

Preventing Reading Failure: The Right Instruction at the Right Time

By Laura Stewart & Dr. Kathy Barclay

The data are in and, for the third year in a row, the reading scores for third- and fourth-grade students are not where school principal Marti H. knows they need to be if her students are going to succeed in middle and high school. Her first inclination is to set up a meeting with the third- and fourth-grade teachers to review their reading and language arts curriculum. She opens her calendar, then pauses, wondering, “Is the problem really with the third- and fourth-grade curriculum?”

Teaching reading in the primary grades is the most urgent task in education today. Why? Because success in school, and in life, depends on it. Yet our most recent national report card shows that nearly two-thirds of our fourth graders are not reading proficiently, and the rate of reading failure in high-poverty, minority populations is much higher (NCES, 2013). Children who do not read proficiently in third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time (Hernandez, 2012, p. 6). In fact, research shows that students who do not learn to read by the end of second grade will likely struggle with reading throughout their lives (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003). Students who are held back or who drop out of school are often those with poor reading skills (Feister, 2010). Conversely, “Students who are above grade level for reading in grade 3 graduate and enroll in college at higher rates than students who are at or below grade level” (Lesnick et al., 2010, p. 2).

Our most vulnerable children especially need effective reading instruction. Effective beginning reading programs are important for children of all backgrounds, but for disadvantaged and minority children and for children with learning disabilities, who particularly depend on school to achieve success, effective beginning reading programs are especially important (Slavin et al., 2009, p. 3).

Although it was once thought that learning to read was as natural as learning to speak, a large body of research over three decades has proven otherwise. We now know the skills children must master in kindergarten, first, and second grade in order to read well, and we know what constitutes effective instruction. If the evidence about reading instruction is readily available to us, why aren’t all of our children learning to read? Putting evidence into practice—and doing so in K–2—is the key.

Effective Reading Instruction: What We Know from Research

To build the neural connections necessary for reading, beginning readers first need to be taught the relationship between letters and sounds—phonics—explicitly and systematically. Research has demonstrated that systematic, explicit phonics is the most critical component of beginning reading instruction (Adams, 1990). Research has also shown that phonics instruction has the greatest impact when taught in the early grades and when accompanied by extensive *application to decodable text* (Jenkins et al., 2003; Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Mesmer, 2001). Finally, research findings support the conclusion that systematic phonics is most effective when it is *integrated with all the language arts*, not taught as a separate subject or add-on to an existing program (Grossen, 1997).

Intervention or Prevention?

Is playing catch-up in third grade and beyond the answer? Is it even possible? A longitudinal study by McNamara and colleagues (2011) concluded, “As children progressed from kindergarten to Grade 3... at each progressing data collection point struggling readers fell further behind their grade-level reading peers” (p. 421). Each year, the variance between

strong and struggling readers increased significantly. “Interventions for struggling readers after third grade are seldom as effective as those in the early years” (Hernandez, p. 6).

The real, long-term solution is not intervention. The answer lies in *prevention*: effectively teaching the fundamentals of reading and writing in the primary grades. The evidence is clear that with research-based instruction, the percentage of first-graders below the 30th percentile can be reduced to 4-6% (Mathes et al., 2005; Vellutino, 2007; Torgesen, 2002). It is critical to choose the best instructional materials and methods to *get it right the first time*.

What Immediate Action Steps Can Be Taken?

To ensure that all of your students get the best possible first instruction:

- Know the research. Clear and compelling evidence shows what has to happen in the early years to prevent reading difficulties. As professionals, we need to ensure that evidence guides our instructional choices. Check out the sources in the bibliography at the end of this paper. Find fellow educators to form a professional learning community. Subscribe to peer-reviewed journals. Join listservs and follow blogs that deal with the science of reading. Share your questions, and share your expertise.
- Find a solid core program with strong efficacy results. Teach it with fidelity. Devote 90-120 minutes daily to language arts instruction. Carve out at least 30 extra minutes a day for intensive instruction for those children below grade level who need acceleration.
- Use a reliable assessment to determine how students are progressing. Look at the data and make instructional decisions early on to help catch children before they fall behind.

- If you are a principal, make literacy for all the focal point of your school. Prioritize blocks of time for reading. Support implementation of a core program and ongoing professional development. Know what is happening in your classrooms and support change when necessary. Recognize the important role you play in student achievement.

Where Does the REAL Problem Lie?

Like Marti H., many principals faced with similar drops in scores at the third- and fourth-grade levels look to the teachers and programs of those grades for answers. Much time and many valuable resources are devoted to solving a problem whose roots lie elsewhere. All too often, the problem lies in the instruction that occurred in the earlier grades—those very important learning-to-read years.

“The real, long-term solution is not intervention. The answer lies in prevention: effectively teaching the fundamentals of reading and writing in the primary grades.”

Research has demonstrated the most effective components of early reading instruction. Consider this statement from Dr. Sally Shaywitz, neuroscientist at Yale University and author of the best-selling text, *Overcoming Dyslexia*.

Highly effective prevention programs...are now a reality. Common threads run through each of these programs. Systematic and direct instruction in phonemic awareness—noticing, identifying, and manipulating the sounds of spoken language; phonics—how letters and letter groups represent the sounds of spoken language, sounding out words (decoding), spelling, reading sight words, vocabulary and concepts, and reading comprehension strategies; practice in applying these skills in reading and in writing... Powerful and proven reading programs incorporating these features are now bringing cutting-edge science directly into the classroom. My recommendations are for total ‘off-the-shelf’ comprehensive programs rather than so-called eclectic ones that are stitched together by a child’s teachers. I would not want to take such a risk with my child; rather, I would want to stay with a proven, cohesive program that leaves nothing to chance (2003, p. 262-263). ■

About the Authors

Laura is the vice president of professional development for Zaner-Bloser, Superkids. Laura has been in education for more than 25 years, working as a classroom teacher, building and district administrator, adjunct professor, and director of numerous professional development initiatives. In addition to directing the professional development for Reading First in Wisconsin, Laura directed long-term projects in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Milwaukee, and El Paso on topics from pre-K literacy to differentiated instruction. She presents throughout the United States and internationally and is the author of 12 children's books, numerous teacher's guides, journal articles, and dozens of training workshops. Laura is co-author of the book *The Everything Guide to Informational Literature, K-2: Best Texts, Best Practices* (Corwin Press, 2014).

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