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READING PROGRAM EVALUATION: A PLAN FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

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In recent years schools have increasingly been faced with the question of accountability. Parents, as well as the general public, are concerned about the quality of instruction which is currently being provided, often noting the decrease in standardized test scores nationally as a primary indicator of fundamental problems in education. Nowhere has this concern been more evident than in the area of reading instruction. Current reading practices and procedures are frequently cited as being ineffective and unworkable. The slogan "return to the basics" is a rallying cry heard throughout the land. In response to these criticisms, schools have found themselves being placed on the defensive with increased importance being given to various forms of curriculum evaluation.

These approaches to measuring the quality of a reading program have taken various formats. Typically they often include faculty questionnaires, limited classroom observations, and a review of student reading achievement scores on standardized tests. Frequently there is also the use of the results of a basic skills test as a determination of reading program quality. While each of these procedures has some degree of merit they often produce very superficial findings. Superficial in the sense that data obtained in this manner does not necessarily reflect the actual quality of the reading instruction taking place in each individual classroom. For this information to be obtained in a meaningful manner there must be active involvement of each staff member at each level. In essence what is being suggested here is for self-evaluation of the part of the teaching staff to be a major component of any reading program evaluation. We will outline a program for implementing this concept.

Program for Change

All too frequently a reading program evaluation is something which is mandated by the administration of a school. This is done in an atmosphere which leaves very little opportunity for individual teachers to actively participate in the process. It almost seems that the primary goal is to collect the most easily obtainable data in the fastest possible manner. What is being suggested here, as an alternate approach, is one that while it may take longer and does not rely as heavily on specific data collection, still gives a school a very accurate measure of their current efforts in reading instruction.

Establishing the Setting or Atmosphere for Change

Perhaps the single most important factor and also one of the most difficult to achieve is the establishment of an appropriate atmosphere in which a reading program evaluation can take place. This is a critically important step because if there is not the appropriate preparation done before the evaluation process begins much of what follows will often be less than effective. In helping to develop the best possible atmosphere for change, the following issues should probably be thoughtfully discussed by all those who are to participate.

1. Both the teachers and the administrators are in agreement as to the reasons for conducting an evaluation of the current reading program in a school.

2. The value of the individual classroom teacher should be recognized as being the most important aspect of any successful reading program.

3. For a reading evaluation to have any merit it must be primarily a self-evaluation by the teaching staff, both as individuals and as a group.

4. The faculty members must assume the responsibility for the openness and candor needed in the evaluation process.

5. On completion of the reading program evaluation each classroom teacher must be willing to honestly consider suggested changes (Robinson & Hulett, 1980, p. 2).

Once there is fundamental agreement as to the reasons and the purposes for the reading program evaluation, the actual process can begin.

Collection of Formal and Informal Information for Change

Traditionally, schools have tended to rely very heavily on the use of standardized reading test results as a single measure of their effectiveness in reading instruction. While these scores do indicate general trends, particularly in large groups of students, they often have limited value when used by an individual school or district for determining local changes to be made in a reading program. Instead, the use of a variety of self-evaluation techniques may give a much more accurate picture of what is actually taking place in the local school's reading efforts. Questionnaires such as in Appendices I & II have been developed to collect this type of information. Hopefully, if the appropriate atmosphere for change has been established the participating faculty will answer the questions with candor and openness.

Motivation for Change

Unfortunately, most of us who have participated in reading program evaluations in the past are well acquainted with what often happens at this point. Once the information, both formal and informal has been gathered, a report is written and then put aside rather than being used. Regardless of the amount of information gathered and reported in various ways, it will be ineffective

until teachers are motivated to consider these results in relation to what is currently taking place in their classrooms.

One of the most useful approaches for motivating teachers to change is simply to allow ample opportunity for interaction and discussion about the reading evaluation results. It is frequently the case that teachers become aware of common problems and concerns for the <u>first</u> time as a result of these discussions. Rather than feel alone, they now realize others may share the same worry. In addition, not only are problems discussed but often workable solutions are also created. The simple knowledge that they are not alone in having problems with reading instruction is often sufficient motivation for change.

These discussion periods between teachers are so vital a part of the evaluation process they need to be scheduled by the administration in much the same manner as teachers' meetings. The degree to which effective communication takes place during these periods will largely determine the success or eventual failure of the entire reading program evaluation. Appendix III is an example of a form which can be used during these discussion periods to indicate current as well as future changes.

Once an effective program for change in a reading curriculum is established, evaluation becomes a continuing process of self-examination and improvement, rather than a one time experience. Information on the current status of reading instruction can be obtained in an effective and realistic manner. It is often the result of a reading program evaluation of this type which shows clearly how well a school is actually doing in the development of children's reading. Rather than being a negative experience this approach to program evaluation is both an encouraging as well as a positive process for change.

