Large urban school districts in the United States are grappling with monumental challenges to the goal of universal literacy. In many city centers fewer than half of third grade children can read on grade level. For these youngsters the picture becomes more grim as they progress in grade. While one should use caution in generalizing about causal factors for such diverse populations, it seems clear that poor reading development is often the traveling companion of poverty, inadequate language development, high student mobility, and ineffective teacher preparation.

In 1996, the Dallas Independent School District (DISD) declared war on its own dismal reading rates in kindergarten through third grade. The first task was to better understand the challenges facing the district's 60,000 children in grades K-3. Using a process created by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) called "failure analysis," the Dallas Reading Plan determined those critical elements of literacy that must be addressed if DISD was to achieve its goal of at least 90% of all children reading on grade level by the end of third grade (May & Rizzardi, 2002). An analysis of these results were presented earlier in the book in the chapter titled “The Pillars of Urban Literacy Instruction: Prerequisites for Change.” As a result of the failure analysis, it was decided that the best way to address the needs of children was to insure that there was a well-trained teacher in every classroom with deep knowledge and expertise in comprehensive reading instruction. Likewise, it would be essential for principals to learn new research-proven ways of creating and sustaining school-wide comprehensive reading programs.

Over the past several years, the Dallas Reading Plan created two state-of-the-art training programs for teachers and principals. For teachers, a 90-hour year long Reading Academy was created to develop teacher capacity for consistently delivering comprehensive reading instruction. As of the spring of 2001, approximately 2,000 teachers had completed the voluntary Reading Academy. Student performance in reading has improved significantly as measured by the Stanford 9 Achievement Test (SAT 9), and on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. Certainly these skilled teachers helped DISD make the greatest gains in 2001 of the eight largest school districts in Texas on these assessments.

School leaders (i.e., principals, assistant principals, and a few central office leaders) were offered a "Principals' Fellowship" to help them learn more about their role in sustaining effective reading programs. To-date about 150 school leaders have completed the Principals' Fellowship. It is interesting to note that the schools enjoying the most rapid growth in reading in DISD were those having both a large percentage of teachers enrolled in the Reading Academy and a principal who has completed the Principals' Fellowship.

It is our belief that the Dallas Reading Plan provided one of the very few longitudinal experiments in a large urban school district having the central aim of institutionalizing comprehensive reading instructional practices. While data coming from the Dallas Reading Plan has indeed been encouraging over the years of its existence, and the trends were quite positive, the picture was not entirely rosy. Gains in
reading were neither as rapid nor as robust as was originally hoped for. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize our findings concerning the challenges that have seemingly inhibited progress in Dallas. We also posit remedies and areas for future research that may prove promising.

**Delimitations**

Admittedly, our viewpoint may have been affected to some degree by our participation in the project: one serving as creator of the Principals' Fellowship, and the other as assistant superintendent for the Dallas Reading Plan. However, findings reported here are well documented by quantitative analyses by internal (DISD) and external (state) agencies. Myriad triangulated qualitative data also were used in analyses presented herein. This includes literally hundreds of structured interactions with DISD teachers and principals (who command our deepest respect and appreciation). Thus, we present our findings, at least in part, as participant-observers (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

**Challenges to Change**

We begin with the dominant challenges witnessed in this long-term intervention which had the potential to impede, if not destroy, systemic reform efforts in DISD. While these challenges may not be applicable in all situations, they certainly appear to be rather commonplace maladies experienced by other leaders from large urban districts with whom we have compared notes.

- **Fragmented Instruction**- Reading instruction can vary a great deal in a large urban district, both interschool and intra-school. Our classroom observation data, which has been gathered continuously from 1997 through 2001, verifies that fact. Not only do you find vestiges of the “Reading Wars” still very much intact (i.e., entrenched American Whole Languagers versus the Phonics-First-and-Only Clan) but, worse yet, a near majority of teachers today (at least in Dallas) are emergency-certified and/or “alternatively-certified.” These are teachers holding forth armed, knowledge-wise, with little more than intuition and fond recollections of their own (usually) suburban schooling as the principal tool for helping youngsters learn to read.

