Lessons from the Reading Reform Field

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This is not a research paper. It is based on research, but what I am reporting is a professional journey instead. It seems to me that, in my case, the journey is at least as interesting as the research itself. In the paper I report some lessons from a 15-year journey into school reform in reading. This professional journey involved more than three-dozen urban and rural schools in reform because of low reading test scores. I have been involved in these elementary and middle schools at different levels—as a state office administrator, a technical assistant, a professional developer and an evaluator.

In this paper, I report briefly on the research results. Then, though, I tell the more interesting story of the lessons I learned on that journey.

Overview

While Isabel and I have many interests in the field of reading in common, one aspect of the field that Isabel never wanted to deal with were the headaches associated with the sheer scale of reform in reading. I am not sure just why this became a passion of mine, but it did.

My journey followed a path similar and parallel to the one laid out by states and the federal government in the late 1990s after the seeming failure of whole language to have an impact on students’ reading performance. At that time a flurry of activity began at the state and federal level regarding reading. States began their own literacy initiatives, each state having an initiative titled with its own name—Utah Reads, Maine Reads, Florida Reads, California Reads—and along down the line of 50 states. These initiatives appeared about the same time that Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) was being written and the work of the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) was taking place. This large, national reform effort was launched, in part, by at least three concerns, 1) California’s alarming decline in students’ reading test scores, 2) additional and significant declines on the Nation’s Report Card (National Assessment of Educational
Progress (NAEP), and 3) growing research evidence that enough was now known about beginning reading instruction to assist all teachers in delivering a much higher quality of instruction than was currently being delivered.

It was in this context that I shifted my research interests and work. My own journey on the road of reading reform began with a small grant from the Utah State Office of Education (USOE) in the mid-1990s and continued with the design, development and administration of the Utah Governor’s Initiative on Reading (Utah Reads). While in the middle of this small grant, the Request For Proposal came out for the Reading Excellence Act (REA) under the Clinton administration in the late 1990s. The goal of this federal project was to improve the reading abilities of K-3 children in high poverty schools across the country. Funds were awarded to successful state grant applicants to implement school reform in local districts. USOE colleagues and I designed, developed and wrote a proposal for that grant. When funding was awarded, I assisted in its implementation. Finally, in the early 2000s, I developed and wrote Utah’s Reading First grant. Reading First had the same goal as the REA—to improve the reading abilities of children in high poverty schools across the country at the K-3 levels. I, along with colleagues John Hosp at the Florida Center for Reading Research and Michelle Hosp, have co-directed the evaluation of Reading First in Utah over the past four years. As I write this chapter, the fifth and final year of Utah’s Reading First grant is being completed.

Learning Anew

Throughout most of my career as a teacher and researcher, I had not worked in high poverty schools. As a teacher, I worked in working class schools in Massachusetts, California, and Colorado. This work was quite comfortable for me as it matched my own working-class background. As a teacher educator and researcher, almost all the work I did was conducted in middle and upper-middle class schools. My journey into a different kind of school began with the USOE grant where I was hired
to work specifically with high poverty, low performing schools. This grant eventually took me to a series of urban schools with largely minority students and rural schools with poor white and minority students across the state of Utah. While Utah does not have the same kind of urban poverty that exists in the most densely populated cities in the country—like Los Angeles or New York—it does have both urban and rural poverty typical of many states in the country. Our minority students are mostly Hispanic, with a large contingency of native Spanish speakers and with many Native American students as well.

My work in the early grades of these high poverty schools led me on a new learning curve. Up to that point, my own expertise and research had been on comprehension instruction. But now I had to look at a much broader range of issues in reading instruction than just comprehension. It forced me to gain expertise in early reading instruction. While I had taught early reading in the classroom and I knew, at a practical level, how young children learn to read, I did not know the research, a fact that Isabel pointed out to me repeatedly. “You really need to know the research on early reading instruction.” This new interest of mine forced me to learn a whole body of research I had not known.

