



Considerations when Selecting a Reading Program

Selecting a reading program can be an intimidating task. School leaders may be inundated with claims from producers of commercial programs, all of whom claim to be able to fulfill the mandates outlined by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and/or the related Reading First program. To further complicate things, reading is a complex task dependent on many different elements (e.g., student diversity, student ability level, and prior knowledge) that requires programs to be adept at addressing a spectrum of issues (O’Cummings & Gerver, n.d.). The goal of this brief is to provide background information on scientifically based research conducted on various reading programs, the findings of the National Reading Panel, and some resources for learning more about reading programs.

Is the Program Research Based?

Before making a decision on a core or supplemental reading program, school administrators should evaluate a variety of programs to ensure that they are aligned with activities and strategies that are supported by research in beginning reading.

Results of the National Reading Panel

In 1999, the congressionally appointed National Reading Panel (NRP) submitted its report identifying approaches proven effective in teaching children to read. The NRP focused on several specific aspects of reading instruction: alphabets (including phonemic awareness and phonics), fluency, comprehension (including vocabulary, text comprehension, strategies for comprehension, teacher preparation, and comprehension strategies instruction), reading-related teacher education, and reading-related computer technology (NICHD, 2000). While the NRP did not focus on students diagnosed with disabilities per se, students with exceptionalities were included in some studies they considered.

The National Reading Panel report has been highly influential for both researchers and policymakers. It played a significant role in shaping President Bush’s Reading First initiative, which addresses the commitment to ensuring that every child can read by the end of third grade, as outlined by NCLB. Reading First was designed to increase the use of scientifically based reading programs in order to fulfill that commitment. The program provides six-year grants to states to:

- select and implement scientifically based reading programs;
- provide professional development for teachers at the school district level;
- conduct screening, progress monitoring, and outcome assessments that are valid and reliable; and
- provide technical assistance in Reading First and literacy coaches at the school level.

What is Research-Based?

With impetus from NCLB, which requires that states adopt and implement programs and strategies that are developed as a result of “scientifically based research,” the Access Center was established to provide research-based strategies that help students with disabilities access the general education curriculum. Using the term “research-based” to describe programs and strategies is not without ambiguity or controversy, however. As Russell Gersten highlighted, “when the term ‘research says’ or ‘research supports’ comes up in a conversation about education, it is greeted with cynicism.” He believes that this occurs because people confuse different types of research (www.nclb.org/Research/research_types.cfm). Indeed, in the broad educational field of teachers, administrators, trainers, researchers, curriculum developers, tutoring providers, entrepreneurs and marketers, there is no common understanding of exactly what defines “scientifically based research.” This leads many educators to ask: Is there an official definition of scientifically based research? Is there a well-established menu of scientifically based researched programs and strategies? How can we meet NCLB’s research requirements?

The Access Center upholds the notion that educational practices designed to improve student achievement within the general education curriculum need to be supported by objective evidence. Whether the practices are learning strategies, particular programs, or certain policies, we believe that educational practices with research support behind them will help practitioners make decisions and ultimately improve outcomes for students.

Reading Programs and Struggling Readers

Which reading programs can state and local education agencies, school administrators, and teachers rely on to help students with reading difficulties? While there are currently efforts to more definitively aggregate such data, it is difficult to find a central, objective source. Many reading programs on the market today are based on reading research that calls for five areas of focus: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Such programs can only be called effective at the most rigorous level, however, if supporting data shows improvement for students who used the program compared to students who did not use it. It is likely that the reasons for early reading difficulty are so varied and individualized that no one reading program or approach can be effective in treating all students’ needs.

Reading programs can help students with disabilities, but appropriate supports must be in place. Administrators, policymakers, and educators thinking about implementing a reading intervention should become grounded in the theory and features of the intervention. To consider the needs of students with disabilities or those who have difficulties attaining literacy, a framework of access-related issues should be explored and applied to the educational settings. This involves the following steps:

- *Step 1:* Ask questions about the research base supporting the use of interventions specifically for students with disabilities. Questions should probe what the research says about implementing the interventions for students with varying types of disabilities.

