# Pathway to Graduation: A Pilot Reading Project for Middle School Students During the Summer Months

**Amanda Strong Hilsmier:** Samford University

**Patricia F. Wood:** Samford University

**Susan Wirt:** Jefferson County School District

**Diane McTamney:** Jefferson County School District

**Mary Beth Malone:** Jefferson County School District

**Becky Milstead:** Jefferson, Blount, & St. Clair County Department of Mental Health

The purpose of this article is to outline the implementation of a summer reading project targeted at middle school students with identified reading deficits and behavioral concerns called Pathway to Graduation (PTG). The project was a collaborative process between a school district, local university, and department of mental health. The students who participated in this pilot project were nominated by teachers, assessed to meet specific qualifications, then received six weeks of reading intervention to improve their reading performance in conjunction with a social support component to address motivational and/or behavioral difficulties that often accompany reading deficiencies.

## Introduction

As students move to the upper elementary and middle school grades, the distance between struggling readers and successful readers widens. Stanovich (1986) referred to this phenomenon as the "Matthew Effect" where the successful readers become stronger and are exposed to more challenging text, while the struggling readers become less motivated to read and fall further behind their peers in reading skill and text exposure. Another issue that arises as struggling readers proceed into the middle school years is an increase in the occurrence of challenging behaviors in the classroom (Oakes, Mathur, & Lane, 2010; Wang & Algozzine, 2011). These behaviors are often in place to mask the students reading difficulties and can become a habit if the reading struggles of the student are not addressed.

Oftentimes, the demands of general education content, lack of reading training in general education teachers, and special education programming or scheduling needs can prevent struggling readers in the middle school grades from receiving the intensive reading instruction needed to impact their learning during the school year (Santa, 2006). The summer months provide a great opportunity to address remediation of reading skills for struggling readers while providing an engaging and enjoyable environment that is often not possible during the school year. An added benefit of reading instruction during the summer months is the opportunity to avoid

the summer reading setback that can cause struggling readers to fall further behind their peers (Allington et al., 2010).

## Summer Reading Setback

Summer reading setback refers to the regression of reading skills during the summer months and has been well documented in minority, low-income, and less skilled readers (Allington et al., 2010; Kim & White, 2008). Most schools require students to read selected books during the summer in an attempt to maintain skill levels over the extended summer break. The majority of research on summer reading programs and the summer reading setback has focused on providing books for low-income students to read during the summer months with mixed results (Allington et al., 2010; Kim, 2007; Kim & White, 2008). However, summer reading requirements are often at too high a level to impact any skill development in struggling readers, particularly during the middle school grades.

The summer break can provide a unique opportunity to remediate and expand on learning for students who are struggling, particularly in reading (Allington et al., 2010; Denton, Solari, Ciancio, Hecht, & Swank, 2010). The time during the summer allows the focus to be on the intensive individual reading needs of the student. With the possibilities of summer reading interventions in mind, a pilot project was developed as part of a collaborative partnership to address the reading needs of middle school students identified or at-risk for disabilities with noted behavioral concerns.

## "Pathway to Graduation": Partnership Roles and Responsibilities

The Pathway to Graduation (PTG) partnership was created between a university, a local school district, and the local Department of Mental Health. The local school district provided the

following: (a) transportation for students to attend the "Pathway" project, (b) testing to determine which students would be appropriate students in the project, (c) three certified special education teachers to teach the decoding component, and (d) two supervisory staff personnel to oversee the project. The local university provided physical space for the project where the students could be trained on a university campus. Ten graduate and undergraduate students in education received course credit for working with small groups of students, and lunch in the university cafeteria was provided daily as a motivational piece to encourage attendance in students. The Department of Mental Health provided a counselor and a special curriculum (Moore, 2004) designed to foster discussion regarding actions and consequences, future life goals, academic motivation, and ways to manage behavior in the school setting.

### Identification of Student Students

Selected schools were chosen from a large metropolitan school district to participate in the PTG project. Students were identified and nominated through teacher referral. For inclusion in PTG, a minimum Intelligence Quotient (IQ) score of 80 was required; deficits in reading achievement were confirmed with standardized and informal reading measurements which included the Gray Oral Reading Tests-4th Edition (GORT-4) (Wiederholt & Bryant, 2001), Test of Word Reading Efficiency-Second Edition (TOWRE-2) (Torgeson, Wagner & Rashotte, 2012), the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test-Third Edition (WIAT-III) (Pearson, 2009) reading composite, and the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) (Leslie & Caldwell, 2010). In addition, documentation of social and behavioral concerns were identified by the teacher and evaluated using the Social Skills Improvement Scale (SSIS) (Gresham & Elliott, 2011). The majority of students in the PTG project were identified with learning disabilities in reading; however, there was several students who were not currently

served under special education services but whose teachers felt could benefit from PTG and met the required testing components.