Another area I needed to learn much more about was systemic change. While I was somewhat familiar with Fullan’s (1991) work on the professional development literature (Guskey, 1995; Hargreaves, 1995; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Smylie, 1995; Sparks, 1995), I did not know the research on systemic change or on various school reform efforts, a body of work largely in the policy area (for reviews, see Berman & McLaughlin, 1977; Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). What needs to be in place in order for schools to reinvent themselves? What needs to happen in chronically low-performing schools (Snow, et al., 1998) to change the culture of the school? While I intuitively knew that it was not a simple matter to change instruction, I also knew it was not an easy matter to change schools and districts. I remembered quite vividly Goodlad’s (1984) argument that change happens at
the school level, but it was not clear just how it happened or what trigger points were needed to make it happen.

Finally, I needed more information on research on professional development, a disparate and sometimes fragmented body of work with few firm conclusions. The body of research is not scientifically rigorous, but it did offer some general principles to guide educators who wanted to design professional development to assist and support teachers in their work with students.

The Results of Systemic Reading Reform

For the projects on which I worked, some small growth has been evident, but huge changes were not. In all projects, districts were not as interesting as individual schools. Results vary considerably at the school level, with some schools profiting from the reform, and others stagnating or yo-yoing. We have seen the yo-yoing effect in many schools, where they make progress in the first two years, then decline the next, only to go up again and then back down. A discernable pattern of steady, incremental progress does not emerge across the years.

For the REA grant, gains or losses were measured at the kindergarten level by a state-developed kindergarten pre- and post-assessment, the state’s CRT language arts scores for grades 1-3, and the third grade SAT-9 reading test scores. The SAT-9 was administered to third-grade students routinely in the state. REA schools were compared to a set of comparison schools, matched on test scores, SES, percent of minority children, and size of school, results indicated mostly comparable gains made across both sets of schools.

Results from two years of the REA grant were mixed (Nelson, Fox, & Gardner, 2001). At the kindergarten level, there were no differences among kindergarten children on the kindergarten pretest for the REA and the comparison schools. However, REA kindergarteners significantly outperformed the comparison kindergarteners at the end of the two years of the project. On the CRTs, at the first
grade level, REA schools significantly outperformed control schools as well. At the second and third grade level, however, there were no significant differences on the CRTs between REA schools and comparison schools at the end of the two years of the project. Also, no differences were found among third grades in REA and comparison schools on the Sat-9.

Thus, the gains made by one grade were offset by no gains at other grades. What does it mean when test scores for kindergarten and grade one increased significantly from one year to the next, and were significantly higher for REA schools than comparison schools, when grades two and three did not increase across years and were not significantly different from comparison schools? Is the project successful or not? These types of results might make sense to researchers, but they do not lend themselves to easy conclusions. Further, they do not particularly impress school administrators and legislatures.

Outcome measures for the Reading First project have included the state CRTs and the standardized test given by the state in grade 3, the SAT-9 administered to third graders in Year 1 of the project, and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) administered in Years 2, 3 and 4 of the project. In general, Reading First’s progress within the state mirrors what was found in the REA. Evaluation of the first four years of Reading First in Utah on the state CRTs can be seen in Table 1. Across the four years of the project, first grade made major gains in the percentage of children who scored at or above proficiency level across the first four years of the project. Those gains diminished this last year. Second grade scores have remained rather flat. Third grade students’ scores showed continuous growth across the four years of the project in that a higher percentage of students scored at or above proficiency over the years of the project.

When Reading First schools are compared to a set of comparison schools, though, results demonstrate comparable gains. A comparison between Reading First and Comparison Schools in Year
4 indicated that 55% (vs. 54% of Comparison) of first graders, 58% (vs. 55% of Comparison) of second graders, and 61% (vs. 58% of Comparison) of third graders met grade-level expectations on the CRTs. Statistical comparisons between Reading First and Comparison Schools indicated no significant differences at grades 1, 2, and 3 on the percentage of students meeting or exceeding grade level expectations. Even though the percentages of students achieving proficiency were greater for Reading First schools than for Comparison Schools at all grade levels, and thus in the right direction, the differences between the two sets of schools overall were not significant.

