INTENSIVE READING INTERVENTIONS FOR STRUGGLING READERS IN EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A Principal's Guide

CENTER ON INSTRUCTION

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Joseph K. Torgesen
Florida Center for Reading Research
Florida State University

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INTRODUCTION

We will never teach *all* our students to read if we do not teach our students who have the greatest difficulties to read. Another way to say this is: "Getting to 100% requires going through the bottom 20%." Teaching all students to read requires a *school-level system* for early identification of "at-risk" students and a *school-level system* for providing those students with the intensive interventions they need to become proficient readers by third grade. Good classroom instruction should meet the needs of most students, but an efficient system for providing high quality, intensive interventions is required to meet the needs of *all* students. The principal plays a key role in helping to organize the school to provide intensive interventions for students who need them. This guide provides information critical to developing and implementing an effective school-level intervention program. These guidelines should not be interpreted rigidly as the "only way" to provide effective interventions for K-3 students. Rather, they are meant to suggest some guiding principles, along with some examples of how those principles can be operationalized, to develop an effective school-level system for meeting the instructional needs of all students.

Why must schools find ways to deliver intensive interventions to some of their students?

When children come to school, they are very diverse in both their skills and preparation for learning to read. Students whose preschool learning experiences do not prepare them well for learning to read need *more intensive instruction* to fill in the gaps in their knowledge and skills. Students with low ability in certain language domains require *more intensive instruction* because they learn critical reading skills more slowly than other students. The range of instructional opportunities (instructional intensity and power) must match the range of diversity among students, or many students will be left behind.

Why can't we expect classroom instruction to meet the needs of all students?

Today's teachers are being trained to meet the needs of a broader range of students than ever before. However, the diversity of students, and the needs of many students, are simply too great to expect the regular classroom teacher, by herself, to meet the needs of all students. Many students, for example, may require at least three or four times as much instruction as the average student

if they are to maintain normal progress in learning to read. In many classrooms, the number of students who will require this amount of additional instruction may approach 50 or 60% of the class—the regular classroom teacher simply does not have the time or resources to provide the required amount of instruction within the school day for the most at-risk students.

What do we know about the characteristics of effective interventions?

Scientific research on reading has identified a number of important characteristics of effective interventions for students who are at risk for reading difficulties. Interventions:

- Should be offered as soon as it is clear the student is lagging behind in the development of skills or knowledge critical to reading growth.
- Must significantly increase the intensity of instruction and practice, which is accomplished primarily by increasing instructional time, reducing the size of the instructional group, or doing both.
- Must provide the opportunity for explicit (direct) and systematic instruction and practice along with cumulative review to ensure mastery.
- Must provide skillful instruction including good error correction procedures, along with many opportunities for immediate positive feedback and reward.
- Must be guided by, and responsive to, data on student progress.
- Must be motivating, engaging, and supportive—a positive atmosphere is essential.

What are some ways to provide intensive interventions to struggling readers in grades K-3?

Three ways of providing intensive interventions to struggling readers are described here, but these are not the only ways that schools can be organized to provide effective interventions. It is also true that more than one of these options will need to be applied simultaneously in order to provide the amount of instruction needed to accelerate reading development for some students.

The most efficient way to increase the intensity of instruction for struggling readers is to provide instruction in small groups. This allows the instruction to be targeted to the specific needs of the students, and it allows the students to

have more opportunities to respond and receive feedback. Intensive interventions work best when they are provided in groups of no more than three to five students. Classroom teachers should provide differentiated and targeted instruction in small groups during part of the 90-minute block, but they will not be able to provide enough of this kind of instruction to meet the needs of their most at-risk students. The power of interventions during "small group time" within the 90-minute block can be greatly strengthened if the principal identifies other teachers or paraprofessionals who can come into the classroom and work with some of the groups while the classroom teacher works with others. *It is critical that these extra personnel who come into the classroom to provide additional instruction do so on a regular basis (every day). They must follow a powerful program of instruction.*

Another way to provide intensive interventions for struggling readers is to work with them in small groups outside the regularly scheduled 90-minute reading block. In this model, intervention instruction must be well-coordinated with the instruction the students are receiving in the classroom. Although the intervention may be guided by a different program than the classroom core reading program, the way that reading skills and knowledge are taught should be consistent with the instruction provided in the classroom. For example, students should not be taught one method for analyzing words in the classroom, and a very different method in their intervention classrooms. Instruction in the classroom and in the intervention group should be complementary and mutually reinforcing. Intervention teachers should meet regularly with the classroom teachers to discuss student progress. Regular "intervention team" meetings in which classroom teachers and intervention specialists discuss student needs and progress are one key to a successful school-level intervention system. The goal might be to have these meetings monthly, but they might more realistically occur four to five times a year. It is very useful for the principal to attend these meetings as often as possible.