  A majority of the urban teachers we observed knew little about the developmental milestones of reading and writing, how to quickly and efficiently assess children’s reading development, how to group students effectively, ways to adapt the curriculum to meet special needs, or how to involve families in their child’s learning. Critical reading skills, even when taught, are taught at different times of the year (a serious problem with highly mobile student populations), with vastly different methods and with generally poor results. While there is usually some sort of reading program in place, it is so fragmented and full of holes that we have coined the phrase “Swiss cheese effect” as a descriptor.

- **Dearth of Teaching Materials**- Most reading teachers would love to have a plentiful classroom library of teaching materials (e.g., leveled books, kits, assessment materials, etc.). A status study of some 146 elementary schools in Dallas having grades K-3, the target population of the Dallas Reading Plan,
consistently revealed a dearth of teaching materials available for balanced instruction. Simple mathematics proved it was economically impossible to stock 3,000 individual classrooms with the materials teachers would need for comprehensive reading instruction in English and/or Spanish. Further, with the rapid turnover of teachers, and the “shrinkage” in classroom materials that usually occurs as teachers move about, replenishing these classroom libraries would be a formidable yearly expense. Another consideration is that individual classroom libraries make little sense when one considers that many of the books in such a library may only be used once in a school year then put back on the shelf: a poor utilization of scarce resources especially during times of austere budgeting.

- Politics & Power: The Wrong Agendas- One of the disturbing realities we observed in a number of large urban school districts was the all-too-common driving force behind decision making at the top: a thirst for power. While many upper level administrators love to chant the mantra “we’re in this for the kids,” their actions sometimes belie the libretto. The dynamics that tend to spawn this form of ersatz leadership are rather easy to understand.

At the top of the power food chain we find state legislators, governors, commissioners, and others dictating high stakes tests, mandated curricula, and the withholding of grant funds as a grand baton for noncompliance with the first two. Considering the dismal reading development of so many children from inner city school, we feel the political establishment is right to up the ante. But the intended result—better instruction and improved learning—is not happening (see results from NAEP, 2000, for example).

At the next link in the power-broker food chain we find school boards, often the dysfunctional small scale replica of the state level. School board members often hire and fire school superintendents largely on their promise to “make things happen” quickly; quickly often being defined as twelve to eighteen months. Since most board members have rarely served as classroom teachers, they tend to have little knowledge of change dynamics in a school that, conservatively, requires four to seven years for substantive improvement. Hence, the average tenure of urban school superintendents has dwindled to only 2 1/3 years (Council of the Great City Schools, 2000). School board members are generally applauded, of course, for “holding those high paid superintendents’ feet to the fire” and vociferously demanding (while the cameras are rolling) quick results.

Since superintendents and their cabinets thus feel pressured by school boards they tend to make decisions about curricula and professional development based not on research data or expertise, but rather on rapidity of change in standardized test scores. It is the instinct of self-preservation and gives the public the appearance that something of substance is being done.

The ripple effect on the front lines of the literacy struggle, our schools, is much like a tsunami. Principals are accountable for implementing flawed decisions about curricula about which they had no voice. If they fail to implement the program of the year (or month), then they are replaced. If they do implement a program but it fails to achieve rapid improvement in test scores, then the principal (not the curriculum director who made the original decision) can be removed. An educational Catch 22 at best.
Teachers, the only link that has consistently made a difference in reading research (not programs), gets the final power-induced squeeze. It is the teacher who is expected to implement the latest-greatest reading program, often without adequate training or materials and under great pressure from several layers of administrators.

**Turnover in the Superintendency**- Dallas Independent School District is infamous for high turnover in the superintendent’s office. Since 1997 there have been five! While that statistic is certainly beyond the pale, high turnover, as previously noted, is not at all extraordinary to that position in urban school districts. With each new leader comes a sense of mandate from the school board to change whatever went on before--whether it was working or not. Taking time to adequately assess the successes and foibles of the previous administration is time wasted and the new “supe” (pronounced, coincidentally, as *soup*) usually jumps right in and implements whatever he/she feels are the universal cures to what ails schoolchildren academically. (Ranchers have known for centuries that you don’t tear down a fence erected by the previous landowner until you figure out why it was installed in the first place…)

This almost frenetic pace of change *sans* adequate assessment leads to instructional fragmentation, morale problems with teachers and principals and, ultimately, poor student achievement in reading. Teachers begin to have a rueful “What’s next?!” attitude toward reading programs/initiatives and fail to commit to any as they know from experience that the program is here today and gone tomorrow.