What I Learned about Systemic Reading Reform

My work with the Reading Excellence Act (REA) and Utah’s Reading First forced me to be concerned about a whole set of educational issues about which, as a reading researcher and educator, I had never been concerned. While I knew how to deliver professional development for high-quality reading instruction at the school and district level, there were many other components of large-scale systemic school reform in reading for which I was unprepared. I learned first-hand the substantial difference between the field of research and the field of evaluation. Issues that, prior to now, had never been important, all of a sudden took on huge significance. For example, what do we compare Reading First school to? Exactly who was being tested in Reading First? How will the professional development be delivered to the people who need it? Which programs and instructional approaches are acceptable and which are not? How do we engage the commitment of principals and keep that level of commitment? Where do we find high quality reading coaches and how do we distribute them? How do we keep teachers in the buildings? What do we do with resistant teachers?

Comparison Schools Are in Reform Too

A critically important learning for me occurred when we interviewed principals in the Comparison schools in Reading First. What became clear was that reading reform does not take place
in a vacuum. In fact, all Title I schools, especially here in the 2000s, are in reform. When we compare REA or Reading First schools to “Comparison Schools,” we are not comparing them to “control schools” doing nothing. Comparison schools were hard at work at reform as well (see also Mesmer & Karchmer, 2003). For example, we found out that almost all the comparison schools in the Reading First project had reading coaches at the school level. The primary difference was that their reading coaches worked with students as well as teachers throughout the day; our coaches only worked with teachers. But Comparison Schools all used different core reading programs, and, in addition, other professional development and intervention programs as well. Finally, they all used some kind of informal assessment of their students.

Thus, when all is said and done, many of the Reading First components—a reading coach, a core reading program, some type of intervention, assessment-driven instruction—were also in use in the Comparison Schools. This makes sense in that as soon as Reading First districts see something that appears to work—e.g. a reading coach, an intervention program, assessment-driven instruction—they immediately try to implement that same instructional component into their non-Reading First schools. And, in fact, this is what we found. Thus, the lines between Reading First and non-Reading First schools become blurred.

**Testing All Students**

The issue of who was tested on the outcome measures became an issue over the years of the Reading First project. This issue never arose during REA. At that time we examined the test scores of students that the districts reported testing, assuming that all students were tested. In Reading First, a big issue became a definitive counting up and matching of the students who were actually tested as opposed to the students who were currently enrolled in the districts. Over the years, as districts have become more accountable for their students’ test scores, some schools and districts began to alter the
criteria for just who was tested. In some districts students who speak English as a second language (ELLs) were not tested, nor were learning-disabled (LD) students. Not testing these students obviously affects overall test scores and changes significantly the reported progress of the districts in teaching everyone to read.

It took a period of two years for the districts to alter their testing so that almost all enrolled students were tested. At the beginning of the project about 90% of enrolled students in grades 1-3 were tested—both in Reading First and Comparison schools. In the third and fourth year of the project, 99-100% of students were tested in Reading First, while 95-98% of students were tested in Comparison Schools. The increase in the percent of students tested is sure to have an impact on test scores. Although we do not know which students were not tested during those first two years, it is unlikely to be students who happened to score the highest on the state CRTs. It is far more likely that the districts’ lowest scoring students were not tested. This issue impacted how Reading First measured progress from one year to the next to the federal government. In our case, the testing issue occurred at both Reading First and Comparison schools. We do not know the extent to which differences in the percentage of students tested affected comparisons made between Reading First and Comparison Schools.

Rural Schools

One of the most difficult issues I wrestled with was thinking about delivering professional development and high quality reading instruction to rural schools. Half of the schools and districts with whom we worked were located hours away from the metropolitan area. One of our most needy rural districts was located a six hour drive away—with no way to get there faster than by car. So, how will the knowledge needed to provide high quality professional development get there? How can the districts entice highly skilled reading professionals to these rural areas? What ended up happening was
that some of the rural districts hired live bodies to fill slots because there simply were not people available with enough knowledge about reading instruction to deliver that instruction or to deliver the high quality professional development to enable teachers in the districts to deepen their knowledge base about reading and to improve their instruction. These larger issues were ones I had not thought about, but they were essential to setting up the infrastructure for the delivery of high quality reading instruction in schools.

Nevertheless, the USOE was successful in bringing in high quality professional development. It was very difficult to convince educators to move to this district full-time. But the USOE was successful at enticing professional developers to travel to the district and spend a week at a time with the different schools. This was no easy feat; some schools within districts were located 30-45 minutes apart from each other.

