NWREL

NORTHWEST EDUCATION MAGAZINE

a tale of two schools: READING INSTRUCTION in the real world

Story and photos by Bracken Reed Summer 2004

GRANGER, Washington, and POLSON, Montana—Reading First, a centerpiece of President Bush's education reform agenda, has been hailed as the largest, most intensely focused early reading initiative ever undertaken in the United States. Picking up where the 1998 Reading Excellence Act left off, but with nearly three times the funding of that measure, Reading First aims more than $900 million a year in federal funds at raising the reading achievement of the nation's kindergarten through third-grade students.

for more information...
- Consider This
- Resources

But the initiative has also been the focus of criticism. Beginning with the publication of the National Reading Panel's report in 2000, which forms the research base for the initiative, some educators and researchers have raised concerns about the narrow focus of the research, the strict parameters of the grant requirements, and the small number of reading programs that have qualified for approval on state and local grant applications. These critics claim that the initiative—which requires systematic and direct instruction—essentially dictates a national curriculum that emphasizes skills-based phonics programs.

The large amount of federal dollars involved, combined with the pressure to meet adequate yearly progress, as required by the No Child Left Behind Act, has led many of the high-poverty schools and districts that qualify for the grant to apply without hesitation. But others have balked at the requirements of the grant, which often entails a school to scrap its existing reading program and start from scratch with a state-approved program. For some, the decision has been easy, while for others it has been the cause of debate and reflection on their instructional mission.

Northwest Education recently visited two schools in the region to see how they have responded to this highly charged issue.

TWO SCHOOLS, TWO DECISIONS

Roosevelt Elementary is located in Granger, a small agricultural town in the fertile Yakima Valley of Washington state. Of its roughly 560 students in grades K-4, 87 percent are Hispanic, 8 percent are Native American, and more than half of the students are designated as limited English proficient. With 97 percent of its students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch, Roosevelt is faced with many of the typical socioeconomic realities of a high-poverty area.

When Washington state received its initial Reading Excellence Act (REA) grant in 2000, at the close of the Clinton administration, Roosevelt was one of the first schools to apply for and receive a subgrant. Two years later, when the state was awarded a $13.1 million grant through the Bush administration's Reading First initiative, Roosevelt was again one of the first schools to be awarded a subgrant.

In contrast, Cherry Valley Elementary, a small rural school located in Polson, Montana, at the southern tip of Flathead Lake, was eligible for a Reading First subgrant, but declined to apply. Located on the Flathead Indian Reservation, Cherry Valley also faces challenging demographics, with 53 percent of its students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch.

Of Cherry Valley's 285 students in grades K-4, 41 percent are Native American, with nearly half of these students identified as limited language proficient in both English and their native language. Despite this fact, the school still chose not to apply for a Reading First grant. Their reasons for doing so, as well as Roosevelt Elementary's reasons for embracing the federal reading grants, are revealing on several levels.

Roosevelt Searching for Consistency

When Principal Janet Wheaton arrived in August 2002, Roosevelt Elementary was halfway through its two-year Reading Excellence grant, but had yet to implement many of its key components and was in danger of having its funding pulled for the 2002-2003 school year. With $200,000 at stake, the pressure was on: Both Wheaton's predecessor and the grant-funded literacy coach had

decided to leave. The school was at a crossroads.

"I remember being handed a list of 19 things that we needed to fix by October," says Wheaton. "It appeared that implementation of the grant had been sort of hit and miss."

Undaunted, Wheaton saw the situation as a clean slate. The Reading Excellence regulations had not been adequately communicated to the staff, she felt. The list of necessary changes needed to be openly shared and explained. No secrets, no tiptoeing. If staff members were to get on board, they needed to fully understand the details of the grant and the reasoning behind them.

One of her first interactions with staff members was to participate with them in a weeklong literacy training session presented by Washington Reads trainers from the state's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. The training was an eye-opener.

"I learned more about reading in that week than I'd learned in the previous 20 years," she says. "The research was there."

Another person at that meeting was the new literacy coach, Virginia Thompson. A long-time teacher in the district, Thompson had most recently been teaching fourth grade at Roosevelt and had earned both the respect of her colleagues and her reading endorsement from the state. Her hiring helped provide continuity in the midst of widespread change, but it also helped drive that change.

From Thompson's perspective, major reforms in the school's reading curriculum were long overdue. "I believe the teachers were ready for this," she says. "Our reading program had not been especially well coordinated. We teachers were going in and closing our door and doing whatever we thought would work. We made our own grade-level schedules and pretty much did our own thing. We needed a better plan with full teacher buy-in."