- **Student Mobility**- Students often move around in large urban centers. We have seen this phenomenon first hand; not only in Dallas, but also in the metropolitan schools of Chicago, Nashville, Toledo, Fort Worth, and Saint Louis. It is usually an economic problem: the rent comes due and the primary caregiver, often a single mother, lacks sufficient resources to pay the bill. After two or three months of nonpayment, eviction is threatened, so she gathers up her children and moves to another apartment complex running a $99 move-in special. This pattern is repeated over and over since the parent's income remains in the poverty range. These drop-in/drop-out children, even with good teaching, miss consistent instruction on essential reading skills. They have an almost serendipitous education and the literacy results are debilitating. According to the latest report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2000) for reading, children from poverty score significantly lower in reading proficiency than more affluent counterparts. High mobility as a result of poverty is unquestionably one of the primary culprits.

- **Non-Strategic Assignment of School Leaders**- One of the most puzzling roadblocks to improving urban school literacy programs is the manner in which many principals and assistant principals are assigned. Many school districts seem to view the elementary principalship as the first (and lowest) rung on the career ladder for principals. Often we have seen our most troubled urban elementary schools assigned a first-year principal, which is itself an illogical placement, and some have *never* taught in an elementary school. Further, many new elementary principals served their only leadership apprenticeship as an assistant principal in either a middle school or high school. The goal, if they are following the school district’s tradition, is to somehow do well in the elementary school so they can be "promoted" (their words) to a middle school principalship and, later, to a high school.

Reward systems are set in place to insure the continuance of this mindset. Since elementary schools are viewed as the lowest rung in this paradigm, elementary principals are paid less. Thus instead of encouraging and rewarding principals to stay in place and develop leadership expertise, they are encouraged to abandon young learners and their teachers as soon as a more "prestigious" middle school principalship opens up--a leadership brain-drain for urban elementary schools. In the end, schools that improve in student achievement end up losing the leader who took them there--somewhat analogous to replacing Winston Churchill during the Battle of Britain.

- **Teacher Mobility**- The teacher shortage is already a harsh reality in urban schools. Aside from the problem of trying to find qualified teachers (there are nearly 200 unfilled teaching positions year-round in Dallas), teachers already in urban districts leave in droves each year for the suburbs. In fact, DISD announced in the summer of 2002 that some 2,000 teachers were needed for the 2002-2003 school year, or about one-fourth of their teaching force. The suburban schools typically translate into better working conditions, less difficulties with poverty and its effects on learning and often more attractive salaries for teachers. As one change management expert told us, "You win on talent!" The talent needed to win in schools is teachers. The constant retreat of qualified teachers from city to suburban schools makes it quite difficult to attain consistent quality and continuity.

- **Higher Education Inadequacies: Weak Entry-Level Teacher Preparation**- Some of the challenges to improving reading instruction in our schools lie at the threshold of universities. Teachers colleges, even the most celebrated ones, have one-size-fits-all teacher education; the notion that there is one way to prepare teachers irrespective of their future teaching assignment. Clearly the challenges facing inner city teachers are remarkably dissimilar to those of teachers in the suburbs; though, interestingly, many of the obstacles faced by inner city teachers are nearly identical to those faced by many rural teachers having children of migrant farm workers (e.g., high student mobility, large percentages of English Language Learners, a prevalence of poverty, limited family involvement).

Perhaps the genesis of this one-size-fits-all mentality in teacher education predates the famous Brown v. Board of Education decision in which the Supreme Court effectively outlawed the "separate but equal" doctrine in the education of minority children. It has, however, taken five decades to (almost) achieve equality of concern for our nation’s children. Before Brown, school districts need only be concerned about white children, and even then the more affluent families. A half-century after Brown many state-mandated proficiency tests, like the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), must now include statistics from all socio-cultural groups including students enrolled in special education. This lifting of the student performance veil has revealed stark inadequacies in the development of young readers in our inner city schools and, thus, the effectiveness of teachers in those settings.

