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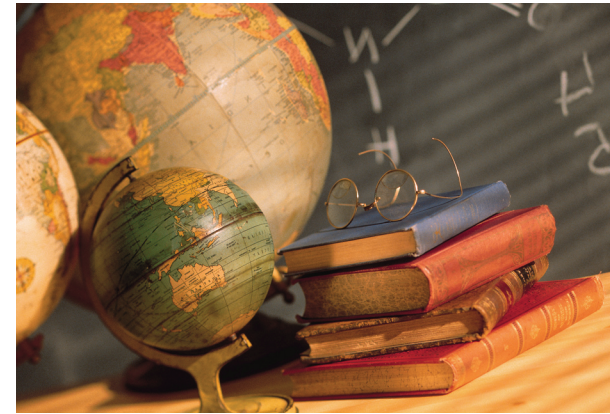
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A Principal's Guide to Intensive Reading Interventions for Struggling Readers in *Reading First* Schools



Introduction

We will never teach all our students to read if we do not teach our most *at-risk* students to read. Another way to say this is: "Getting to 100% requires going through the bottom 20%." Teaching all students to read requires a school level system for early identification of *at-risk* students and a *school level system* for providing those students with the intensive interventions they need to become proficient readers by third grade. Good classroom instruction should meet the needs of most students, but an efficient system for providing high quality, intensive interventions is required to meet the needs of all students. The Principal plays a key role in helping to organize the school to provide intensive interventions for students who need them, and this guide provides information critical to developing and implementing an effective school level intervention program. These guidelines should not be interpreted rigidly as the "only way" to provide effective interventions for K-3 students. Rather, they are meant to suggest some guiding principles, along with some examples of how those principles can be operationalized to develop an effective school level system for meeting the instructional needs of all students.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why must schools find ways to deliver intensive interventions to some of their students?

When children come to school, they are very diverse in both their skills and preparation for learning to read. Students whose home backgrounds do not prepare them well for learning to read need *more intensive instruction* to make up for their lack of preparation and knowledge. Students with low ability in certain language domains require *more intensive instruction* because they learn critical reading skills more slowly than other students. The range of instructional opportunities (instructional intensity and power) must match the range of diversity among students, or many students will be left behind.

Why can't we expect classroom teachers to meet the needs of all students?

Reading First teachers are being trained to meet the needs of a broader range of students than ever before. However, the diversity of students, and the needs of many students, are simply too great to expect the regular classroom teacher, by herself, to meet the needs of all students. Many students, for example, may require at least *three or four times* as much instruction as the average student if they are to maintain normal progress in learning to read. In many *Reading First* classrooms, the number of students who will require this amount of additional instruction may approach 50 - 60% of the class; the regular classroom teacher simply does not have the time or resources to provide the required amount of instruction within the school day for the most *at-risk* students.

What do we know about the characteristics of effective interventions?

Scientific reading research has identified a number of important characteristics of effective interventions for students who are *at-risk* for reading difficulties. These include:

- They should be offered as soon as it is clear the student is lagging behind in the development of skills or knowledge critical to reading growth
- They must significantly increase the intensity of instruction and practice and they should be available in a range of intensities
- They must provide the opportunity for explicit (direct) and systematic instruction and practice along with cumulative review to insure mastery
- They must provide skillful instruction including good error correction procedures, along with many opportunities for immediate positive feedback and reward
- They must be guided by, and responsive to data on student progress
- They must be motivating, engaging, and supportive; a positive atmosphere is essential.



What are some ways to provide intensive interventions to struggling readers in grades K-3?

The most efficient way to increase the intensity of instruction for struggling readers is to provide instruction in small groups. This allows the instruction to be targeted to the specific needs of the students, and it allows the students to have more opportunities to respond and receive feedback. Intensive interventions work best when they are provided in groups of three to five students. Classroom teachers are being trained to provide differentiated and targeted instruction in small groups during part of the 90 minute block, but they will not be able to provide enough of this kind of instruction to meet the needs of their most at risk students. The power of interventions during “small group time” within the 90 minute block can be greatly strengthened if the Principal is able to identify other teachers or paraprofessionals who can come into the classroom and work with some of the groups while the classroom teacher works with others. *It is critical that these extra personnel who come into the classroom to provide extra instruction do so on a regular basis (every day), and they must follow a powerful program of instruction for the groups they work with.*



Another way to provide intensive interventions for struggling readers is to work with them in small groups outside the regularly scheduled 90-minute reading block. The essential thing with this model is that the intervention instruction be well coordinated with the instruction the students are receiving in the classroom. Intervention teachers should meet regularly with the classroom teachers to discuss student progress. Regular “intervention team” meetings in which classroom teachers and intervention specialists discuss student needs and progress are one key to a successful school level intervention system. The goal might be to have these meetings monthly, but they might more realistically occur four to five times a year. It is very useful for the principal to attend these meetings as often as possible.



