



## ***What Is Evidence-Based Reading Instruction and How Do You Know It When You See It?***

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*“As teachers and programs become more capable of applying research-based principles for reading assessment and instruction, the real winners should be adult learners and their families. Improved literacy skills may allow these adults to take giant steps in the journey of lifelong learning.”*

*Susan McShane  
First Steps for Teachers, 2005*



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## Introduction

The Division of Adult and Career Education (DACE) of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the largest provider of reading instruction to adults in the greater Los Angeles area. DACE operates within the 710 square miles that comprise the LAUSD. In the 2010-2011 school year, more than 12,000 adult and young adult learners enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) reading classes offered by DACE and taught by 173 instructors at more than 30 campuses throughout the District.

Efforts began in 2005 to introduce Evidence-Based Reading Instruction (EBRI) to DACE teachers and administrators. Since then, implementing EBRI in DACE ABE reading classes has been a work in progress. It continues today as more teachers are trained.

Implementing EBRI requires fundamental change both in perceptions of what constitutes adult reading instruction and how adult education programs deliver that instruction. This brief reflects the experience of the LAUSD's ABE Program as it has worked to bring about these fundamental changes.

Part I defines and describes evidence-based reading instruction. Part II offers examples of instructional scenarios that demonstrate what EBRI looks like in the classroom. Part III is a brief case study of how EBRI has been implemented within LAUSD. Part IV offers recommendations to agencies that may wish to implement EBRI.

## Part I: What Is Evidence-Based Reading Instruction?

Any discussion of evidence-based reading instruction should begin with a definition of “reading” and a clarification of what the term “evidence-based” means.

The Partnership for Reading (National Institute for Literacy, 2005) defines reading as *a complex system of deriving meaning from print. It requires:*

- *an understanding of how phonemes, or speech sounds, are connected to print*
- *the ability to decode unfamiliar words*
- *the ability to read fluently*
- *sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension*
- *the development of appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from print*
- *the development and maintenance of a motivation to read* (Reading Excellence Act; retrieved Oct. 9, 2011; [http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OESE/REA/reading\\_act.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OESE/REA/reading_act.pdf))

“Evidence-based” refers to practices that have been shown to be successful in improving reading achievement. The success of these practices is demonstrated in two ways: by research-study data collected according to rigorous design, and by consensus among expert practitioners who monitor outcomes as part of their practice. These results—whether scientific data or expert consensus—must be valid and reliable and come from a variety of sources (Reading Excellence Act, 1999).

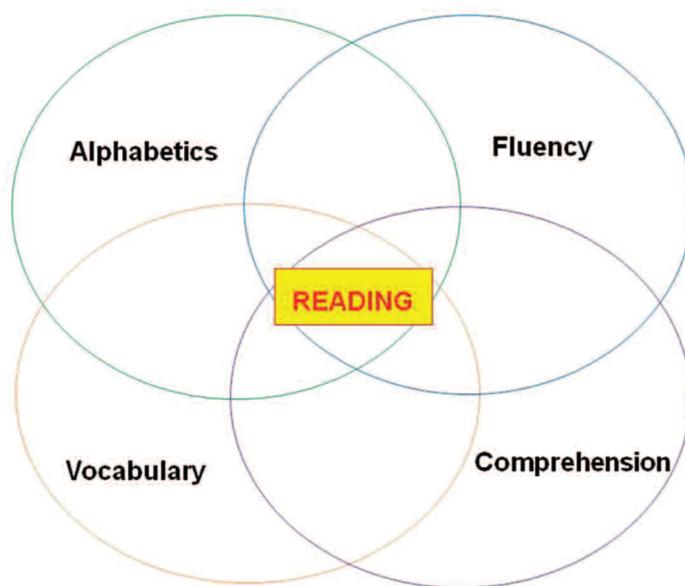
A summary of scientifically-based findings is found in *Adult Education Literacy Instruction: A Review of the Research* (Kruidenier, MacArthur, & Wrigley, 2010). It is a follow-up to *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction* (Kruidenier, 2005). *Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers* (McShane, 2005) presents the consensus among experts about the implications of this research for instruction.