What is needed is a greater degree of specialized preparation for those who will teach city kids. Urban education is withering in part due to the mere trickle of competent teachers to fill classroom vacancies. The talent pipeline for teachers, i.e., teachers colleges, therefore must be considered in the equation for improving urban schools.
Higher Education Inadequacies: Preparation of Instructional Leaders - Just as most colleges of education have prepared all teachers in a homogeneous manner, they have typically prepared educational leaders with a single mindset as well. Few graduate programs for principals include training on ways to establish and maintain school-wide reading/literacy programs. As corporate partners who contributed some $5 million for teacher and principal development in Dallas remarked, “We learned a long time ago that for any complex human enterprise to succeed, you must develop your building-level leaders in tandem with their professionals [teachers].”

The most common career path for central office leaders now presiding over reading and language arts curricula began in the classroom, followed by the earning of a master’s degree in educational administration (or administrative credentials added to a curriculum-oriented master’s), service as a principal, then on to the “central office.” The problems associated with this route to leadership are many. First, as with other college of education programs, graduate programs for middle and upper school management (i.e., those intended for future directors, assistant superintendents, and superintendents) tend to treat central office leadership preparation in a single way, as though being a director of special education is much the same as being in charge of school maintenance services.

Another problem is that the preparation of central office leaders via graduate programs is a lack of depth-- much like the proverbial pond that is a mile long but only a quarter inch deep. For example, school finance is generally “covered” in a single three-semester hour course. It is common in large districts now for an assistant superintendent of reading and language arts to administer yearly budgets of many millions of dollars. The annual budget for a top ten urban district in the US commonly exceeds $1 billion. Wisely managing these amounts of revenue requires expertise and skill. It is the difference between being “not competent” versus “incompetent”—in the former case the person is improperly prepared (our current predicament), and in the latter s/he is unable to perform in spite of preparation.

Subterfuge by Vendors and Consultants - Urban school districts have a great deal of money with which to work, and their budgets are public record. In Dallas, the annual Title I budget alone has typically exceeded $40 million. Such immense budgets, though we must remember that these budgets are intended to serve six digit student populations, can motivate reading program vendors to promise much more than they can deliver in order to land a major contract. In DISD there exists more than 15 years of internal program evaluation data showing that most reading programs purchased over the years have been ineffective, yet repeat purchases occur yearly either due to habit or subterfuge.

Vendors sometimes appear to be the like the "snake oil" vendors of old - promises are made that their product can cure the reading ailments of all-- from dyslexia to the boredom of the gifted. Just one expensive dose each day and your reading woes are banished. Because of pressure on new superintendents and their cabinets to deliver better test scores in 18 months or less, the frenzy to find quick solutions each year creates a kind of revolving door for the cure-all reading vendors. Since top-level administrators change every few years, the cycle is repeated over and over.
This problem seemingly grows worse each year as respected researchers create new products, or sign on with vendors as "senior authors" for questionable-but-lucrative programs. The publishers' interest in celebrated researchers is that they bring an implied legitimacy to their product. We have witnessed egregious conflict of interest situations emerge, if not illegal conduct, in scenarios like the following: The reading researcher is first hired as a consultant by the school district at premium rates to conduct teacher training workshops. Next, s/he energetically recommends a vendor’s product (the vendor being their employer and/or they hold significant stock portfolios with the company). As an “author” of the program, the reading researcher-turned-vendor also, of course, receives royalties or other rewards. Usually the reading program they have introduced yields less than promised (see, for example, Pogrow, 2002). Worse, the reading needs of children and their right to a highly qualified and versatile teacher have again been compromised.

**Rescuing Urban Reading Programs: Some Possible Solutions**

Believe it or not, we actually feel optimistic about the future of urban reading instruction. Though there are many problems facing our schools, there are also many positive developments and viable courses of action for providing high quality reading programs for city kids. While space limitations will not permit us to describe all of the solutions we have witnessed in recent years, we would like to summarize a few of the more workable ones that keep us hopeful.