Reading Programs and Instructional Approaches

Another important lesson for me was the difficulty of mandating programs and instructional approaches to districts. It is one thing to talk to colleagues or even to educators at a given school about preferred programs and instructional methods. It is quite another to be responsible for mandating a particular program or instructional method. The REA grant was one of the first federal grants to states and districts that came with assurances, restrictions and requirements about instruction itself. It must be remembered that Congress authorized the REA grant in the late 1990s just after the apparent collapse of whole language. The terms “scientifically based reading research” and “evidence-based practice” were coined and defined around this point in time. Programs and instructional approaches that were not “scientifically based” were discouraged from being used.

At that time, though, which programs and instructional approaches were and were not scientifically based was a debated issue (as they still are today). Even within the area of phonics, now
accepted in the field as an essential part of reading instruction, there is still some debate about how best to deliver the instruction in phonics. Experts can look at two different phonics programs and not necessarily agree about whether either one is “acceptable.”

In the initial meetings with the districts for the REA grant, most fought to keep the programs and instructional approaches they already had in place. This was foreseeable, of course, since the districts had paid considerable sums of money for these programs and were obviously committed to them. While in general the actual requirements were fuzzy, some programs clearly were not in the best interests of children.

Rural districts have often been vulnerable to home-grown, self-produced programs whose developers are mostly interested in financial success. State departments of education often helplessly watch these programs adopted by districts eager to implement anything that they think will make a difference. During the REA grant, one district wanted to keep in place a professional development model that trained all teachers in a regionally, but not nationally, known tutoring program. The professional development provided teachers with knowledge about how to tutor individual students in reading. Then, teachers were removed from their classrooms to provide the instruction to one student at a time, while substitute teachers taught the rest of the class. However, approximately 85% of the students in the schools needed individual tutoring as they were well below grade level. Since so many of the students needed tutoring, then, it was impossible for teachers to reach all needy students. In addition, substitute teachers, not regularly certified teachers, taught the rest of the class while the teacher was out of the classroom tutoring.

Eventually, the district did give up its tutoring program and invested instead into the kind of professional development model advocated by the project. It was a hard sell for the project administrators, but the district did come around and learned a better way to deliver professional
development to their teachers—and at the same time keep them in their classrooms throughout the school day.

Because of problems such as these, the Department of Education tightened up their notion of acceptable programs and instructional approaches from the REA grant to Reading First, believing that the REA left too many doors open for schools and districts to use anything they wanted. Reading First therefore required, among other things, that districts faithfully follow a “core reading program.” Serious problems plagued Reading First developers within the Department of Education as they tried to identify acceptable “core reading programs” and instructional and assessment materials (Bell, 2003). I have learned to appreciate that developing policy about acceptable and unacceptable programs is no easy thing to do.

*Turnover*

Teachers often lament the fact that so many students in Title I classrooms leave during the school year. Teachers say that if there were less turnover among students, then test scores would be higher, an idea which certainly makes sense. However, what I learned was that a significant factor in school reform was the turnover of the teachers, reading coaches and principals. Throughout the four years of Reading First, we have experienced about a 30% turnover in the teachers and reading coaches in the project. There has been less among principals, but an important percent as well.

What that means is that each year, about one third of the teachers leave and new teachers come in. This is also true for reading coaches. Thus, the strong professional development that takes place each year in Reading First for both teachers and reading coaches is diluted, thereby diminishing the overall knowledge base about reading. We have seen this more clearly with reading coaches in that we are in the process of examining how coaches spend their time through coaches’ logs and direct observations. Our observers remark how some coaches have little knowledge about their jobs, after
having missed the strong professional development of coaches that took place in the first few years of the project. The strongest coaches appear to be the ones who have began the project when it started.

Leadership

The role of principals is clearly one of the most important ones in terms of the success or failure of school reform (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977). The REA and Reading First found a range of interest and commitment to the project by the different principals who were involved. I learned about two important issues related to the principal: 1) the principal’s level of commitment, 2) the principal’s sense of continuity and focus necessary to sustain change, and 2) principal turnover.

