

WHAT REALLY MATTERS WHEN WORKING WITH STRUGGLING READERS

Richard L. Allington

There is good news and bad news on working with struggling readers. The good news is that we now have an essential research base demonstrating that virtually every child could be reading grade level by the end of first grade. The bad news is that almost no schools in the United States have anything in place that much looks like what the research says young children need to become engaged readers.

When I was a graduate student, one of my professors told us that it took 50 years for research findings to influence daily classroom practices! I recall that my peers and I were aghast at that thought. “Surely he is wrong. Surely he is too pessimistic,” we said to each other during our class break. Now, 40 years later, I tell my graduate students roughly the same thing.

In this article, I hope to convey what the research has indicated about teaching beginning reading

in plain language. I open with an argument that entrepreneurial enterprises continue to hold much more sway on daily practice than do research activities (Shannon & Edmondson, 2010). Then I note how too often “what the research says” has been ignored and that ineffective instructional practices continue unabated in U.S. classrooms. I also list a few of things that we do as common practice that research has suggested be eliminated from the school day. I close by suggesting that common aspects of the reading instruction currently offered could and should be eliminated and that we use those savings to invest in research-based reading lessons.

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Teaching Beginning Reading Based on Evidence

We have just completed a decade in which federal education policy typically touted “scientifically based, reliable, replicable research” as the basis for instructional recommendations provided teachers, schools, and state education agencies. The cornerstone of that effort was set out in a document entitled *Put Reading First* (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001), which was supposed to be a “plain language” summary of what the research said about effective reading lessons. However, instead arguments were presented in an entrepreneurial spirit, a spirit that often conflicted with what the research actually indicated. Nonetheless, too many educators took that document as “truth,” and reading lessons were altered, as was reading curriculum and assessment.

In the recent past, entrepreneurial documents (as in “buy our stuff”) proliferated, masquerading as research summaries (see Allington, 1999; Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Krashen, 2004; Strauss, 2003; Taylor, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 2000). This masquerading was unmasked by the Inspector General’s reports of federal mismanagement of the Reading First program (Brownstein & Hicks, 2005; 2006a; 2006b; Manzo, 2005; Schemo, 2007). After much involvement with changing primary-grade reading lessons, the Reading First program was not only found to have evidence of corruption primarily of the entrepreneurial sort (Garan, 2005),

but also did no more to raise reading achievement than control schools that received no Reading First funds (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2009). This combination of corruption and ineffectiveness led Congress to defund the Reading First program.

Misrepresenting What the Research Says About Developing Decoding Proficiencies

What went wrong? First and perhaps foremost, much emphasis was placed on explicit and systematic phonics instruction, although the National Reading Panel (NRP; 2000) report warned against such excesses while at the same time making the commonsense recommendation that effective decoding instruction become a small part of every kindergarten and first-grade reading lesson. The NRP report also noted that such an emphasis produced a moderate positive effect on later decoding performance but a trivial positive effect on later reading comprehension. The report noted that no significant positive effects for decoding emphasis lessons were found for students, including struggling readers, beyond first grade.

Linked to this systematic phonic emphasis was the entrepreneurial recommendation to include decodable texts as an essential element of a scientifically based reading instructional plan. However, no research indicated that decodable texts were necessary or useful in beginning reading instruction (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1998; Hoffman, Sailors, & Patterson, 2002). Research conducted later (Jenkins, Peyton, Sanders, & Vadasy, 2004) found that decodable texts and predictable texts produced the same reading outcomes for first graders in 11 urban schools when the decoding lessons were constant for both groups of children. Still, many, many schools had already purchased decodable texts and placed them in students’ desks.

