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A Schoolwide Organization System for Raising Reading Achievement Using General Outcome  
Measures and Evidence-Based Instruction: One Education District's Experience

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### Abstract

Improved student achievement in reading is the number one priority in American schools at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article describes a system that coordinates (a) general outcome measures, (b) evidence-based instruction, and (c) schoolwide organization to ensure the most effective instruction possible for each student. First each of the elements are described along with a brief review of the literature. Next the implementation of the system in seven elementary schools in one education district is discussed using case studies to illustrate how the elements interact to serve students efficiently and bring about improvements in reading proficiency.

## A Schoolwide Organizational System for Raising Student Achievement Using General Outcome Measures and Evidence-Based Instruction: One Education District's Experience

The demands for educational accountability are coming at an opportune time with respect to beginning reading instruction. The public insistence for greater student achievement and increased accountability in our schools and the political will in state and federal legislatures to address these demands have coalesced to support educators' efforts to improve student outcomes. Moreover, converging evidence regarding the importance of early reading instruction, the most effective methods for teaching beginning reading, and the most appropriate measurement instruments to monitor student progress, provides the tools necessary to achieve improved student outcomes in reading, and thus meet these public and political demands.

In this article we present the experiences of an education district in pulling together these elements to improve the reading of all students. First, we briefly examine the current situation in reading and provide the rationale for this type of schoolwide coordinated organization of reading instruction and assessment. Second, we outline three important requirements in developing effective beginning reading programs in public schools: (a) measurement, (b) evidence-based instructional practices, and (c) schoolwide organization. Finally, we examine the experiences of the St. Croix River Education District in Minnesota (SCRED) in implementing systemwide changes to improve beginning reading achievement.

### Current Situation in Reading

The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2001) report tells us that 37% of our students are not learning to read at even the basic level at grade 4. Students who are not reading by grade 4 are poised to fail because from this point on students are asked to

use reading to gain important knowledge and skills in math, science, social studies, and other subject areas (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Success must begin early.

Once a child arrives in kindergarten (or even before) we are working against the clock. Intervening early is our only opportunity to reduce the achievement gap. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers have less than two years to avoid the achievement gap. Second- and third- grade teachers are in the important safety net positions. The likelihood of a poor reader becoming a good reader after grade three is small. That child is facing the "tyranny of time" (paraphrased from Kameenui, 1993).

The large number of students who have failed in early reading is now a major concern of the public, educators, and the federal government. The No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001 brings all the forces of the national government together to insist that every child has a right to learn to read (No Child Left Behind, 2001). School districts are on notice that if students do not succeed, there will be strong financial consequences. As Secretary Paige said in a February 2002 letter to every school superintendent in the nation, he intends to enforce the law (C. McHugh, personal communication, February 2002).

Fortunately, a plethora of beginning reading research is available to guide us. Three major reading instruction syntheses, discussed below, give the field of reading instruction compelling evidence of best practice. In addition, a long history of research on frequent measurement procedures gives schools the necessary tools to merge assessment with instruction to increase achievement for all students.

#### Schoolwide Requirements: Research Perspective

Three basic elements for improving reading achievement are identified: assessment, instruction, and school organization (Kameenui & Simmons, 1998). All of these elements are

critical to student success; none affects student achievement adequately on its own (see Figure 1). Instruction and assessing the effectiveness of that instruction must be implemented within a school structure that supports and utilizes data. We will discuss these three elements first from a research perspective, then in the context of the SCRED implementation. Finally, case studies will demonstrate the importance of the interrelations between the elements.

### *Measurement*

The first requirement in the triangle of critical elements is measurement. Every state of the union except one has now established a state assessment of reading. The federal government mandates that the first assessment must be done at least by grade 3 (No Child Left Behind, 2001). While the goal may be to have students reading well by grade 3, schools cannot afford to wait that long to assess students. Educators must know from the earliest possible moment who is and is not succeeding. What are needed are measures that allow schools to assess their students from kindergarten, or even earlier, to see if they are gaining skills and if instruction is effective. Starting early affords time to rectify the situation for students who are not on target to succeed on their state's reading assessments.