A third way to provide intensive interventions, particularly for second and third grade students who are lagging seriously behind in reading growth, is to identify one or more intervention classrooms at each grade level. Students with the most serious reading difficulties (those who are lagging so far behind in reading growth that instruction guided by the comprehensive core reading program is substantially above their level) would walk to the intervention classroom for the 90-minute reading block. This intervention classroom could

be taught by a resource teacher or by a classroom teacher as long as her moderate risk or grade-level students were taught by other teachers in grade-level classrooms using the comprehensive core reading program. In this model, the intervention classrooms should always contain substantially fewer students (not more than 15) than the grade-level classrooms. This is appropriate because students closer to grade level can profit more easily from large-group instruction and can also work more independently. Although some of the instruction provided in the intervention classroom would be done with the group as a whole, much of it would occur in small groups so that instruction could be matched directly to the needs of individual students.

Intervention classrooms will be most effective if another intervention specialist or paraprofessional is available to work with small groups during part or all of the reading block. For example, an ideal structure for intervention classes might divide the instructional time into three blocks in which students receive teacher-led instruction during two of the blocks and work on independent activities (perhaps with technology supports) during the other block. The curriculum for the intervention classrooms would be a "comprehensive intervention core" that contains both instruction and practice activities suitable for the needs of all students in the class. The scope and sequence and the pace of instruction in these classrooms should be strong enough to accelerate the development of students toward grade-level reading ability.

At this point, several ideas need to be reviewed for emphasis. First, none of the models described above will be as effective as they need to be unless they produce a substantial increase in the *intensity of instruction*. If instructional groups are too large, instruction is not properly paced or focused, or too many intervention sessions are cancelled, then impacts on student performance will be reduced. Second, we must keep firmly in mind that the goal of interventions is to *accelerate student performance toward grade-level standards*. One of the biggest risks of intervention groups or intervention classrooms is that we begin to expect a lower standard of performance for students who require them. The goal of interventions should always be to accelerate reading development. If student performance shows that this is not happening, then the model or the instruction needs to be strengthened. Third, to work properly, intervention systems require *school-level monitoring and regular adjustments*. Those involved in the child's instruction (and those providing leadership for it) need to

meet regularly to discuss student progress and to make adjustments such as shifting resources, increasing time, and/or reducing group size.

Who can provide these intensive interventions?

Effective interventions require skillful teaching. The most effective intervention teachers are likely to be those with the most training and experience. However, in the absence of well-trained and experienced intervention specialists, less experienced teachers, or even qualified para-professionals, can deliver effective interventions if they are trained to use a well-developed, explicit, and systematic intervention program. Many of these programs are available, and provide a useful "scaffold" to help less experienced teachers provide powerful instruction. A good rule of thumb is that the less experienced the teacher, the more structured and "scripted" the intervention program should be. Even media specialists, art teachers, and assistant principals can provide effective interventions when they are enthusiastic and their instruction is guided by a well-structured and systematic intervention program that they have been trained to use. Principals may need to make difficult budgetary decisions to find the funds to pay the salaries of teachers or paraprofessionals whom they recruit to provide intensive interventions to K-3 students. In fact, one of the principal's most creative challenges is to identify resources that may already be available in the system to provide effective interventions for students who are struggling in learning to read.

It is critical that someone at the school level be responsible for ensuring that intervention programs are implemented regularly (every day) and with a high degree of fidelity. The very best intervention programs are only as good as the level of their implementation with students. If intervention teachers are pulled away from their groups for other "emergency" assignments, or if the quality of instruction is not regularly monitored by someone who knows the program, the effectiveness of the intervention will be diminished.

What about the role of technology in providing interventions?

Research shows that computer-assisted instruction can provide effective supplemental instruction and practice for students if it is carefully monitored and delivered with enough regularity and frequency. However, computer programs are not yet developed enough to be depended on as major sources of intervention for our most struggling readers.

How can effective, school-level intervention systems be established and monitored?

There are at least eight keys aspects to developing and maintaining an effective intervention system for K-3 students:

1. Strong motivation on the part of teachers and school leaders to be relentless in their efforts to leave no child behind.
2. A psychometrically reliable system for identifying students who need intensive interventions in order to make normal progress in learning to read.
3. A similarly reliable system for monitoring the effectiveness of interventions. This often involves the repeated administration of the same tests originally used to identify the students to receive interventions.
4. Regular team meetings and leadership to enforce and enable the use of data to adjust interventions as needed.
5. Regular adjustments to interventions based on student progress. The most frequent adjustments should involve group size and time (intensity), but may also involve a change of teacher or program.
6. Enough personnel to provide the interventions with sufficient intensity (small group size and daily, uninterrupted intervention sessions); this may be the biggest challenge of all.
7. Programs and materials to guide the interventions that are consistent with scientifically based research in reading.
8. Training, support, and monitoring to insure that intervention programs are implemented with high fidelity and quality.

Even a cursory glance at this list shows that it takes strong school leadership to ensure that the necessary elements are functioning properly. However, it takes more than strong leadership. It also requires sufficient personnel resources and highly trained teachers following evidence-based instructional programs.