



Guidance Document for Florida *Reading First* Schools

# Differentiated Reading Instruction: Small Group Alternative Lesson Structures for *All* Students



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## OVERVIEW

### Purpose of this Document

This document was prepared to provide guidance to *Reading First* Coaches and Teachers regarding alternative lesson structures for providing small group, differentiated instruction to students in grades K-3 within *Reading First* schools in Florida.

### Importance

The motivation for the development of this document stemmed from specific weaknesses in student reading outcomes and observations of classroom practices during the first two years of implementation of Florida's *Reading First* program (2003-2004 & 2004-2005).

Of special concern is the fact that more than half of the first grade students in *Reading First* schools are not able to meet the February benchmarks for phonemic decoding skills (as assessed by the Nonsense Word Fluency Measure from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS®), and almost half still cannot meet these February benchmarks at the beginning of second grade. Furthermore, students in *Reading First* schools show an overall relative decline in oral reading fluency (ORF) during the first and second grade, so that too few (46%) meet grade level expectations in ORF at the beginning of third grade (compared to 72% and 56% at the beginning of 1st and 2nd grade, respectively). Overall, the data suggest that students in *Reading First* schools are consistently "losing ground" relative to grade level expectations in word-level reading skills (accuracy and fluency) between the beginning of first grade and the beginning of third grade. In contrast, the percentage of students that meet grade level expectations in oral language vocabulary actually increases from the end of kindergarten (39%) to the end of third grade (47%).

In response not only to these student data but also to observations of methods (i.e., lesson structures) used during small group, teacher-led instruction, it is recommended that Reading Coaches and Teachers participate in training and have access to continued support in the use of alternative lesson structures to provide small group, differentiated instruction and targeted interventions to struggling readers.

## DIFFERENTIATION

### What is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated instruction is matching instruction to meet the different needs of learners in a given classroom. The range of instructional need within one classroom is large. In order to accommodate these instructional needs, it is recommended that teachers plan for:

- small group, differentiated instruction
- ample student practice opportunities in the form of Reading Centers

### When is Differentiated Instruction Implemented?

Differentiated instruction is implemented *during* the designated block of time for reading instruction. Usually, whole group instruction is provided, and then classrooms and instruction are organized in the form of Reading Centers. Reading Centers are special places organized in the classroom for students to work in small groups, pairs, or individually. Students practice, demonstrate,

and extend learning independently of the teacher at *Independent Student Centers* or students are provided with explicit instruction by the teacher at the *Teacher-Led Center*. Students frequently work at Independent Student Centers while the teacher conducts small group, differentiated, explicit instruction at the Teacher-Led Center. **This document focuses on the different types of lesson structures recommended for implementation at the Teacher-Led Center (for more information about Independent Student Centers, please see <http://www.fcrr.org/activities/>).**

### **How is Differentiated Instruction Implemented with Small Groups?**

Differentiated instruction is implemented at the Teacher-Led Center. The Teacher forms small, flexible groups based on student data and observations. The classroom is organized in terms of time (number of days per week and number of minutes per day) for each small group. The Teacher determines the appropriate small group lesson structure for each group. Differentiating instruction at the Teacher-Led Center requires the Teacher to use data to form small, flexible groups so that each group meets the specific needs of the students assigned to it, in terms of:

- size of each group (e.g., 3-5 for struggling readers, 5-7 for other students, etc.)
- number of days per week each group attends the Teacher-Led Center (e.g., daily, twice/week, 3 times/week)
- number of minutes per day (e.g., 10 minutes, 20 minutes, 30 minutes, etc.)
- type of lesson structure for each group (i.e., *Skills-Focused Lesson* or *Guided Reading*)
- content and level of the lesson (i.e. area(s) of reading skill and level of instruction)

## **ALTERNATIVE LESSON STRUCTURES**

### **What are Alternative Lesson Structures for Differentiating Instruction?**

Alternative lesson structures refer to the different activities that are implemented with students in a small group setting at the Teacher-Led Center. It is critical for Teachers to alter small group instruction based on the instructional needs of students. For this to occur, it is recommended that teachers increase their knowledge and proficiency using at least two types of lesson structures: *Guided Reading* and *Skills-Focused Lessons*. Although other lesson structures might be created by blending aspects of these two types, all teachers should be able to create small group lessons using at least these two main types of lessons.