## What Is Evidence-Based Reading Instruction and How Do You Know It When You See It?

The research produced findings that together form the basis of evidence-based practices. Among them:

- There are four key component areas of reading: *alphabetic*s (phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding), *fluency* (the ability to read accurately, at an appropriate rate, and with prosody), *vocabulary*, and *comprehension*.
- Learners' strengths and weaknesses need to be assessed in each of the four components.
- Instruction should be based on assessment results.
- Instruction should be systematic, sequenced, direct, and explicit.
- Instruction and materials need to be engaging and relevant to learners' needs.
- Instruction must be continuously monitored, by teacher and learners, to gauge its effectiveness.

The research suggests that effective adult reading instruction is more nuanced than traditionally delivered in most adult basic education classrooms. For example, most, if not all, instructional decisions generally have been based on a single assessment, specifically a silent reading comprehension test, such as TABE. The research, however, tells us that a single assessment provides an incomplete picture of a learner's strengths and weaknesses. It is critical to assess a student's strengths and weaknesses in all components for the simple reason that the strengths and weaknesses a student exhibits in one component affect his or her ability in the other components. Multiple assessments provide more instructionally relevant information about a learner's needs (Kruidenier, MacArthur, & Wrigley, 2010). For example, a student who is not a fluent reader will likely have difficulty comprehending much of what he or she is reading. The poor comprehension is in part due to the lack of fluency. Helping a non-fluent reader to improve his or her fluency skills will also help raise that student's comprehension level.



A key concept of EBRI is “teach the reader, not the reading.” In other words, the focus of evidenced-based instruction is not to have students master content area subject matter; rather, EBRI focuses on helping students master reading strategies that build reading skill. For example, when the student learns the comprehension strategy of summarizing, he or she transfers it to another situation, thereby allowing the student to make meaning from a variety of texts.

Similarly, vocabulary instruction should focus on the corpus of high-utility, high-frequency words that learners will find useful in many contexts (National Reading Panel, 2000). These are often referred to as Tier 2 Words (Beck & McKeown, 1985). Words such as *analyze*, *recognize*, and *transform* have numerous applications, and students will encounter them in a wide range of materials across content areas. Spending precious class time teaching specialized words like *metamorphosis* or *scythe* is counterproductive when it comes to building a rich, useful vocabulary. These content-area words can be explained at the time they are encountered in a text (Beck et al., 2002).

That is not to say that content-related materials should not be introduced into an EBRI classroom. One of the purposes of assessment is to determine a student's mastery and instructional levels in the component areas. Content- or job-related materials have a place in an EBRI classroom as long as they are at the appropriate levels for the students who will be using them.

## Part II: How Do You Know EBRI When You See It?

### Scenario A

*It is several weeks into the school term. In an adult reading classroom, three groups of ABE students are observed working at tables. The teacher is providing instruction in alphabetics to four students in Group A. Six to eight students each comprise Groups B and C. These groups are using a graphic organizer to practice the comprehension strategy of summarizing. Group B is using material written at about a fifth-grade level. Group C is practicing with seventh-grade level material. At some point the teacher leaves Group A to monitor Groups B and C and provide feedback to the students. Finally, the teacher asks all students to complete what they are doing. Twenty to twenty-five minutes have been devoted to this portion of the class. Now the teacher refers to the class schedule written on the white board and asks students to open their notebooks to the vocabulary section.*

Scenario A illustrates two fundamental instructional characteristics of an EBRI classroom.

*Diagnostic assessment:* Instruction begins with the assessment of students' needs in the four components of reading. During the assessment process, practitioners identify students' mastery and instructional levels and review the results with the students. Using the assessment results, practitioners create reader profiles, thereby identifying groups of learners with similar needs and the same or similar instructional levels. Teachers can target instruction to meet students' needs (Kruidenier, 2002) and select appropriate materials at learners' instructional levels.

In Scenario A, it is evident that diagnostic assessment has occurred. Students are grouped according to need and instructional levels. Only Group A is working on alphabetics. Groups B and C do not need that instruction. However, they need comprehension strategies and are practicing at their instructional levels.

*Planned instruction, instructional routine:* Quality reading instruction is planned and sequenced. In Scenario A, it is evident that the instruction is planned and sequenced. While Group A receives alphabetics instruction, Groups B and C work on another component using material the teacher has created or selected to match the groups' instructional levels. The practice is also scaffolded (graphic organizers). The teacher is able to monitor the groups, further evidence of instructional planning, and provide necessary feedback. The class schedule is on the board and the teacher refers to it, evidence that an instructional routine has been developed.