REFERENCES

Robinson, Richard and Hulett, Joycelin. Evaluation of the Reading Program–Decisions for Improvement. Monograph published by the College for Education and the University Extension Division, Columbia, Missouri: Univ. of Missouri, 1980.

APPENDIX I

Current Reading Program Assessment
(Please answer on separate piece of paper)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. How many years have you taught?
2. What grade levels or subject areas?
3. How many courses in the teaching of reading have you had?
4. If you remember the titles of these courses or their content, please list.
5. How long have you taught in your present school?
6. How long have you taught at your present grade level?

Appendix I (continued)

READING PROGRAM INFORMATION

7. Briefly summarize your feelings about the current conditions
   of the reading program in your school system. Indicate
   strengths and weaknesses of these efforts.
8. Please define the word, "reading."
9. What do you feel is the primary cause of reading disability
   in children? Briefly explain your answer.
10. What do you feel is the single biggest problem you have in
    teaching children to read?

READING MATERIALS

11. What is the primary basal series used in your class? (list
    the company name)
12. What other basal materials are available for your use? (list
    the company names)
13. What other reading materials are available for your use?

_____ kits   _____ library books in

_____ Reading machines   classroom (how many?)

_____ other   _____ Newspapers

(specify _____

14. Do you feel you have adequate materials for the teaching of
    reading in your classroom?
15. If not, what additional materials would you like to have?

APPENDIX II

Teacher Self-Inventory of Classroom

Reading Practices

The following teacher inventory is intended to encourage
you to think about your own classroom efforts in the area of
reading instruction. While general in nature, each statement is
designed to assist you in thinking about specific aspects of your
own classroom reading program. As you consider each statement
try to recall how you structure your teaching of reading to meet
the stated goal or objective.

The ten statements which follow are frequently made about
teacher practices in effective reading programs. Indicate by cir-
cling the appropriate number the extent to which your classroom
reading program shows each characteristic or practice. If it is
found almost always in your classroom, circle "1." If it is found
most of the time, circle "2." If found sometimes, circle "3."
If it is found very seldom or never, circle "4." If you are un-
decided, circle "5." If you think this characteristic or practice
is not desirable, then circle "6." As a reminder, the rating scale
is presented here

1—almost always   4—seldom or never
2—most of the time   5—undecided
3—sometimes   6—not desirable

Appendix II (continued)

I. The ultimate goal of my classroom reading   1   2   3   4   5   6
program is to show each child the value of
reading in their personal lives as both a
source of information and as a valuable
recreational pursuit.

II. In all my reading activities I respect the   1   2   3   4   5   6
self-image and individual worth of each
child.

III. I know the objectives and goals of the total   1   2   3   4   5   6
reading program in my school and the role
my efforts contribute to this effort.

IV. My classroom reading program reflects an   1   2   3   4   5   6
understanding of the fact that reading is
closely related to the other language
arts—writing, speaking, and listening.

V. I am aware and respect the differences in   1   2   3   4   5   6
each of my students, adjusting reading in-
struction to meet these individual needs.

VI. The use of reading materials in my class-   1   2   3   4   5   6
room reflects a thorough understanding on
my part of their content and the place they
have in a total reading program.

VII. My reading instruction reflects a belief   1   2   3   4   5   6
about the reading process as being a per-
sonal search for meaning rather than just
the mastery of isolated skills.

VIII. The child experiencing difficulty in   1   2   3   4   5   6
learning to read is provided with the appro-
priate instruction whether it is in the
classroom or with a special teacher.

IX. I am enthusiastic about my reading instruc-   1   2   3   4   5   6
tion and am open to suggestions and new
ideas related to the classroom activities.

APPENDIX III

Implications of the Reading Program Evaluation

Based on the review of the information collected about your
school's total reading program and discussion with your fellow
teachers concerning common problems, complete the following:

1. What are the major strengths and weaknesses identified through
the evaluation process about the current reading program?

Appendix III (continued)

2. How do these conclusions relate to the efforts in your classroom reading instruction?
3. What implications or changes are you considering in your daily reading instruction based on the results of this evaluation? Specific areas which might be noted include:

	Does not need Changing	Needs to be Improved	Expected time needed for Change
Basal reading program			
Comprehension			
Content Area Reading			
Recreational Reading			
Study Skills			
Language arts (writing, speaking, listening)			
Individualized Instruction (gifted, average, and remedial readers)			
Classroom reading organization			
Reading evaluation (formal and informal)			
Other (specify)			