Frequent assessment allows educational teams to use instructional time efficiently. Data-based measurement practices allow evaluation of instruction for each student during learning (Deno, 1985; Deno, Marston, Shinn, & Tindal, 1983; Deno, Mirkin, & Chiang, 1982). These practices, known as curriculum-based measurement or general outcome measures, allow teachers to formatively evaluate their instruction for individual students on an ongoing basis. Such frequent measurement prompts teachers to adjust instruction as needed to effect more progress for each student (Deno & Fuchs, 1987). Further, schools can use the same measure to evaluate their overall instructional programs regularly.

The measurement system consists of listening to students reading aloud for one minute and counting the number of words read correct per minute (WRCM). WRCM is an excellent measure of reading proficiency because it is valid, reliable, simple, quick, inexpensive, easily understood, can be given often, and is sensitive to growth over short periods of time (Deno, 1985; Marston, 1989; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Oral reading fluency measures can be taken as early as the winter of first grade. Fluency measures of preliteracy skills can be taken even earlier than first grade (Kaminski & Good, 1998). Research is currently being conducted on measures that can be taken as early as age 3 to predict success on kindergarten measures (McConnell, Preist, Davis, & McEvoy, 2002).

Kameenui and Simmons (1998) presented a schoolwide intervention model (SIM) in which students are measured on three schedules: Benchmark for all students (three times a year), Strategic for students of some concern (once a month), and Intensive for students of great concern (once a week).

*Benchmark testing.* Benchmark testing every student in the school three times a year serves three purposes. First, it monitors the progress of every student, calling attention to any student who is having difficulty and might have escaped the attention of the school staff. This signals the need to monitor the student more often. Second, it establishes school norms that can be used to set goals. Third, it evaluates the effectiveness of the school reading program.

*Strategic or intensive monitoring.* Strategic and intensive monitoring serves four purposes. First, a graph of regular data provides a basis for evaluating instructional programming for individual students as the instruction is occurring. The graphed data guide instructional change. Second, the graph helps the educational team make ongoing decisions about goals, materials, levels, and groups. Third, graphically displayed data aid communication with parents

and other professionals. Finally, the information on the graph can be used to document progress for IEP students as required by law for periodic and annual reviews.

Once regular data are collected and examined by teachers there's a natural inclination to want to find more effective ways to raise achievement for all students. This leads the teachers to a search for more powerful instructional techniques.

### *Scientifically Based Reading Instructional Practices*

The second side of the triangle of critical elements is instruction. After decades of arguing over what effective reading instruction is, three syntheses of reading research are available to guide us. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* (Adams, 1990), and *Preventing Reading Difficulties* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), both commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, give the field a common and trustworthy path for reading instruction. The final and most recent synthesis of beginning reading research is the report of the National Reading Panel's review of the last 30 years of research in reading. The significant difference in this report was the establishment of criteria that studies must meet in order to be included. With the National Reading Panel report the field of reading instruction landed clearly in the realm of hard science (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

The National Reading Panel Report stresses five big ideas in beginning reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Due to space limitations, the reader is referred to *Put Reading First* (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), a summary of the National Reading Panel Report, for details on this very important information (<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/PFRbooklet.pdf>).

In addition to the research on *what* should be taught to beginning readers, a synthesis on effective teaching principles gives us information on *how* to teach (Ellis & Worthington, 1994).

Students learn best when, among other things, they are actively engaged, have high to moderate success rates, have multiple opportunities to cover content, spend most of their time being directly taught by the teacher, have instruction that is scaffolded, have strategic instruction, and have explicit instruction (Ellis and Worthington review of research can be accessed at <http://idea.uoregon.edu/~ncite/documents/techrep/tech05.pdf>).

The important point is that, like assessment, instruction must be coordinated schoolwide. That is, materials used in the basic curriculum must not conflict with interventions being used by tutors or specialists. What students learn one year must coordinate with what they learn the next year. Students must hear and practice the same elements of beginning reading in every situation.

### *Schoolwide Organization*

The third critical element in the triangle is school organization. Although the National Reading Panel has research-based suggestions for assessment and instruction in beginning reading, it is silent on the topic of school organization. As mentioned, school administrators can interpret the research but might have difficulty putting it into practice. Without a school-level system of implementation, it is nearly impossible for assessment and instruction best practices to be put into place effectively. The school as the “host environment” must be organized to ensure that research-based practices can thrive and be sustained (Coyne, Kameenui, & Simmons, 2001).