### Scenario B

*The teacher refers to the class schedule posted on the white board. She explains that the next 20 minutes will be devoted to practice reading aloud in phrases. All but three students will receive the instruction and practice; the three students will work independently or in a small group on another component. To the rest of the class, the teacher explains that to read smoothly and with meaning a person must read chunks of words, or phrases, by pausing in the right places. She demonstrates this, first by reading a sentence or two in a word-by-word fashion, then modeling smooth, fluent reading, slightly exaggerating the pauses and expression. She continues the lesson by explaining that marking phrases in a text will help them read more smoothly. She shows them a short text that she has marked. The text is at a level accessible to all students receiving the instruction. She reads it to them while they follow along. Then she shows them how she would mark the phrases of another short text. She reads it as they follow along ("I do"). She has the students echo read the passage with her a couple of times. She may do this again with another text, or she may proceed to have students mark a new text with her ("We do"). Depending on the time, the teacher may end the lesson here, explaining that in the next class they will practice with a partner marking phrases in a new passage ("You all do"). Eventually they will read more smoothly, with meaning and expression, and without marking phrases in text ("You do").*



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In Scenario B, the teacher has based instruction on diagnostic assessment results, and students are grouped according to their instructional needs. Just as important, this scenario illustrates another characteristic of an EBRI classroom: sequenced and direct instruction. In this model, the teacher plans a sequence of instruction over multiple class sessions by breaking down a strategy into short, focused lessons. The teacher in Scenario B clearly applied the elements of direct, explicit instruction:

*Explanation:* She explained to students what they were going to learn, why it was important, how it would help them, and connects the learning to their needs and goals.

*Modeling:* Observation is the first step in learning something new (Beers, 2003). Learners need to hear/see a good example of what they are expected to do. The teacher modeled good fluent reading as well as how she chunked or marked phrases in the text. (This is the “I do” stage.)

*Guided practice with feedback:* Learners need multiple opportunities to practice what they are learning. Practice is scaffolded as necessary. At first the students practice with the teacher. (This is the “we do” stage.) Later, they will practice with a partner or in a group (Beder & Medina, 2001; Beder et al., 2006). The teacher monitors the practice and provides feedback as necessary (the “you all do” stage). Guided practice may take place over several class sessions.

*Application:* When students have mastered a strategy, they are ready to apply it independently in a new situation (the “you do” stage).

From the two scenarios, we can conclude that the teacher has been trained in evidence-based reading instruction. However, the success of EBRI also has operational implications that are not immediately evident in either Scenario A or B. If EBRI is to be successfully integrated into classroom practice, it must be supported by operational and organizational procedures and policies that often are at odds with traditional methods of providing adult education classes.

*Target population:* The EBRI classrooms presented in the scenarios served a student population of adult and young adult learners whose reading levels are at the intermediate range, i.e., from 4 through 8. The nonreader and beginning level reader (reading levels 0-3) have very different needs because they are learning to read. It is recommended that an EBRI classroom be “leveled”; that is, nonreaders and beginning level readers should not be enrolled in the EBRI class. If there is no choice but to enroll these learners in the EBRI class, then provisions must be made to accommodate the 0-3 readers and meet their needs—an adjusted class schedule, team teaching, volunteers, classroom aide.

*Managed enrollment:* The scenario classrooms benefited from managed enrollment. The tradition of open enrollment in adult education programs is a double-edged sword. While it has been seen as a way to address poor attendance, persistence, and attendance-based funding (Strucker, 2006), it has contributed greatly to “attendance turbulence” (Sticht et al., 1998) and the widespread use of individualized instruction, conditions that are counter-intuitive to the EBRI principles of systematic, direct instruction and multiple opportunities for guided practice with feedback. A constant influx of new students makes it difficult for teachers to plan high-quality, sequenced lessons that provide all students with sufficient practice and feedback (Strucker, 2006). It also hampers the teacher’s ability to conduct diagnostic assessments in the four components of reading. Open enrollment penalizes previously enrolled students because the teacher must stop to assess new students and review what has already been covered (Strucker, 2006). New students suffer because they have missed multiple practice opportunities. “The success of systematic instruction depends on good attendance by individual learners and a relatively stable classroom environment with minimal turnover and turbulence”

(Strucker, 2006). Research suggests that some form of managed enrollment may help learners improve their attendance and completion rates (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999).