With Thompson's help, Wheaton began implementing key elements of this Clinton-era grant that had not been adequately addressed. The first priority was a full commitment to a 90-minute literacy block at each grade level. Along with this came the implementation of a Walk to Read model of instruction, which organizes students into small groups based on their individual instructional levels.

The combination of these two components provided students with the maximum amount of direct, individualized instruction at a level that was neither too easy nor too difficult. To do this, Wheaton had to coordinate the schedule of all available staff, including the school's 13 paraeducators.

In a typical first-grade literacy block, each certified teacher is assigned a group of students at or near the same reading level. At the beginning of the 90-minute block, students "walk" to the appropriate classroom, where the certified teacher is joined by two paraeducators. The students are then divided into groups of seven or fewer, again based on their individual reading level. In this way, students are grouped with others that most closely match their own instructional level and are then provided with at least 90 full minutes of small-group direct instruction.

For both Wheaton and Thompson, the Walk to Read model is the most important element of their new reading program.

"Just the fact that they're not floundering in a class with five or six different levels in the same room trying to do reading is a huge difference," says Wheaton. "In Walk to Read, with the leveled instruction, you can truly target kids where they are and then move them—they're not just stuck there."

For this model to work, adequate staffing is obviously an important issue. "We're only able to do this by having 'para' support," says Wheaton. "If the groups get much bigger than seven, you lose effectiveness. We need the instructors. So we've spent a lot of time and effort training our 'paras.' We include them in as much professional development as possible, including the OSPI summer institutes. They are vital to this program."

The other key element in making the model work is the use of frequent individual assessments. At the beginning of the Reading Excellence grant period, Roosevelt's literacy team eventually settled on Harcourt as its core reading model in grades K-3. After the first year, according to Thompson, the staff recognized a need for even more phonics-based instruction in the kindergarten and first grades. After a great deal of research, the literacy team chose the Read Well program for its kindergarten and first-grade instruction.

As it happened, they chose Read Well and Harcourt from the state's list of approved programs for Reading First. In fact, they had now been awarded a Reading First grant. These programs emphasize the five major components of reading as identified by the National Reading Panel—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Accordingly, Read Well is heavily phonics based and both programs

include frequent assessments, usually at the end of each unit, which in some cases can be almost daily.

The shift from the school's former whole language-based core reading program to the current reading programs was not overly controversial, says Thompson: "Our former program was rich in literature, but very lacking in skills instruction. There was never a great deal of argument about needing to teach phonics—we recognized that it was needed. There was some discussion, but nobody was digging in their heels."

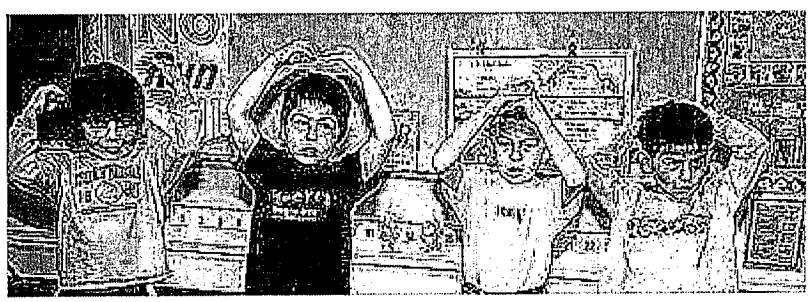
As Thompson sees it, the controversies surrounding the National Reading Panel's research and the small number of reading programs that have made state-approved Reading First lists are misplaced.

"At some point you have to say, 'OK, we're going to trust the people that are looking into this to know what they're doing,'" says Thompson. "And then you also have to trust your own knowledge and experience, as well as your colleagues'. You're talking about people with many, many years of education. And we keep educating ourselves. Then, when it's time to make a choice, we take a team of teachers—it's not just one teacher or one administrator making the decision, it's a broad group of very well-educated people coming to a consensus about what's best for our students.

"Yes, there are politics involved," Thompson acknowledges, "but we try to disassociate from that. The day-to-day reality that we deal with down here is trying to get our children ready to face the world. The tools we have decided to use might have been published in China—I don't know and, frankly, I don't care. If it works with our students, that's the basic thing. You get to a point where all the [talk about the] complexity and controversy doesn't get the job done."

For Wheaton, the strict requirements of the Reading First grant were, if anything, a blessing. "When you start with reading scores that are in the single digits," she says, "the grant made sense. We needed to grab something and use it with fidelity and move forward. I think this grant is the best thing that's happened to this school, because it gave us not only the financial means to do some things, but also the parameters that everybody had to get on board with."

