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ADMINISTRATORS CAN HELP MEET READING IMPROVEMENT OBJECTIVES

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Total commitment to the improvement of the reading skills of our elementary and middle school students resulted from a performance objective initially set by our Board of Education. In some way all staff members were involved in the improvement of delivery systems and assessment programs.

Each year the members of our Board devise performance objectives for the superintendent, who in turn devises performance objectives for his assistant superintendents and principals. Principals devise objectives for their assistant principals and building coordinators. As the performance objectives are formulated, the person involved is free to suggest revisions, request additional resources to do the job, and help develop the time schedule for data collection and evaluation.

A case in point is the fact that our Board originally set as its primary goal, "To have all fourth graders read at a fourth grade level or above." This is, of course, educationally an unattainable goal. Our Superintendent, however, reacted to this preliminary statement with a performance objective which was more developed, educationally attainable, and it was eventually adopted. It read:

"To decrease by a minimum of 3% the percentage of students whose standardized reading scores fall below grade; and to cause a gain of at least one month beyond the normal reading achievement pattern established by the pupils who remain below grade level within the time period September 1, 1973 to June 30, 1974. These measurable objectives to be limited to grades 2 through 4."

Having reached that initial agreement with the Board of Education, the Superintendent then met with his Assistant Superintendent for Instruction. The objective was expanded to include:

". . . An achievement rate in reading, on a group basis, of at least one month beyond the normal reading pattern achievement by students in grades 1 and 5 through 8 who are below grade level on the original measurement."

Having agreed on the objective, all available resources were recruited and utilized. With the help of the building principals, a total of 250 parents were trained as volunteer tutors. Initial training sessions were large group,

but individual direction was given by the building reading consultants. Volunteers were usually involved extensively with no more than two or three students and most often contact was in a one-to-one situation.

The role of the reading teacher was redefined. Whereas she was formerly a remedial teacher, she now assumed a consultant role. This took better advantage of her special training. While she still involved herself with remedial students through diagnosis and prescription she was, with the availability of the parent volunteers, freed of the actual administration of the activities. Teachers felt freer to seek her advice in reading programs for students of all ability levels.

Using our psychologists, learning disabilities teachers, and elementary physical education teachers, a program was devised whereby the Purdue test was administered to all kindergarteners and first graders. The purpose was to detect, as early as possible, all perceptual problems and treat those problems at an age when we knew our effectiveness was the greatest.

One of the principals devised a handbook for classroom teachers giving some very specific activities which could be used in dealing with the perceptual problems identified. The suggested activities were easy to follow and required the kinds of materials found in any elementary classroom. The most severely handicapped students were screened into one of our two elementary learning disabilities classrooms. This was done only when an integrated problem in the home school appeared inadequate in light of the severity of the handicap.

A special \$5,000 budget was allocated to provide professional reference materials and other materials needed by individual students. This was a very small expenditure, less than \$1.00 per student for additional materials involved in the program. The only other major expenditure was in staffing: the employment of the reading consultants as full-time employees, whereas the previous arrangement provided for something less, usually four days a week. Full-time reading aides were also employed in three of our five elementary schools; one for our largest elementary school and another two where our reading achievement scores were traditionally lower.

Our kindergarten teachers devised a criteria reference test used to identify kindergarteners ready for a formal reading program. Our decision was to individualize as much as possible, allowing those who were ready to proceed as far as possible without pushing too hard. This will, over a period of time, encourage additional efforts to individualize as these students move up in the grades. It also answered a question in the minds of some parents who recognized their child as having superior ability and who had previously advocated a first grade entry position.

All our middle school students were scheduled for reading in addition to the usual language arts classes. The students reading below grade level were scheduled for a full year of instruction; all others had a minimum of one semester. Our biggest job at the middle school level was to convince all teachers of their responsibilities to teach reading. We continually emphasized that; because the tendency of most secondary teachers seemed to be to let a specialist do the job, thereby absolving themselves of their responsibility.

As a measurement of success, the Gates-MacGinitie test was administered in September and May of the school year. The results were gratifying. The first sub-objective was easily met; in all grades, in all buildings, in both comprehension and vocabulary, the minimal 3% reduction in the number of students below grade level was exceeded with a range of 8% to 46%.

In the total group of 381 first graders, 90% achieved at or above the national norm in comprehension. Other than the fact that these are more than respectable percentages, the chief value will be the fact that these data will serve as base line data as the students are followed in the future.

In September, 52% of our second, third, and fourth graders achieved below grade level in vocabulary, and 70% of these achieved below in comprehension. The May test showed that only 23% remained below grade level in vocabulary and 27% remained below in comprehension. In vocabulary the decrease was from 604 students to 268 or a 56% decrease. In comprehension, the decrease was from 800 students to 315 students, or a 61% decrease. Furthermore, 69% of those students who remained below grade level accelerated their growth by at least one month beyond their previous rate pattern of achievement.

Our middle school students also grew significantly. Students in grades five, six, seven and eight, who were below grade level in September, accelerated their rate of growth on a group basis by 2.4 to 14.2 months.

For our own curiosity, we calculated, on a group basis, the growth rate of those students who tested at or above grade level on the original instrument used in September. This was not a requirement of the performance objective. We found that these students also made impressive gains in both vocabulary and comprehension. Out of the 30 sub-groups, 25 groups grew by a year or more, one group of second graders testing out at four years and one month in growth in comprehension. Obviously our attention given to those students below grade level did not detract from the progress made by those at or above grade level in September.

The results were extremely satisfying for staff members too. When we first talked about the Board's performance objective there were some negative reactions from teachers. Some saw it as a management system leading to individual teacher accountability and eventual evaluation. Realizing this we were careful to avoid comparisons between teachers or buildings. Others were upset with the implication that their good work of the past was not appreciated or good enough. As one teacher said, "I gave 110% last year; what do they expect this year?" Before the year was over I think the teachers were convinced that their good work was appreciated. The additional resources provided, the additional volunteer manpower, and general emphasis served to assure teachers that their efforts in reading instruction, past and present, was valued.

For our Board of Education it did stress the importance of team work. It did point out the fact that significant achievement can be realized if our priorities are clearly delineated.