

Accelerating Acquisition of Basic Reading Skills: Elementary and Middle School

Center on Instruction

Research and expert opinion suggest that it is important to build basic or foundational reading skills in students who need them, while also providing them with access to grade-level concepts and content. The Response to Intervention (RTI) framework provides one method for accelerating student achievement in various content areas, including foundational skills in reading. In an RTI framework, students receive daily help learning not only so-called “basic skills” (e.g., decoding common words) but also higher order skills, such as comprehension, and grasping critical content in the disciplines. For more information about essential reading components, see the National Reading Panel Report (NICHD, 2000).

Attempts to develop foundational skills require school-wide commitment. Classroom teachers can provide differentiated instruction, create learning situations where heterogeneous pairs of students work together to build foundational skills, and provide sensible accommodations to ensure that all students, including English language learners and those with disabilities, receive meaningful access to the core grade level curricula content. A wide array of school personnel needs to ensure that the school conducts universal screening in reading, monitors progress of students identified as at-risk on a regular basis, and ensures that teachers are prepared to teach higher order skills by providing professional development when needed.

Action Principles

For District

1. Provide ongoing support and mentoring for schools as they expand RTI programs in reading (Gersten, Compton, Connor, Dimino, Santoro, Linan-Thompson, & Tilly, 2008).
2. Create a syllabus or curriculum guide and accompanying professional development for teaching literacy skills to adolescents (Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger, & Torgesen, 2008; Boardman, Roberts, Vaughn, Wexler, Murray, & Kosanovich, 2008).
3. Analyze district-wide data to identify schools that appear to be consistently building foundational skills in reading in low-performing students. Examine their programs and use principles learned and personnel from those schools to provide mentoring to others (Hamilton, Halverson, Jackson, Mandinach, Supovitz, & Wayman, 2009).

For School

1. Implement and expand Response to Intervention models in reading across all grade levels when feasible. In many cases, an RTI program will be established in K-3 reading, but often it should be expanded into higher grade levels as well (Gersten, Compton, Connor, Dimino, Santoro, Linan-Thompson, & Tilly, 2008; Glover & Vaughn, 2010).
2. Establish courses in adolescent literacy in middle school. Ensure that courses include not only work on decoding for those students who need it, but also contain a strong emphasis on vocabulary and comprehension (listening as well as reading) (Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger, & Torgesen, 2008; Boardman, Roberts, Vaughn, Wexler, Murray, & Kosanovich, 2008).
3. Use peer-assisted learning or class-wide peer tutoring in day-to-day classroom instruction in reading. Schedule these activities two or three times a week. They should never supplant instruction, but rather support time normally devoted to individual seatwork (Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Simmons, 1997).
4. Use differentiated instruction for part of reading lessons. Use formative assessment data to determine which students require help in foundational reading skills (Connor, Morrison, Fishman, Schatschneider, & Underwood, 2007; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

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