Cherry Valley
Holding Its Ground



Elaine Meeks has been principal at Cherry Valley for 16 years. In that time, she has weathered many challenges, witnessed many educational battles, and watched as the political winds have swirled around her. Through it all she has attempted to build a quality staff and form a clear, research-based vision for her school.

At the center of that vision has been a commitment to early childhood literacy. At Cherry Valley, literature is everywhere: in the well-stocked library, in the resource room with more than 2,500 leveled books, in the book bags students bring home every day. It's in the Kootenai language storytelling of a community volunteer, and in fun-filled activities such as the art project in which students draw their favorite book cover, or the special day when staff members come dressed up as their favorite literary character. A love of literature, a sense of the joy of reading, and a commitment to instilling that passion in students—and the skills to go with it—permeate the building.

"I speak from the perspective of a school that's had years and years of professional development," says Meeks. "That makes a difference. If you really want to build the ideal situation, which is that every teacher in your school is a highly skilled teacher of reading, that takes years of work and professional development and knowing how to bring new teachers on."

For Meeks, effective reading instruction begins and ends with quality staff. "The very best reading program is to have a highly skilled, knowledgeable reading teacher in every classroom, and the materials to support them," she says. "And we've done everything we can to build that here. It's a part of the culture of the school—a staff that's philosophically aligned and has common knowledge."

When the Reading First grants became available, Meeks and her staff took a good look at the program. Feeling that it would be irresponsible not to consider a grant that could potentially mean as much as $175,000, the school's literacy team went to the state Superintendent of Public Instruction's informational meetings, listened to the presentations from experts such as G. Reid Lyons and Edward Kame'enui, and looked at the core reading programs on the state's approved list.

After a great deal of reflection, the principal and her staff decided to hold their ground. A key reason for their decision was the requirement of "implementation with fidelity" written

into the grant.

"The grant is extremely program-driven," says Meeks. "You have to choose from a very small list of programs, and then you have to implement with fidelity. You can't buy the program and then massage it into what works for your school. I understand that it's an attempt to bring consistency to a school's reading program, but for us, it didn't make sense."

One reason for this, says Meeks, is that many features of a typical Reading First school are already part of Cherry Valley's literacy program, including a dedicated reading block, a Walk to Read-type instructional model, and data-driven instruction using frequent assessments.

A key difference is that Cherry Valley has had time to fine-tune these instructional strategies to best meet the unique needs of its students. The Walk to Read model, for instance, is called flooding, and it's the teachers and paraeducators that do the walking. Each grade-level has its designated flooding time, during which students are placed in small groups based on their instructional level. All available staff, including Title I teachers and paraeducators, then walk to the designated classroom. "We feel that learning time is lost when the students have to walk to other rooms and back," says Meeks. "This plan works better for us."

The freedom to modify specific instructional strategies is one example of what Cherry Valley's staff felt they would lose by applying for the grant. For long-term teacher Doug Crosby, buying into the Reading First grant would also have meant the abandonment of a project he has led since coming to the school in 1995: the development of the school's resource room of level-appropriate books.

Standing in the book-lined room, Crosby reflects on the realities of choosing a packaged core reading program. "If people ask, 'What reading program do you use?' We say, 'We use our own—we created it.' If we went with Reading First," he says, "we would lock this door and never come in here again."

While Cherry Valley is less phonics-driven than a typical Reading First school, it does use a packaged phonics program to provide 20 to 30 minutes of direct instruction a day for every student. Other elements of the school's literacy block also explicitly address the five components of reading identified by the National Reading Panel, but for Meeks it is less a matter of isolated, skill-based instruction, and more a matter of creating a comprehensive, fully integrated reading program that focuses on the individual needs of each student.

"The thing that concerns me about 'scientifically based research' and the National Reading Panel," says Meeks, "is that there's a huge body of research that isn't being acknowledged as

valid anymore. The five components aren't anything new. We've known about these things for a long time, and we've incorporated them into a comprehensive program. Now, they are being interpreted by some people as a kind of linear process, but I think, from a more balanced literacy perspective [that], yes, all of those things are important, but they need to be integrated and they need to all happen from day one. Everything that you do in the classroom should be about building language and building the conceptual understanding around language. It's not just about phonics and phonemic awareness and some controlled vocabulary. And I don't think the National Reading Panel ever indicated that these components should be taught in an isolated fashion."

Another concern, says Meeks, was the lack of cultural relevancy in the packaged reading programs that were presented to schools as scientifically based. "None of the programs addressed the specific needs of our Native American students."

As a school with a fully developed reading program already in place, Meeks feels strongly that Reading First did not make sense for Cherry Valley, but she does understand that it might be a good starting point for some schools.

