

# Educational Leadership

April 2008 | Volume 65 | Number 7

Poverty and Learning Pages 91-92

## Leading to Change / The Leadership Challenge in Literacy

*Douglas B. Reeves*

Although all educators acknowledge the importance of literacy for student success, schools have a long way to go in implementing consistent, high-quality literacy programs. Part of the problem is that in many schools, administrators and teachers have not developed common understandings of the essential elements of effective literacy instruction.

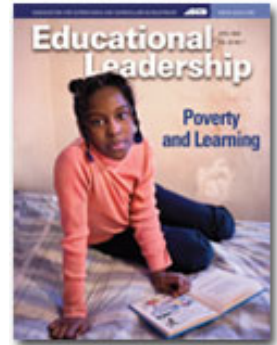
Even though experts still disagree on various aspects of reading instruction (Allington, 2005; Calkins, 2001; Lyon & Chhabra, 2004), they have now reached some consensus on a set of instructional practices that create readers who not only are proficient but also have the "flashlight under the bedspread" joy of reading for pleasure. For example, research has shown the effectiveness of phonics instruction, guided reading, independent reading, informal feedback, interim assessments, expert tutoring, and extended time allotted to reading. In addition, strong evidence shows that effective literacy instruction includes writing (Calkins, 2001), with a particular emphasis on nonfiction writing (Reeves, 2004).

This consensus, however, will not translate into reality in the classroom unless school principals take the lead in developing consistent, schoolwide responses to such questions as, What is effective literacy instruction? How will we ensure that teachers have time for effective literacy instruction? and How will we help students who are struggling? If school leaders really believe that literacy is a priority, then they have a personal responsibility to understand literacy instruction, define it for their colleagues, and observe it daily.

### Consistent Labels, Inconsistent Implementation

Consider the evidence from more than 130 schools in three school systems—one on the West Coast, one in the Midwest, and one on the East Coast. All three systems claimed to have "nonnegotiable" standards for the time devoted to literacy and the methods of effective reading instruction. To verify this assertion, I handed out a confidential one-page survey to principals, assistant administrators, and central office administrators. Although this is certainly not a national sample, the findings suggest that some of the assumptions leaders make about their reading curriculum are subject to challenge.

Specifically, the survey responses revealed a striking gap between the administrators' illusion



April 2008

of consistent delivery of literacy instruction and the teachers' actual practices. Although all three school systems claimed to strictly enforce a 90-minute daily block for literacy, the time that teachers actually allocated for reading ranged from 45 minutes to more than three hours a day. Despite the school systems' claim to provide immediate and mandatory intervention for struggling readers, the time actually provided for additional reading instruction ranged from zero hours to more than two hours. Most important, when administrators and teachers were asked to identify essential elements of effective reading instruction, their responses reflected widely varying emphases on guided reading, individual work, and group work—and inconsistent understandings of what each term even meant. Actual practice came nowhere near conforming to the consistent requirements of the district-mandated reading curriculum.

## **Challenges for Teachers**

Imagine that you are a teacher attempting to do the right thing for students and faithfully implement the required reading curriculum, but you receive conflicting guidance from building administrators, district administrators, curriculum experts, and professional developers. Your mentors and colleagues down the hall offer a different set of suggestions. Eventually, you will undoubtedly conclude that all this conflicting information is useless, and you will do the best you can to develop an approach to reading instruction on your own. Add to this challenge the fact that if you're a veteran teacher, you may be more informed about the nuances of reading instruction than your principal is. This is a formula for poor morale and, most important, inconsistent opportunities for students.

There is no malice at work here. In observations of thousands of teachers, I have yet to meet one who didn't want to provide the best instruction possible. Even when teachers are engaging in practices that are unsupported by research and contrary to district policy, the reasons are sometimes found not in willful insubordination but in lack of clear leadership.

## **Challenges for Administrators**

To fulfill their instructional leadership role, school administrators have been exhorted to monitor instruction more closely with walk-throughs (Cervone & Martinez-Miller, 2007) and other supervisory techniques. But administrators can walk marathons through classrooms of a school and accomplish nothing if they do not begin with a clear concept of what effective instruction looks like.

To improve literacy instruction, school leaders must meet three essential challenges. First, leaders must make the case for consistency in reading instruction. Interestingly, although definitions of effective reading instruction varied widely in the questionnaire, respondents were nearly unanimous (more than 98 percent) in saying that consistency in reading instruction was "extremely important." But neither administrative demands nor staff development workshops are sufficient to provide consistency. If leaders expect consistent literacy opportunities for students, then they must be willing to describe what effective literacy instruction is and to provide opportunities for teachers to engage in extended observations of effective instruction.

Second, leaders must define what good teaching means. One way to do this is to create a

scoring guide for each element of instruction (for example, guided reading) that teacher evaluators can use to rate teachers from expert, to proficient, to progressing, to novice. This is more than a checklist that reflects that guided reading was taking place at the appropriate time of day. Rather, evaluators must communicate the difference between an expert and novice approach to guided reading and every other element of literacy instruction. These norms should be so specific that teachers can monitor their own practice and observe their colleagues and almost always come to the same conclusion about the level of instruction as the school principal would.

Third, leaders must balance the need for consistency on essentials with the differentiation necessary to meet student needs. Leaders and teachers must collaborate to find the golden mean between instruction that is compliant but devoid of joy and classroom practices that are fun but unsupported by research. Allington (2005) reminds us that

good teaching, effective teaching, is not just about using whatever science says "usually" works best. It is all about finding out what works best for the individual child and the group of children in front of you. (p. 462)

## References

Allington, R. (2005). Ideology is still trumping evidence. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 86(6), 462–468.

Calkins, L. M. (2001). *The art of teaching reading*. New York: Addison-Wesley Longman.

Cervone, L., & Martinez-Miller, P. (2007). Classroom walkthroughs as a catalyst for school improvement. *Leadership Compass*, 4(4). Available: [www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=2243&action=print](http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=2243&action=print)

Lyon, R., & Chhabra, V. (2004). The science of reading research. *Educational Leadership*. 61(6), 12–17.

Reeves, D. B. (2004). *Accountability for learning: How teachers and school leaders can take charge*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

---

**Douglas B. Reeves** is Founder of the Leadership and Learning Center; 866-399-6019, ext. 512; [DReeves@LeadandLearn.com](mailto:DReeves@LeadandLearn.com).

Copyright © 2008 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

---

[Contact Us](#) | [Copyright Information](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

© 2007 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development