*Project tutors*

Graduate and undergraduate university students applied to participate as PTG project tutors. Undergraduate students obtained a course credit for participation; graduate students received clinical experience in their summer graduate course. Three recent graduates from the university returned as assistants to further their professional development as teachers. All tutors received approximately 6-8 hours of training on reading instruction prior to the start of the PTG project.

## Components of Project

The PTG project involved 3 components identified by the collaborators as key to meeting the outcomes. Reading was the primary focus with intensive instruction occurring in decoding, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary skills. Students were provided Nooks (e-reader) and computer-based reading instruction as an additional reading experience, which also served as a motivator. An additional component of the PTG project was a counseling piece that was renamed social support so the students would not feel threatened attending the sessions. The social support sessions used a specific curriculum to enhance the development of self-determination skills and the concept of actions and consequences (Moore, 2004). Guest speakers from the community met with the students one day a week reinforcing issues addressed in the social support component of the PTG project. Finally, students were allowed to eat lunch in the university cafeteria and have free time on campus to encourage students to think about long-term goals and motivate them to further improve their reading performance.

## Daily Orientation

At the start of each morning, a daily acknowledgement of the students' ability to learn was reinforced. Students were told that they were chosen to participate in the PTG project because they were smart and capable of learning. During this time, community leaders would speak one morning a week. Also, the students took turns presenting reader's theater during daily orientation on each Thursday of the project.

## Reading Instruction

The reading instruction in the PTG project was focused on the components of effective reading instruction outlined by the National Reading Panel (2000). The project tutors and certified teachers were responsible for implementing the reading instruction program. The reading instruction focused on decoding, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development. The students moved through the reading instruction component, counseling, lunch, and recreation in a scheduled rotation to ensure that each group received every component of instruction daily and to keep the students focused and motivated in the project (see Table 1 for daily schedule). The rotations allowed students to be mobile so they would remain engaged in the content and learning tasks.

The Wilson Reading Program (Wilson, 2004) was selected for teaching decoding skills. One of the three certified teachers taught the decoding in small groups based on each participant's reading skill level. The Wilson Reading Program is a research-based reading program focused on the reading needs of students with language-based reading deficits, such as decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (Guyer, Banks, & Guyer, 1993; Moats, 1998; Wilson, 1998; Wilson & O'Connor, 1995). The program is based out of the Orton-Gillingham Method of multisensory teaching (Orton, 1937; Ritchey & Goeke, 2006). Each PTG project tutor and his/

Table 1: Sample Daily Schedule for Pathway to Graduation

| Group 1 | | Group 2 | | Group 3 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9:00 | Orientation* | 9:00 | Orientation* | 9:00 | Orientation* |
| 9:10 | Lexia/Vocabulary | 9:10 | Comprehension | 9:10 | Decoding |
| 9:30 | Social Support | 9:50 | Lexia** | 10:00 | Comprehension |
| 10:05 | Decoding | 10:10 | Vocabulary | 10:40 | Vocabulary** |
| 10:55 | Fluency | 10:30 | Social Support | 11:00 | Fluency |
| 11:00 | Free Time | 11:05 | Decoding | 11:05 | Lunch |
| 11:20 | Lunch | 11:55 | Lunch | 11:35 | Free Time |
| 11:50 | Comprehension | 12:25 | Free Time | 11:55 | Lexia/Vocabulary |
| 12:30 | Vocabulary** | 12:45 | Fluency | 12:20 | Social Support |
| 12:50 | Daily Wrap up | 12:50 | Daily Wrap up | 12:50 | Daily Wrap up |
| 1:00 | Depart | 1:00 | Depart | 1:00 | Depart |

*During orientation, guest speakers and Reader's Theater also occurred one day a week.

**Independent reading was allowed if vocabulary/lexia was not needed.

her assigned group of 2-4 students attended the decoding session with the certified teacher. To ensure that the proper instruction occurred during the lesson, project tutors assessed treatment fidelity. Decoding instruction included sound drills, explicit modeling of sounds between real and nonsense words, use of word and letter manipulatives and games to practice new skills, text reading, reading in sentences to practice fluency skills, and dictation of sentences using skills learned in the lesson.

