

# Turning Around a Reading Program

Principal Ben Sayeski wasn't sure whether to discipline or hug the girl who had been called to his office after arguing with a boy. As the girl recounted the incident, she said, "'He called me the F-word,'" recalls Sayeski. "And then she said, 'He used a suffix: 'er.' I thought, man, she's really getting this!"

Sayeski had been working hard for three years to raise Johnson Elementary School's scores on the Virginia accountability tests, especially reading scores. When he arrived at the Charlottesville school, only 37 percent of third graders could pass the reading test.

Sayeski knew it wouldn't be easy to turn the reading program around. For one thing, he was 29 when he took the job, and many of his faculty had been teaching before he had even started college.

The teachers had grown comfortable with their long-standing system of reading instruction—using chapter books and focusing on reading skills, one element at a time. It wasn't a bad way of approaching reading, says Sayeski, but too many children were slipping through the cracks.

Sayeski wanted a reading program that would work for all readers. He checked out the research and decided on a two-pronged curriculum: the Open Court reading series and Reading Mastery, a direct instruction program.

The idea was to assign each of the school's Title I teachers about six students at a time for the more intensive Reading Mastery program. Each child would spend as much time as he or she needed with the program before returning to a regular classroom.

Sayeski also analyzed the teachers' schedules and

was surprised at what he found. "We used to have a 90-minute reading block, with kindergarten having two 45-minute reading periods and an hour of unstructured centers," he says. "Then you throw in gym and art, and that didn't leave a whole lot of time to teach."

Now, everyone gets two hours of reading each day—even the kindergartners. Not everyone on the staff was thrilled. Some objected to higher expectations for younger children. "You got into this argument about what was developmentally appropriate," says Sayeski.

A few teachers left. "They told me, 'I don't think this is for me,'" he recalls. "They'd just look at me and try to argue, and I'd say, 'This is non-negotiable.'"

Today, 73 percent of Johnson's third graders have passed the state reading test and the achievement gap is closing, with 60 percent of black students passing—compared to 25 percent three years ago. The school is a frequent stop for educators looking for model programs.

Now, Sayeski has a new, though not unwelcome, problem: The constant parade of kids who want to read to him. "They say, 'Mr. Sayeski! I'm a reader!'" says the principal, who invites them into his office and sometimes puts them on the speakerphone to read to their parents.

—Ruth Sternberg

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or unwilling to maintain orderly learning environments rarely remain on staff.

**Data.** Turnaround principals recognize the necessity for regular and reliable data on each student's progress. They expect teachers to use diagnostic instruments, practice tests, frequent in-class questions, and assignments requiring application of knowledge to continually monitor how students are doing. When the data indicate that certain students are experiencing difficulties, their cases are frequently brought to grade-level and schoolwide meetings, where participants are asked to analyze the students' problems and develop intervention strategies. Waiting until

students receive failing grades on their report cards is not a viable option. By that time, these students often have fallen so far behind their classmates that catching up is unlikely.

Turnaround principals make certain they know which students are at risk of failing and they personally see to it that help is provided both within and outside of class. In case after case of schools that have reversed downward spirals, turnaround principals have taken a personal interest in seeing that struggling students do not slip through the cracks.

## Applying Simple Wisdom

Academics are fond of focusing on

the complexities of school improvement and the change process, and never tire of isolating new and unusual "keys" to saving schools. Principals are urged to create professional learning communities, collaborative cultures, and shared governance structures. Buzzwords abound: distributed leadership; authentic assessment; full-service schools; accelerated learning; and so on. I do not intend to demean the well-intentioned efforts of my colleagues, which sometimes bear fruit. But for the turnaround principal, there is no substitute for simple wisdom.

Turning around low-performing schools is unlikely to occur unless principals enable staff members to: