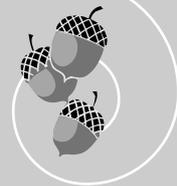




## chapter 1

# Why Struggling Readers Continue to Struggle

Most struggling readers never catch up with their higher-achieving classmates because schools create school days for them where they struggle all day long.



In other words, in most schools struggling readers are lucky if they spend 10 to 20 percent of their school day in lessons designed to meet their needs. Typically those lessons are part of the intervention effort the school has created. But, unfortunately, most of their day, 4 to 5 hours every day, is spent in classrooms where the instruction is targeted to the average achieving student. In other words, struggling readers struggle more because they get far less appropriate instruction every day than the achieving students do.

Think of it this way: That second-grade student still reading at the first-grade reading level often spends his day in a second-grade classroom where almost every lesson is focused on second-grade-level students. (The same situation is usually in place for the ninth-grade student reading at the fifth-grade level—a locker full of ninth-grade-level books he cannot read, but more on this later.) Too often, even the reading lesson is drawn from a second-grade core reading program, a text too hard for that struggling reader. Rarely, if ever, will second-grade students who are struggling readers benefit much from second-grade reading lessons. The lessons are simply over the children's heads, and rarely do the instructional guides provided by the publishers of second-grade reading programs contain useful advice on how to modify, adapt, or replace reading lesson materials so that struggling readers will benefit (McGill-Franzen, Zmach, Solic, & Zeig, 2006).



## Reading Lessons, Interventions, and Struggling Readers

Perhaps using grade-level materials to instruct all students is an unintended effect of federal education legislation and the focus these laws have had on creating intervention programs for struggling readers (Title I, special education, English language learners, etc.). The recent No Child Left Behind Act, and especially its Reading First component, has targeted classroom instruction as central to developing a greater number of (basically all) students who read on grade level. These two efforts are among the first federal initiatives to target classroom lessons in addressing the needs of struggling readers. But in

many cases these initiatives have been badly misread, and unfortunately, because of the rules and regulations, there are now classrooms that are actually less focused on struggling readers than has been the case in the past. By this I mean that in too many school districts teachers are required, or at least advised, to provide a 90-minute block in some designated grade-level core reading program. In such cases struggling readers will not benefit much from the reading lessons offered.

## A Simple but Basic Rule of Learning

Every model for lesson planning begins with selecting print materials appropriate for learners. I have been unable to locate any lesson planning model that suggests that this isn't a critical aspect of effective lesson design. But, on average, most teachers select one text. Most often this text is most appropriate for the average or higher-achieving students. The struggling readers get left behind. One of the key findings of our work studying some of the nation's best first- and fourth-grade teachers was their regular use of what we dubbed the "multi-text, multi-level" curriculum design (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Pressley et al., 2001). In these classrooms teachers selected a variety of texts to teach whatever they were required to teach. They selected some texts that even the struggling readers could read.

Perhaps this is why we were able to document the enormous gains that struggling readers made in these classrooms. These children simply got much more instruction, all day, every day, that both theory and research indicate would allow them to increase their reading proficiencies. A central theme of this book is that struggling readers need a full day, at least, of high-quality lessons if they are to match or even exceed the reading growth patterns observed in their higher-achieving peers.

As outlined in the next chapter, beginning the process of designing school programs that meet the needs of struggling readers has to begin with an examination of the quality of the classroom lessons they are getting. That has to be Step 1 if only because virtually all struggling readers spend the majority of their day in the general education classroom. Thus, it is the quality of the general education instruction that must also match the development of the struggling readers.



Think of it this way: If struggling readers spend their days in classrooms where only grade-level texts (or higher) are used, they are wasting most of their day. It is a waste of time because no theory and no empirical evidence suggest that ignoring the reading needs of struggling readers will produce adequate levels of academic learning. Struggling readers need high-quality lessons *all day long* if they are to ever catch up with their peers.

## Different Rates of Learning

There is now good evidence, at least for reading, that almost no students should be lagging behind in their reading development. The federal rules allow schools to exclude 2 to 3 percent of their total student population from meeting adequate yearly progress standards. That means one student in every other classroom will not be required to add at least one year of reading growth, or more, every year he or she is in school. Currently, some 40 percent of students fail to meet this standard. That is almost half of the students!

While mandating virtually all students to the one-year's-growth-per-year reading (and math) standard, the federal legislation assumes that some students are instructionally needier than others. Some students will therefore need more and better reading instruction than other students in order to make the mandated gains. Thus, the federal legislation provides some of the funding that will be necessary to provide that added instruction. These federal funds pay for reading specialists, special education teachers, and teachers for English language learners. These funds also allow schools to provide paraprofessional support.

Perhaps because after 50 years of federal programs where annual gains of one year's growth per year were not expected, much less required, few schools have created classroom or intervention programs that actually produce such growth in struggling readers. The congressionally mandated study (Puma et al., 1997) of the federal Title I program noted that Title I funds have long been spread broadly but thinly. "The level of instructional assistance Title I students generally received was in stark contrast to their levels of educational need" (p. iii). In other words, the federal government never provided sufficient funding to meet the educational needs of all qualified students. Thus, in many school districts the funds were spread about such that some eligible students

received some sort of instructional support, but rarely did that support ever reach the level of intensity or expertise that those students needed to achieve a full year's growth, or more, in reading.

### Currently special education students don't catch up to peers

Special education placements tend to stabilize reading growth of students with reading disabilities rather than accelerate it. . . . Students who enter special education with reading levels that are two or more years below those of their age mates can be expected to maintain that disparity, or fall further behind. (Denton, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2003, p. 203)



The results were that, on average, Title I participants added a month or two of growth but never enough to make the goal of adding one year's reading growth per year. Thus, these students fell further and further behind even when they participated in a federally funded intervention. A similar situation describes both special education and English language learner programs. Additionally, little in the earlier federal laws focused on the quality of classroom lessons. Thus, there were too few classrooms where these students had their reading needs met.

Federal law does not ignore the fact that some students find school easier than others. What the law does require, however, is that schools create learning environments where students who need more and better reading instruction actually get more and better reading instruction (Allington, 2006c). What has changed is that federal law now requires schools to show that they are providing instruction that helps struggling readers catch up. This is the "adequate yearly progress" requirement, and it basically requires that schools demonstrate that all students are growing at the rate of at least one year of growth for every year of schooling.

If there is a problem with the federal law, it is that the federal government has not provided sufficient funding to support the programs that will be needed to produce such growth. Personally, I believe that the incentive funding that is provided should be looked upon as a gift to help get schools started down the path of powerful classrooms and even more powerful intervention

designs. The problem, then, is that in the end it is the local taxpayers who will most likely foot the bill for more effective schools. In far too many school districts the historical pattern has been to accept the federal money and develop some sort of intervention with that funding. However, the federal funding has never been sufficient to cover the total costs of the sort of high-quality interventions that research indicates could accelerate reading growth. Today, though, too few school boards and central administrations are providing the additional funds needed.

The focus of the new federal legislation is primarily early elementary education, K–3. That is where most of the federal money is targeted. Again, this seems appropriate because the reading gap grows larger every year that struggling readers attend school. The first-grader who is half a year behind his on-level classmates needs far less extensive intervention than the fourth-grader who is two years behind or the ninth-grader who is four years behind. Younger students can catch up faster, or with less extensive and less expensive efforts, than is the case for older readers.

Some students, though, will need extra instructional support even after they have caught up with their peers—not every one of them, but some of them. Using the available data, it is reasonable to expect that almost all of the students who initially struggle can be caught up by third grade. And of those, about half of the students served will remain on level with no added services. However, half will need some instructional support later in their school careers, and a few will need added support all of their school careers if educators expect them to remain on level. Reading development must be monitored so that those students who will need extra support will be located and the support can be provided.

## The Essence of the Problem

Some students find learning to read easier than others. For years we have focused mostly on what was “wrong” with those students, and for years we have used whatever we found out to explain why children were not adequately developing reading skills. We often jumped in and provided some sort of support, but too rarely did we believe that whatever we provided was going to help those struggling readers to catch up to their achieving classmates.



So, currently you can walk into almost any fourth-grade classroom and find one or more students reading at the second-grade level. These are students who have been increasing their reading skills at the rate of one-half year per year of school, regardless of what the school has done.

In most cases these students were recognized early, often on entry to kindergarten. The most typical scenario has been that these students were given the “gift of time.” In other words, we waited for them to develop. When they didn’t, we referred them for more testing and typically for placement in an intervention program (Title I, special education, English language learners, etc.). Sometimes we simply held them back to repeat a grade level in the hopes they would catch up. Yet most never caught up, whether they were provided an intervention or retained in grade. They became the bottom group of students who forever lagged behind their on-level peers.



## Doubling or Tripling Reading Growth

Struggling readers have rarely caught up to their achieving peers because most schools have not thought about what sort of efforts might be required to double or triple the struggling readers’ learning rates for reading. If a 90-minute reading block is producing a half year of growth, then why would 30 additional minutes every day of large group intervention double or triple that rate of learning? That is assuming that the 30 added minutes are actually added. In most cases, however, that intervention 30 minutes was scheduled during the 90-minute classroom reading block. So no new minutes of reading instruction were added. Instead, we altered part of the 90 minutes of reading instruction but did not add more minutes of reading instruction.

What is worse, perhaps, is that many of those 30 minutes were taught by a paraprofessional. I say worse because there are few people less expert at teaching reading in the school than the paraprofessionals. A large body of research indicates that paraprofessionals do little that actually improves a student’s reading achievement in classrooms or either remedial or special education programs (Gerber, Finn, Achilles, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2001; Gray,

McCoy, Dunbar, Dunn, Mitchell, & Ferguson, 2007; Rowan & Guthrie, 1989). These findings are the reason that federal rules on using paraprofessionals have become more explicit and more rigid.

