

What Principals Need to Know About

Reading Instruction

Marie Carbo

Research is clear on what works
in five essential reading areas.

IN BRIEF

Principals should understand and incorporate into their reading programs research-proven strategies for instruction in five critical areas: phonemics, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Although most principals don't teach reading, it's critical that they know how reading should be taught, especially in the primary grades. A growing body of research gives us an increasingly clear picture of effective reading programs. It tells us

that most young children need instruction in five reading areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. And here's good news: Research clearly identifies which reading strategies and procedures in these areas work best for most youngsters. So let's see what good reading instruction looks like.



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Phonemics

Phonemics and phonics are not the same. Instruction in phonemics helps children to become aware of sounds in *spoken* words, where phonics increases awareness of sounds in *written* words. Phonemics instruction helps prepare children to learn phonics.

Good phonemics instruction:

- Precedes phonics.
- Is particularly appropriate for kindergartners.
- Is generally playful, using such activities as rhyming words; identifying the number of words in a phrase or the number of syllables in a word; or taking apart words and putting them together (segmenting and blending).

Phonics

Effective phonics instruction comes after students have a good grasp of the concept of reading. Therefore, before formal phonics instruction, good teachers read a wide variety of printed materials to young children at least once a day, write down and share children's dictated stories, and read predictable books frequently (Bridge *et al.* 1983).

Good phonics instruction:

- Makes up approximately one quarter or *less* of a total reading program. The National Research Council recommends about 15 minutes of phonics instruction a day for first graders (Manzo 1998).
- Is generally finished by the middle or end of second grade (Anderson *et al.* 1985; Stahl 1992).
- Is most appropriate for students whose reading styles match the phonics method—in other words, those who have the auditory strengths to perform phonics tasks (Barber *et al.* 1998; LaShell 1986; Oglesby and Suter 1995).
- Focuses on words, not rules. Good readers decode new words by comparing them to patterns within words they already know (Adams 1990). Good phonics teachers draw children's attention to *word patterns* and provide prac-

tice using text containing those same word patterns (Gaskins *et al.* 1988; Cunningham 1991).

- May include invented spelling in the early grades. Research indicates that invented spelling improves children's writing and phonic awareness, and does not appear to harm children's reading or spelling (Clarke 1989; Slavin 1991).

Fluency

Instruction in fluency is extremely important. It is also the most neglected skill of the five critical reading areas. Fluent readers read rapidly, accurately, and with good expression.

Good fluency instruction:

- Provides many fluid models of reading, live or recorded.
- Encourages non-fluid readers to listen to brief, fluid reading models and then to practice the modeled passage repeatedly until they can read it fluently before reading it aloud to others (Samuels 1988).
- Uses a variety of assisted reading methods (shared reading, echo reading, recorded books, neurological impress, choral reading, pair reading), depending on the reading level of the student and the difficulty of the reading material (Carbo 1997; Kuhn and Stahl 2000).
- Provides a variety of high-interest, high-level reading materials both on tape and in text so that the child can compare printed and spoken words (Carbo 1978a, 1978b; Molbeck 1994).

Vocabulary

Oral and reading vocabularies differ. Oral vocabulary refers to the words we understand when we hear them and are the words we use when we speak. Reading vocabulary refers to those printed words that we understand as we read, but often do not use. While children learn most of their vocabulary indirectly, by listening to adults and other children speak, being read to, conversing, and reading on their own, students with large reading vocabular-

ies have a better chance of comprehending what they read. (Greer 2002).

Good vocabulary instruction:

- Engages children in discussions about words.
- Uses videos, visuals, and anecdotes to expand word meaning.
- Provides readings of materials that help students become increasingly familiar with a variety of high-level words.
- Provides strategies for deciphering unknown words, such as understanding prefixes, suffixes, and roots.
- Uses many hands-on vocabulary games and weekly challenges to encourage children to expand their vocabulary.
- Teaches children when and how to use dictionaries and reference aids.

Comprehension

Finally, we arrive at the ultimate goal of reading instruction: text comprehension. The other four areas serve as contributing factors to this goal, which is to create active, purposeful readers whose brains are always working and thinking while they read (Anderson *et al.* 1985; Greer 2002).

Good comprehension instruction:

- Sets the mood of a story and provides opportunities for dramatizations.
- Helps children monitor their comprehension by asking key questions and modeling the thinking process while reading a story.
- Uses organizational pictures of the text's content.
- Asks questions about what children have read, especially questions that require children to draw conclusions, make inferences, and predict.
- Teaches children to generate and ask their own reading questions.
- Makes children aware of story structure.

How can principals use this important research? You can begin by sharing this article with your teachers and by using this information to evaluate your reading program.

Reading is the most important of all skills and principals who focus instruction on its five elements are bound to reap the benefits not only of improved reading scores, but happier children, teachers, and parents. ■

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