- **Breakthroughs in Reading Research** - Over the past few years a number of important research reports have been released that show a high degree of agreement about the essential elements of comprehensive reading programs. Reutzel and Cooter (2003) have summarized seven such reports (see Figure 1) and their areas of agreement concerning reading programs and minimal reading skills to be learned (Figures 2 and 3). This growing sense of concurrence in the field has the potential of helping school leaders screen and select programs based on scientific research, assist colleges of education in updating and improving their programs for teachers and administrators, and create a framework for higher quality research.

**Figure 1: Seven Landmark Reading Research Reports**


Figure 2: Seven Areas of Agreement Among Reading Research Reports

- Family and Community Involvement
- Nonnegotiable Skills & Instruction
- Teacher Competencies
- School-Wide Practices
- Comprehensive Assessment
- Student Motivation
- Pursuit of a National Goal

Figure 3: Nonnegotiable Reading Skills & Instruction*

- Phonemic awareness; alphabetic principle
- Phonics
- Oral reading fluency
- Independent reading practice
- Exposure to a variety of reading materials
- Comprehension strategies
- Vocabulary instruction
- Guided reading instruction
- Oral language development
- Concepts of print instruction
- Spelling and word study skills
- Interactive read aloud
- Technology-assisted reading instruction
- Integrated reading, writing, and language instruction
- Adequate time for daily reading/writing instruction and practice

*Note: These recommendations are minimal and do not speak to the many other needs of students such as family involvement or adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of exceptional children.

- Reading “Safety Nets” to Address Student Mobility- One silver lining in the student mobility cloud is that urban students often stay within the same school district's boundaries. A viable solution is to cast a kind of reading safety net over the school district to prevent highly mobile students from falling through the

cracks created by mobility-induced curriculum fragmentation. This can be accomplished by developing a *curriculum calendar* for the entire school district such that on any given week in, say, third grade, *all* students in the school district would focus on a specific reading objective during a daily thirty-minute lesson (as just one part of the teacher's daily reading instruction). We realize that some may consider this kind of regimented instruction heresy, but the consequences of *not* creating reading safety nets for highly mobile children are simply unacceptable. This kind of safety net only requires a small portion of the daily reading/language arts block and still allows for a great deal of teacher discretion.

This approach was implemented in the 2001-2002 school year in Dallas. Weekly lesson plans were developed by skilled lead reading teachers (LRTs) under a major grant from a private educational foundation. The lesson plans used teaching strategies confirmed as effective in the research reports cited earlier. Teaching materials in English and Spanish needed for implementing the reading safety net in grades K and 1 were purchased under a second major grant and dispersed to the schools. Needless to say teachers, especially those under emergency certification, were very pleased to have structured daily lesson plans and abundant materials with which to teach. Safety net skills to be taught were correlated with required state objectives as well as those articulated by the school district’s basal reading program. Safety net instruction can provide both the teachers and students with needed scaffolding for teaching and learning.

- **Providing Adequate Teaching Materials** - Many urban classroom teachers have little with which to teach beyond the standard basal reading series. A common desire is to have one’s own classroom library well stocked with a variety of genre and a range of reading difficulty levels. Frankly, this is not a realistic goal in that to do so would be cost-prohibitive and an unwise use of resources.

Many schools are finding that they are better able to leverage limited resources and insure that each child has access to high quality reading materials by establishing a Reading Resource Room (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000, p. 566). Title I funds and other district resources go into purchasing leveled books (English and Spanish), big books, pocket charts, easels, games, professional books and other essential teaching materials. These materials are placed in a special Reading Resource Room and made available to all teachers for instructional needs. Books in the Reading Resource Room are not in general circulation to students for checkout in order to prevent them from being exposed to content prior to instruction. The chief advantage is that all teachers (and children) can have equal access to a full range of materials. Materials are also used more frequently since more than one teacher can access them. This is one cost-effective way to make sure that “every classroom is as good as our best” when it comes to the availability of instructional materials.