First, principals involved in the REA and Reading First differed in their commitment to the projects from the beginning. The level of commitment sometimes varied depending on who was most involved in applying for the grants. When the driving force occurred at the district administrative level, without much assistance from the principals, then the commitment of some principals tended to be less strong than when the driving force for the grant occurred at the school level. Districts were required to demonstrate participation from principals and teachers. However, the extent to which that actually happened varied by district. This makes sense, since a reluctant principal should not diminish enthusiasm for a project. However, because the principal is so important to school reform, such a move can eventually do more harm than good.

Thus, the level of commitment by principals varied greatly throughout the projects. Certainly, all principals were committed to improving their students’ reading abilities. However, some were not convinced that the REA and Reading First were the way to go to accomplish this. After all, when REA and Reading First were initiated, schools had already been involved in reading reform. All high poverty schools with poor test scores were already heavily invested in school reform of some sort. So,
in all the buildings involved in REA and Reading First, school reform of some sort already existed. Giving up what already was in place was difficult for principals.

As well, it was difficult for many principals to keep the focus on reading across the years. As soon as the second year of the project began, several principals in the REA grant introduced other programs and projects into their schools—along with professional development for teachers in addition to the extensive professional development to which they were already committed. One principal had a keyboarding program all set to go into Year 2 of the REA project, with additional professional development for teachers and additional time being used for keyboarding by primary grade students. It was a difficult sell to convince principals that all attention needed to stay focused on reading every year.

Still another issue related to the important leadership in the district was principal turnover. While one assurance from the districts in Reading First was that principals be placed in buildings for a period of three years, there was more turnover than that. New principals most often came in knowing little about the project in which the school was immersed. For some, their commitment to the projects was less than those who had been with the project from the beginning. Because the principal is so important to school reform, a less than fully committed principal makes reform far more difficult; in fact, a less than fully committed principal can be a serious barrier to reform.

The role of the principal makes a difference. Throughout both REA and Reading First I never saw a successful school with a less than fully committed principal. Principals do not necessarily need to be instructional leaders themselves, but they must have a full commitment to change and to the particular approach to change being offered. However, the opposite is not true. We saw some schools with fully committed principals, yet the schools were not able to make the kinds of changes and gains we would have expected.
Reading Coaches

The limited research on professional development suggests the important role that reading coaches can play in assisting teachers in implementing high quality instruction in reading (Joyce & Showers, 1995). Reading coaches are master teachers who actually visit classrooms and support teachers in their daily workplace. The reason coaches can be so important is that they can bridge the divide between professional development sessions and workshops and teachers’ workplace, the classroom (Dole, 2004). It is likely that the very best professional development is a good reading coach to assist teachers in learning new skills and strategies to teach. That coach has the opportunity to work with teachers in their classrooms where the learning is most meaningful and where the most transfer of learning is most likely possible.

For some reason, reading coaches became a part of the REA project and Reading First. My guess is that state departments of education saw a need for more professional development for teachers than just the typical workshop and inservice to which teachers have been exposed for decades. Educators and researchers alike are quite critical of this traditional professional development model for teachers (Fenstermacher & Berliner, 1985; Fullan, 1991; Hawley & Valli, 1999). So, despite the fact that there has been very little research on reading coaches, they became the standard for professional development in both projects.

Very few studies have been conducted to determine the extent to which traditional professional development results in changes in teaching behavior. For the most part, professional development is measured, when it is measured, by teacher evaluations at the end of the session (Hawley & Valli, 1999). The extent to which teachers actually change their behavior in their classrooms based on their professional development is largely unknown.
The belief, of course, is that reading coaches can play a critically important role in helping teachers change their behavior in classrooms. But, in order for this to happen, coaches need to be in teachers’ classrooms. That is the heart of the notion of reading coaches, yet that is a very difficult thing to do. The prevailing belief among many teachers and the classroom culture in general is that classrooms are private spaces, not public places.

One of the hardest things to do as a coach is to go into teachers’ classrooms. This is often the rub. Some coaches, nervous to be in teachers’ classrooms where they may not be wanted, choose to be more managers of information and support staff to teachers rather than instructional mentors to teachers. In their cluster analysis of how coaches spend their time, Deussen, Coskie, Robinson and Autio (2007) found that reading coaches can take on many different roles—from manager-oriented to data-oriented to student-oriented to teacher-oriented at the individual level to teacher-oriented at the group level. In the schools with whom I have worked, only the most confident and competent coaches actually take on the teacher-oriented roles. It is far easier to take on the role of managers or data experts where coaches are supporting teachers instead of mentoring them.

