Literacy Support Systems and Leadership

At the heart of any successful literacy implementation is leadership. Leadership comes not just from the building principal or district superintendent, but also from teacher leaders and mentors.

It is the school leadership who must unite the entire staff in support of a collective vision of reading instruction. The leader must thoroughly understand the elements of a research-based reading program and establish a school culture that values effective research-based proven practices. The school leadership is responsible for marshalling resources, providing time, and staying the course. The school leadership must be “heroic,” able to resist the many forces that may inhibit implementation of an effective reading program. Those forces will include the need to attend to other curriculum areas and to district- and state-mandated reforms. Still other forces will come from within the staff, as teachers struggle with implementation problems.

Above all else, leadership requires determination, commitment, and perseverance.

But a lone leader needs to understand that he or she cannot do this without help. Rather, the skilled leader will identify the other leaders and utilize their expertise to build a solid leadership team. This team will be essential to successful program implementation.

In this short newsletter we can only touch on some key points—few in number but (we hope) highly intriguing. If you would like a copy of Linda Diamond’s papers listed under “Sources” or a reading list for future reference, please contact our newsletter editor, Nancy Everett, at neverett@corelearn.com. The list is just too long to include here!

Bill Honig, President  Linda Diamond, Executive Vice President

“The times call for everyone in education to accept leadership in improving the quality of education offered to every child.”

—Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education.
Literacy Expertise Is Not Someone Else's Job

Savvy instructional leaders pay close attention to three critical components of effective literacy instruction. Like a three-legged stool, a literacy implementation will eventually crumple without strong support on all three legs.

What does this look like in practice?

Everyone involved in reading instruction, including leaders, must have the knowledge to evaluate research-based reading programs, choose them wisely, and then use them to teach all students effectively. Some of this knowledge should be gained in traditional workshop settings, but some should take place over time at the school during collegial meetings and within the classroom.

Equipped with this knowledge, the instructional team can make a good choice of tools: their selected research-based instructional materials. Yet once an instructional program is selected, it is crucial that the program be implemented with fidelity.

That brings us to the third leg, support systems. Once a school embraces a new curriculum for reading instruction, it must be nurtured by frequent review, regular meetings for collaborative discussion and troubleshooting, ongoing professional development, implementation mentoring systems, and coaching support for continuous improvement. Assessment systems, planned restructuring of classroom organization and instructional time, and grouping for differentiated instruction are also aspects of the crucial support package. It falls to the school leadership to provide the support and make the systemic changes that enable the implementation to flourish.

Guiding Principles for Literacy Leaders

1. Insist on deep community and school-wide discussion of student achievement.
2. Establish clearly measurable reading goals (e.g., at Thorny Mountain School, the percentage of students reading at or above grade level will increase from 40% to 55% by June 1, 2005).
3. Implement a thoughtful and complete process for selecting instructional materials. Make sure the materials “really” fit the research!
4. Provide ongoing and effective professional development. This includes regular study of teaching and learning; the use of data that focuses on student progress monitoring and achievement to support complete program implementation; and time for collaboration, reflection, and refinement.
5. Encourage parent involvement and garner community support.
6. Maintain well-stocked classroom libraries and school media centers with easy access to a variety of print materials.
7. Provide sufficient time for language arts/reading instruction: 2 to 2½ hours in the primary grades (at least 90 minutes for reading), 2 hours in the upper elementary grades (at least 90 minutes for reading), and two periods in middle school (grades 6–8).
8. Provide well-designed and immediate intervention programs for students significantly below grade level, beginning in the primary grades and all the way through high school, including specialized 2–3 hour blocks for prolonged and intense intervention for those most seriously behind.
9. Establish norms and agreements such as these:
   - Every student is able to learn to read and to write at an acceptable level if instruction is effective and sufficient.
   - To fully implement a well-designed program requires sustained effort, continuous vigilance, and ongoing support.
   - We will regularly monitor student progress in order to make timely adjustments and corrections. This includes examining assessment information to make sure implementation is effective.
   - The school literacy coach will serve as a resource to the teachers, but all administrators and each individual teacher together will make this work.

“Most people would rather have the person in authority take the work off their shoulders, protect them from disorienting change, and meet challenges on their behalf. But the real work of leadership usually involves giving the work back to the people who must adapt, and mobilizing them to do so.”

