any school plan that does *not* put high-success texts in struggling readers' hands all day long is not only ignoring the research but also creating and perpetuating large numbers of struggling readers.

They don't offer self-selected reading. Core reading programs don't provide any opportunity for students to select what they want to read. Everyone reads the same stories, often those that don't violate some set of state or school district guidelines for content (Ravitch, 2003). Self-selected reading activity seems to be about twice as powerful at generating reading development as teacher-selected reading (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Lindsay, 2010).

What Schools Should Do

Start in Kindergarten on Day One

The one-third of entering kindergartners who don't know all their letter names are likely to become the one-third of 4th graders reading below the basic level. Therefore, schools should begin by ensuring that these kindergartners participate in additional high-quality reading lessons. These could be provided by reading specialists or other more expert reading professionals (Scanlon et al., 2010) or by classroom teachers who have received substantive professional development in teaching young students to read (McGill-Franzen, Payne, & Dennis, 2010). We must structure our schools so that what we know on the first day of school no longer predicts the NAEP scores that students will earn five years later.

Continue to Offer Supports in 1st Grade

The kindergarten intervention will bring many at-risk students up to grade level in reading. Some students, however, will still need intensive, expert reading instruction as well as high-quality additional reading interventions in 1st grade. The vast majority of studies that develop reading proficiency in at-risk 1st grade readers have used a tutorial format to accelerate reading development (Ehri et al., 2007; Pinnell, Lyons, Deford, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994; Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, et al., 1996) and two studies used very small intervention groups (Hiebert, Colt, Catto, & Gury, 1992; Mathes et al., 2005). However, few at-risk readers in 1st grade receive any such intervention, thus sealing their fate as struggling readers (Mathes et al., 2005).

Engage Students in High-Success Reading

Struggling readers need precisely what good readers receive—lots of high-success reading experiences (Allington, 2009). These experiences provide evidence of the *self-teaching hypothesis* (Share & Stanovich, 1995), which proposes that children develop a variety of reading skills—such as phonemic segmentation, decoding, and vocabulary building—when they engage in high-success reading.

So What Will It Be?

We can create schools where teachers use a one-size-fits-all core reading program, where we fill up students' days with worksheets and test-preparation sessions, and where nonexperts in reading instruction are expected to work with large numbers of at-risk readers—and then we can blame the students or their parents for their struggles.

Or we can begin by acknowledging that at-risk readers need more expert reading instruction than we have been providing. We can figure out how to fund this and then get on with it. Only then will struggling readers become on-level readers. Only then can we look ourselves in the mirror and say, "We've done everything we could."

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Endnote

¹ Reading Recovery was the one commercial reading program that received a "strong evidence" rating.

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