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Meeting the Needs of Struggling Readers in High School: What are Rural Schools Doing?

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Implementing effective reading programs to meet the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) represents an immense challenge for all high schools, but the challenges for rural high schools may be particularly acute. Rural schools have large concentrations of children living in poverty, greater per-pupil costs and low fiscal capacity, all of which can make meeting the reading demands of NCLB difficult. The purpose of this article is to report the results of research that examined the question of what rural high schools are doing to meet the needs of their struggling readers. The results of focus groups from a rural high school in the southeastern United States and a state-wide survey of rural high schools also in the southeastern United States are reported. The implications of these findings for future practice in rural high schools are discussed.

Introduction

Implementing effective reading instruction at the secondary level represents an immense challenge. On any given day reports showing that high percentages of high school students fail to meet even basic standards on high stakes tests of reading achievement are likely to appear in the broadcast and paper press. Annual yearly progress (AYP) as required by the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) is a determining factor for school funding as well as a public indicator of school success.

There is no shortage of suggestions from educational think tanks and interest groups telling high schools what they need to do to improve (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; National Governors Association, 2005; The National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2005). With almost uncanny unanimity, these reports call for high schools to adopt research-based practices in the teaching of reading, engage in continual assessment of student reading performance, and provide extensive on-going professional development for teachers and staff to create a school-wide culture of literacy.

The problem of meeting school reform initiatives such as NCLB may be particularly acute in rural high schools (Chance, 1993). Indeed, rural schools in many locations have large concentrations of poor children who are more likely to struggle with academics (Jimerson, 2005). Many rural schools are also in financial distress (Jimerson, 2005) giving administrators limited means to mount and maintain the school improvement process. Greater per-pupil-costs and low fiscal capacity can result in less money to pay for instructional assessment materials, attract quality teachers, and provide necessary faculty professional development

(Harmon, 2007; Stephens, 1998). This lack of fiscal resources could result in the inability to implement the scientifically-based practices being recommended to improve student performance in reading. Also problematic in rural schools is that an inability to attract highly qualified content teachers due to lower competitive salaries and benefits can result in higher numbers of teachers teaching outside their area of expertise (Harmon, 2007). Teachers teaching outside of their area of expertise may be overly dependent on textbooks, resulting in greater reading demands on students and the need for more reading supports. Finally, the lack of fiscal resources in schools that are smaller physically could result in less space for special reading classes and specialized reading materials. Clearly, rural high schools may be at significant risk in meeting the reading demands of NCLB. Thus, it is important to find out how rural schools are faring in their efforts to meet increased societal demands for improved reading performance.

It was with this concern in mind that we conducted two studies: a series of focus groups with students, parents and educators at a rural high school in the southeastern United States and an email survey of high school principals in a Southeastern state. The focus groups were aimed at clarifying the challenges rural high schools currently face in meeting the needs of struggling readers in high school. The intent of the survey was to determine the extent to which rural high schools in a state in the southeastern United States were implementing research-based practices being advocated nationwide. The survey involved high schools in rural, suburban and rural areas, but only the results from rural schools are reported here. We felt that the focus groups and survey combined would provide information that would

be valuable to policy makers and rural high schools as they continue to try to meet the reading needs of students under NCLB or otherwise.

Findings

Focus groups

For our focus groups, high school department heads, students with reading disabilities who had failed the most recent state high stakes reading test, and parents of these students, all from a rural high school in the Southeastern United States were invited to attend separate focus group sessions. Thus, a total of 3 focus groups were conducted. The protocol for the focus groups included a set of nearly identical questions with wording designed to address each specific group. For example, students were asked the question, "What do you want to do after you graduate?" Parents were asked the similar question, "What do you think your child wants to do after he/she graduates?" The agenda for each session included opportunities for each target group to voice opinions about high school reading problems, how the school was currently addressing these problems, and suggestions for how reading could be addressed in the future. The sessions for department heads were held after school, while those for parents and their students were held in the evening at the same time, but in separate settings to encourage candor from student members.

The similarity of the focus group questions helped determine if the experience and understanding of the problem of poor reading ability in high school was shared by each focus group or whether they had a different perspective of the problem. The task of comparing responses to questions between groups was aided by this structure. It became apparent that there was a shared understanding of what was happening at their school even though each group represented differing roles and needs. Answers to questions were coded within groups to ensure uniformity and reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Consistent responses across groups substantiated recommendations of systematic identification and remediation of reading skill deficits and, as shown in Table 1 (on page 32), were important to all stakeholders in this rural high school.