#### **A. Guided Reading**

##### **Using *Guided Reading* as an Alternative Lesson Structure for Differentiating Instruction**

Observations during regularly scheduled site visits conducted by the Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR) as well as continuous observations conducted by *Reading First* Professional Development (RFPD) coordinators suggest that the dominant lesson structure currently being used to provide differentiated instruction during the 90 minute block is the “guided reading” format. As outlined in the work of Fountas and Pinnell, “*Guided Reading* is a context in which a teacher supports each reader’s development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 3). The structure of a typical *Guided Reading* lesson roughly follows the following pattern:

- Selecting the text
- Introducing the text
- Reading the text
- Discussing the text

Teaching for strategic activities  
Extending meaning (optional)  
Word Work (optional)

In broad overview, a typical *Guided Reading* lesson occurs as students read text that has been selected to be at an appropriate level of difficulty. The teacher's role is to provide supports to students in the appropriate use of a variety of strategies to identify words and construct meaning from the passage. Instruction from the teacher is provided primarily through questioning students and scaffolding more accurate responses when they make errors during reading. *Guided Reading* provides a context in which the teacher can monitor and guide the student's application of specific skills in decoding and comprehension to construct meaning while reading.

There are many reasons why *Guided Reading* is an important lesson structure for teachers to implement at the Teacher-Led Center. The *Guided Reading* lesson structure provides teachers the opportunities to: monitor how well students are applying skills to reading text, encourage and support application of skills during text reading (e.g., word level skills and comprehension skills), engage students in thinking about the meaning of text, and build a sense of reading as a meaningful, enjoyable activity.

At the same time, *Guided Reading* may not be the appropriate lesson structure to implement with all small groups of students, especially struggling readers, since it typically emphasizes discussing the meaning of text rather than building specific word analysis skills. Due to this emphasis, *Guided Reading* may not be the best lesson structure for providing focused and systematic instruction in specific skills and knowledge the student is struggling with (i.e., letter-sound fluency, blending, suffixes, multi-syllable strategies, etc.). Students who have fundamental knowledge gaps, particularly in the skills necessary to apply phonemic decoding skills during reading, require focused learning opportunities to help them become accurate and fluent readers so that they will enjoy reading and be able to focus their attention on the meaning of the text. Many of the "leveled books" used during *Guided Reading* lessons may not actually provide good supports for instruction that emphasizes explicit development of skills in phonemic awareness and phonics as an important foundation for the development of initial reading accuracy leading to reading fluency. Finally, during a *Guided Reading* lesson, it is difficult to build in the systematic review of critical knowledge and skills that struggling readers need.

## **B. Skills-Focused Lessons**

### **Using *Skills-Focused Lessons* as an Alternative Lesson Structure for Differentiating Instruction**

Given the strengths of the *Guided Reading* lesson structure in the hands of a skillful teacher, it is clear that such lessons should continue to play a role in providing differentiated instruction and support during the 90-minute reading block. However, it also seems important to consider other lesson structures that might be more effective in providing explicit and systematic instruction for students who do not yet have the necessary skills and knowledge to be integrated together in the reading of text. These *Skills-Focused Lessons* would be provided in order to help insure mastery of elements like letter-sound knowledge, phonemic decoding strategies, critical vocabulary, or reading comprehension strategies.

*Skills-Focused Lessons* are teacher-planned lessons that provide the opportunity for more systematic and focused practice on a relatively small number of critical elements at a time (e.g., unknown consonant digraphs, vowel teams, r-controlled vowels, etc.). They would also provide the opportunity

for sustained, systematic, and interesting “word work” (e.g., Beck, 2006) in order to build fluency and confidence in the application of these skills to reading words. These lessons could draw upon lesson formats and content from the core reading program to reinforce knowledge and skill that was only weakly learned when it was taught in the whole group format. In schools that serve a high proportion of poor and minority students, it does not seem reasonable to expect that most students will be able to master many of the skills they are taught if they are only presented and explained during whole group instruction. Many students will need explicit re-teaching of both knowledge elements and skills, as well as extended opportunities to practice the application of these skills in a variety of contexts ranging from individual words, to phrases, to sentences, to connected text. *Skills-Focused Lessons* will be successful to the extent that they are fast-paced, interactive, and targeted appropriately on critical skills for each reading group.

