

Best Practices for Achieving High, Rapid Reading Gains

By Marie Carbo
From *Principal*

PRINCIPALS are standing on the front lines of a battle for our children's futures. Consider the following facts:

- Reading for pleasure, which is closely linked to reading achievement, declines in the U.S. every year.

- Boys fall 1-1/2 years behind girls in reading between grades 8 and 12.

- Though a high percentage of U.S. students perform at the proficient reading level on statewide exams, a low percentage perform at that level on the more valid and accurate National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

In fact, the percentage of students who read at the proficient level on the NAEP has not improved,

and is appallingly low. Less than one-third of U.S. students in grades 4, 8, and 12—and only 31 percent of college graduates—test at the proficient level.

Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind, the reading achievement of U.S. students on the NAEP has remained the same or declined.

Do What Works

What are we doing to solve these problems? Sherry Gorsuch and Greg Mikulich, principals of two Reading Styles Model Schools, understand our nation's literacy problems, why many current mandates are not working, and what to do to enable their students to achieve high reading gains. Consider the following infor-

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mation about their schools and the gains that they have made in reading.

Gorsuch is the principal of O'Connor Elementary in Victoria, TX, a pre-K-5 Title I school that has 86 percent Hispanic and black students. Between 1993 and 1997, O'Connor students achieving reading proficiency rose from 19 percent to 98 percent. The school has maintained this high level of proficiency scores for all grades for the past 10 years.

Mikulich heads Marion (MI) Elementary, a pre-K-5 school where one-third of the school's families have no phones, there is high unemployment, and 61 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. Despite these factors, students improved from 42 percent attaining reading proficiency in 2002 to 87 percent in 2005. Between 2005 and 2006, Marion students made another leap to 95 percent achieving reading proficiency.

The extraordinary gains at O'Connor Elementary and Marion Elementary reflect the work of principals who focused their teachers on consistently reducing reading practices that make learning to read difficult, while increasing strategies that make learning to read easy.

Reduce the Worst Reading Practices and Increase the Best

In order for students to achieve high reading gains and become lifelong readers, reading comprehension (the goal of all reading instruc-

tion) and reading enjoyment must be the top two goals. More than anything else, we want our students to enjoy reading. The reason is simple and powerful—students who voluntarily read for their own pleasure improve their reading skills and their test scores at a much faster rate than those who do not.

When students truly enjoy what they read and are deeply engaged in the reading process, their emotional memory is tapped. In other words, when students are deeply interested in what they're reading, they use more of their natural brain power to learn and remember and their reading improves rapidly. Engaged reading is not assigned reading, nor is it affected by extrinsic rewards. Engaged reading is reading that students do because they want to. Here are some strategies to transform struggling, at-risk readers into successful, lifelong readers.

Strategy #1: Change negative perceptions. We need to perceive students primarily in terms of their reading style strengths rather than their disabilities. Focusing on a student's reading strengths is especially important for struggling readers, who tend to be global, tactile, and kinesthetic learners. These youngsters benefit from high-interest, challenging reading materials; structured choices; powerful modeling of texts; increasingly difficult stories; hands-on skill work; opportunities for mobility; and opportunities to work in groups.

Strategy #2. Reduce stress. The sad, fearful, and angry behaviors of struggling readers subside when these same students experience success. For that to happen, reading programs need to be easy and engaging, with large doses of brain-friendly, fail-safe strategies that increase success, teach to students' strengths, and respect student differences. When we reduce the stress associated with reading, students become excited about reading and learning accelerates.

For example, the practice of taking word counts focuses students on learning to read as fast as possible, not on comprehension and enjoyment. Though taking constant word counts may increase a student's reading speed, reading comprehension and enjoyment may decline—and those are our two most important goals for reading.

Many students are at risk because they don't receive the kind of instruction and materials that enable them to learn easily. Some children, for example, have been given intensive phonics instruction even though they are not auditory learners and have difficulty learning that way. We may do lasting harm when we continue to prescribe methods of instruction that have proved to be largely ineffective.

Strategy #3: Use powerful modeling reading methods. Modeling is a strategy in which a competent reader reads aloud a portion of a high-interest, somewhat challeng-

ing story, while the less able reader listens and looks at the words being read. After several repetitions, the less able reader reads the passage aloud. Modeling methods like paired reading, choral reading, and listening to recorded books can help beginning and at-risk readers to improve comprehension and to read more smoothly and effortlessly. The idea behind the modeling continuum is simple, yet powerful. Children who are not yet independent readers, especially those reading well below their potential, need frequent modeling of high-interest materials.

Modeling methods help struggling readers bypass the decoding process, read fluently, and concentrate on meaning. The most competent readers participate in modeling methods that feature low teacher involvement and high student independence while beginning readers and those who cannot read a particular story with good fluency should participate in modeling methods that feature high teacher involvement and low student independence.

Strategy #4: Use Carbo recordings. These special recordings enable students to read challenging reading materials with ease and to make high gains in reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

To create the recordings, a small amount of a high-interest, somewhat challenging story is recorded at a slow pace with good expression (about two to four minutes). The

student listens and follows along two or three times, then discusses the passage and reads a portion aloud to a teacher, peer, or volunteer. At another sitting, the student listens to the next part of the story and repeats the process.

The slow pace and the repetition of just a small amount of a challenging, high-interest story enables students to follow along easily and remember the words. As students continue to work with the recordings, sight words such as “am,” “then,” and “but” are repeated often within the context and are learned easily. And as they learn a sufficient number of words, students automatically begin to decode unfamiliar words.

Strategy #5: Provide student-responsive environments. Many students, especially at-risk readers, have strong learning needs and preferences that do not match traditional classroom environments (e.g., formal seating and bright lights), or traditional methods of teaching (e.g., standardized texts, teacher lectures, and extensive, independent seatwork). Young children—and at-risk readers in particular—tend to be global, tactile, and

kinesthetic learners. These children prefer and do well in classrooms that allow for movement, have some comfortable seating and varied lighting, and enable students to work with relative ease in different groupings. Most important, research indicates that when students’ environmental preferences are met, they are more likely to associate reading with pleasure, to read for longer periods, and, overall, to achieve higher scores in reading.

The Principal’s Role

Great principals understand the importance of focusing reading instruction on comprehension and enjoyment so that learning to read becomes easy and fun. They understand why many current mandates are not working, and they reduce practices that make learning to read difficult and increase those that facilitate learning to read. When a reading program is grounded in research and best practices, students learn through their strengths and interests and they subsequently read a great deal because they enjoy it. And that’s when student motivation, reading achievement, and test scores all improve. *e*

WEB RESOURCES

Download free sample pages from *Becoming a Great Teacher of Reading* and checklists for identifying students’ strengths, hear stories recorded with the Carbo Recording Method, and learn about the Reading Styles Model Schools, at the National Reading Styles Institute’s Web site, www.nrsi.com. Authorama: Public Domain Books and Books for a Buck provide books that are available for free download, www.authorama.com, and www.booksforabuck.com/general/pubsources.html.