The department heads recognized that there were many students who lacked the reading skills needed to be successful in their subject-matter classes. When asked what services were in place for helping these students, the department leaders acknowledged that there were no classes devoted specifically to teaching reading, indicating that the press to cover the curriculum did not allow time for it. The department heads expressed the further beliefs that students should already come to high school with the reading skills necessary to succeed, and that high school teachers had neither the training nor inclination to teach reading. The department leaders also expressed concern about how the

researchers were going to use the focus group information; they worried that, as with similar meeting in the past, nothing would come of it.

Parents' concerns focused primarily on the lack of results produced by previous school attempts to improve student reading skills and the continued struggle their students were experiencing with reading in their content classrooms. Parents also expressed reservations about the school's retention policy feeling that it failed to get at the root of the problem, which, they felt was reading. Parents suggested several interventions that they felt would help their children. These included smaller content-area classes, more in-class support for students in their general education classes; and the establishment of voluntary reading programs after school hours as an extracurricular activity. Interestingly, while parents felt that their children needed intensive help in reading, they felt that the help in reading should not interfere with band, sports, or work. The parents also indicated that they were willing to help their children with reading as long as there was evidence of growth.

Students were fully aware of their reading problems and they knew that better reading comprehension skills would help them succeed in the future. They admitted to having particular difficulty reading their textbooks, saying that the purpose for the reading wasn't always made clear and that it was frustrating trying to keep up with the more fluent readers in class. The students said they would be willing to do anything to read better but, due to fear of being stigmatized, did not want to attend a special reading class during the school day; they preferred having such a class after-school hours and said they would be willing to work for 90-minutes to two hours in the class. When asked what specific strategy above all others they would like to learn, students said they would like to learn a strategy to help them identify unknown words in their content textbooks.

Statewide Survey

The purpose of the online survey of high school principals was to learn what rural high schools across a Southeastern state were doing to meet the reading needs of students who failed the state high stakes reading test. To our obvious concern, the results of our focus groups showed that despite the fact that 10% of the school had failed to meet standards on the most recent high stakes reading test, no systematic effort was in place to teach these students to read. We wanted to see if other rural high schools were having more success designing programs to meet the needs of their struggling readers.

We designed our survey to reflect research-based components of reading instruction for struggling high school readers that were based on the recommendations of the National Reading Panel (2000) as well as reports by key research groups referenced earlier in the article. There were sections devoted to the topics of assessment, reading instruction, and professional development. Prior to use, the

survey was piloted with a small group of high school principals to ensure the clarity of the survey questions.

The online survey was sent to every high school principal ($n = 547$) in the state. A total of 59 persons completed the online survey including 50 principals, 4 general education teachers, 2 assistant principals, 2 curriculum coordinators, and one guidance counselor. Of these, 27 were from rural schools and it is the results from these schools that are reported here. Data from the survey were summarized by calculating percentages and frequencies for each question. Not all participants responded to each question; the percentages reflect only those answering that specific question. Skip Logic switches also changed the potential number of responses to each question, i.e., if participants reported that their school did not have a reading program for struggling readers, they were not asked what form of assessment they used to determine whether a student was eligible for participation in a reading program.

One of the key questions we wanted to answer was whether rural high schools had programs in place to help their struggling readers. Our focus group school did not have a reading program so this was a concern. The results showed that 37% of the rural high schools surveyed had a reading program in place to help students who had failed the state End-of-Grade reading test.

We asked the 17 rural schools who were not offering reading programs to explain why. Three schools (11 %) indicated that it was because they couldn't afford them. Seven schools (41%) said they were unable to attract qualified reading teachers. Four rural schools (24%) said they could not fit a reading class into students' schedules.

The schools that said they *had* reading programs were asked to describe what they were offering. Three of the ten rural schools having reading programs offered separate reading classes; five (50%) offered a combination of reading classes plus reading instruction embedded within content-area instruction.

We were also interested in how students were assessed. The research shows, and our focus groups confirmed, that struggling readers are not a homogeneous group: They can have problems in many areas such as phonemic awareness, word identification, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. It takes a systematic assessment effort to identify particular problems and match students with the appropriate intervention. The results of the survey showed that 9 of the 10 rural schools that had reading programs used some form of reading assessment. However, the one assessment consistently used by the schools was the state-mandated end-of-year reading test, a test not designed to diagnose students' instructional needs. Indeed, all 9 rural school respondents who used reading assessments used the state test to diagnose students' reading needs.

The need for professional development is echoed by all of the recent national reports on the state of teaching reading in high schools. One of the most powerful points made by the department heads in our focus groups was that their teachers

were unprepared to teach reading. This was reflected further in the perceived failure of earlier reading efforts to close the reading gap. Given its importance, the results of our survey related to professional development were disappointing. The results showed that 26% of the rural schools, including those not having a reading program, provided professional development in reading. Of these schools, only 4 or 44% said professional development in reading was compulsory. In addition, most of the professional development consisted of workshops, with little on-site coaching provided for teachers. Of the 13 schools reporting the type of professional development provided, 7 offered single workshops on different reading topics, 4 offered multiple-session workshops on a single topic and only two offered multiple-session workshops with in-class coaching.

Implications

While the combined number of participants in the principal survey and the focus groups is small, and a definite limitation, the results still resonate. One of the most interesting findings is that the problems of rural high schools aren't all that different from their urban and suburban counterparts. Indeed, as we listened to the department chairs say that reading was the responsibility of elementary schools; we felt we could have been in any school in the country. In addition, while not reported here, the results for the urban and suburban schools surveyed were not significantly different from the rural schools on any of the survey items. Indeed, it appears that for high schools in all areas, the accountability requirements of NCLB alone may not be enough to stimulate more effective reading practices.

Our research shows that all high schools, including those in rural areas, are struggling to provide support for their students with reading problems. This lack of support for struggling readers in many high schools is a concern. Furthermore, the human cost of doing nothing may be great. To illustrate, the rural schools surveyed that did not have a reading program reported having a combined total of 360 students failing the state high stakes reading test. That's 360 students who will continue to struggle with reading their entire lives if they don't receive effective supports. Without a doubt, the impact of below basic literacy skills affects many aspects of adult life. In *Literacy in everyday Life: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy*, Kutner, et al. (2007) report the earning potential for adults older than the age of 16 on three separate measures of literacy. In their research, 59% of adults with below basic abilities earned less than \$500 per week and 17% reported earning less than \$300 per week. The failure to achieve beyond the basic levels of literacy has a long lasting effect beyond high school on the lives of students.

Whatever the similarities of rural schools to those in urban and suburban areas, the survey also reinforced issues unique to rural schools revealed in previous research. One

such area is a lack of fiscal resources (Harmon, 2007; Jimerson, 2005). Nearly 17% of the rural schools responding indicated they didn't have a reading program in place because they couldn't afford one. The fact that 35 % of the rural schools also couldn't find a reading teacher provides further validation of the chronic problems rural districts have attracting qualified teachers capable of delivering research-based reading programs (Harmon, 2007). Clearly, state and local leaders need to provide better direction and fiscal support for implementing research-based reading practices in rural high schools. We suggest a three-pronged approach involving technical assistance, fiscal support, and increased within and between school collaborative school improvement programs. Because increased fiscal support is never a given, we will focus on technical assistance and collaboration.

A key part of technical assistance involves working with principals since, ultimately, change at the building level takes leadership on the part of the principal (Salazar, 2007). Principals need to be familiar with and able to monitor implementation of the components of effective high school reading programs. These components include assessment and intervention strategies employed both within designated reading classes and also as part of content-area instruction. Scientifically-based reading practices comprise a continuum of supports needed to meet the diverse needs of high school readers. Second, principals need to know how to deliver professional development that is compulsory, ongoing, and classroom-based. Having effective professional development activities is particularly critical in rural schools where an infusion of new resources and/or teachers is unlikely, placing the burden of improving reading scores on existing staff. Of particular importance is convincing content teachers that infusing reading instruction into their classes accelerates not impedes student subject matter learning. Last, technical assistance is needed on ways to create a rural school infrastructure more hospitable to conducting an evidence-based reading program. For example, in both our focus groups and surveys, teachers and principals mentioned scheduling as a major impediment to providing help for struggling readers. Space for small-group reading classes and specialized materials is an additional concern that needs to be addressed in rural high schools.

