



Meet Your New “Reading First” Students

Dear Colleagues:

Did you know that more than 78,000 students in K-3 classrooms in our state have taken part in a new approach for the teaching and learning of literacy? Since 2001, in more than 308 New York state schools, 10,000 teachers have adopted the principles of reading instruction that were part of Reading First, the cornerstone of the No Child Left Behind Act. The student impact is even wider than this because many non-Reading First schools have adopted some of the instructional and organizational strategies and shared the professional development that are key components of Reading First.

These students are now in grades 3-8. As middle-level school children throughout the state crossed over the classroom threshold in September,

they may have looked the same but something was distinctly different. Many of them have spent up to the last five years working with their teachers through the educational rigors of the Reading First Program. These children are different from previous middle-level students. You have the opportunity to build on the successful components and approaches that are at the heart of Reading First instruction. If you are not aware of these differences you might underestimate the skills your students have acquired. Without that understanding, you — as colleagues of early literacy instruction and middle-level instruction — would likely be at a disadvantage. Having a conversation at this point will prove enlightening. It could set the stage for uninterrupted, successful learning for both teachers and students.

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What is Reading First?

Reading First, a national early literacy initiative, is a key component of NCLB. It is funded by competitive three-year grants that support early literacy programs from kindergarten to grade 3 in schools at greatest risk of student failure. Like most initiatives that undergo widespread implementation, Reading First has received some tough criticism. While it has been controversial on a national level, many districts in New York have enjoyed much success with it. Buildings receiving Reading First grants are subject to the following:

All K-3 teachers and special education teachers must participate in an online professional development program known as the New York State Reading Academy.

Participating districts must use grant monies to provide full-time building literacy coaches, with the number based on the number of teachers per building. The role of the literacy coach is to support the teachers as they practice skills learned in Reading Academy professional development. Coaches model lessons, help the teacher assess student performance, and

facilitate regular building literacy meetings.

Districts must give the required assessments and report their findings. These include diagnostic tests, progress monitoring, and year-end data. Some districts use grant money to hire Reading First data coordinators. The expectation is that the findings would give teachers a clear picture of where their students are and how instruction could be modified to meet their diverse needs.

Districts and buildings use a core reading program that meets the requirements of scientifically based reading research.

Supplemental materials purchased to enhance instruction must meet the same rigors.

The core curriculum must include explicit instruction practices in the “Big 5” — phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. A 90-minute, uninterrupted reading block is required for smooth implementation of this extensive literacy instruction.

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METHODOLOGY

**For more
information on
Reading First in
New York state:**

NY Reading First:
[NYSRRC @ monroe.edu](mailto:NYSRRC@monroe.edu)

NY State Reading Academy
[www.readingacademy.
monroe.edu/](http://www.readingacademy.monroe.edu/)

State Education Department
[www.emsc.nysed.gov/
readfirst/](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/readfirst/)

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Some points to reflect upon...

Children who have had the experience of being in a Reading First classroom entered your classroom with a variety of experience and skills directly related to the guiding principles of Reading First. Being able to swiftly recognize these behaviors and understandings will put you at a distinct advantage. Let’s briefly discuss some of these.

Your students have had the benefit of learning in small and large groups. This might not seem significant but truly it is.

Concepts and strategies have been introduced in large groups and reinforced in small ones. Your students have practiced their learning in small focus groups designed to scaffold them where they are and help them attain grade-level benchmarks.

Your students have worked cooperatively and independently in learning centers as their previous teachers have worked with small groups. This classroom procedure fosters student responsibility for their own learning as well as an ability to use time efficiently and effectively. Group meetings that follow small-group work not only hold children accountable for their learning but

challenge them to notice, think, and discover new concepts. Being aware of this can help middle-level teachers move more easily into cooperative learning situations that are more appropriate for this age student.

Systematic, explicit instruction has been synonymous with Reading First. Your students are accustomed to this form of instruction. While the degree of explicitness varies with teacher judgment and knowledge of his or her students, this type of instruction becomes more complicated as students move up in age and grade level. “Oftentimes, as anyone working with teenagers knows, being explicit is the perfect way to meet resistance.

One must temper explicit instruction with an understanding of the adolescent learner. Achieving this delicate balance will result in student empowerment. Furthermore, if a student can figure something out for him or herself, explicitly providing the information preempts the student’s opportunity to build a sense of agency and independence, which in turn affects the relationship between teacher and student.” (Peter H. Johnston 2004)

Understanding previous teaching methodologies takes on paramount importance as middle-level teachers assume the awesome responsibility of shifting their students into more mature learners.

Reading First teachers, using the principles of Reading First, have worked diligently to teach the “Big 5” to your students. They have consistently taught, tested, and reflected on an enormous amount of formative data. They have diagnosed student strengths and weaknesses. Teams of teachers have worked together to provide different tiers of intervention when deemed necessary. Coaches and teachers have explored the meaning of data, working collaboratively.

One organizational requirement of Reading First was the creation of an uninterrupted 90-minute literacy block. Students learned how to shift from instruction to application of skills at learning centers. They used computers, audio equipment, and manipulatives to practice new skills. Learning centers provided meaningful opportunities to differentiate the instruction and engage students in tasks that reinforced and expanded previously taught strategies.

You may have heard that Reading First involved much testing. Indeed, Reading First grants required frequent collection of data about student performance, including diagnostic assessment, progress monitoring, and frequent checks for understanding. We hope that our students now view these short measures and the data collection process as simply a means of monitoring their progress.

Although writing and its direct link to reading and thinking are acknowledged, it has not been deeply embedded within the existing Reading First 90-minute framework. Maturing readers need to understand writing as a tool that takes their reading and thinking to new levels of understanding. We see this as an area for you to build upon.

One criticism of the Reading First program nationally was the focus on the mechanics of reading while not building comprehension skills. New York state’s data is inconclusive about this question. We know comprehension is the purpose of reading; we also know that as students enter the intermediate grades with greater capacity to process and interpret words on a page, they will be able to demonstrate increased understanding.

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You may wonder, “What about the students who did not succeed in acquiring the basic reading skills?” Reading First programs did include small-group interventions for struggling readers. However, when they reach your classrooms there will still be some students who require additional instruction and support through Academic Intervention Services or Response to Intervention. These are the challenges you will have to deal with as they enter your classroom.

Reading First has had its critics as well as supporters. We do not know what will happen to the No Child Left Behind Act or Early Reading initiatives in the new administration. We do know that over the last six years many of our students learned the basics of reading in a profound way. The results of research-based best practice will become evident in your classroom.

Reading First supports what Giselle Martin-Kniep refers to as a “commitment to expertise.” She strongly supports the premise that “the aim of education should be to enable individuals to learn with and from others. She goes on to say that “... the work

of a professional learning community is to design and distribute thoughtfulness.” (2007) It not only takes on paramount importance for you, middle-level teachers, to have a deep understanding of the kinds of instruction that preceded your students in their middle school experience, it becomes imperative that you do. Our hope is that the work we accomplished these past few years serves as a springboard to begin a dialogue that will sustain the effectiveness of literacy instruction and student achievement. We encourage you to discuss with colleagues in the earlier grades in your school the approaches to reading that your students experienced. In this way, together, we can help our students and our schools improve.

Sincerely,

Anne Genovese

Carol Pufahl

Roberta Senzer

A Reading First Team on Long Island

REFERENCES

Johnston, P. (2004) *Choice words/How our language affects children's learning*. New York: Stenhouse Publishers.

Martin-Kniep, G.O. (2007) *Communities that learn, lead and last/Building and sustaining educational expertise*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.