There is not one set format that a *Skills-Focused Lesson* follows. Rather, these lessons could be closely aligned with results from the DIBELS® progress monitoring measures (particularly for letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, phonemic decoding, and reading fluency) as well as other assessment data. Resources that may be utilized to implement *Skills-Focused Lessons* include curriculum maps (<http://reading.uoregon.edu/appendices/maps.php>), Core Reading Program activities, K-3 Student Center Activities, Just Read, Florida! K-3 Reading Academy Guide, or activities drawn from Supplemental or Intervention reading programs. Another source for developing *Skills-Focused Lessons* would be teacher oriented books that provide examples of how to deliver explicit instruction and practice in early reading skills such as *Bringing Words to Life* (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002), *Making Sense of Phonics* (Beck, 2006), and *Comprehension Process Instruction* (Block, 2004).

The following information includes a kindergarten example and a first grade example of how students and activities at the Teacher-Led center and at the Independent Student Centers may be organized. The activities at the Student Centers are from the K-3 Project referenced earlier in this document.

### **C. Lesson Structure Examples**

#### **Alternative Lesson Structures to Differentiate Instruction in Kindergarten: Example One**

Using assessment data from DIBELS® and classroom observations as guidance, Mrs. Tyson will select appropriate activities from the school’s core program to deliver additional support during Teacher-Led small group lessons. For a more intensive instructional focus in phonemic awareness and phonics for some of the students, the teacher will use the reading intervention program adopted by the school. In order to achieve the necessary instructional intensity and support, 3 of the groups will contain only 3-4 students while the remaining two groups will have 5-7 students. Although these groups are highly focused on specific skills, word meaning should always be addressed during the lessons. In addition to the instruction described below, all students will receive daily whole class instruction in phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension, as well as some phonemic awareness activities, from the comprehensive reading program. Other grouping practices, such as student pairs and one-on-one instruction, are also used to support reading instruction. Membership in these groups will change as students’ needs change.

<p><b>Group Members:</b> Kylie, Nate, Rosa</p> <p><b>Minimum Meeting Frequency:</b> Daily</p> <p><b>Lesson Structure:</b> Skills-Focused</p>	<p><b>Instructional Focus: Phonemic Awareness and Phonics</b></p> <p><b>Small Group Lesson at the Teacher-Led Center:</b> This group is at high risk and requires intensive work in phonemic awareness and phonics. Because they were at high risk on the phonemic awareness measure, they may require segmenting and blending at the syllable level followed by onset and rime blending. Phonics activities should target learning letter names and fluency and accuracy in identifying letter-sound correspondences with attention to matching and identifying initial, final and medial sounds.*</p> <p><b>Independent Student Center Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Syllables-Segmenting: Syllable Graph (PA.023) Students sort pictures by the number of syllables and glue on a graph.