The fluency instruction in the project was conducted by the PTG project tutor and consisted of multiple readings of text from Great Leaps (Mercer & Campbell, 1998), a reading fluency program created specifically for middle school students. First, students read aloud a short passage. Then, they were timed rereading the passage for one minute. In order to progress, students had to read at 100% accuracy.

The comprehension component of the PTG project was taught by a certified special education interventionist from the local school district, assisted by the project tutors. Specifically, the comprehension component involved the group reading of a chapter book. The first week focused on expressive language development through visualization and verbalization strategies. The remaining 5 weeks focused on completing the chapter book using best practices for reading comprehension, such as predicting questions, evaluation, summarizing, and questioning the text.

Each week one of the small groups was chosen to present a reader's theater. Reader's theater consisted of a brief play/skit using props, technology, and acting skills using a script provided the prior week. Each group presented twice during the 6-week PTG project.

The vocabulary component of the PTG project focused on the training of multiple meaning words and was taught by the project tutors. Students were asked to draw pictures, write sentences, and use graphic organizers to represent the multiple meanings of words. At the end of the vocabulary session, students were given time for independent reading on Nooks purchased by the school district. The students who were particularly low in reading used this time to work on basic reading skills using the Lexia Reading program (Lexia Reading Core5) in a computer lab.

## Social Support and Guest Speakers

In addition to the reading program, a mental health counselor led the students through social support program focused on long-term goals and academic motivation. The Why Try Curriculum (Moore, 2004) was used in the social support component of the PTG program, and students met daily with the counselor for 30 minutes. In the curriculum, students viewed video vignettes and participated in role-play and group problem solving focused on motivation and academic success.

In addition to the social support curriculum, guest speakers from the community met with the students one morning a week. These speakers addressed topics such as staying in school, working hard to overcome academic struggles, how to apply for a job at graduation, and setting realistic goals for post-school. Table 2 outlines the specifics of the reading and social support components used in this project.

## Lunch and Recreation

Since the PTG project was conducted on a university campus, the students were allowed to eat lunch in the university cafeteria. Lunch was intended to motivate attendance and provide an authentic glimpse into life on a university campus.

Students were given approximately 30 minutes a day of recreation on the college campus. This meant that they could play Frisbee

Table 2: Summary of Reading and Social Support Instruction

| | |
|---|---|
| Decoding | • Completed in small groups of 2-4 students<br>• Led by certified teacher and supported by university tutors<br>• Used Wilson Reading Program (Wilson, 2004) focused on sound drills, word reading skills, reading in text, and dictation |
| Comprehension | • Combined small groups to 1 large group on similar level<br>• Led by special education interventionist and supported by university tutors<br>• Focused on reading a chosen chapter book to predict, summarize, question, and evaluate the text |
| Vocabulary/Lexia | • Completed in small group of 2-4 students<br>• Led by university tutors<br>• Focused on multiple meaning words and a variety ways of illustrating those meaning<br>• Low level readers also completed the Lexia reading program that was individualized to the individual needs of students<br>• For higher readers, independent reading time was allowed using the Nooks provided by the school district was provided. |
| Fluency | • Completed in small groups of 2-4 students<br>• Led by university tutors<br>• Students practiced repeated readings of a passage until able to read fluently in 1 minute |
| Social Support | • Combined small groups to same large group as in comprehension and lunch<br>• Led by certified counselor and supported by university tutor<br>• Used "Why Try" curriculum to encourage students to focus on academics, and make long-term academic/life goals |

on the quad, play a pick-up game of basketball in the gym, board games in the open areas, or have free reading time. The recreation time gave the students the opportunity to discover what it is like to be on a college campus and, like the lunch break, was intended to motivate the students to reflect on their goals for their future and the possibility of attending college after graduation.

## Anecdotal Reflections

This article provides preliminary information on a first-year pilot project for summer reading instruction for middle school students. Informal observations of students suggested that those who attended regularly demonstrated growth in skills and concepts taught in the PTG project. This included the reading instruction as well as the social support program. Several students showed behavioral improvement during the project as a result of the social support component. Of note, the older the participant (i.e. rising 8th grader) the less impact the project seemed to have on the students' reading. This finding supports the contention for early intervention in the upper elementary and middle school years.

The following comments are from parents who noted improvements in academic and behavioral performance after attending the project (for confidentiality purposes, all names have been changed).

From Jen's mother:

This year Jen has been doing much better in school. Her reading skills have improved because of the summer reading project. She didn't like to read before and now she's more willing to read and sound out words. She is even volunteering to read out loud.