Another related curricular shift was a focus on teaching young children to pronounce decodable nonwords (also known as nonsense syllables). This was, supposedly, a true test of decoding prowess, which was touted as the solution that was needed. Along with this focus came assessments that measured how accurately and quickly children could pronounce nonsense words. It never occurred to anyone that having children attempt to pronounce nonsense words might undermine their use of cross-checking and other self-regulating strategies when they finally moved on to actual texts (Pressley, 2002; Walmsley, 1978). Children can be taught to pronounce nonsense words, but this should not be confused with teaching them

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None of this is to suggest that children don't need to learn to decode. Effective decoding proficiency is a hallmark of good beginning readers, but it is hardly the only hallmark. However, as the NRP noted, there are many ways to develop decoding proficiencies in young children. That is, there is no single method of teaching decoding that has been shown to be the most effective approach. Cunningham (2011) argued that:

The key conclusion of this research is that children do need systematic phonics instruction, but there is no one best way to teach phonics. This conclusion is disturbing to those who would like for there to be a specified best way so that everyone could be mandated to do it that way. (p. 221)

Every primary-grade teacher needs to know how to teach several decoding approaches effectively—several because no single approach works for every child, and effective teachers adapt their teaching until they locate the best method for developing decoding proficiencies for each child.

There is more to do than simply helping primary-grade teachers develop the expertise in providing explicit decoding lessons. Fostering phonemic awareness is a critical aspect of emergent literacy development. It isn't clear why primary-grade teachers rarely use inventive writing in kindergarten and first grade, but we have good evidence, as Adams (1990) noted almost 25 years ago:

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The evidence that inventive spelling activity simultaneously develops phonemic awareness and promotes understanding of the alphabetic principle is extremely promising, especially in view of the difficulty with which children are found to acquire these insights through other methods of teaching. (p. 387)

Inventive writing works, in large part, because as Adams also noted, instruction in letter–sound relationship is of little value or utility unless the child is interested in using those letter–sound relationships to read or write (Adams, 1990). Inventive writing provides just that motivation, and “sound stretching” as a complimentary task focuses attention on the individual phonemes that compose English words (Clarke, 1988; Gough, 1998; Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, & Perney, 2003).

However, on my visits to primary-grade classrooms, I have noticed almost no inventive writing activity, while also noting many decoding worksheets that have been assigned and completed. Unfortunately, those worksheets are largely worthless and instead make up what Adams (1990) called the “inherently intractable, slow, inefficient” (p. 292) basic phonics curriculum.

As I noted earlier, developing effective early decoding proficiencies is an essential task of primary-grade teachers. Unfortunately, the emphasis on decoding brought to U.S. classrooms almost nothing of what we know about how to accomplish this effectively and efficiently.

Fidelity of Implementation Replaced Developing Effective Teachers as Our Goal

The past decade has seen a return of the commercial core reading program as the primary guide for delivering reading lessons. This is another example of the entrepreneurial influences on teaching children to read—entrepreneurial because not a single reliable study supports the use of any of the commercial core programs (What Works Clearinghouse [WWC], 2007).

In fact, of the 153 different reading programs reviewed by the WWC, only one had “strong evidence” that it improved reading achievement! One! That program was Reading Recovery, a first-grade reading intervention program that features a yearlong intensive professional development component in which teachers learn how 6-year-olds get confused and begin to struggle with reading acquisition.

Beyond the research reviews provided by the WWC, McGill-Franzen, Zmach, Solic, and Zeig (2006) studied third-grade reading achievement in Florida and found that it didn't matter

which of the core reading programs school districts adopted; a quarter of the children still failed the state reading test and were held back in third grade. Almost half of the children held back the first year were held back for a third year in third grade in Florida schools, thus providing them with three years of reading lessons from the same core reading programs that had led to their initial failure. Their failure to acquire reading proficiency seems related to the fact that no research supports the use of core reading programs in fostering reading growth.

Dewitz, Jones, and Leahy (2009) analyzed five core reading programs and noted that if developing children's reading comprehension was a goal, then core reading programs had little to recommend them. They noted that these core reading programs don't provide the same amount of guided practice as is provided in the research, don't consistently follow the gradual release of responsibility model researchers have developed, and don't consistently follow the research on providing explicit instruction, nor on having teachers relate strategies to one another or make their impact on reading clear. In other words, commercial core reading programs typically provide lessons that bear little or no relationship to the research on fostering the development of reading comprehension. The authors concluded that "Fidelity to a flawed program is not a virtue" (p. 122).

Nonetheless, fidelity to flawed core reading programs became a goal in too many schools, especially schools serving low-income children. The irony here is that this was done in the name of "scientifically based, reliable, replicable research." This is ironic because no research existed then, or exists now, to suggest that maintaining fidelity to a core reading program will provide

effective reading lessons. Instead of focusing on what research has identified as the critical factor in the quality of reading lessons offered, the expertise of the teacher (Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2009), in the past decade, federal, state, and district policies have focused on mandating the use of an approach that has generated no support in the research on teaching beginning readers.

Too Often We Don't Have Expert Teachers Working With Struggling Readers

Too often, struggling readers work with paraprofessionals in their reading intervention services. This is unfortunate because paraprofessionals are usually the least expert adults working with children in schools. Over a decade ago, the federal Title I program evaluation noted:

Progress in using Title I to support improved instructional practices at the school-level remains limited by the continued use of paraprofessionals who provide instruction—particularly in the highest-poverty Title I schools.... Phasing out their use in instruction and promoting their use as parent liaisons or in administrative functions should be a priority. (United States Department of Education, 1999)

However, if any change has occurred in Title I programs over the decade since that indictment was written, it is that paraprofessionals continue to provide an even greater proportion of Title I reading interventions. The aforementioned concern was driven

by a continuing series of research reports noting that paraprofessional-led reading interventions rarely produced the accelerated reading growth necessary if one ever hopes to turn struggling readers into achieving readers (Anderson & Pellicier, 1990; Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain, 1998; Croninger & Valli, 2009; Puma et al., 1997; Rowan & Guthrie, 1989; Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Madden, 2011; Wasik & Slavin, 1993).

Nonetheless, paraprofessionals working in schools now far outnumber available reading specialists. Again, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2004) Schools and Staffing Survey data indicated that there were 29,000 individuals who were working as reading specialists in U.S. schools, but only one-third of those individuals reported holding a graduate degree with an emphasis on reading. This federal agency concluded that the typical reading specialist had less educational preparation in their field than did other specialists working in U.S. schools. Most U.S. schools, then, employ few teachers who know much about reading development or how to facilitate it. The NCES data suggest that for every school that employs a reading specialist with appropriate graduate preparation, there will be 10 schools or more that have no such person on their staff.

I suggest that U.S. schools will rarely deliver high-quality reading lessons that struggling readers need until every school employs multiple reading specialists who have earned a

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graduate degree with the appropriate reading emphasis. U.S. schools will not deliver high-quality lessons if there is a continued reliance on paraprofessionals to deliver reading lessons in intervention programs, either through Title I or special education programs. We have too much evidence that expertise in reading matters for any child who is struggling while learning to be literate.

Stuhlman and Pianta (2009) reported that less than a quarter (23%) of first-grade teachers provided high-quality reading lessons, lessons of the sort that might enable every student to complete first grade as a successful reader. They also noted that almost as many teachers offered low-quality reading lessons that would enable few students to be successful readers at the end of the year. Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider, and Sweeney (2010) and McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi, and Brooks (1999) demonstrated the potential powerful effect that targeted professional development can have on the reading instruction provided by kindergarten and first-grade teachers. In both studies, emergent readers at risk for becoming older struggling readers were largely eliminated after their teachers had participated in 30 or more hours of targeted professional development, in addition to having classroom coaching available to support their efforts to become truly effective reading teachers.

Vellutino and Scanlon (2002) noted that some primary-grade children who are struggling are easy to remediate and turn into achieving readers. These children who began kindergarten at risk of reading failure became achieving readers with just two weekly sessions of one-on-one expert tutoring during their kindergarten year. A second group is a bit more difficult to bring up to grade level; these children improved as a result of the kindergarten tutorial but were still

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at risk entering first grade. However, after about 12–14 weeks of expert tutoring in first grade, they had become achieving readers.

A third group of children needed more than 12–14 weeks of tutoring in first grade to become achieving readers, and some needed a full first-grade year of expert tutoring to become achieving readers. However, virtually every child in these schools could be brought up to grade-level reading performance when they received sufficient expert tutoring. Furthermore, most of these formerly at-risk readers maintained their on-level reading achievement at least through the end of fourth grade.

Not at all children find learning to read an easy accomplishment. Some children need more expert instruction and need more reading lessons than others if they are to be expected to succeed as readers. The work of Vellutino et al. (1996), that of Mathes et al. (2005), and that of Phillips and Smith (2010) provide powerful testament to the potential of expert reading lessons as the solution to the problems U.S. schools are experiencing with too many children who find learning to read difficult.

Struggling Readers Are Often Asked to Read Texts That Are Too Difficult

Struggling readers are often asked to read text that is far more difficult for them to read than the texts their better reading peers are assigned (Allington,

2012). Since Betts (1946) first established the criteria for optimum text difficulty, there have been a number of studies validating the potential power of engaging children in reading where their accuracy is high.

Ehri, Dreyer, Flugman, and Gross (2007), for instance, noted that the reading development of primary-grade struggling readers who were tutored “appeared to be explained primarily by one aspect of their tutoring experience—reading texts at a high level of accuracy, between 98% and 100%” (p. 441). Likewise, O’Connor and colleagues (2002) found that sixth-grade struggling readers benefitted more when tutors used reading level–matched texts than when they used grade-level materials.

Jorgenson, Klein, and Kumar (1977) reported that struggling readers were more likely to be engaged when the texts they were reading better matched their reading levels as compared with engagement when texts were at grade level. Gambrell, Wilson, and Gantt (1981) reported the same results, as did Fisher and Berliner (1985) and Anderson, Evertson, and Brophy (1979). In short, too many struggling readers have desks full of grade-level texts that they cannot read accurately, texts that will foster neither engaged reading nor reading development.

It is the better readers in U.S. classrooms who daily engage in much high-success reading activity (98% accuracy or higher) and who develop

into our good readers. In too many classrooms, their struggling reader peers engage in daily hard reading activities and continue to flounder as readers. As Adams (1990) noted decades ago, “The most important activity for developing literacy is that of inducing students to read independently. Yet, when a text is difficult for children, they comprehend little, learn little, and tire quickly” (p. 295).

Reading with 98% accuracy, or better, may seem to imply providing texts that are too easy to foster reading development. However, consider that if adults typically read texts at this level of difficulty, that would mean they would encounter approximately six words on every page of a paperback novel they had not seen before and would have to work out the pronunciation. The problem here is that most adults don’t encounter such a word in almost any text they read! In fact, most adults consider texts they can read with only 98% accuracy as hard texts. Most adults will work to avoid reading any such difficult text. They will look for alternative texts, texts that are easier—texts they can read accurately without actually using their decoding abilities.

Struggling readers just participate in too little high-success reading activity every day. This is one reason so few struggling readers ever become achieving readers. We could change that, but such change runs counter to the dominant one-size-fits-all entrepreneurial curriculum framework that dominates schools today and seems the dominant model for the future (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). It is our struggling readers who will continue to pay the price for such ill-begotten plans.

Minimizing the Time Spent on Independent Reading During the School Day

Although we have hundreds of correlational studies reporting that better readers spend more time engaged in silent reading of self-selected books (see Krashen, 2004, for a review of these studies), the NRP (2000) only examined experimental studies in which the volume of reading was manipulated. There are fewer of these studies for reasons that should be obvious. The NRP reported on the dearth of experimental studies and concluded that “based on the existing evidence, the NRP can only indicate that while encouraging students to read might be beneficial, research has not yet demonstrated this in a clear and convincing manner” (p. 3–3).

Pearson (2007) noted that the problem the NRP had with independent reading was that there was not a large number of randomized field trials, so they concluded there was no evidence to support the efficacy of school-based programs that promote independent reading. However, there was evidence from a few small-scale experiments, from naturalistic epistemological studies, from best-practice studies, from many correlational studies, and from studies for which the research was on foreign populations that did not speak or read English. He pointed out that the situation was very different from saying “no evidence” was available to support school-based independent reading.

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However, Armbruster and colleagues (2001), in their widely distributed booklet entitled *Put Reading First*, went a step further and recommended that “rather than allocating instructional time for independent reading in the classroom, encourage your students to read more outside of school” (p. 29). This guidance effectively removed independent reading during the school day.

Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) noted that “individual differences in exposure to print can predict differences in growth in reading comprehension ability throughout the elementary grades and thereafter” (p. 940). They found that differences in early reading proficiency predicted differences in how much children read, which predicted 10 years later who would be a good reader and who wouldn’t.

Much of this debate centers on the potential role of self-teaching, or learning without lessons. Self-teaching is one of those largely ignored but potentially powerful aspects of engaged reading. I think it is clear

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that vocabulary knowledge is largely a product of independent engaged reading (Stahl & Nagy, 2006). However, there is also evidence that almost everything, from phonemic awareness, to phonics, to comprehension, is developed through independent reading and writing (Allington, 2009a).

Our most recent study examining the self-teaching hypothesis involved providing 12 free self-selected books every summer to children from low-income families (Allington et al., 2010). What this study found was that we could eliminate the summer reading loss that produces most of the reading achievement differences found between the children of low- and middle-income families in U.S. schools. The poor children to whom we provided free self-selected books gained reading achievement during the summer months, whereas the control group of children who did not receive the books lost ground, or experienced summer reading loss.

Our intervention provided only the free books; there was no corresponding reading instruction attached to the book distribution. Nonetheless, even without summer reading lessons, just reading during the summer months fostered reading growth! The observed summer reading development equaled the achievement growth found in an earlier meta-analysis of the effects of summer school on reading achievement (Cooper, Charleton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000). The experimental evidence is

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clearer today perhaps than a decade ago that the actual volume of reading activity is an important component in the development of a myriad of reading proficiencies. Still, however, schools seem to largely ignore independent and voluntary reading as important aspects of their curricular and instructional plans.

Struggling Readers Are Assigned Less Reading But Do More Worksheets

In addition to limiting the volume of independent reading that children do during the school day is the evidence that we do not design lessons so that those who are struggling read more every day than their peers who have successfully developed reading proficiency. That is, we fill struggling readers' days with tasks that require little reading. If we want to foster reading development, then we must design lessons that provide the opportunities for struggling readers to actually read. Torgesen (2004) made a similar argument:

Schools must focus powerfully on preventing the emergence of early reading weaknesses—and *the enormous reading practice deficits* that result from prolonged reading failure—through excellent core classroom instruction and intensive, explicit interventions for children who are identified through reliable indicators as at risk of failure. (p. 365)

For any number of reasons, struggling readers in U.S. schools do far less

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reading than good readers. Some of this, undoubtedly, has to do with reading motivations. That is, children who struggle with reading engage in less voluntary reading than do good readers. However, we have convincing evidence that the design of reading lessons differs for good and poor readers in that poor readers get more work on skills in isolation, whereas good readers get assigned more reading activity (Allington, 1980; 1983; 2002; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Collins, 1986; Cummins, 2007; Valli & Chambliss, 2007; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003).

Linked to engaging in less reading during reading instruction is the fact that struggling readers also do more oral reading during their lessons than do better readers. Much of this oral reading is done in the round robin oral reading style (Allington, 1983; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2010). This occurs even though round robin reading has been criticized as a lesson component (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2008; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003) and shown to be a less effective use of instructional time than other alternatives (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003).

A primary problem with the round robin reading activity is that only a single child is reading while others in the instructional group are, at best, following along as their classmate reads aloud. In silent reading activity, everyone is engaged in reading, so

during the same period of time, children engaged in silent reading read three to five times as much text as during a round robin reading event.

In addition to limiting reading volume, round robin oral reading produces far more teacher interruptions of the reading activity. The most common point of a teacher interruption is when a reader makes an error while reading, although even a hesitation can prompt a teacher interruption (Allington, 1980; Collins, 1986; Eder, 1982). Members of struggling reader instructional groups pick up the interrupting behavior by their teacher and in a short period of time begin to mimic the teacher by interrupting other struggling readers (Eder & Felmlee, 1984).

The end result is that round robin reading fosters the interruptive behavior, and under those conditions, readers begin to read more slowly and tentatively. Ultimately, I've argued that the interruptive round robin oral reading lesson fosters the dysfluency that typically marks the oral reading behaviors of struggling readers (Allington, 2009b).