</li> <li>- Onset and Rime: Say it Now (P.048) Students play a blending game to make words using onsets and rimes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Group Members</b> Kershawn, Ellie, Michael</p> <p><b>Minimum Meeting Frequency</b> Daily</p> <p><b>Lesson Structure</b> Skills-Focused</p>	<p><b>Instructional Focus: Phonemic Awareness and Phonics</b></p> <p><b>Small Group Lesson at the Teacher-Led Center:</b> These students still require intensive support but the emphasis should be at a higher level in the phonological awareness developmental hierarchy. Phonemic awareness instruction should target phoneme segmentation and blending in two and three phoneme words. Phonics instruction will emphasize letter-sound correspondences and the use of Elkonin boxes and counters will facilitate the transition from sounds to letters, and beginning blending skills.*</p> <p><b>Independent Student Center Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Phoneme Segmenting: Say and Slide Phonemes (PA.055) Students orally segment words using counters and Elkonin Boxes.</li> <li>- Letter-Sound Correspondence-Object Letter-Sound Matching (P.027) Students match the initial sounds of objects to letters.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Group Members</b> Ethan, Jabari, Jenna, Jacob</p> <p><b>Minimum Meeting Frequency</b> 3 times/week</p> <p><b>Lesson Structure</b> Skills-Focused</p>	<p><b>Instructional Focus: Phonics and Fluency</b></p> <p><b>Small Group Lesson at the Teacher-Led Center:</b> These students are performing at grade level with phonemic awareness and can receive extensive work in letter-sound correspondence with a focus on medial vowels. Word work activities should focus on phoneme segmentation and blending at the individual phoneme level for 3-4 phoneme words. Fluency with these skills should be emphasized as well as fluency with high frequency words.*</p> <p><b>Independent Student Center Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Letter-Sound Correspondence: Letter Stamp Mini-Books (P.031) Students make medial sound letter books using letter stamps.</li> <li>- Word Study Blending: Draw-A-Card Word Game (P.066) Students make words using consonant and vowel cards.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Group Members</b> Connie, Teresa, Joe, Karl, Sean</p> <p><b>Minimum Meeting Frequency</b> 3 times/week</p> <p><b>Lesson Structure</b> Skills-Focused</p>	<p><b>Instructional Focus: Fluency</b></p> <p><b>Small Group Lesson at the Teacher-Led Center:</b> This group is at low-risk on measures of phonemic awareness and phonics. The small group instructional focus could be on reading decodable text, fluency, and extended discussion with leveled text as well as focused practice using word lists made up of words with phonic elements already learned (and the new ones being learned).*</p> <p><b>Independent Student Center Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Word Study: High Frequency Words, Word Baseball (P.090) Students play a baseball game reading words.</li> <li>- High Frequency Words: Fluency, Word Wiz (F.015) Students read high frequency words in a timed activity.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Group Members</b> Pete, Marcia, Meghann, Elissa, Liz, Randee</p> <p><b>Minimum Meeting Frequency</b> Twice a week</p> <p><b>Lesson Structure</b> Guided Reading and/or Skills- Focused</p>	<p><b>Instructional Focus: Phonics, Vocabulary, &amp; Reading Comprehension</b></p> <p><b>Small Group Lesson at the Teacher-Led Center:</b> These students have met the benchmark for word reading/decoding. Guided Reading would be an appropriate lesson structure for this group. Additionally, small-group instruction for these students could focus on more advanced phonics and word study (e.g., multisyllabic words) while emphasizing word meaning.*</p> <p><b>Independent Student Center Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Syllable Patterns: Word Syllable Game (P.095) Students play a game by reading and counting syllables in words.</li> <li>- Word Study: High Frequency Words, Word Fishing (P.089) Students play a 'fishing' game by reading words.</li> </ul>