From Brad's mother:

Mrs. J said that the summer reading project helped him socially. He loved going to the project and enjoyed being around the other kids. This year in school he has had an easier time getting along with his classmates.

From Kate's mother:

Mrs. B said she thought it was an "excellent" project, and she's glad we allowed Kate to participate. This year so far she has been on the A Honor Roll and the A-B Honor Roll. Ms. B feels it is because of the summer reading project that she is doing so well, before she would struggle. She appreciates the help and support Pathway to Graduation gave Kate.

Current teachers of students who participated in the PTG project were contacted anonymously to describe the reading and/or behavioral performance of the students who were in the study during the school year. Teachers stated the following improvements in students' reading and/or behavioral performance:

"The students love to read orally and they sound out unfamiliar words."

"Both students decode words when they read aloud in class."

"They are actually on or about on reading level according to the QRI-5 as opposed to their other special ed. peers. Their comprehension is much better."

"Joe seems to have self confidence in reading aloud in class or answering questions."

In order to know what students' thought of the PTG project, students were asked about their experience. Following are some examples of student feedback from the project:

Matt said it took some time to get past his mother signing him up, but now he enjoys the project.

> "It might be the teachers, it might be being around the other kids, I don't know," he  said. "I've learned about different things, like the third person, second person, first person, syllables. The group sessions are fun. It's like a fun project and other people might like it, too."

Adam said:

> "I had fun at the summer reading project. I learned about bullying. When I see people being picked on I know that I have to speak up, let a teacher know. I also learned how to sound out words that I don't know. I know word parts go together to make larger words."

Jennifer also shared the following about the PTG project:

> "The summer reading project helped me to be a better reader because I know how to better understand what I read. The lunches were good, and I had a good relationship with everyone that was there."

Finally, Diane said the following about her experience:

> "Going to (the university) was fun and the lunches were great. I got to meet kids from other schools. The teachers made it fun. I'm glad they could take time out of their summer to help us."

## Discussion

This article is an outline of a summer reading project meant to impact the reading skills of middle school students who were struggling readers and exhibited behavioral and/or motivational deficits. Oftentimes, the last opportunity to impact struggling readers is at the middle school level (Strong, Wehby, Falk, & Lane, 2004). Once students move to the high school level, the opportunity to learn to read has passed and bad compensatory habits have developed. Summer projects provide a great opportunity for struggling readers to improve their reading performance and avoid the summer reading setback so often seen in students with academic struggles.

The focus in high school is on earning credit-based units toward graduation. When struggling readers are faced with the credit-based demands of the high school curriculum, a sense of failure and inability to learn can impede motivation and academic success (Stanovich, 1986; Vaughn et al., 2011). Such bad experiences lead to a sense of learned helplessness in struggling readers that can make school an undesirable setting and lead a student to drop out of high school.

Students with academic and behavioral issues have an increased potential for dropping out of high school, incarceration, underemployment, and unemployment (Sinclair, Christensen, & Thurlow, 2005; Wagner & Newman, 2012). The hope of the Pathway to Graduation project was to provide early middle school students with significant reading deficits and behavioral concerns one last opportunity to receive intensive reading instruction and coping skills through a counseling curriculum so that the participants may have a greater chance of academic success upon reaching high school and be less likely to drop out.

Anecdotal outcomes reveal that participants were more motivated and excited by the program. As the program continues to develop, the collaborators hope to collect long-term data to support the effectiveness of Pathway to Graduation and create a model for school districts on how to impact the reading skills of middle school students who are struggling in reading and in behavior. The collaborators have much to develop, but this project is a great example of a community partnership between a local university, local school district, and local department of Mental Health. The ultimate goal of this project is to improve the reading competency and academic motivation of struggling middle school readers while training future teachers how to implement effective reading practices in their classrooms.

## References

Allington, R. L., McGill-Franzen, A. M., Camilli, G., Williams, L., Graff, J., Zeig, J., Zmach, C., & Nowak, R. (2010). Addressing summer reading setback among economically disadvantaged elementary students. Reading Psychology, 31, 411- 427. DOI: 10.1080/02702711.2010.505165

Denton, C. A., Solari, E. J., Ciancio, D. J., Hecht, S. A., & Swank, P. R. (2010). A pilot study of a kindergarten summer reading program in high poverty urban schools. The Elementary School Journal, 110, 423-439. DOI: 0013-5984/2010/11004-0001

Gresham, F., & Elliott, S. N. (2011). Social skills improvement system. San Antonio, TX: Pearson.

