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## What's the New Reading Program Today?

Cecil G. Good

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During any hour of the day at any modern metropolitan airport, many large, beautifully designed, well-engineered airplanes land or take off, fulfilling their goal—the safe transport of large numbers of passengers. Despite the brilliance of our engineers, a scene of pandemonium and crisis would occur without careful coordination of flights. Because of the large number of airplanes, even though each is well designed, the role of a central control tower is critically important in providing coordination resulting in safe landing for all.

A comparison can be made between the airports and the often frantic efforts of our urban educators to solve the reading problems of their students. Unlike airports where take-offs and landings are well coordinated and planned, the variety of reading programs that buzz our schools are frequently unrelated to each other and often appear to be on crash patterns.

The traditional approach to seeking solutions to the problems of reading instruction in our urban schools has been to provide freedom to each school to develop reading programs which will address the apparently unique needs of that

school. The assumption is that just as each child is unique, each classroom is different from all others and each school is unlike all other schools. Because of this uniqueness, the answers to the problems, it is assumed, can be developed by those closest to the scene—the school community, defined as staff and parents. As a result of this approach, many urban districts have not really had a reading program, but rather a series of programs, one for each school in the district.

The harried principal is susceptible to any promise of assistance and clutches at the latest fad, whether it be super computer assistance or pornographic highly motivating, low vocabulary, high-interest typewriters. You promise me it'll work and will relieve the pressure on me and I'll find the money and the way to glue it onto what we are already using.

With local, state and federal funds, urban districts have also designed and implemented a great variety of reading projects. Many of these are individually well-conceived and carefully planned. It would seem that many might be instrumental in improving test scores if given time, proper implementa-

tion, and support. Unfortunately, however, when improvement is not immediately apparent or when additional federal dollars become available, changes are made and new, frequently unrelated reading projects are added.

With little coordination of the various programs, many appear to work in opposition to others. It is little wonder that classroom teachers often feel blitzed. This smorgasbord approach creates a virtually impossible task of separating what works from the unsuccessful aspects of reading instruction. When the level of success attained is not what the district and community desire, the answer is to launch another program in a shotgun attempt to hit the target.

Most urban educators concede that based on any criteria, the public schools are not adequately succeeding in the most basic of goals—successful reading performance of the students. It is conceivable that this failure is in spite of our great efforts but because of them.

It is possible that we have more programs flying at our teachers and students than the flight controllers can handle. Just as airports can dictate the timing and approach that various airplanes can use to enter a

runway, school districts should bravely face the possibility that it might be necessary to say no to changes, no to new programs and no to special grants that are likely to prevent us from adequately evaluating our circumstances and comprehensively planning our way out of the current dilemma.

### URBAN SCHOOL PROBLEMS

If the above assessment is accurate, what are the specific problems that confront urban school districts and that need to be addressed?

Initially, it should be stated that the concerns listed here are intended to be only those over which an urban district has some control. Many of us believe that city schools have historically been under-financed and that educational parity will occur only when financial support is equalized. It is also apparent that the socio-economic status of many inner-city children results in problems unique to the urban scene. The intent is not to deny these challenges but to reject them as excuses and to acknowledge that barring miraculous intervention, they are probably beyond our control.

There are a number of concerns that we can address.

1. The problem of transiency of urban children is very evident. It is not particularly unusual for a child to attend four or five elementary schools within the district.
2. The range of reading levels within a classroom can cover the entire scale of reading scores.
3. Repeated failure has reduced the optimism of both student and teacher that true learning is possible and likely.
4. Parent involvement and support can range from outstanding to virtually nonexistent.
5. There is frequently a lack of a systematically developed, long-range plan for the district leading to reading improvement.
6. The lack of such a plan frequently results in commercial textbook vendors being in a position to exert greater influence over the district than is healthy or wise.
7. The existence of compensatory projects that are inadequately tied to the ongoing programs of the school district can confuse and create problems for students and staff.

### ADDRESSING THE PROBLEMS

What can urban district do to address the above problems?

1. Urban educators must separate what we can control from what is beyond the power of the schools. Rather than dwelling on the social disadvantages of the children, school people need to focus on the hours that we control the child's environment to assure that we are doing everything possible for the children.

2. Each urban district can develop a district-wide reading plan that includes:

a. common objectives, tests, and record-keeping systems to assure that students who transfer frequently as parents move have a fair chance to stay even with their peers;

b. realistic goals that permit children to achieve a valuable taste of success;

c. materials that accurately reflect the cultural and racial composition of the district;

d. a challenge to each child where he/she currently is reading, in effect some type of individualized program to address the great range of individual differences.

3. The reading design should foster the type of environment which builds student and teacher expectations and confidence that the goals can be reached.

4. All aspects of reading including compensatory programs must be tied to the master plan. School systems must take the political risk of saying no to new grants if the activities cannot be tied directly to the district's master plan.

5. Publishing companies and the schools should know that any purchases of newly developed materials will not be approved if they are not clearly related to the plan.

6. A system of accountability should be incorporated into the plan to assure that all teachers are actively conducting the reading system as designed.

7. The district should design methods through which parents can become actively involved in the educational process of their children. This may involve a home curriculum of homework, inservice sessions for parents, and new progress reporting techniques.

8. Even though the intent is to increase the amount of uniformity

within the reading design, care should be extended to permit a maximum degree of teach creativity. The classroom teacher has more insight into the unique needs of each child than any other person and should be permitted to creatively address those needs.