*\* Using the scope and sequence and the students' assessment data as guidance, the teacher will select appropriate lessons and materials from the comprehensive reading program, a supplemental reading program, or an intervention program that will effectively address the identified instructional focus for each group.*

## **ALTERNATIVE LESSON STRUCTURES TO DIFFERENTIATE INSTRUCTION IN FIRST GRADE: EXAMPLE TWO**

Using assessment data from DIBELS® and classroom observations as guidance, Mrs. Rodriguez will select appropriate activities from the school's core program to deliver additional support during Teacher-Led small group lessons. For a more intensive instructional focus in phonemic awareness and phonics for some of her students, the teacher will use activities from the reading intervention program adopted by the school. Although these groups are highly focused on skills required for reading accuracy, discussion of word meanings should also be included when talking about individual words. In addition to the instruction described below, all students will receive daily whole class instruction in phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension, as well as some phonemic awareness activities, from the comprehensive reading program. Other grouping practices, such as student pairs and one-on-one instruction, are also used to support reading instruction. Membership in these groups will change as students' needs change.

<p><b>Group Members</b> Dora, Daniel, Eliza, Rodney</p> <p><b>Minimum Meeting Frequency</b> Every day</p> <p><b>Lesson Structure:</b> Skills-Focused</p>	<p><b>Instructional Focus: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, &amp; Word Reading</b></p> <p><b>Small Group Lesson at the Teacher-Led Center:</b> The students in this group are Ms. Rodriguez’s most struggling readers. They will work toward the goal of segmenting three-phoneme words into individual phonemes, although they may need to develop some prerequisite skills first (e.g., onset-rime blending and segmentation). In addition, they will learn letter-sound correspondences and directly practice blending letter sounds in CVC words. She will also teach students to read both phonetically regular and high frequency words so that they can read sentences as quickly as possible. The teacher will emphasize word meaning during instruction.*</p> <p>The students in this group will probably need intervention in addition to the instruction they are receiving during the reading block.</p> <p><b>Independent Student Center Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Letter-Sound Correspondence: Letter-Sound Bingo (P.044) Students play an initial sound bingo game</li> <li>- Onset and Rime: Say It Now (P.048) Students make words by playing an onsets and rimes game.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Group Members</b> Alex, Antwon, Delia, Angela</p> <p><b>Minimum Meeting Frequency</b> Every day</p> <p><b>Lesson Structure:</b> Skills-Focused</p>	<p><b>Instructional Focus: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Word &amp; Sentence Reading</b></p> <p><b>Small Group Lesson at the Teacher-Led Center:</b> The students in this group are also struggling both in phonemic awareness and in phonics. Ms. Rodriguez will work with them on segmenting three- and four-phoneme words into individual phonemes. This instruction will integrate letters as soon as possible so students can begin blending letter sounds to read words (e.g., CVC, CCVC, and CVCC words). She will also teach students to read both phonetically regular and high frequency words so that they can read sentences as quickly as possible. Students may practice applying blending skills by reading decodable text. Word meaning will be emphasized.*</p> <p>The students in this group may need intervention in addition to the instruction they are receiving during the reading block.</p> <p><b>Independent Student Center Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Phoneme Segmenting- Say and Slide Phonemes (PA.055) Students orally segment words using counters and Elkonin Boxes.</li> <li>- Onset and Rime: Word Swat (P.054) Students use a flyswatter to match onsets and rimes to make words.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Group Members</b> Larah, Gerry, Chris, Tina, Jay</p> <p><b>Minimum Meeting Frequency</b> Three times a week</p> <p><b>Lesson Structure:</b> Skills-Focused</p>	<p><b>Instructional Focus: Phonics &amp; Paragraph Reading</b></p> <p><b>Small Group Lesson at the Teacher-Led Center:</b> The students in this group have met the benchmark for phonemic awareness but are identified as slightly below grade level on the assessment of word reading/decoding. Ms. Rodriguez will review letter sounds with them, and they will work on blending letter sounds to read words. She will also emphasize word meaning. Students will practice applying blending skills by reading decodable text. The teacher will build students' skills so that they move from word reading to sentence reading, until finally they are reading paragraphs and stories.*</p> <p><b>Independent Student Center Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Word Study Blending: Spin-A-Word (P.068) Students use a spinner, blend sounds, and make words.</li> <li>- Word Study Segmenting: Say and Write Letters (P.074) Students orally segment words and match corresponding letters on spaces in Elkonin Boxes.</li> <li>- Word Study High Frequency Words: Word Checkers (P.088) Students play a checker game reading the words on the squares.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Group Members</b> Natalia, Felicia, Rey, Clarissa, Jade, Aaron</p> <p><b>Minimum Meeting Frequency</b> Twice a week</p> <p><b>Lesson Structure:</b> Guided Reading and/or Skills-Focused</p>	<p><b>Instructional Focus: Phonics, Reading Comprehension, &amp; Vocabulary</b></p> <p><b>Small Group Lesson at the Teacher-Led Center:</b> These are Ms. Rodriguez's most advanced learners—all have met the benchmark for word reading/decoding. Guided Reading would be an appropriate lesson structure for this group. Additionally, small-group instruction for these students could focus on more advanced phonics and word study (e.g., multisyllabic words) while emphasizing word meaning.</p> <p><b>Independent Student Center Activity:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Syllable Patterns: Multisyllabic Words (P.093) Students make words from syllable puzzle pieces.</li> <li>- Morpheme Structures: Compound Word Puzzles (P.097) Students fit together puzzle pieces to form compound words.</li> </ul>

\* Using the scope and sequence and the students' assessment data as guidance, the teacher will select appropriate lessons and materials from the comprehensive reading program, a supplemental reading program, or an intervention program that will effectively address the identified instructional focus for each group.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

It is important to note that observational studies of teachers who are effective in teaching early reading skills to all students employ both the kind of explicit and systematic instruction embodied in *Skills-Focused Lessons*, and the integrative and supported reading experiences that are characteristic of *Guided Reading* lessons to meet the needs of all their students. They are skilled at making judgments about which kinds of instruction are most important at different points for individual students. Less effective teachers tend to focus more exclusively on one or the other of these two broad kinds of instruction, and thus are not as able to effectively meet the needs of all their students. We encourage all *Reading First* teachers to reflect carefully on the individual needs of students and to employ the particular type of lesson structure that will be most effective in meeting their needs for differentiated instruction.

## REFERENCES

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