Guyer, B. P., Banks, S. R., & Guyer, K. E. (1993). Spelling improvement for college students who are dyslexic. Annals of Dyslexia, 43, 254-259.

Kim, J. S. (2007). The effects of a voluntary summer reading intervention on reading activities and reading achievement. Journal of Educational Psychology, 99, 505-515. DOI: 10.1037/0022-0663.99.3.505

Kim, J. S., & White, T. G. (2008). Scaffolding voluntary summer reading for children grades 3 to 5: An experimental study. Scientific Studies of Reading, 12, 1-23. DOI: 10.1080/10888430701746849

Leslie, L., & Caldwell, J. S. (2011). Qualitative reading inventory-Fifth edition. Columbus, OH: Allyn & Bacon.

Lexia Reading Core5. www.lexialearning.com

Mercer, C., & Campbell, K. (1998). Great leaps reading program. Micanopy, FL: K-2 Diarmuid Inc.

Moats, L. C. (1998). Reading, spelling and writing disabilities in the middle grades. In B. Wong (Ed.), Learning about learning disabilities (2nd edition)(pp.1-19). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Moore, C. (2004). The why try secondary teachers' manual. www.whytry.org

Oakes, W.P., Mathur, S. R., & Lane, K. L. (2010). Reading interventions for students with challenging behavior: A focus on fluency. Behavioral Disorders, 35, 120-139.

Orton, S. (1937). Reading, writing, and speech problems in children. New York: Norton.

Pearson. (2009). Wechsler individual achievement test-Third edition. San Antonio, TX: Pearson.

Ritchey, K. D., & Goeke, J. L. (2006). Orton-Gillingham and Orton-Gillingham-based reading instruction: A review of the literature. Journal of Special Education, 40, 171-183.

Santa, C. M. (2006). A vision for adolescent literacy: Ours or theirs? Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 49, 466-476.

Sinclair, M. F., Christenson, S. L., & Thurlow, M .L. (2005). Promoting school completion of urban secondary youth with emotional or behavioral disabilities. Exceptional Children, 71(4), 465-482.

Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. Reading Research Quarterly, 21(4), 360-407

Strong, A. C., Wehby, J. H., Falk, K. B., & Lane, K. L. (2004). The impact of a structured reading curriculum and repeated reading on

the performance of junior high students with emotional and behavioral disorders. School Psychology Review, 33, 561-581.

Torgeson J., Wagner, R., & Rashotte, C. (2012). Test of word reading efficiency-Second edition. San Antonio, TX: Pearson.

Vaughn, S., Wexler, J., Roberts, G., Barth, A. A., Cirino, P. T., Romain, M. A., Francis, D., Fletcher, J., & Denton, C. A. (2011). Effects of individualized and standardized interventions on middle school students with reading disabilities. Exceptional Children, 77, 391-407.

Wagner, M., & Newman, L. (2012). Longitudinal transition outcomes of youth with emotional disturbances. Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 35(3), 199-208. DOI 10.2975/35.3/2012. 100.208

Wang, C., & Algozzine, B. (2011). Rethinking the relationship between reading and behavior in early elementary school. The Journal of Educational Research, 104, 100-109. DOI:10.1080/00220670903567380

Wiederholt, J. L., & Byant, B. R. (2001). Gray oral teading Tests-Fourth edition. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Wilson, B. A. (1998). Matching student needs to instruction: Teaching reading and spelling using the Wilson Reading System. In S. A. Vogel & S. Reder (Eds.), Learning disabilities, literacy, and adult education (pp. 213-234). Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

Wilson, B. A. (2004). Wilson Reading System Deluxe Set. Oxford, MA: Wilson Language Training.

Wilson, B. A., & O'Connor, J. R. (1995). Effectiveness of the Wilson Reading System used in public school training. In C. W. McIntyre & J. S. Pickering (Eds.). Clinical studies of multisensory structured language education (pp. 247-254). Salem, OR: International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council.

**Authors' Note:**

Amanda Strong Hilsmier, Ph.D., focus area is Reading and Behavioral Disorders at Samford University.

Patricia F. Wood, Ph.D., focus area is Gifted and Reading at Samford University.

Susan Wirt, M.Ed. is at Jefferson County Schools, Birmingham, AL.

Diane McTamney, M.Ed. is at Jefferson County Schools, Birmingham, AL,

Mary Beth Malone, M.Ed. is at Jefferson County Schools, Birmingham, AL.

Becky Milstead, LPC,  is at JBS Mental Health Authority, Birmingham, AL.