IES Institute of Education Sciences

Tip Sheet: Planning Instructional Time to Prevent Reading Difficulties in Elementary Grades

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Prevention is the best form of intervention.[1] High-quality reading instruction in primary-grade classrooms can reduce the percentage of students with reading difficulties to 5 percent or lower—in turn reducing the need for intervention outside the classroom and referral to special education, and ensuring that most students achieve grade-level proficiency.[2,3]

North Dakota districts have adopted evidence-based curriculum and assessments and identified common practices that do not produce effective results. Even with strong instructional materials and assessments, it can be challenging knowing where to start when using data to plan and differentiate instruction to support all students. This tip sheet summarizes evidence-based practices to prevent reading difficulties in three areas:

1. Using assessment data to inform instruction
2. Allocating time to differentiate instruction
3. Staffing flexible reading groups

For each area, the tip sheet includes self-check questions adapted from a REL Southeast early literacy guide to help staff self-assess and monitor progress on schoolwide literacy plans.[4]

Box 1. Predictors of reading success in elementary grades[5]

- **Kindergarten.** Phonemic awareness, letter names and sounds, vocabulary, listening comprehension
- **Grades 1 and 2.** Letter-sound knowledge (decoding and spelling), oral reading fluency, vocabulary, comprehension
- **Grade 3 and beyond.** Oral reading fluency, vocabulary and morphology, grammatical and text structures, writing, comprehension

Area 1: Using Assessment Data to Inform Instruction

Guiding questions[5,6,7,8]

1.1. Does the school measure the predictors of reading success (Box 1) validly, reliably, and with high utility (that is, results translate to instructional objectives) at least three times a year?

☐ Absent ☐ Partial ☐ Full Implementation

1.2. Do teachers participate in professional development on how to translate the data to plan instruction and form instructional groupings (for example, whole class, small groups, pairs, independent, centers)?

☐ Absent ☐ Partial ☐ Full Implementation

1.3. Are teachers using formative or skills assessments to form flexible reading groups?

☐ Absent ☐ Partial ☐ Full Implementation

What effective practice looks like

Universal screening assessments are used to identify students at risk for reading difficulties. Educators are trained to identify valid and reliable screening instruments and to accurately interpret and use the results to provide focused instruction to the right students.[6]

Assessments best support student progress when they are used not only to monitor progress and diagnose difficulties, but also to revise instructional objectives throughout the year.[7]

Formative or skills assessments are used to monitor progress, diagnose reading problems, and establish instructional objectives.[7]

Examples of formative or skills assessments are phonics surveys, informal reading inventories, and curriculum-based skills assessments. When these assessments are aligned with the curriculum, they are an effective way to know whether students have learned what they were taught.[8]

Area 2: Instructional Time

Guiding questions[9,10,11,12]

2.1. Is the ELA block long enough to cover instruction in all ELA components (for example, reading, spelling, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing)?

☐ Absent ☐ Partial ☐ Full Implementation

2.2. Does the ELA block allow all students to participate in daily core instruction, supported by flexible reading groups which extend time for struggling readers to focus on reteaching and practice?

☐ Absent ☐ Partial ☐ Full Implementation

2.3. Does the school schedule allocate enough time for interventions of adequate intensity and duration to support catch-up growth for students with reading difficulties?

☐ Absent ☐ Partial ☐ Full Implementation

What effective practice looks like

The school schedule allocates enough instructional time to provide coherent and standards-aligned literacy instruction.

Classroom instruction promotes intentional practice, reteaching, and extension time for struggling readers. Teachers may differentiate instruction through small groups and evidence-based center activities.[10,11]

More intensive intervention focuses on students who require supplemental instruction after ample opportunities for repeated practice in the core classroom.[12]

Area 3: Staffing

Guiding questions[11,13,14]

3.1. Is a plan in place to provide adequate staffing with highly trained individuals (staff or volunteers) to support multiple small groups in the classroom?

☐ Absent ☐ Partial ☐ Full Implementation

3.2. Is a plan in place for someone to hire, train, and supervise additional staff to support literacy instruction?

☐ Absent ☐ Partial ☐ Full Implementation

What effective practice looks like

The school has a **staffing plan** to evaluate, retain, and hire well-trained literacy teachers (and additional staff as needed) to support classroom and intervention instruction, allowing for multiple reading groups and daily student reading with adult feedback and error correction.[11,13]

Staffing may include **specialized staff** (for example, a reading specialist, literacy coach, special education teacher, or student performance strategist) or **well-trained and supported individuals** (for example, paraprofessionals, college students, retired teacher volunteers, or cross-age tutors).[3]

Evidence in Action

- Build your understanding of reading assessment terms: Assessment Terms Used in Reading
- Strengthen your ability to use data to plan effective, differentiated instruction: REL Resource | Toolkit for Differentiating Reading Instruction for Grades K-3
- Explore sample master schedules that enable 45-minute reading instruction sessions two times a day per grade level: Self-study Guide for Implementing Early Literacy Interventions (Appendix B)
- Consider staff design and supports for effective early literacy tutoring: Starting Your District's Tutoring Journey with Early Literacy | National Student Support Accelerator

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