*Class size:* Neither of the scenario classrooms was modeled on the more traditional “lab” setting commonly found in ABE. The lab accommodates an open enrollment model with larger numbers of students whose attendance is more sporadic and in which instruction is highly individualized. The EBRI model, in which direct instruction is critical, relies on systematic, sequenced instruction delivered to groups of students with similar instructional needs and at similar instructional levels. Logically, the fewer the number of groups, the more successful the teacher will be at managing the different groups. The enrollment in each of the scenario classrooms was held to 25 students.

### **Part III: EBRI Implementation Case Study—Los Angeles Unified School District, Division of Adult and Career Education**

Prior to the introduction of EBRI, adult reading instruction in DACE followed an individualized instruction model using a packaged reading product. Students checked out materials from their teacher, completed assignments listed on a flow chart, and slowly progressed, or not, through Beginning (reading levels 0-3), Intermediate (RL 4-6), and Advanced (RL 7-8) reading. Although the students met in classrooms, a form of tutoring rather than teaching was the mode of instructional delivery. Many students, especially second language learners, never completed the three reading courses. Instead they dropped out or found themselves lost in what became known as a “black hole.”

We knew that our program was not meeting students’ needs. Our instructional materials were outdated and out of print. We embarked on a mission to find new instructional materials.

At the same time, we began visiting ABE reading classrooms to find out just what was going on instructionally. These visits revealed:

- A few highly effective teachers.
- Classrooms with as many as 30 to 50 students and no teacher’s aide.
- A majority of well-meaning teachers who, when asked what they were doing to teach reading, could not point to anything in particular except for the materials.
- Little or no direct, explicit instruction.
- Teachers who spent most of their time moving quickly from one raised hand or call for help to another, assisting with an unknown word here or explaining a passage there.
- Teachers who sat at their desks where students would come up to ask questions.
- “Librarian” teachers who kept close to the reading materials cabinet for most of the class period passing out and checking in materials.
- Teachers who were often unaware of their students’ goals and educational backgrounds.
- Vocal students who received more instructional time than quiet ones. It was not uncommon for some students to have no instructional time with the teacher during an entire class period.

The model was very much one of teach the reading, not the reader with teachers explaining Tier 3 vocabulary and providing explanations of readings.

During these class visits, we also interviewed students. We asked them what they were learning and what was the purpose of the assignment they were doing. Sadly, in many cases, students had no answers.



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## What Is Evidence-Based Reading Instruction and How Do You Know It When You See It?

For most of its existence, DACE received its funding from the State of California based upon average daily attendance (ADA). Whether a student progressed or completed a class or level of instruction was not as important as whether the seat was occupied. DACE's state allocation was separate and protected from monies directed to the LAUSD K-12 program. This was not only the case in LAUSD, but for all adult education programs throughout the state. California's recent budget crisis changed all that. Now, there is no firewall between K-12 and adult education funding. Many adult education programs have been swallowed up by their K-12 partners who needed the money to keep elementary, middle and high schools functioning.

The adult school programs that remain now have to prove they are indeed generating student outcomes. For DACE, this shift in the allocation of monies has meant severe budget cuts and forced us to take a serious look at how we do business. Making changes in the way reading instruction is delivered is now crucial to the ABE program's survival. Success must now be measured by students making measurable learning gains.

Our search for a new packaged reading program was not successful. Fortunately, at the same time we were looking, we were invited to participate in the STAR pilot project. STAR was a federal initiative that trained a national cohort of ABE teachers in evidence-based reading instruction. Our initial response to EBRI was, "this will never work." Our teachers were materials dependent for their reading instruction. EBRI was not. Many teachers did not have a strong background in preparing lessons or delivering direct, explicit instruction. Open enrollment meant that students entered and left our reading program whenever they wanted. EBRI requires some form of managed enrollment to be successful.

However, knowing that we needed to do something, we provided the following teacher trainings to phase in EBRI.

- An adult reading study circle
- An introduction to EBRI for over 60 teachers and administrators provided by Susan McShane
- Workshops for reading teachers on lesson planning and small group instruction
- Workshops on assessing and teaching fluency using EBRI assessments and strategies

These efforts started an EBRI "buzz" in the field. However, classroom practice was not changing and neither were outcomes. Training that focused on one component of EBRI without exposing teachers to the big picture and how the components worked together was comparable to only letting them touch part of the elephant. Teachers didn't understand how to apply what they were learning to their classrooms. Our open entry, open exit enrollment system did not accommodate the need for teachers to assess students and provide direct explicit instruction. We were trying to layer EBRI on top of existing instructional practices or classroom habits instead of requiring teachers to replace those practices and habits with something new.