"If I moved to another district as the principal of a school," she says, "and there was no consistency in reading instruction, and there hadn't been a lot of professional development, then it would make sense, on some level, to apply for the Reading First money. But I do feel that the grants are too program-based."

Forgoing the funding was a tough decision, and Meeks can't help doing a little wishful thinking. "If we had been invited to develop a proposal without being required to purchase a prescriptive program, we would have definitely applied," says Meeks. "We would have relied on the research that individualized instruction increases student achievement, and we would have put our dollars into professional development, additional staff, and more resources that meet the unique needs of our learners."

For Meeks, a quality staff, not a packaged program, is the key to success. "I think there has been an attempt to kind of teacher-proof our classrooms," she says, with the idea that "if you just follow a certain program with fidelity, then your kids are going to succeed. I think that is diminishing to the professionalism of our teachers. There is really no substitute for having highly skilled teachers in the classroom."

THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS

Instilling a joy of reading in students, creating a culture of success at a school, developing a

well-trained staff that is philosophically aligned—these are ideas that sound good on paper but can run smack into the cold, hard reality of standardized tests and the demand for adequate yearly progress. Student performance on state-level assessments, such as the Washington State Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), are now the primary measure of a school's success or failure, like it or not. It's within this environment that both Cherry Valley and Roosevelt Elementary operate. The data, some say, do not lie.

But do the data tell the whole truth? At these two schools, the story is not so cut and dried. A look at the reading scores of Cherry Valley and Roosevelt students fails to show a marked trend either forward or backward. Cherry Valley has consistently had more than 60 percent of its students meet proficiency levels on the ITBS, while Roosevelt has hovered at 30 percent proficiency on the WASL during the last two years. Claims for the success or failure of either school's reading program would seem premature, and comparisons are pointless. What's clear is that both schools have now put reading first, with or without federal assistance.

AT THE CROSSROADS

As Principal Meeks points out, Reading First doesn't make sense for everyone. It is not a one-size-fits-all grant any more than there can be a one-size-fits-all reading program. But for some schools, the grant can be the first step in the right direction.

The Reading First grant has allowed Roosevelt Elementary to develop many of the successful characteristics that a school like Cherry Valley has been working for years to develop. And that might be the biggest lesson of these two schools: A literacy program may vary in its devotion to phonics, or in the size of its resource library, but all successful schools share some common traits. At these two Northwest schools, those traits include principal leadership; highly skilled staff provided with extensive professional development opportunities; dedicated reading blocks; frequent and effective assessments that lead to data-driven instruction; and a consistent, research-based, schoolwide reading program that focuses on individualized instruction.

These two rural schools are taking very different routes, but their paths may yet converge. ■

CONSIDER THIS

Altogether, Northwest states will receive more than $190 million in Reading First funds throughout the six-year span of the initiative. These funds will be passed

on to qualifying schools and districts in a competitive subgrant process that is having far-ranging effects.

While a subgrant may represent only a small percentage of a school's operating budget, its impact can be enormous. In most cases, the guidelines of the grant require a school to significantly alter its curriculum, scheduling, staffing, and overall instructional planning. Beyond the local level, the initiative stimulates states to reexamine their approach to reading instruction and technical assistance in light of the mandate that federally funded reading programs be based on scientific research.

Oregon has been at the forefront of the Reading First initiative. A National Center for Reading First Technical Assistance, one of only three in the nation, has been established at the University of Oregon. Edward Kame'enui, a special education professor at the university, will lead the new center. It will provide both technical assistance in implementing Reading First curriculum and teacher training. Kame'enui has been a major player in the Bush administration's efforts to implement the initiative. He helped to write the legislation and makes presentations at state Reading First conferences.

Kame'enui, along with his University of Oregon colleague, Deborah Simmons, is also the author of *A Consumer's Guide to Evaluating a Core Reading Program*. The guide has been widely used by states to develop their lists of approved, scientifically based reading programs from which Reading First schools can choose. In addition, the university developed the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a classroom-level reading assessment tool that has been adopted by many Reading First schools around the country.

RESOURCES

A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO EVALUATING A CORE READING PROGRAM GRADES K-3: A CRITICAL ELEMENTS ANALYSIS
http://reading.uoregon.edu/appendices/con_guide_3.1.03.pdf

OFFICIAL DIBELS HOME PAGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON
http://dibels.uoregon.edu/

READING FIRST
www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/index.html

THE NATIONAL READING PANEL
www.nationalreadingpanel.org

◂BACK | NEXT▸

This document's URL is: file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/laurel.eisinger/Local%20Settings/Temporary%20Internet%20Files/OLK2/tale.htm

© 2002 Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

Date of Last Update: 7/18/2004
Email Webmaster
Tel. 503.275.9500