Points from the Keynote Address at the CORE Literacy Leadership Summit by Dr. Joseph Torgesen, Director of the Florida Center for Reading Research

In our extensive work with schools and districts, the most successful are those whose literacy leaders stay current with effective literacy practices. That is why we hold an annual Literacy Leadership Summit and invite distinguished researchers to present. Here is an excellent synopsis from our Summit held in March 2004. Notes are courtesy of Kevin Feldman, Director of Reading and Early Intervention, Sonoma County Office of Education, California.

Myths of Interventions

1. If a child is a visual learner, he/she should be taught to read using a visual strategy (sight words), not an auditory strategy.
2. If children haven’t learned the alphabetic principle by grade one, they need to be taught in another way.
3. Children who struggle in grade one just need time and they catch up.
4. We should take guidance from learning styles and multiple intelligences in teaching children to read.
5. A little quality time with a motivated tutor is all children need.

A Consensus View of Most Important Elements of Effective Interventions

1. Provide more systematic and explicit instruction in whatever component a child is struggling with (phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency—the five big topics from Reading First).
2. Provide a significant increase in the intensity of instruction; for example, a longer period of time or a smaller group.
3. Provide ample opportunities for guided practice of skills taught.
4. Provide systematic cueing of students to use the strategies and skills taught.
5. Provide appropriate levels of scaffolding as children learn to apply new skills. This is especially important for the neediest children.

If you are a subscriber to this newsletter, we will notify you of the next Summit as soon as registration opens. Non-subscribers can sign up at www.corelearn.com.

Systemic Change: The Imperative of Large-Scale Improvement

Thoughts from Richard Elmore About Distributed Leadership, from “Building a New Structure for School Leadership.”

In order to bring about large-scale improvement in student achievement, Elmore believes that it is necessary to change our perception of leadership.

Elmore defines leadership in education as the “guidance and direction of instructional improvement.” He defines improvement as “change with direction, sustained over time, that moves entire systems, raising the average level of quality and performance while at the same time decreasing the variation among units, and engaging people in analysis and understanding of why some actions seem to work and others don’t.”

His model to bring about instructional improvement is called distributed leadership.

According to Elmore, “The job of the administrative leader is primarily about:

- enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization,
- creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge,
- holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and
- holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result.”

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Upcoming CORE Events

- CORE Reading Coach Institute
  September 23–25, 2004, Emeryville, CA

- CORE Reading Leader Institute, Elementary
  Fall 2004, Emeryville, CA (dates TBA)

Call 888-249-6155 to register or get onto our events notification list. Or send us a message via www.corelearn.com. Click on the contact tab. There is also more information about our open events on this website.

Big Job for Leaders: Choosing Instructional Materials for Struggling Older Readers

Traditionally, secondary reading intervention has focused on comprehension rather than on decoding. This has occurred because struggling readers most often manifest comprehension weakness; however, the underlying causes generally have not been treated. That is why comprehension interventions alone may result in short-term gains that are not sustained and do not transfer (Kulik and Bangert-Downs 1990). Research indicates that for middle and secondary students, effective programs address the following four components (Peterson et al. 2000):

1. **Motivation to read:** This refers to intrinsic motivation to want to read and read widely.
2. **Decoding skills and fluency:** This includes basic decoding skills and reading fluency—at every grade level where intervention is needed.
3. **Language comprehension:** This includes linguistic knowledge, morphemic knowledge, and semantic and syntactic knowledge.
4. **Text comprehension:** This includes teaching students how to be active with text and make personal connections, how to make inferences and activate background knowledge, and how to interact with different types of texts.

CORE Goes to High School!

We are delighted to announce CORE's new onsite and regional Secondary Literacy Achievement Support System. Thank you to our many customers who have persistently asked us to do for the secondary grades what we do for K–8. We talked to customers, studied the research (of course!), and evaluated what really works for older struggling readers. Here is what we include in our new offering for grades 6–12:

- **Reading Leader Institute, Secondary,** for principals and department leaders.
- **Focus Seminars** on vocabulary and comprehension instruction for content and intervention teachers.
- **Site Implementation Visits** from a CORE Secondary Specialist to support teachers, reading specialists, and principals at the school level.
- **For districts,** Implementation Support Technical Assistance from an assigned CORE Implementation Advisor who meets with you regularly to help your team implement and monitor your literacy improvement plan, mentor district-level coaches, department heads, and other literacy staff, and much more.

Please contact Linda Diamond at 888-249-6155 if you are interested in an Implementation Support Proposal for your secondary schools (or any other grade levels).