In 2008, we handpicked five school teams to participate in our STAR pilot EBRI training. The training was delivered by our two ABE advisers, who were STAR trainers. The intention was to create a cadre of mentors who would provide model classrooms for future EBRI trainees. Three of the five teachers became successful EBRI teachers and mentors.

Next, we invited school teams from all DACE adult schools to apply for STAR training. A school team included all the reading teachers from the school and a supporting administrator who attended the first and last session. School teams submitted an application and agreed to attend all six training sessions, conduct diagnostic assessments, implement instructional strategies, and complete other mandatory training activities. Teachers were paid for the time they spent in the training sessions. An expert in managed enrollment was brought in for a special meeting with administrators. Teachers who missed sessions were either dropped from the training or did not receive certificates of completion.



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## What Is Evidence-Based Reading Instruction and How Do You Know It When You See It?

Getting the teachers in the training to embrace EBRI completely was difficult. Several teachers picked out pieces they were comfortable with and added them to their repertoires. Some struggled to implement EBRI in open enrollment situations and gave up. Some found their intermediate reading classes packed with 0-3 readers and ESL students who were still learning the language. Even at schools where administrators demonstrated strong instructional leadership in support of EBRI, problems occurred. Some teachers lost their teaching assignments due to budget cuts. A few teachers simply refused to implement EBRI, preferring to stick with the old materials and their own teaching practices. Of the 40 teachers trained, only a handful fully implemented EBRI.

Then we lost one of our ABE advisers due to budget cuts. How could one adviser support the teachers who had received training? How could we keep EBRI moving forward and expand capacity?

EBRI network meetings were our solution. Held monthly and facilitated by the adviser, these meetings provided a forum for reading teachers to share what they were doing in their classrooms, focus on challenges and gain insights from the adviser and the mentor teachers who had successfully implemented EBRI in their classrooms. Initially the meetings were only offered to EBRI-trained teachers. But, word was spreading that EBRI classrooms had better retention and students were showing improved learning gains. So, we opened the meetings to all reading teachers with an interest in EBRI and focused on topics such as direct instruction, instructional routines, modeling strategies (e.g., think-aloud), goal setting. The purpose of the meeting now is to reinforce evidence-based practices for the EBRI-trained teachers and to introduce these practices to untrained teachers. The monthly meetings have become a way to build a community of practitioners.

Is EBRI improving student outcomes? Although not conclusive, the results we are seeing thus far are encouraging. In the 2009-10 school year, attendance data revealed that students in classes with an EBRI-trained teacher had a 24% completion rate vs. 10% of students in similar classes with untrained teachers. In reviewing pre- and post TABE reading scores from 96 students who received EBRI instruction in five separate EBRI classes during a 20-week period between September 2009 and March 2010, we found that

- 89 students (93%) improved their TABE scores
- 45 students (47%) improved by 2 grade levels or more
- 29 students (30%) improved sufficiently to exit the ABE program. In other words, they achieved a 9.0 grade level equivalent (GE) or higher on the TABE
- The average increase in GE was 2.5.

Our goal is to have all of our intermediate level reading teachers using EBRI and producing strong student learning gains. That means training and supporting well over 100 teachers. It is clear from our experience thus far that it will be impossible for us to do this alone. Therefore, we have now partnered with the California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO) to develop and implement an EBRI training that is designed and presented by our state EBRI specialists and DACE EBRI mentor teachers. We held our first collaborative series of trainings in the spring of 2011. Another is planned for spring 2012. This professional development collaboration has been invaluable for DACE, as well as smaller nearby districts that have taken advantage of the trainings. CALPRO handles all of the operational issues involved in the training, including paying the presenters. Our ABE adviser is now free to provide mentoring and hands-on support to DACE reading teachers.

Fully implementing EBRI with a large cadre of teachers and administrators and establishing a managed enrollment system that supports it is a process that cannot happen overnight. The challenges to create sustainable change and build capacity are many: teacher and administrator turnover, limited follow-up resources to support teachers in their attempts to “get it right,” limited means to enforce implementation, and the fear of change that goes to the very core of a fossilized method of “teaching” reading that was accepted for so many years.