Resistance

A critical issue in school reform arises from the source of the proposed change—whether it be bottom-up where teachers decide to change a program or take on a new innovation, or top-down where district administrators decide to adopt a new program or innovation. I have directly observed bottom-up rather than top-down reform for most of my professional career. With REA and Reading First, I have learned much about top-down reform, especially about resistance.

First, I was surprised at how much passive resistance could be generated in response to reform. I had expected to see, and was not surprised at, active resistance to top-down projects. But I had not expected to see the more common passive resistance that was evident in the REA and Reading First.
One aspect of the successful reform effort, Success for All (SFA) (Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1993), that intrigued me was the idea that teachers in schools needed to commit to a project and actually cast a vote to approve it. I read where SFA required an 80% approval rate before they would go in to a school for reform. Therefore in the projects in which I was a part, we required that teachers in schools discuss the project and actually vote on it (a blind vote at that). In fact, in all the reform projects in which I have been involved, schools voted on their participation in the project. I believed this to be an important aspect of teacher buy-in.

What surprised me was the amount of passive resistance that I saw. I first became cognizant of this idea when I found out that virtually every school in which a reform project was implemented voted 100% to implement it. Then, months later, I would always find a few teachers who were resistant to the project. Why would this be so, since the teachers voted for the project? Did the resistant teachers vote for it? Of course they did. These teachers had the options of leaving the building or changing grades, but they chose not to. Instead, they chose to passively resist the reform effort. This passive resistance was clearly visible to me in the REA project in the first year when one teacher, seeing me in my role as a technical assistant on the project, closed her door after she watched me go into neighboring classrooms. As I reached for her classroom door next to observe her, I found she had locked the door of her classroom.

In the yearly interviews we have conducted at the end of each year with Reading First, most districts reported that a weakness of, or problem within, the project was teacher resistance. At the end of the first year of Reading First, I had a meeting with all the principals. At that time, I shared with them our first year findings from the interviews about the barrier of teacher resistance, and I suggested that principals might want to think about removing these teachers from the K-3 classrooms. Principals balked at the idea; not one principal was receptive to the idea of removing or reassigning a teacher.
Toward the end of Years 2 and 3 of the project, however, we found that several resistant, and/or incompetent teachers had been reshuffled around and reassigned out of the K-3 classrooms. In Years 3 and 4 of the project, teacher resistance remained an issue mentioned by some districts, but not all.

A Success Story Almost

So, after many sojourns into reading reform, what do I believe now? They say that inside every pessimist is an optimist, and though I may appear to be outwardly pessimistic, I remain fairly optimistic in the hope of reform in reading. It is clear that we are having some success in this country in improving the reading abilities of primary grade children. Scores for NAEP in 2004 were higher for fourth-graders at the fiftieth percentile than they ever have been since NAEP began in 1971 and significantly higher than they were in 1999 (U. S. Department of Education, 2004). I attribute this increased performance to the rising interest and initiatives by states and the federal government in reading reform beginning in the late 1990s, including new reviews of research (e.g., Snow, Griffith, & Burns, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000), and accompanying funding at both the state and federal levels. Congress bolstered the amount of funds available at the state level, not only through the REA, but also through Reading First, Early Reading First, and also through additional Title I funding and support. For all the criticisms of these programs, and there are many, NAEP scores suggest they are having an effect nationally.

An Example of Success

Interestingly, one of my very first journeys into school reform in reading occurred at a middle school that was powerfully successful in reforming their reading program during the life of the project (Jetton & Dole, 2004). This success story occurred in a high poverty urban middle school that had a large number of Hispanic students, many who spoke English as a second language. Though this is a middle school example, there are multiple success stories like this one across the country.
There were many things that differentiated this school from others from the very beginning. Interestingly, it was not the students that differentiated this school from others; the students were similar. It was the administration and the teachers who were different. The project began in the English Department with an energetic department head as well as an enthusiastic vice principal determined to do whatever it took to get his school on track. Teachers in the Department were also an energetic group who actively sought help and support for their English classrooms. These English teachers had a unifying sense of responsibility to their students, and they knew that what they had been doing for many years was no longer working with the current students they had. Perhaps most important, the teachers did not take this fact personally; they saw it as a part of changing times and they wanted to do something about it. Additionally, they were uniformly grateful for the funds awarded to them to purchase books and for the reading coach who had come to help them. It was the only time in my 15 years of work on reading reform where the teachers, at the first, introductory session asked, “How soon can you come into my classroom?”