### DORT

During the 1976-77 school year, partly in response to a federal court order to desegregate the school district, the Detroit Public Schools developed a comprehensive reading program to address the problems listed above. Given the title Detroit Objective Referenced Tests (DORT), the program is used in every elementary and middle school reading classroom in the district. The reading plan consists of very specific objectives at every grade level, tests to determine the mastery of each child on each objective, instructional lessons for each objective, and a complete record-keeping system for each classroom and student.

Once the teacher has diagnosed the strengths and deficiencies of each child through DORT, specific lessons are prescribed for each skill. By using the program the teacher is able to address the wide range of reading levels in each classroom. Children who already have demonstrated mastery of a particular skill can go on to more challenging activities without frustrating the more deficient readers.

A second advantage of DORT is its uniformity. Even though creativity is encouraged and a significant degree of flexibility is permitted, the district now knows that each third grade teacher, for example, is teaching and evaluating progress on the same objectives. The district cannot control the transiency of the students, but it has reduced the impact of all the movement. The child who transfers from one Detroit school to another now has a degree of familiarity with his/her new school's curriculum.

Another strength of DORT is that all aspects of reading are now correlated to one master design. Before a reading textbook can be sold to Detroit, the publisher must demonstrate its correlation to the DORT objectives. Compensatory remedial projects are also designed to clearly support the ongoing

reading program. As a matter of fact, no new reading program or thrust can be introduced until a supportive relationship to DORT is established. It is anticipated that the bombardment of new reading programs which have overwhelmed the teachers will be reduced.

Fourth, by dividing the reading process into smaller, more manageable sequential skills, the probability is increased that every child will achieve some success. Once an objective is mastered in DORT, the student and teacher are patterned toward success. Expectations are higher and success breeds success. The classrooms environment becomes more conducive for learning.

Fifth, a special Home Curriculum Project has been developed to encourage more active and meaningful parent involvement. Special parenting inservice, parent-centers in each middle school, weekly

DORT homework lessons, and home visits have resulted in a greater awareness of the role of the parent in the educational process.

Finally, a very tightly structured monitoring system has been incorporated to assure that all reading teachers are implementing the reading system as designed. By incorporating DORT into the district's achievement plan, the specialists who are evaluating the achievement plan of each school are in the position to demand accountability in the implementation of the reading program.

#### **READING IMPROVEMENT REALIZED**

The best designed reading program, implemented in the most effective manner, cannot be considered successful if the district's reading performance does not suggest improvement. Since the implementation of the DORT System,

the downward spiral of test scores has been reversed. For the last three years the students in Detroit have done better, for example, on every MEAP objective. The scores on the California Achievement Tests have likewise begun to show improvement. While these scores still do not equal those of most districts in the state and are still not where we want them to be, the trend toward significant improvement is most encouraging.

One district has determined that a smoothly coordinated reading program is of greater value than a multitude of attractive but uncoordinated attempts at reading improvement. The airport analogy is consistent with the student's needs. It is better to plot a meaningful master plan carefully than to flood the schools with a blitz of well-intended reading attempts, none of which hit the target.

## **The Classroom Teacher as a Reading Diagnostician**

**Margaret E. Johnson**

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Six-and-a-half-year-old Melinda was brought by her mother to our clinical and educational psychology office. Melinda seemed unable to learn to read in the first grade, even though she was of average intelligence and was working up to grade level in all her subjects except reading. On coming into the office, Melinda was noticeably nervous. She appeared to be frightened by her new surroundings and the strangers who were to find out why she was having difficulty learning to read. Consequently, the first session with Melinda was dedicated to establishing friendly relations with her and trying to put her at ease. A complete academic and intellectual evaluation was then conducted, which ultimately revealed that Melinda was suffering from a mild visual-perceptual dysfunction. She was referred to a perceptual therapist, who worked with her for several months. Perceptual therapy proved successful and Melinda is now reading on grade level.

This professional evaluation would have required less time, ef-

fort, and anxiety both for Melinda and her parents had the initial diagnostic tests been performed in the child's classroom, an atmosphere familiar to the child, and by the classroom teacher, a person she already knew and trusted. The elementary grade classroom teacher is the best initial source for an answer to why a child cannot read. The teacher sees the child daily, knows the child's study habits and personality traits, and works regularly with the child on his reading.

Many learning difficulties can be diagnosed within the classroom by use of short, simple, and easily administered tests. These informal observations and screening tests enable the teacher to make a judgment about the need for outside referral. If she decides that the referral is desirable, she can then advise the psychologist or reading specialist of the results of her initial screening.

This article discusses several of the more common causes of reading difficulties in children of elementary

school age and some simple screening procedures that can be used by the classroom teacher to enable their recognition.

#### **VISION AND VISUAL PERCEPTION**

The most common forms of vision impairment are short-sightedness and far-sightedness. These are easily recognized by most teachers. While extreme cases might affect motivation and cause students to become tired and have headaches, most forms are milder and do not affect learning to a significant degree. The teacher, however, should be alert to squinting, redness or watering of the eyes, and to complaints of headaches or fatigue. When these occur, an eye examination is recommended.

Binocular vision problems have a more serious impact on learning and are less easily recognized by the teacher. They may be manifested in difficulties in lateral and/or vertical posture. Difficulties in lateral posture, or the inability of both eyes to focus on the same lateral plane,