The unit of implementation must be the school building (Kameenui & Simmons, 1998). The school district is too large to dictate implementation details because each school has unique student populations, staffs, and so on. However, the district must provide guidance and support. The classroom is too small of a unit for implementation; many resources beyond a single classroom need to be organized. Within each school therefore, assessment and instruction must be coordinated at each grade level, between classroom teachers, specialists such as teachers of

special education and English Language Learners (ELL), and across grade levels. The model we present systematically uses each critical element for student success in the context of a well-coordinated school system.

#### Schoolwide Requirements: SCRED Example

To further illustrate the elements described above an example of how they are implemented through SCRED is presented. SCRED is an education district comprised of five independent school districts. Each district is unique, but SCRED assists them in providing the basic instructional and assessment elements, and each district then determines the details of implementation. Like the No Child Left Behind legislation, each district stands on the foundation that only scientifically based educational practices will be used.

#### *Measurement: SCRED Example*

The research on the general outcome measures was replicated in the SCRED districts by conducting correlational studies between oral reading fluency scores and the state criterion measure – the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA). The concurrent correlations between oral reading fluency scores and the third- and fifth- grade Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) are .70 and .76, respectively. Furthermore, the correlation between kindergarten spring scores on letter sound fluency, a preliteracy measure, and grade-1 spring words read correct per minute is .68. These reliable and strong correlations between fluency measures and statewide assessments allow teachers to graph student progress and determine if they are on a trajectory of reading success. Through discriminant analysis of students' fluency scores over five years, we are working to determine how a student should perform in order to be on the road to reading proficiency. Preliminary scores, identified in Table 1, have become target scores or goals that students are expected to meet in order to do well on statewide testing in

third-and fifth-grade. Setting reasonable yet ambitious goals is one of the hallmarks of effective teaching practices.

In SCRED schools, students are given the measures on schedules similar to those mentioned by Kameenui and Simmons (1998) – benchmark, strategic, and intensive. During fall, winter, and spring norm periods, fluency data are collected on all students. The grade-level team determines how often each student is measured, with students of greater concern being measured more often. This includes special education, Title I, some ELL, and recently referred students.

*Benchmark testing.* Benchmark testing is done in the fall, winter, and spring by having a cadre of trained individuals test each student in every classroom. With 12 testers, a classroom of 24 students can be tested in 15 minutes. Appropriate testers include paraprofessionals, community volunteers, and/or National Honor Society students. Training of these individuals, which takes about one and a half hours, includes giving and scoring the measure and recording the scores. Data privacy issues must also be stressed.

Benchmark data can be displayed in a variety of reports. SCRED uses an internet-based software system called AIMSweb to enter, analyze, and display data ([www.edformation.com/demos.htm](http://www.edformation.com/demos.htm)).

A useful chart for an educational team planning instruction is a top-to-bottom listing of every student in the grade (see Figure 2). By comparing these data to the target or expected scores for that norm period (see Table 1), teachers see at a glance who is succeeding and who is not. Examining the entire grade level of students allows teachers to determine how to most effectively use valuable yet scarce resources.

Figure 3 is an example of a report of benchmark scores used for program evaluation. It is a display of box and whiskers charts of every class in a school for each norm period. On the

horizontal axis is listed each grade level and norming period (i.e., 2F means second grade fall, etc.), with words read correct per minute (WRCM) shown on the vertical axis.

Each box shows the middle 50% of the class, with the bottom of the box being the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile and the top of the box being the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile. A line within the rectangle marks the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. The “whiskers” extend to the scores of the 90<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> percentiles.

Target scores for each grade and norm period are shown as short heavy horizontal lines across each “box”, for example, second-grade fall, winter, and spring target rates are 30, 55, 80, respectively. The goal is to have 90% of the students in each class rise above the target. That is, when the entire box and bottom whisker are above the target, 90% of the students in a given class are achieving at the target level. This is far different from expecting the average (50<sup>th</sup> %ile) child to be at target, and is in line with the idea of leaving no child behind. Ninety percent of all students achieving the target rate seems an ambitious goal, but as illustrated in Figure 3, the students and teachers are approaching the goal.

Examining the charts over the past years shows that while the targets for each grade at each norm period have stayed the same, the percent of students in each grade exceeding the target has gone up. For example, during school year 1997-1998, only about 45% of the students in grade 3 during the winter measurement were at or above the target. By comparison, in school year 2001-2002, 75% of the students in grade 3 during winter measurement were at or above the target.