But the evidence of success we have witnessed among a committed group of teachers and administrators, and students, is encouraging.

## Part IV: Recommendations for Implementation of EBRI

Our recommendations are divided into six categories: EBRI training, instructional support, operational support, teacher hiring, materials development, and measurable student outcomes. Many of the recommendations mirror STAR best practices. Others are based on our field experience implementing EBRI.

### EBRI Training

Based upon our experiences, the investment in EBRI training is considerable—more than 30 hours of training, plus administrative in-services and follow-up support for teachers in the classroom. All of this consumes time and money, and requires a personal as well as professional commitment from participants.

A screening process, such as an application, should be in place to identify motivated school teams with the potential to successfully implement EBRI. School teams must be open to changing the way instruction is delivered and the program is operated. Teachers and administrators need to understand that EBRI is not about “cherry picking” a few instructional strategies to try out in the classroom. To successfully implement EBRI, agencies must be prepared to change the way they do business, from configuring classes and attendance policies (i.e., managed enrollment) to instructional delivery.

*Less is more:* The EBRI training can be overwhelming, even for the experienced teacher. And with many ABE teachers coming to the profession with little or no formal background in reading, support and guidance are essential. Coaching must continue after the training for all teachers in order to ensure EBRI implementation and fidelity (Van Dyke et al., 2010). Therefore, train only the number of teachers who can be adequately supported with mentoring and frequent classroom visits for as long as a year or two after the training.

*Additional professional support:* EBRI requires that a teacher be skilled in other crucial aspects of teaching. Professional development in managing small groups, working with volunteers or aides, lesson planning, and scaffolding instruction should also be part of the overall EBRI implementation plan.

If teachers are paid for participating in EBRI training, payment, if possible, should be tied to changes made in the classroom, not simply to seat time in training.

### Instructional Support

As noted above, teachers need a great deal of support during the implementation stage. EBRI-trained teachers benefit from having multiple opportunities to come together—in real time or, perhaps, virtually—to meet and share successes, discuss challenges of implementation, and problem solve.

In Los Angeles, we identified model EBRI teachers who were willing to have newly-trained EBRI teachers observe their classes. During training, we impress upon teachers that transitioning to EBRI is a process. Teachers will often need a full school year to implement and feel comfortable with EBRI.

### Operational Support

Support for the kind of change that EBRI requires must come from the highest levels—statewide, agency-wide, district-wide. Without this support, critical operational changes are not likely to happen smoothly, or happen

at all. This may mean adapting new class size guidelines and advocating for paid planning time among other recommendations.

The EBRI approach is focused on the needs of learners performing at the intermediate level (4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>-grade levels). Consequently, EBRI classrooms need to be leveled to include only these intermediate-level readers. Teachers who are implementing EBRI should not be expected to also meet the needs of 0-3 readers and upper-level ESL students. Only one teacher we worked with was able to do this successfully because he is an exceptional teacher and had a classroom aide and volunteers.

EBRI is based on assessment and planned, systematic instruction. Therefore, a managed enrollment model is essential. Managed enrollment minimizes classroom turbulence and allows for the necessary assessment and systematic instruction. It may be necessary to provide additional staffing or teacher hours to ensure that students are properly assessed.

### **Teacher Hiring**

We believe that most adult education teachers are dedicated professionals. However, not all of them are cut out to be adult reading instructors. Therefore, it is important to identify instructors who are committed to growing as professionals and who may have a background in education or teaching reading. These are the better candidates for EBRI training.

### **Materials Development**

Most current adult reading materials do not support EBRI, and teachers spend considerable time developing their own materials. A system for creating and sharing of teacher-developed EBRI materials and lessons should be established. Programs should have an ongoing dialogue with authors and publishers to encourage the development of instructional materials that support EBRI.

### **Measurable Student Outcomes**

STAR EBRI training was developed and promoted as a way to change teacher behavior and the operational delivery of adult reading instruction. Improved student outcomes were implied, but not supported by data. It is time at this point in the evolution of EBRI implementation to look at measurable student outcomes. Creating a viable EBRI program takes a sizeable investment. If it cannot be proven that EBRI results in considerable improvement in student outcomes, then the support and funding for EBRI will be in jeopardy. EBRI must now prove itself.

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