- **Stability in Leadership** - It is tautology to state that great schools and school districts are built upon stability and consistency in leadership. School boards must have the determination to stay with capable superintendents over time; preferably five or more years. Superintendents must revise their thinking (and the district’s policies, if need be) so that elementary and middle school principals are rewarded for longitudinal service in their respective schools. There should be no difference in the reward system between elementary and high school principals, with possible exceptions made for principals leading larger
campuses and faculties. Further, no one should be assigned as principal to an elementary campus unless they have had extensive and successful experience as a teacher at that level. It is clearly in the best interest of children to have strong, competent, and experienced principals helping their teachers to succeed.

• **Improved Incentives for Urban Teachers** - If it is a truism that schools “win on talent,” then something must be done to improve the supply and quality of teachers for urban children. Most acknowledge that teaching in the inner city can be inherently more stressful than in other settings. Therefore, the reward systems for teachers must change accordingly if we are to recruit more teachers for city schools; they must be paid handsomely and supported with high quality materials and professional development.

  Teachers should be able to deepen and improve their expertise each summer through professional development, perhaps during the entire month of June, at full salary while they do so. It is common for leading corporations to allocate up to one-third of their budget for professional development. The time is here for us to do as well for our urban teachers. Without this kind of support we will be unable to recruit and retain the best and the brightest.

  **Higher Education: Retooling Teacher Education** - Given that as many as half of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years, more so in urban schools, there must be some acknowledgement that entry level certification programs for elementary and secondary teachers are falling short in providing requisite skills for urban classroom realities. Schools of education should consider overhauling entry level teacher education programs using a “less is more” philosophy; *less content* presented as “survey” or *awareness* sessions (see Baskin’s chapter immediately preceding this one for more information), and *more* attention paid to developing a reasonable degree of expertise in essential pedagogy.

• **Higher Education Retooling: The Instructional Leader** - More must be done to prepare principals to deal strategically with urban school realities. As with teacher preparation, some rethinking about how principals and other school leaders are developed seems in order. Our data from 1997 through 2001 in Dallas confirms that the schools having the most significant and rapid improvements in reading typically have two things in common: teachers involved in deep and rigorous training over time, and principals likewise involved in professional development on ways to develop and sustain school-wide comprehensive reading and writing programs.

  Graduate programs for principals, in general, need to go far deeper into such areas as budgeting and finance, counseling, change management strategies, and certainly curriculum and instruction. For graduate programs to respond more effectively to the needs of children, they should also have areas of specialization including the needs of urban schools and the diverse students they serve, not to mention differentiation for those seeking to become elementary, middle school, or high school principals. Since state certification criteria tend to precede innovation in these areas of the academy, legislatures will likely need to consider new laws to make it so.

The Principals’ Fellowship

Over the past four years, we have co-taught a special Principals’ Fellowship aimed at building the capacity of principals in creating and sustaining comprehensive reading programs in their schools. This training was initially sponsored by Southwestern Bell who recognized the need for educated school leaders, and has been credited with moving a large number of schools from the state's "low performing" list to acceptable rankings. Selected topics from the Principals' Fellowship are shown in Figure 4 below. About 140 principals and assistant principals have now participated as "fellows" in this prestigious experience, and most petitioned for a "Part II" Fellowship. Fellows received three graduate hours of credit from a local university that can be applied to a graduate program, if they so choose. Books, materials, and weekly refreshments were also provided in this weekly course. In recognition of the hectic and busy lives principals lead and, concomitantly, to help insure full attendance, the Fellowship held its weekly three-hour session on both Tuesday and Thursday evenings with the same exact content. Then if a scheduled Parent Night or other required activity for principals fell on their usual class night, they could easily come to the alternate session that week. Attendance was near perfect.