Although schoolwide benchmark data are useful for program evaluation, and to verify progress for students at or above goal, the real power of data collection comes when we monitor an individual student who is below goal and use the data to inform his or her instruction.

*Strategic and intensive measurement.* As stated, students of concern are measured more frequently. Graphs are created including goal lines, ongoing data, and a record of instructional interventions. At SCRED, paraprofessionals often collect these frequent data, whereas the teachers are responsible for examining the data often and using it to make instructional decisions. How the teachers examine and use these data to make instructional decisions will be described in the grade-level team meeting section.

*Scientifically-Based Reading Instruction: SCRED Example*

The schools in the St. Croix River Education District that have had rising scores in beginning reading have emphasized the big ideas on what to teach and how to provide reading instruction. Their success has not been curriculum specific. Our experience matches the model presented by Coyne, et al. (2001). As long as the big ideas in beginning reading are being attended to through good curricular design and good instructional delivery, students are likely to succeed.

Several schools are using a highly scripted curriculum that provides explicit, well-sequenced instruction and examples, many opportunities to respond, and frequent corrective feedback. These schools have supplemented their instruction in basic skills with literature, oral comprehension, and vocabulary training.

Several other schools are using a popular commercial program that is strong in literature and oral comprehension, but weak in phonemic awareness, phonics, and decodable text. These schools supplement the commercial program with their own structured curriculum that teaches phonemic awareness and phonics, and gives practice in reading decodable text.

*Schoolwide Organization: SCRED Example*

At the St. Croix River Education District five elements of school organization are promoted to ensure that effective instruction can be provided to every student: continuous measurement, grade-level team meetings, flexible grouping, grade-level scheduling, and concentrated resources.

*Continuous measurement.* Measurement has already been discussed in the assessment section. It entails both the benchmark measurement for all students and the frequent measurement for students of concern. The importance of formative evaluation cannot be overemphasized. Without continuous data, it is difficult to intervene as soon as a problem occurs. However, continuous measurement is not of any value unless a system for frequent data review is in place. For this SCRED schools have relied on regular grade-level team meetings.

*Grade-level team meetings.* Once the data are available, the school needs a system that encourages staff to review the data on a consistent basis. This is best done by a team rather than individual teachers as a group of people combining their knowledge and suggestions are more likely to devise powerful interventions than one person working alone. The team consists of all professionals who work with the grade-level students. This includes classroom teachers, reading teachers, special education teachers, teachers of English Language Learners (ELL), the principal, the school psychologist, and in some cases paraprofessionals. Teams hold meetings monthly or bimonthly for about 40 minutes each time.

Classroom teachers and reading teachers have notebooks containing graphs for the students of concern they are working with. At the meetings, oral reading fluency data are examined as the primary indicator of progress. Graphs are shown for all students. Other data that may be available are also considered. This might include end-of-unit tests, standardized test

results, and informal observations by the teacher or a paraprofessional. Decisions are made about resources and interventions that can help solve problems for students. For example, students for whom data indicate good progress may be taken out of an instructional support group, providing more time for a student who needs extra time.

The team discusses all students who are not making sufficient progress in reading-whether they are special education, general education, Title I, or ELL students. The assumption at the grade-level team meetings is that all students are the responsibility of all team members. That is, the classroom teacher has some responsibility for special education students. General education students who are low-performers might need some consultative or even instructional services from the special education teacher. Paraprofessionals, while not responsible for assessment and lesson planning, may be responsible for delivering instructional services. The principal often has control of resources that can be brought to bear on a problem. The school psychologist is likely to have suggestions for further assessments or instructional interventions that could be tried.

*Flexible grouping.* Instructional groups are formed based on student need, based on such factors as student's instructional program, the level of instruction, the amount of time the student needs, and the student-teacher ratio needed. Groups change regularly based on the same variables. No student is left in a group after the group is no longer appropriate for that student.

The key point about achievement grouping is that it is a means to an end - that the student master instructional goals (Mosteller, Light, & Sachs, 1996). As discussed above, this is most likely to happen if the big ideas in beginning reading and effective instruction are attended to. Indeed, grouping lends itself to attending to those instructional principles.