Delivering professional development in reading to rural principals will not be easy. Rural schools often employ fewer administrators and reform efforts leave principals with "more to do and less to do it with" (Eady, 2007, p.1). Thus, time is of the essence. In a recent study, Salazar (2007) surveyed principals of rural school as to their preferred methods of receiving professional development. She found principals wanted to be a captive audience by attending workshops and/or conferences outside of the district but for short periods of time so they could get back to their schools. Interestingly, online, self-paced experiences were chosen infrequently by principals, largely because competing demands caused them to never fit them into their

schedules. Clearly, states need to use these and other means to provide principals with the knowledge they need to effectively implement research-based reading programs in their schools.

Professional development for teachers must also take into account the unique needs of rural high schools. Since, due to fiscal constraints, a large influx of expensive experts is unlikely, other more economical ways of providing professional development need to be employed. In our view, collaboration between all the stakeholders in the rural educational community will be necessary to compensate for the continued lack of resources. For example, itinerant consultants could provide technical assistance across schools as they regularly collaborate with principals and teachers. Common professional development programs and subsequent follow-up sessions could provide support needed to enable schools to implement strategies to improve student reading performance. Making professional development opportunities available within a reasonable travel distance would be attractive as the cost of transportation continues to rise.

The establishment of professional learning communities (Wald & Castleberry, 2000) has also been recommended as an effective procedure for staff development in rural schools (Howley, 2005). In this approach teachers in a school assume responsibility for students' success in a given area and then go about collaboratively learning how to teach it. Professional development communities can take many forms. In one particular form, programs of data-based improvement (Howley, 2005), educators establish standards and benchmarks followed by ongoing assessment and classroom-based reform. This approach may be particularly well suited to the accountability demands of NCLB.

Another approach to professional development that may be effective in rural schools is referred to as "teachers as experts" (Hickey, 2005). In this approach, individual or groups of faculty are identified and/or cultivated as experts, and then provide professional development to their colleagues. For example, with respect to reading, an English teacher could be identified as either having expertise in reading, or interested in acquiring it. The English teacher could then be assigned to initiate a school-wide effort to implement a program for struggling readers. Hickey (2005) found that rural teachers respond positively to professional development by peers. He made six recommendations for encouraging the growth of teachers as leaders including: identify teacher strengths; match teacher strengths to professional development needs; develop professional development programs with these strengths and needs in mind; provide teachers with time to prepare for their presentations; provide opportunities for informal presentations to reduce the anxiety and stress of presenting; and provide time throughout the year to take advantage of collaborative opportunities (Hickey, 2005, pp. 14-15).

A particularly poignant finding from the focus groups was the seeming lack of collaboration between teachers, parents,

and students in the rural high school we studied. It seemed that each group viewed the problem from its own perspective with little expressed concern for the other parties. The teachers were skeptical that anything could be done, and expressed little concern for the problems struggling readers were having in their classes. Likewise, parents and students wanted more support in reading, but insisted that it be at certain times and places, without regard for the difficulties in scheduling and availability of resources that they might entail. A logical first step for principals would be to have parents, students, teachers, and administrators come together to discuss their respective needs, and, through a collaborative process of give and take, craft a plan for a reading program that all parties can support.

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Table 1

Focus Group Responses

<u>Question</u>	<u>Department Chairs</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>Students</u>
What would an ideal reading program be like?	<i>Not applicable</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one help • Small groups where time/patience are utilized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • after-school tutoring • teaching to read for understanding • teaching to read aloud
What would you (your daughter/son) be willing to do to read better?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take classes (not tied to high-stakes tests that take time to teach reading). • Attend designated classes that use specific supports for reading (9th grade only). • Attend classes taught by teachers trained in reading. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose their own reading material (shorter articles rather than novels) • Get more involved in their own education • Set individual goals with parental help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anything • Go to after-school tutoring • Work with parents at home or teachers at school
What other suggestions do you have for the school to help struggling readers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not take away class/course time to teach reading skills. • Provide strategies to meld curriculum with reading instruction. • Identify struggling readers by Day 1 of high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact parents more often • Be more understanding of individual student learning needs • Do not assign student to teacher where student has already failed class. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't give up on struggling students. • Teach with enthusiasm. It is more enjoyable for students.

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