A third way to provide intensive interventions, particularly for 2nd and 3rd grade students who are lagging seriously behind in reading growth, is to identify one or more “intervention classrooms” at each grade level. Students with the most serious reading difficulties (those who are lagging so far behind in reading growth that instruction guided by the comprehensive core reading program is substantially above their level) would walk to the *intervention classroom* for the 90-minute reading block. This *intervention classroom* could be taught by a resource teacher, or by a classroom teacher as long as her moderate risk or grade level students were taught by other teachers in “grade level classrooms” using the comprehensive core reading program. In this model, the *intervention classrooms* should always contain substantially fewer students (not more than 15) than the grade level classrooms. This is appropriate, because students closer to grade level can profit more easily from large group instruction and can also work more independently. The *intervention classrooms* will be most effective if another intervention specialist or paraprofessional is available to work with small groups during part or all of the 90-minute block. For example, the ideal structure for this 90-minute class might involve three 30-minute blocks in which students received teacher led instruction during two of the blocks and worked on independent activities (perhaps with technology supports) during the other block. The curriculum for the *intervention classrooms* would be a “comprehensive intervention core” that contained both instruction and practice activities suitable for the needs of all students in the class.

Who can provide these intensive interventions?

Effective interventions require skillful teaching. The most effective intervention teachers are likely to be those with the most training and experience. However, in the absence of well trained and experienced intervention specialists, less experienced teachers, or even qualified paraprofessionals, can deliver effective interventions if they are trained to use a well developed, explicit, and systematic intervention program. Many of these programs are available, and they provide a useful

“scaffold” to help less experienced teachers provide powerful instruction. A good rule of thumb is that, the less experienced the teacher, the more structured and “scripted” the intervention program should be. Even media specialists, art teachers, and assistant principals have been known to provide effective interventions when they are enthusiastic, and their instruction is guided by a well structured and systematic intervention program! Principals should know that they can use some of their Reading First award to pay the salaries of teachers or paraprofessionals whom they recruit to provide intensive interventions to K-3 students.

It is critical that someone at the school level be responsible for insuring that intervention programs are implemented regularly (every day) and with a high degree of fidelity. The very best intervention programs are only as good as the level of their implementation with students. If intervention teachers are pulled away from their groups for other “emergency” assignments, or if the quality of instruction is not regularly monitored by someone who knows the program, the effectiveness of the intervention will be diminished.

What about the role of technology in providing interventions?

Research shows that computer assisted instruction can provide effective supplemental practice for students if it is carefully monitored and delivered with enough regularity and frequency. However, computer programs are not yet well developed enough to be depended on as the major source of intervention for our most struggling readers.

How can effective, school level intervention systems be established and monitored?

There at least eight keys aspects to developing and maintaining an effective intervention system for K-3 students:

1. Strong motivation on the part of teachers and school leaders to be relentless in their efforts to leave no child behind
2. A reliable system for identifying students who need intensive interventions in order to make normal progress in learning to read
3. A reliable system for monitoring the effectiveness of interventions
4. Regular team meetings and leadership to enforce and enable the use of data to adjust interventions as needed.
5. Regular adjustments to interventions based on student progress. The most frequent adjustments should involve group size and time (intensity), but may also involve a change of teacher or program.
6. Enough personnel to provide the interventions with sufficient intensity (small group size and daily, uninterrupted intervention sessions)

7. Programs and materials to guide the interventions that are consistent with scientifically based research in reading

8. Training, support, and monitoring to insure that intervention programs are implemented with high fidelity and quality.

If properly implemented, the Reading First assessment plan takes care of numbers 2 and 3 on this list, but the principal, reading coach, and other leaders must insure that the other things on the list are implemented.



Where can principals and other decision makers learn about effective programs and materials that can be used to guide and support effective interventions?

The Florida Center for Reading Research has reviewed many intervention programs; detailed reviews and evaluations are posted at their web site <http://www.fcrr.org>. Principals who have questions about any aspect of how to organize, select, or implement intensive interventions at their schools should contact either their local *Reading First* coordinator, their Regional Reading First Professional Development Coordinator, or the Intervention Office at FCRR by phone at 850-644-9352.

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