-
- *Step 2:* Ask questions about the contextual conditions needed to support effective implementation of the intervention. What conditions appear to be facilitating or restricting implementation? What is the status of those conditions in the state, district, or school? How can educators address those conditions that need to be more fully developed to facilitate implementation?
 - *Step 3:* Make sure the following conditions are present to support access:
 - a) the intervention will support the learning goals defined for each student, in accordance with the general education curriculum and content standards;
 - b) necessary media, technology, and materials are available to provide instruction through a variety of formats – thus meeting the demands of diverse learning needs;
 - c) appropriate accommodations are available to address the unique needs associated with individual students; and
 - d) appropriate assessments are available for measuring student progress.

Using these steps, states and districts can become more aware of the conditions that should be present to effectively reach diverse learners and become effective consumers of research-based reading interventions.

Beyond “The Program:” Considerations in Relation to Students with Disabilities

It is difficult for a single program to accommodate the varied weaknesses and needs for reinforcement in specific areas that different students experience. Additionally, any program a school leader selects will depend on the nature of the school’s needs and the cost of the program. However, the research suggests that high quality—and often personalized—approaches to teaching reading are necessary. If students receive better quality reading instruction, they may be less likely to fall behind in reading and therefore be more likely to succeed in school (Scanlon & Vellutino, 1996; Pascopella, 2002).

Practitioners will want to consider the range of possible adaptations that would be needed for at-risk students and students with disabilities. Of particular concern are those students who do not respond to initial teacher instruction or who struggle to acquire reading skills. Curricula should include explicit, systematic instruction—approaches that are effective for students with disabilities. For students with disabilities, programs should provide a great deal of support or scaffolding during the first phases of instruction. The intent of scaffolding is to lead learners to an independent skill level with the least amount of confusion and error along the way.

For example, researchers (Simmons, Chard, & Kameenui, 1994) have found that, in several commercially available reading programs, phonological awareness activities are rather limited in scope and often do not include segmenting and blending activities. Since these activities are highly correlated with reading acquisition (Torgeson, Morgan & Davis, 1992), school leaders and teachers would first need to consider whether such a program would be appropriate to adopt in their school. Second, they should determine what program adaptations would be needed to accommodate struggling

readers. Educators may need to rearrange skills in a more appropriate order, or may need to add introductory skills.

Qualities of Effective Reading Programs

1. Effective programs are driven by reading research and not ideology;
2. Effective programs emphasize direct, systematic, intensive, and sustained reading instruction;
3. Effective programs require school-wide buy-in before they are adopted;
4. Effective programs are supported by initial professional development and then extended follow-up training throughout the school year;
5. When implementing an effective program, the school needs to be committed to the integrity of the program's instructional approach and materials;
6. Effective programs make effective use of instructional time, provide multiple reading opportunities, and employ a variety of reading assessments (Schacter, nd).

How do I find information about specific reading programs?

Several centers and/or state departments of education have reviewed products and programs currently available. Findings presented on the sites may serve to guide, but not dictate, programmatic decision making. The sites listed below provide factual information about reading programs, but do not specifically endorse or oppose any particular programs.

➤ **The Oregon Reading First Panel**

<http://oregonreadingfirst.uoregon.edu/SIreport.php>

Two special education and reading professors from the University of Oregon, Edward Kame'enui and Deborah Simmons, invited a panel of experts to evaluate various commercial reading programs against criteria established by the state of Oregon. Kame'enui and Simmons invited publishers to submit their programs for review and then identified 106 supplemental and/or intervention¹ programs to be reviewed by the panel.

Based on the criteria under the five components identified by the NRP, the Oregon reviewers gave each supplementary and intervention program a corresponding rating. The ratings for each of the programs, as well as an explanation of the rating system, can be found on the above site. Although several states have used Oregon's review lists to assist them with their own decision-making, the center does not endorse any specific program over another, and acknowledges that the list of reviewed programs is not all-inclusive.