Remember that what I have just described is, in many schools, the best that is available. There are still far too many students who experience difficulty with reading who get no support at all. These students may be retained in grade, but they get no special services to help them develop their reading skills. It isn't because we have no idea of how to create intervention efforts that help all students achieve on-level reading development. A number of such studies are already available (Hiebert, Colt, Catto, & Gury, 1992; Mathes, Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, Francis, & Schatschneider, 2005; Pinnell, Lyons, Deford, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994; Vellutino, Sipay, Small, Pratt, Chen, & Denckla, 1996). In each of these studies 97 percent or more of all students were reading in the average achievement range after the intervention effort. In these studies rate of reading acquisition was doubled or tripled for participating students. In other words, the interventions were designed to catch up these struggling readers with their achieving peers. These research studies suggest that we have a pretty good idea of how to accelerate the reading development of the instructionally needy students in our schools. The problem: Most schools provide nothing like the interventions that were offered in these studies.

I will also note that each of these studies focused on struggling readers in the primary grades. Studies of techniques used with older struggling readers, grade 4 and upward, have typically shown less success in bringing struggling readers' achievement up to grade level, but that may be a result of the size of the gap in reading achievement these older readers experience. In the early grades it is rare that a struggling reader is more than a year behind. But by fourth grade, one- or two-year lags are common. By sixth or ninth grade, three- and four-year lags in reading achievement are far too common. In these cases it will usually require several years to catch up these struggling readers even if we can triple their reading acquisition rate. There are few intervention studies that last for four years in middle or high school, so there is far less research evidence on just what to do with older struggling readers. Having said that, I will note that doing little or nothing, as is currently the case in too many districts, is a good strategy for fostering dropping-out-of-school behavior.



## Building a Reader

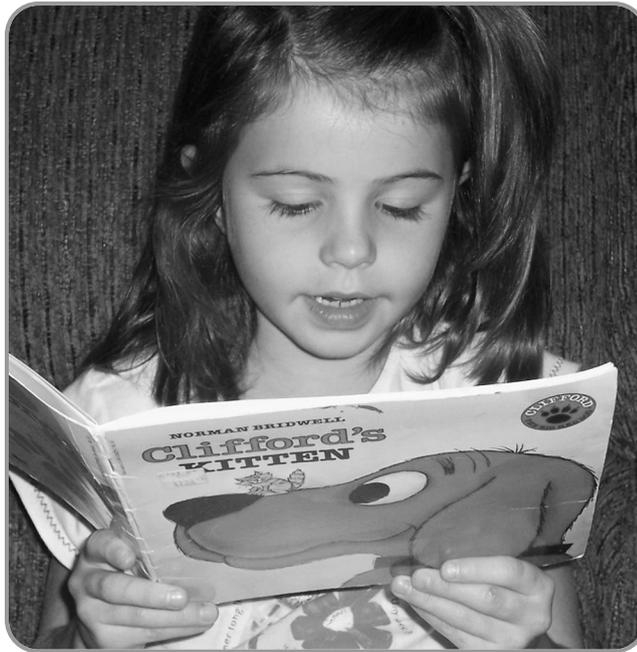
When students begin kindergarten, there are huge differences in their literacy development. Some kids have been read over 1,000 books and others but a handful. Some children arrive from preschool programs, and others arrive from home. Some have extensive vocabularies, and others have a far smaller vocabulary. All of this produces some children more ready to read than others. The evidence, however, shows that we can create kindergarten classrooms that reduce, or expand, these initial differences.

McGill-Franzen (2006; McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi, & Brooks, 1999) has developed and tested a kindergarten design that reduces these differences. In this case there are no special intervention teachers. Rather, the kindergarten teachers are provided professional development that fosters an improvement of their classroom early literacy lessons, including daily very small group lessons focused on accelerating the literacy and language development of the children who arrive most at risk of reading failure. Here, the kindergarten teacher simply selects the two or three lowest-achieving children for a daily very small group targeted lesson. The lesson design provides the more expert, intensive, and explicit instruction the lowest-achieving students need if schools expect them to begin to catch up to their more advantaged peers.

It is problematic that few schools consider kindergarten one of the places where early intervention must occur. Additionally, McGill-Franzen's (2006) focus on developing kindergarten classroom teachers' expertise is literally unique in the field. Her design whereby the kindergarten teacher delivers the intervention is also unique. The outcomes of this project have been outstanding and deserve a far broader audience than they have yet received.

So we begin in kindergarten (or prekindergarten if possible) and work harder and more expertly with those students most in need. This begins closing the achievement gap. In first grade the differences in reading development may still exist. So now we create early intervention lists and begin to offer broad extra instructional support to the students who seem the furthest behind their peers.

Each of these early struggling readers must receive a full period of high-quality literacy instruction in the classroom. In two recent studies (McIntyre, Rightmeyer, Powell, Powers, & Petrosko, 2006; Connor, Morrison, Fishman, Schatschneider, & Underwood, 2007) the researchers report that low-



► Alaina loves series books.

readiness, entering first-grade students were largely unable to complete much student-directed work they were assigned independently. The most successful first-grade teachers created classrooms where early in the year the students who had developed fewer literacy-related skills spent as much as 70 percent of their reading instructional time in teacher-guided small group lessons. Students with better early skills development spent only about 30 percent of their instructional time in such groups and the remaining time in student-directed reading. However, gradually decreasing the percentage of teacher-directed instruction for the students who arrived with few skills was the instructional strategy that worked absolutely the best.