In addition, the vice principal gave his full support to the project. He began with a critical question to teachers, “What will it take to implement this new program into your classrooms?” and “Tell me the barriers you are encountering and I’ll find ways to fix them.” His own personal support for the teachers and the numerous ways he eliminated barriers that came up were huge factors in the success of the project. For example, the teachers needed assistance in organizing the book orders for the library of novels and nonfiction books they had ordered; the vice principal provided secretarial support to order the books. Teachers needed a place to store the books they had purchased; they could find no empty space. The vice principal found empty space for the books. Funds were not forthcoming for the third year of the project. The principal hounded the USOE for those funds to continue the
project. In numerous ways throughout the project, the principal provided the support needed for teachers to be successful.

The reading coach and I developed a model for reading and writing instruction for the middle schools grades, and the reading coach worked through elements in the model in a series of professional development classes for the English teachers for which they received university credit. In addition, the reading coach worked with the teachers in their classrooms each month for three years. She modeled reading and writing lessons for them, observed them teach, and provided them with feedback.

A look at the 8th graders scores on the SAT-9, the annual standardized test administered to all 8th graders, demonstrates the success of the project (see Table 3). Prior to coming into the school, the school’s average on the test was at the 29th percentile. During the three years of the project test scores more than doubled, going up to 61st percentile of students being proficient on the SAT-9.

The Caveat

This particular project was funded for three years. Three years after that, as I was writing about the project, I looked up the school’s reading test scores to see if they maintained their growth in reading. To my amazement, I found that since the project ended, scores declined each year for the following three years. At the end of three years after the project ended, scores were actually below where they began (see Table 4).

I went back to talk with the English Department Head to find out what had changed over the course of the three years since the project ended. First, she indicated that there had been over a 30% turnover in the teachers in the Department. The new teachers did not have a history of the project, nor did they have a commitment to continue a project in which they had no part. Over time, the goals and purposes of the project were lost. In addition, the vice principal had retired. He had been a significant
linchpin in the success of the project. With him gone, there was no longer a leader with the vision and support so needed for the school’s success.

The support provided by the reading coach and the vice principal, as well as the critical mass of teachers who began the project together, appeared to have been decisive factors in the school’s success. The Department head suggested that the momentum that the department had made was gradually diluted without the teachers who had been a part of the project and without the vice principal and reading coach. Minus that support and consistency, the existing teachers who had been a part of the project were not able to sustain the momentum and the strong gains they had once made.

For three years, this middle school “beat the odds” (Langer, 2001; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). Other schools in the REA and the Reading First project did too. It is possible. And, the possibilities add up and make a difference. Despite all the unknowns and hardships inherent in reading reform, it still makes sense to use the best available evidence now known to try to impact schools in reading. The price of not trying is too high.
Table 1

*Percent of Utah’s Reading First Students Reading on or Above Grade Level According to the State CRTs Across the Four Years of the Project (Cohort 1 only)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Percent of Utah’s Reading First (RF) Students and Comparable Schools’ (CS) Students Reading on or Above Grade Level According to the State CRTs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>RF</th>
<th>CS</th>
<th>RF</th>
<th>CS</th>
<th>RF</th>
<th>CS</th>
<th>RF</th>
<th>CS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Three</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Averages for Cohorts 1 and 2 combined
Table 3

Average Percentile for 8th Grade Students at One Middle School Reading on or Above Grade Level According to the SAT-9* the Year the Intervention Began and During the Intervention, 1996-1998**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SAT-9 administered in the fall of each year
**Intervention began fall of 1996 and ended spring of 1998
Table 4

*Average Percentile for 8th Grade Students at One Middle School Reading on or Above Grade Level According to the SAT-9* the Year the Intervention Began Up to Three Years After the Intervention, 1996-1998**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SAT-9 administered in the fall of each year
**Intervention began fall of 1996 and ended spring of 1998
References


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