¹ According to Reading First regulations, schools may elect to adopt a supplemental reading program (SRP) in addition to their core program. While the SRP does not take the place of the core program, one may be selected for one or both of the following reasons: (1) schools can select an SRP to compensate for any weakness in the core program; (2) a school can adopt an SRP when its students require reading instruction in addition to that presented by typical reading programs. Intervention programs are designed to help specific students or groups of students who are performing below grade level.

-
- **The Florida Center for Reading Research**
<http://www.fcrr.org/FCRRReports/reportslist.htm>

This site provides a lengthier look at programs, broken down into the following categories: core reading programs, supplemental and intervention programs, technology-based programs, programs that may be implemented by tutors or mentors, intervention and remedial programs for students above third grade, pre-kindergarten programs, and professional development. For each program reviewed, a researcher at the center has issued a multi-page report which discusses general or background information of the program, how the program is or is not aligned with Reading First, the extent of the research base available for the program, and the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The report also lists school districts in Florida that are currently using the program, where to go for more information, and a listing of any references used in the report.

The Center states that the reports are intended to be used by teachers, principals, and district personnel when they are considering using reading programs, but the Center does not endorse any program over another. The Center prepares reports in response to specific requests from teachers and other personnel, so the absence of a particular program from the list does not constitute a negative review.

- **Reading Programs that Work: A Review of Programs for Pre-Kindergarten to 4th Grade**
<http://www.mff.org/pubs/ME279.pdf>

John Schacter, while serving as vice president for research projects at the Milken Family Foundation, compiled a report on effective programs for early reading (Schacter, n.d.). Programs that were selected for review in this report had to meet several criteria. First, the program had to be referenced by the U.S. Department of Education's National Diffusion Network. Second, the program had to have been evaluated based on experimental/control group designs and random assignment. Third, where possible, results needed to be reported in effect sizes. Fourth, the evaluation research had to use valid and reliable measures of reading achievement and take place over at least a three-month time span. Finally, the evaluation's results had to be replicated in more than one study. Selected programs are described using the following format: program description, effectiveness of the program, professional development associated with the program, cost of the program, and contact information.

- **Washington State's 4-12 Reading Intervention Materials Review**
<http://www.k12.wa.us/CurriculumInstruct/Reading/pubdocs/4-12ReadingIntervention.doc>

Recognizing a need for strong intervention instruction, the state of Washington convened a panel of Washington educators to review reading intervention materials for these grade levels. The panel included classroom teachers, special educators, central office administrators, teachers on special assignment, higher education educators, and staff from the state department of education. The panel reviewed five components of essential intervention programs: phonemic awareness, phonics/decoding, fluency,

vocabulary, and comprehension. The panel also considered components of instruction: explicit instructional guidance, program design, assessment, and universal access. The panel then listed the programs that either met or did not meet the standards. Programs that met the standards received a rating of three or four, based on a four-point rubric. Programs not meeting the standards of the review received a rating of one or two. A complete description of the review process and rating system is available online at the link listed above.

References

- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425, (2002).
- O’Cummings, M., & Gerver, M. (n.d.). *Answering the question. . .What criteria can be used for selecting a reading program?* Retrieved October 12, 2004, from: <http://www.emstac.org>.
- Pascopella, A. (2002). Overhauling an Early Education Program. *Curriculum Administrator*, 8, 34–37.
- Scanlon, D.M. & Vellutino, F.R. (1996). Prerequisite skills, early instruction, and success in first grade reading: Selected results from a longitudinal study. *Mental Retardation and Development Disabilities*, 2, 54–63.
- Schacter, J. (n.d.). Reading programs that work: A review of programs for pre-kindergarten to 4th grade. Retrieved October 10, 2004, from: <http://www.mff.org/pubs/ME279.pdf>.
- Simmons, D.C., Chard, D., & Kameenui, E.J. . (1994). Translating research into basal reading programs: Applications of curriculum design. *LD Forum*, 19(4), 9-13.
- Torgeson, J.K., Morgan, S. & Davis, C. (1992). Effects of two types of phonological awareness training on word learning in kindergarten children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 84, 364-370.