## But Is This Fair?

I mention these two studies because they reflect an important point we observed in our study of exemplary teachers. That observation had to do with what teachers considered “fair.” Some teachers, the less effective ones, thought that *fair* meant distributing instruction equally to all students

regardless of their needs. The exemplary teachers we studied, however, thought *fair* meant working in ways that evened out differences between students. Early in the year the exemplary teachers largely followed the research by offering greater amounts of instructional time with the poorest readers in their rooms. Gradually the teachers reduced the amount of attention as those children developed better reading skills. The poorest readers in the exemplary teachers' classrooms read as well as the average readers in the more typical teachers' classrooms (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-MacDonald, Collins-Block, & Morrow, 2001).

I have to agree with the stance taken by the exemplary teachers we studied. I do this for two reasons. First, the evidence available shows no negative impacts for assigning the best readers more student-directed work (Connor et al., 2007). Second, since Congress has mandated a substantial reduction in the number of students struggling with reading, the new mindset for schools must be focused on this goal. Providing struggling readers with greater amounts of teacher direction, at least early on, produces improved reading outcomes for these students, and thus the congressional mandate is met.

## So How Might This Look in a School?

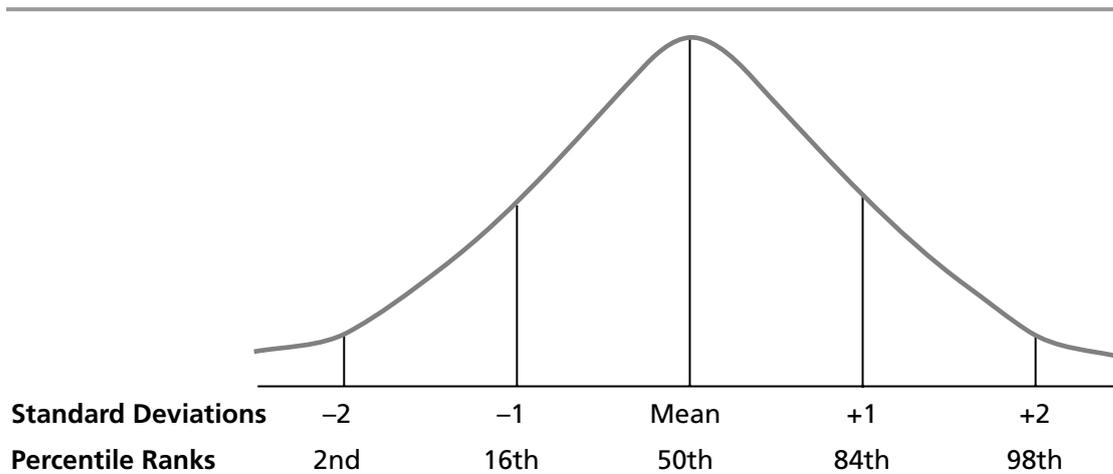
Figure 1.1 presents the normal bell curve that has been used to describe human cognitive abilities. However, I want to use this curve to suggest something else—typical reading achievement when instruction is common for all students. When all kids are given roughly the same amount of reading instruction of roughly the same intensity and quality, we see reading achievement that looks much like the situation in the normal curve. On the right side of the curve are the higher-achieving students; on the left are the lower-achieving students. In the middle is the middle group of average-achieving students. Most students are in the middle, on or close to grade level.

What Congress has mandated is that federal funding will be used in ways that alter this pattern such that the curve looks more like the one in Figure 1.2. That is, almost all of the students are removed from the far left end of the curve—very low reading achievement has been eliminated.

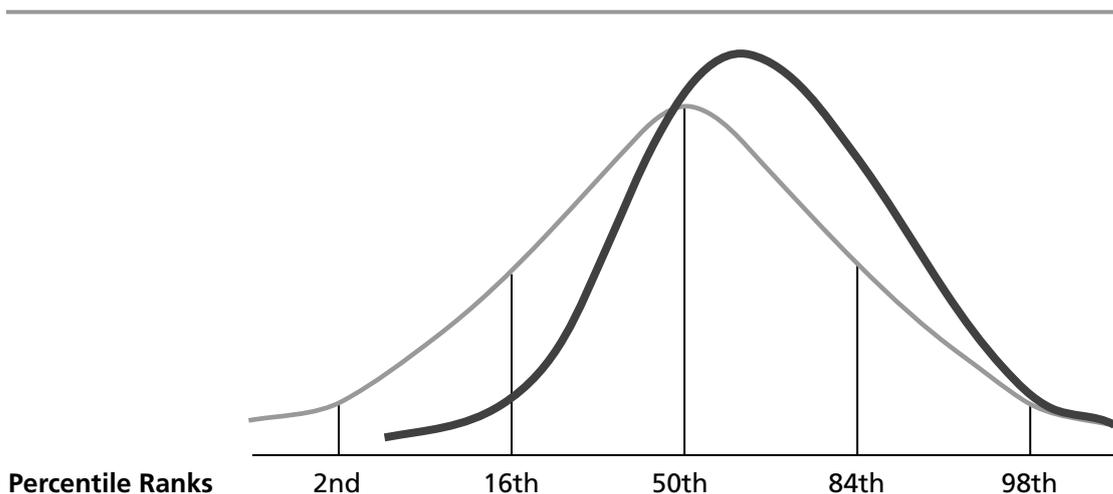
The only way to create fewer students with limited reading proficiency is to provide those students with more and better reading instruction than that provided to the other students. If we offer all students the same sort and type of reading lessons, we get reading achievement that is spread across the