Figure 4 Selected Topics of the Principals' Fellowship Training

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<tr>
<th>Principles of Balanced Literacy Instruction</th>
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<tr>
<td>Five (5) Strategies To Get The Ball Rolling Faster</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phonological Awareness, Alphabetic Principle &amp; Phonics: Research &amp; Solutions</td>
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<td>The Comprehension Workshop</td>
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<td>English Language Learners</td>
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<td>Guided Reading</td>
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<td>Adapting Instruction for Special Needs Learners</td>
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<td>Small Group Instruction That Works</td>
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<td>Classroom Management Strategies</td>
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<td>Reading Recovery and Other Targeted Interventions</td>
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<td>Involving Families &amp; Volunteers</td>
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<td>Developing Reading Fluency</td>
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<td>Identifying and Obtaining External Funds for Literacy Programs</td>
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Some Final Reflections

As we look back over our experiences in Dallas, we see certain constants that seem to be at work when attempting to implement systemic literacy reform in urban schools. We offer some final reflections and proposals.

First, one should face systemic reform realistically. A key question should be, "What must come first to achieve consistent comprehensive reading instruction?" To answer that question one must carefully review the research evidence to find what will matter most when trying to improve student reading ability district-wide. For example, in many urban settings one may well see, as we have, fragmented and

inconsistent instruction as a result of inadequate teacher knowledge about balanced instruction. The remedy (deep learning over time coupled with expert mentoring) may take years. Such a lengthy intervention cannot meet the needs of the thousands of children currently enrolled in our schools. Indeed, substantial research data from Tennessee (Sanders & Horn, 1995; Sanders & Rivers, 1996) indicates that a child placed with an ineffective teacher for just one year can be handicapped throughout their schooling; and a child placed with an ineffective teacher for two years is virtually "toast" in terms of ever reading on level. The first thing to do in such an extreme scenario as Dallas may be to put in place in Stage One a satisfactory basal program (not necessarily an oxymoron). This would serve the cause of establishing a consistent baseline program, if implemented in a synchronized fashion using what we referred to earlier as a district-wide curriculum calendar. While this notion will undeniably repugnant to many, it may be essential to stabilize instruction-- a Stage One priority. Stability enables a school district to move into the next logical priority-- teacher education.

We must establish a pipeline of training in the school districts so that everyone eventually has the same toolbox and vocabulary with which to teach. Comprehensive reading instruction, if implemented well, requires deep training over time, preferably coupled with expert mentoring. One does not gain true expertise in comprehensive reading instruction in even a 90-hour training program; it can take two or more years of careful study, practice in the classroom, and coaching from other more advanced colleagues. Therefore, as we begin to stabilize and make consistent classroom instruction in "stage one" using a basal program as outlined above, we must simultaneously begin in earnest a massive teacher development program for our urban teachers. Entry-level training should include an introductory program of 90 or more hours for teachers on the most basic parts of a comprehensive reading program. Second stage training should be based on a careful assessment of each teacher’s strengths and needs in the classroom; individualized professional development, in other words, to achieve maximum effectiveness in the classroom over time. Professional development cannot stop here if our goal is to make "every classroom as good as our best"-- we must include principals.

Principal training should begin with current principals and assistant principals as our building leaders. The emphasis, we think, should be on ways of insuring consistent implementation of the basal reader program as the first step, and linked to ways they can support their teachers while involved in professional development on comprehensive reading instruction. When comprehensive reading instruction is a priority with the principal, it quickly becomes a school priority.

We must invite college of education faculties to reconsider their own modus operandi for teacher preparation and align with urban districts in more meaningful ways. A provost at a major university recently asked us, “Do you think colleges of education will ever be helpful to inner city schools in finding solutions to their problems?” “They must find ways to do so, if they are to survive,” was our reply. Some rethinking of the Ed School milieu and tenure/reward system is certainly needed so that, for instance, expert inner city practitioners can be hired as regular faculty (and not in some sub-par designation like "instructor") to mentor college students, inform other professors about the gritty realities of teaching in

urban schools, and participate in the crafting of effective programs for teachers. It has been said by many that the abandonment of the normal school model (complete with laboratory/demonstration schools for educational research) in favor of less effective faux academic models was a disaster for children when it comes to their right to have access to a competent teacher. We feel there may be some validity to this proposition.

Finally, we must quit infighting. The literacy battle has many fronts and cannot be attacked long-term without coordination. Turf disputes between departments in school districts, faculty in schools of education, and politicians must end. We are in this battle together and the only victors or victims will be children.

References