*Grade-level scheduling.* In an effective school organization model, all students in a particular grade have reading at the same time. This type of schedule allows students to be moved easily from one group to another with minimal disruption to schedules. Common reading time also usually facilitates a common planning time for staff to meet to review data and make decisions

*Concentrated resources.* Finally, the school districts assign special education, Title I, ELL, and other support staff to each grade level during their reading times. This allows each grade level to have more reading groups during their reading time. More reading groups mean that students who are having the most difficulty be in smaller, more homogeneous groups. In this way students who need more opportunities to respond and more corrective feedback can get it.

### Case Studies

To further illustrate how the triad of critical elements – assessment, instruction, and school organization - work together for improved student achievement, two case studies are presented. The first is of an individual, the other illustrates how schoolwide data can be used for total program evaluation.

#### *Individual Student Case Study*

Figure 4 is a graph of a general education second-grade student who has made significant progress. At the beginning of this school year his ORF scores indicated that he was significantly below the target rate of 30 WRCM for his grade and norm period. As a result, the grade-level team placed him with other students functioning on a similar level in a class that used a very explicit skill instruction curriculum. A special education teacher taught the group comprised of five students with IEPs and three without IEPs. In comparison, the instruction in the classroom

had a ratio of 1-15. The student continued to have oral comprehension and literature experiences at another time in his classroom within a heterogeneous group.

By mid-November of second grade, the data indicate progress, but not enough to predict the student would reach his goal by spring. At this point the grade-level team decided to add another intervention to this student's instruction. The student was added to a group, conducted by the Title 1 reading teacher, that worked on a repeated reading fluency intervention for 15 minutes three times a week during the regular class' silent reading time.

By mid-January the individualized instruction as planned by the team was paying off well as illustrated in scores consistently well above the student's goal line. As a result the team decided he no longer needed as much specialized instructional time. Since the measure indicated he was reading less controlled passages at grade-level rate, he was moved out of the more explicit instructional curriculum and back into the general education classroom.

However, the team left two safeguards in place for this student. First, they did not remove him from the three-times-a-week repeated reading fluency intervention. Also, they decided to continue his measurement on a frequent basis to be certain he maintained his high rate of success. They realized that the more individualized, explicit, systematic instruction the student had been receiving may have been responsible for his progress and that removing him from that stronger support might result in a slower rate of progress. Continuing the frequent measurement enabled the team to respond quickly if necessary.

#### *Program Evaluation Case Study*

An important purpose for taking regular benchmark data is program evaluation. This has been an interesting process in SCRED where five districts comprised of seven elementary schools have taken the same benchmark data, using the exact same passages, over the past 5-6

years. The superintendents and principals have been interested in comparing the data on their schools each norm period. They have confidence in the degree to which the data accurately reflect student performance and are aware of the curricular and instructional innovations going on in the various schools. Using these data as indicators, they collegially discuss and often influence each other's practice.

Figure 5 is a line graph displaying multi-year benchmark data from one school. In this case we see that first grade data in the 1997/98 school year is of concern. While first-grade scores had been acceptable in the 96/97 school year, the median score for 97/98 in the spring was 25, or 30 points below the target score.

This kind of evaluative data was critical to the school. They noted the problem, made curricular changes that allowed students to master more of the content of the curriculum in kindergarten and first grade. We can see that first grade median scores in 99/00 and 01/02 were well above target.

The school also put extra resources into the cohort of students who were in first grade in 1997/98. The chart in Figure 6 shows that the remedial steps made by the district in response to the data had the desired effect. The median student in grade three in 99/00, the same class that had done poorly in first grade, was above target.

#### Discussion

Politicians, researchers, parents, administrators, and teachers all agree that schools' first and foremost job is to teach every student to read. With the political will, and the research in instruction and assessment to do it, the challenge is for each school to combine a schoolwide system that raises achievement for every student. It is not easy. As the American Federation of Teachers has said, "Teaching Reading is Rocket Science" (Moats, 1999, p. 1).

We have presented one system that emphasizes the critical elements of assessment, instruction, and school organization that have brought success to the schools of the St. Croix River Education District in Minnesota. We have not yet reached our goal of 90% of our students reaching their reading goals, but we have seen steady progress. With the system in place and constant attention to research and our own data, we are confident that we can continue to improve students' reading achievement.

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