spectrum, as in Figure 1.1. If we offer differential reading lessons such that the students who are behind get more and better reading lessons than other students do, we can achieve a distribution of reading achievement that looks more like Figure 1.2. And schools have been mandated to achieve Figure 1.2.

► **Figure 1.1 Normal curve equivalents**



► **Figure 1.2 The bold line shows the expected range of reading scores mandated by Congress under the NCLB Act of 2001**



Given all the bad outcomes in life that are associated with students who continue to struggle to read, I'm reasonably sure that this is a good idea.

Another way of thinking about the typical normal curve is to consider that the further a student's reading development falls below (to the left of) the average reading development of students his or her age, the greater the intensity and expertness of reading instruction that will be required to move his or her reading performance into the average range. All schools have some students who have minimally developed reading proficiencies. But only a few schools have felt charged to provide extra and more intensive and expert reading instruction to the point that those lowest-achieving students achieve reading proficiencies in the average range.

So, in the classrooms we need, struggling readers will get more teacher time, more intensive reading lessons, and, simply, more teacher-directed reading lessons targeted to their specific instructional needs. This will not be easy, nor will it be as hard as it might seem. Taylor's Early Intervention in Reading program (Taylor, Short, Shearer, & Frye, 2007), for instance, created a second daily reading lesson for struggling readers. Similarly, the "after lunch bunch" described by Cunningham and Allington (2007) does the same thing. In both cases higher-achieving students are largely left to read independently while the struggling readers work with the classroom teacher for a second reading period every day.

The success of each of these models has been well described, but neither model actually catches up every struggling reader to grade level. However, both improve the reading levels when compared to classrooms where struggling readers get a single daily reading lesson.



## What Does Intervention Beyond the Classroom Look Like?

For the students who are not moving into the average reading achievement range after receiving a second daily classroom reading lesson, schools need to provide something more. The usual name for whatever is provided here is "intervention" or "support services." So what might these "interventions" look like?

Truth be told, I've seen lots of different-looking interventions. At the same time, however, few of these interventions seem well informed by the research we have available. Instead, struggling readers often are sent out of the classroom to work with someone else (or that other person comes into the classroom to work with them). This other person may be a specialist teacher (reading specialist, learning disability teacher, speech and language pathologist, etc.) or a paraprofessional or a volunteer. What we do know is that struggling readers are typically sent out of the room for this intervention during their classroom reading block. Thus, the intervention adds no additional reading lesson time to their school day. Two factors seem important here.

- ▶ Many struggling readers benefit more from guided reading lessons than from free, voluntary reading, at least initially.



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First is the issue of what the struggling reader might miss if he or she is sent out of the classroom at a time other than the reading block time. Second is the issue of ease of scheduling the intervention teacher's time. With the first issue, there is no easy answer but if we intend this intervention effort to close an existing reading achievement gap, then simply replacing part of the classroom reading lesson does not seem a good strategy. Struggling readers need *additional* reading instruction if we expect them to learn to read faster than the achieving students. Replacing part of the classroom reading lesson does not add any more reading lesson time. But if we schedule them out of the room at some other time, they will miss some other instructional segment of the day.

This potential problem may be the best reason for considering after-school intervention designs for many of the struggling readers in your school. Nonetheless, scheduling the intervention reading lessons for times outside the classroom reading lesson time must be done. When to schedule the intervention lesson depends on the reader and his or her classroom. Ideally, it would not be scheduled during core curriculum content classroom lessons, but that leaves little time in most school days to schedule it. We might elect to schedule it during the classroom science, social studies, or health class time, but if so, then the reading materials used in the intervention should be linked to grade-level content in those subject areas. This is not that difficult, but it remains largely unused.

## How Much Intervention?

Another problem with most school interventions is that even when they are scheduled outside of the classroom reading block, they typically do not add enough instructional time to be expected to double or triple the student's rate of reading acquisition. Yes, we must double or triple the rate of acquiring reading proficiency. Intervention design must consider that most struggling readers continue to fall further behind each year even when they get whatever intervention is offered (Denton et al., 2003; Puma, Karweit, Price, Ricciuti, Thompson, & Vaden-Kiernan, 1997).

A big part of this problem is that many intervention designs used in schools add a little bit of reading instruction but not enough to double or

triple the rate of learning to read. I commonly see intervention efforts that add an additional 90 minutes of reading lessons each week, and those interventions add a month or two of added reading growth. But they do not double or triple the rate of reading acquisition. These interventions rarely help the struggling readers catch up. There is just not enough added reading instruction to accomplish that goal. Thus, we should not be surprised that struggling readers continue to fall further and further behind each year with the small doses of intervention provided.