It Is Not a Lack of Money That Prevents Us From Teaching Every Child to Read

Before you throw up your hands and shout, "I'd love to provide what research says is necessary but we don't have the money to do that," let me point out a few money-saving opportunities that could well provide the money you don't seem to have. The following is a list of fairly common instructional options that currently use the dollars (and time) that could be spent to provide the research-based instruction that all children deserve.

- Eliminate workbooks—No study has ever identified completing workbook

pages as effective practice (Anderson, Brubaker, Alleman-Brooks, & Duffy, 1985; Cunningham, 1982; Fisher & Hiebert, 1990; James-Burdumy et al., 2010; Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, & Russ, 2004; Turner, 1995). In addition to having no evidence of producing positive effects on reading achievement, workbooks are consumable and thus an annual expense (Jachym, Allington, & Broikou, 1989) that we could tap to fund evidence-based practices.

- Eliminate test prep—What test prep is good at is generating profits for the test publishers (Glovin & Evans, 2006). However, no research has demonstrated that test prep actually improves performance on standardized tests of reading development, much less fostered improved reading behaviors (Guthrie, 2002; Popham, 2001). Again, test prep produces annual expenditures that could be instead invested in research-based practices.

- Eliminate paraprofessionals from instructional roles—Following the advice of the federal Title I program noted earlier, reducing annual expenditures for paraprofessionals also provides funds that could be invested in research-based practices.

- Eliminate expenditures for computer-based reading programs—Although computer-based reading programs have become this decade's most popular educational fad, no research supports the expenditure of education dollars on computers, computer software, or

computer-based reading curriculum (Campuzano, Dynarski, Agodini, & Rall, 2009; Slavin et al., 2011).

Eliminating money wasted on things that don't really matter seems the most logical place to begin our effort to teach all children to read. In many schools, eliminating all of the aforementioned items from our current expenditures would provide between \$250,000 and \$500,000 annually to fund research-based instructional efforts. In addition, eliminating things that have never made a positive difference in reading outcomes would mean that we would also have time to implement the many research-based instructional improvements that all readers need.

Summary

We can change the future for struggling readers. However, to do so requires that we rethink almost every aspect of the instructional plans we currently have in place. What benefits children who struggle with learning to read the most is a steady diet of high-quality reading lessons, lessons in which they have texts they can read with an appropriate level of accuracy and in which they are also engaged in the sort of work we expect our better readers to do.

The instruction we currently provide struggling readers too often focuses on isolated lessons targeting specific skill deficits. Too often these lessons involve the least powerful instructional options as we expect struggling readers

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to complete worksheet after worksheet, skill lesson after skill lesson, and engage them in round robin oral reading activities. We’ve known for two decades that when classroom reading lessons for struggling readers are meaning focused, struggling readers improve more than when lessons are skills focused (Knapp, 1995). Nonetheless, skills-focused instruction still dominates the lessons we offer struggling readers.

One thing that every educator who reads this article might do is to respond to each of the following characteristics of research-based reading lessons for struggling readers:

- Do we expect our struggling readers to read and write more every day than our achieving readers?
- Have we ensured that every intervention for our struggling readers is taught only by our most effective and most expert teachers?
- Have we designed our reading lessons such that struggling readers spend at least two-thirds of every lesson engaged in the actual reading of texts?
- Do we ensure that the texts we provide struggling readers across the full school day are texts that they can read with at least 98% word recognition accuracy and 90% comprehension?
- Does every struggling reader leave the building each day with at least one book they can read and that they also want to read?

We can teach virtually every child to read. Now the question that we face is this: Will we use what we know to solve the problems faced by the children who struggle to become readers? Unless you were able to respond positively to each of the five questions just posed, then there is work to be done. However, the time has come to recognize that struggling readers still exist largely because of us. If every school implemented the interventions that researchers have verified and if every teacher who is attempting to teach children to read developed the needed expertise, struggling readers would all learn to read and become achieving readers. However, it remains up to us, the educators, to alter our schools and our budgets so that every child becomes a real reader. I hope we are up to the challenge.

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