When we add 90 minutes of weekly small group intervention, about the best we can hope for is a 20 percent increase in reading acquisition or one or two months of added reading growth. For students who are just two months behind their achieving peers that would be sufficient to catch them up. At the same time, most students who are two months behind would not qualify for intervention programs. However, when intervention efforts dramatically increase the amount of reading instruction offered, we are far more likely to see the growth needed to catch up. In one study done by Torgeson and colleagues (2001), they added two daily 50-minute periods of very small group expert intervention for struggling readers in grades 2 through 4 and found that the reading skills gap was basically closed in an eight-week intervention period. In that eight weeks, however, the typical struggling reader received nearly 70 hours of added reading lessons. The typical school intervention effort of 90 minutes each week would have added a little over 10 hours of intervention lessons in the same time period.

If we want struggling readers to catch up to their achieving peers, we must schedule intervention periods so dramatic that increases in reading instruction actually occur. Whether two 50-minute daily reading lessons in addition to a high-quality 90-minute classroom reading lesson are needed is open to question. It does seem, however, that adding about 15 minutes of reading lessons each day is simply insufficient to achieve the on-level reading achievement goal. The same seems true for a daily 30-minute period with older struggling readers.

So how much time does a school community need to schedule for intervention? The simple answer is “enough” to close the reading achievement gap. I note this because if we intend to catch up struggling readers, we will need to schedule sufficient time each day to do so. My guess is that in kinder-



garten and first grade, most struggling readers will benefit enormously from an additional 30 minutes daily of extra, intensive, and expert reading support. But by second grade and beyond, we will need to schedule more intervention reading time every day. It may be that an extra 30 daily minutes will be insufficient for even some struggling first-grade readers. Although that amount of one-to-one intervention has worked well for those using the Reading Recovery tutorial, it has almost never resulted in every struggling reader achieving on-level reading. Typically between 80 and 85 percent of the students served by Reading Recovery are brought to grade-level proficiency and brought there in 12 to 20 weeks of that intervention (What Works Clearinghouse, 2007).

But that still leaves 15 to 20 percent of the struggling readers struggling. In some cases, extending the length of Reading Recovery intervention would likely bring them to grade-level reading proficiency. In some cases, even that might not be sufficient.

I would suggest that a daily 30-minute expert tutorial or very small group (two or three students) lesson become the basic time allocation model for any intervention intended to close a reading gap. This represents a one-third increase in reading lessons, and this time allocation has been widely studied. There is a good research base indicating the effectiveness of this time period for younger struggling readers (Mathes et al., 2005; Pinnell, Lyons, Deford, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994; Torgeson, 2002a; Vellutino et al., 1996).

## The Bigger Reading Problems

Beyond first grade, longer intervention periods are usually necessary. That is because struggling readers have fallen further behind. By fourth grade there are too many struggling readers who are two full years behind their achieving classmates. It will take greater amounts of reading instruction to ever hope that these struggling readers can catch up. These cases require that we provide something that doubles or triples the rate of reading growth.

If you take a fourth-grader reading at the second-grade level and provide two 30-minute intervention reading periods every day, he might catch up in a year or two or three, or even four. I say this because his historical learning



rate for reading has been roughly a half of a year's growth in each year of schooling. This is the growth rate he has exhibited while receiving whatever reading lessons that have been offered. If you want him to catch up to grade level, you will need to triple his acquisition rate over a four-year period, or quadruple his historical rate of learning over a two-year period.

If you add sufficient time to double this fourth-grader's current reading growth rate, he would still be two years behind peers year after year since he began with a two-year deficit. Doubling that growth rate means he is developing reading skills at a rate of one year per year of schooling. So he never catches up—at least his reading proficiency never catches up with his on-level classmates.

So, although bringing struggling readers' word reading skills up to grade level has been accomplished with older struggling readers, the interventions that accomplished this did not bring reading comprehension and fluency up to grade level (Torgeson & Hudson, 2006). Nor did these interventions make up the substantial vocabulary deficits most older readers have. Now think of a ninth-grader reading at the middle fourth-grade reading level—another struggling reader developing at that same half-year per year. What can be done to bring her reading to grade level before she graduates?

I was visiting a school district this week that provides 25 minutes of remediation every other day to high school students who are struggling readers. That works out to about an hour each week of added reading instruction. Although that is more support than many high schools provide their struggling readers, you should be able to understand why this model does not help many struggling readers catch up. There is good evidence that adding an extra period of high-quality reading instruction to the typical high school day can accelerate reading development but not quadruple that rate of learning to read (Showers, Joyce, Scanlon, & Schnaubelt, 1998).

I would expect that by fourth grade, struggling readers would benefit from a full extra hour of intensive and expert reading intervention every day. For many of these students, this would be sufficient for them to catch up over one year. For others, it would not be sufficient, but it would help close the reading achievement gap. We might consider a two- or three-year intervention plan for these struggling readers, but the goal remains: Struggling readers must catch up.

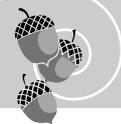
## Response to Intervention

Before closing this chapter I must discuss *response to intervention (RTI)*. Another new federal initiative, RTI derives from the recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the law that provides the federal rules for special education. The intent of RTI is to reduce, perhaps by 70 percent, the number of students who are classified as pupils with disabilities (Lyon, Fletcher, Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Torgeson, Wood, Schulte, & Olson, 2001). Underlying the RTI initiative is the research on early intervention that suggests that many struggling early readers can be caught up to grade level and that currently too many of these students are simply classified as pupils with learning disabilities. Too many are classified without ever having participated in any intensive early intervention.

### Response to Intervention

The new IDEA legislation basically attempts to assure that schools have achieved the following (Lose, 2007):

- Provide early identification and intervention with students who struggle with learning to read.
- Develop an alternative method of locating students with disabilities.
- Provide effective, intensive, evidence-based early intervention.
- Monitor each student's progress, using data-based documentation.
- Produce accelerated reading growth to meet annual yearly progress (AYP) criteria.
- Create a multitiered problem-solving team.
- Provide high-quality professional development to teachers of lowest-performing students.



The notion that many struggling readers can catch up—or have their reading acquisition rate accelerated—began largely with Marie Clay, the New Zealander who developed the Reading Recovery intervention (Clay, 1985). Clay advocated providing intensive, expert tutoring to the lowest-achieving first-graders in each school. The goal was to tutor them so as to accelerate their reading development such that they were caught up to their normally achieving peers. Although this intervention has had many critics, the What Works Clearinghouse (2007) has made Reading Recovery the only intervention program to receive the highest ranking for evidence of success. (Chapter 10 contains the WWC ratings of 24 intervention programs that had some research behind them and a listing of over 100 programs that no research supports.)

The review of the research by WWC, D’Agostino and Murphy (2004), and Schwartz (2005) demonstrates that Reading Recovery does accelerate reading development. In fact, the evidence supporting Reading Recovery makes the lack of evidence that the WWC was able to locate for other intervention plans an embarrassing situation. (Go to [www.whatworks.ed.gov](http://www.whatworks.ed.gov) and click on “Beginning reading” study to see their reviews.)

Reading Recovery has grown over the years since its introduction to North America through the Ohio State University, yet it remains a largely untapped resource used in only some schools. This may be because of its intense focus on training teachers to deliver the intervention design and its reluctance to endorse any intervention design outside of one-to-one tutoring. Thus, Reading Recovery is an expensive proposition at first glance. I say this because when one calculates the true cost of other options (e.g., special education services or retention in grade), using the Reading Recovery intervention with struggling first-grade students is actually less expensive and it enjoys a level of success seldom observed in school intervention designs.

Having said that, let me note that Reading Recovery is one good option for intervening with struggling first-graders. However, first grade is the only place you can use it. There is no second- or third- or ninth-grade Reading Recovery program. This may also be another reason it has not been as widely adopted as might have been expected. But the good news is that we know more about how to design effective intervention lessons that accelerate reading development for struggling readers. I use the term *accelerate* purposely because in order to actually solve the



problems struggling readers face every day, they must catch up with their achieving classmates, and accelerating their reading development is the only solution.

What is confusing about the RTI initiative is that although it is a general education initiative, funds can be taken from a school district's special education budget to pay, at least in part, for developing and running an RTI program. Thus, in many school systems today the RTI effort is being headed by an administrator from the special education program rather than a general education administrator. In these cases often a special education teacher delivers the RTI instruction as well. But that wasn't the original plan for RTI.

#### RTI: Electronic resources

<http://blog.reading.org/archives/002225.html>

[www.hel-earlyed.org/](http://www.hel-earlyed.org/) (click on Jan/Feb 2007 issue)

<http://nrclid.org/research/rti.shtml>

[www.nasdse.org](http://www.nasdse.org)



The original basis for the current RTI initiative was set a decade ago when the IDEA was being reauthorized in 1998. During that time the International Reading Association led a drive to include in that law a requirement that all students struggling with reading receive one-to-one tutoring for one year before they were referred for possible classification as a pupil with disabilities. This effort was based on the research then available that indicated that many early struggling readers could catch up when they participated in expert tutoring (e.g., Lyons & Beaver, 1995; Pinnell et al., 1994; Vellutino et al., 1996). However, that aspect of the bill was deleted as an unfunded federal mandate. Response to intervention then reappeared a couple years later as a special education initiative (Lyon et al., 2001).

But as the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2007) has noted: "RTI is not something that happens in special education. Rather, it is a method for teaching all students that needs to be driven by general education teachers in the general education classrooms" (p. 2). Basically, the new IDEA requires each state to adopt criteria for determining

Specific Learning Disability eligibility that may no longer require districts to use an IQ discrepancy formula and must permit them to use RTI for that purpose. Because it is based in federal rules and regulations for special education programs, it isn't surprising that many see it as another special education initiative, but it is not.

The other reason for the emergence of the RTI model is the IDEA requirement that schools demonstrate that reading difficulties are not the result of a lack of appropriate reading instruction. Basically, the law says:

A child shall not be determined to be a child with a disability if the determinant factor for that determination is—

- (A) lack of appropriate instruction in reading, including the essential components of reading instruction of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965;
- (B) lack of instruction in math; or
- (C) limited English proficiency. (pp. 2705–2706)

The IDEA then requires that all students, and especially struggling readers, be provided appropriate classroom and intervention reading instruction. Only after schools have provided such and documented such instruction and the failure of the student to benefit can the process of consideration for special education begin.

The most appropriate grade levels for RTI initiatives might be in first and second grades and in seventh and eighth grades because those are the grades where most pupils with disabilities are actually identified. On the other hand, there is that evidence about kindergarten interventions as well as evidence on intervening with struggling readers in grades 3 through 5. Again, though, recall that the basic intent of RTI is to provide the intensive instruction that struggling readers will need to catch up with their achieving peers before they are referred for special education services. In many respects an RTI initiative might be placed at almost any grade level where students are referred for screening as pupils with disabilities.

The goal of the RTI legislation is to reduce the number of students who are referred for special education services. The hope is that by providing

## One Scheme for Thinking about Struggling Readers and Intervention Design

### A Three-Tiered Model

Experts say response to intervention should have several levels of intensity, with instruction provided based on students' individual needs. Currently, this three-tiered model is being popularized. However, nothing in the federal law mentions how many tiers an intervention might include.

#### 75 to 80 Percent

Universal classroom interventions

- All students
- Preventive and proactive

#### 10 to 15 Percent

Targeted very small group interventions

- 2 or 3 students at risk
- High efficiency
- Rapid response

#### 5 to 10 Percent

Intensive, individualized tutorial interventions

- Individual students
- Assessment based
- High intensity
- Longer duration

*Source:* National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2007).



## Iowa's Principles for RTI Design

- All students are part of one proactive educational system.
  - All students can learn.
  - Use all available resources to teach all students.
- Use scientific, research-based instruction.
  - Curriculum and instructional approaches must have a high probability of success.
  - Use instructional time efficiently and effectively.
- Use instructionally relevant assessments that are reliable and valid.
  - Screening:* Collect data for the purpose of identifying low- and high-performing students at risk for not having their needs met.
  - Diagnostic:* Gather information from multiple sources to determine why students are not benefiting from instruction.
  - Formative:* Collect frequent, ongoing information, including both formal and informal data, to guide instruction.
- Use a problem-solving method to make decisions based on a continuum of student needs.
  - Provide strong core classroom curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
  - Provide increasing levels of support based on increasing levels of student needs.
- Use data to guide instructional decisions.
  - Align curriculum and instruction to assessment data.
  - Allocate resources.
  - Drive professional-development decisions.
- Use professional development and follow-up modeling and coaching to ensure effective instruction at all levels.
  - Provide ongoing training and support to assimilate new knowledge and skills.
  - Anticipate and be willing to meet the newly emerging needs based on student performance.
- Leadership is vital.
  - Provide strong administrative support to ensure commitment and resources.
  - Provide strong teacher support to share in the common goal of improving instruction.
  - Allow a leadership team to build internal capacity and sustainability over time.

Source: Adapted from Iowa Department of Education, 2006.



instructionally needy students with intensive reading interventions, they will be able to demonstrate the ability to catch up with their achieving peers. However, if, after providing appropriate intensive and expert reading interventions through a multitiered design, we have not accelerated a student's reading development, then schools might consider a referral to special education as the last step in the RTI process.

The good news is that we know a lot about how to design effective intervention lessons that accelerate reading development. The RTI needs to be designed to achieve this goal. The main accomplishment of any RTI, then, would be resolving the reading difficulties that some readers experience. Accomplishment of that goal will be most likely if RTI initiatives are designed around core research-based design principles.



## The Design of This Book

The rest of this book targets key design features for RTI and other reading interventions. I have identified eight research-based principles after reviewing the research on interventions that accelerate reading development—producing more than one year's growth per year—that must be considered in designing effective reading interventions. Each of the next eight chapters focus on one of the eight research-based principles:

1. Begin an intervention plan. (Chapter 2)
2. Match reader and text level. (Chapter 3)
3. Dramatically expand reading activity. (Chapter 4)
4. Use very small groups or tutoring. (Chapter 5)
5. Coordinate intervention with core classroom. (Chapter 6)
6. Deliver intervention by expert teacher. (Chapter 7)
7. Focus instruction on meta-cognition and meaning. (Chapter 8)
8. Use texts that are interesting to students. (Chapter 9)

As you read this book you will see much of the research that supports each principle. I say “much of the research” because there exists an enormous body of research on interventions, and I present the most powerful studies and meta-analyses of the research on intervention design. To help you evaluate current or planned efforts I have developed the rubric in Appendix A for examining the eight principles of reading intervention design. The rubric presents the likelihood that the design you have chosen will solve the problems of the struggling readers in your school. But before using the rubric, read the book. Happy reading.