The Quest for Reading Programs That Work

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Successful and widely adopted reading programs have similar characteristics which apparently contribute to their effectiveness.

What makes a reading program effective? The answer is becoming clearer as we seek to identify and provide information about successful practices.

A number of proven programs are listed in a catalogue published by the United States Office of Education called Educational Programs That Work. Each of them must have been certified by a 22-member panel (half appointed by the Education Division of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare; half appointed by the National Institute of Education) as having met six criteria:

1. Did a change occur?
2. Was the effect consistent enough and observed enough to be statistically significant?
3. Was the effect educationally significant?
4. Can the intervention be implemented in another location with a reasonable expectation of comparable impact?
5. How likely is it that the observed effects resulted from the intervention?
6. Is the presented evidence believable and interpretable?

In addition to being listed in Educational Programs That Work, programs approved by the joint review panel qualify for dissemination funds. These funds are available on a competitive basis.

to developers of programs who are willing to help another school system "adopt" and install their program. The objective is to transplant successful programs. Dissemination funds are also competitively available to persons who work as state facilitators, helping others become aware of the successful programs, and also assisting them in adopting these programs.

When developers of a program are successful in their request for certification by the joint review panel and in their competition for dissemination funds, they then face another kind of test: will other educators consider the program appropriate for use in their schools?

Among the programs that scored well on that test—those that have been most widely adopted and successfully implemented—are:

1. Project Catch-up, Newport Beach, California (139 adoptions; 32 states and two territories).
2. Pegasus-Pace, Tuscaloosa, Alabama (80 adoptions; 9 states).
3. Reading, English Rotation Project, Thomson, Georgia (60 adoptions; 11 states).
5. School Volunteer Development Project, Miami, Florida (53 adoptions; 14 states and Guam).
7. Learning to Read by Reading, Jamestown, California (42 adoptions; 10 states).
9. Systems Directed Reading, Richardson, Texas (23 adoptions; 23 states).
10. Alphaphonics, San Francisco, California (15 adoptions; 15 states).

When one analyzes these programs, certain characteristics appear repeatedly. These characteristics, which apparently are associated with effectiveness in reading instruction, are:

1. There is a structured curriculum with hierarchical sequencing stated in behavioral objectives with instructional activities, materials, and tests keyed to stated objectives.
2. The program is individualized to accommodate specific skills needs and varied learning patterns with a heavy focus on direct teaching of decoding skills.
3. Trained auxiliary support staff is used such as reading specialists, teacher aides, and parent volunteers. Structured, well-planned coordination exists between support staff and the regular teacher.
4. Grouping of students is accomplished through multiple methods.
5. There exists the belief that students can achieve, and the school environment is the responsible entity for assuring student achievement. Varied strategies are utilized to involve parents.
6. There are varied reinforcement and frequent repetition strategies.
7. There is positive and immediate reinforcement of instruction.
8. There is a cumulative, consistent, varied testing program.
9. There is structured and frequent monitoring of student progress.
10. There is a well-defined program articulation and pupil progress system.
11. Reading is interrelated with other basic skills.
12. A literature/reading enjoyment component is a part of the program.
13. Varied approaches to teaching reading are utilized with emphasis on diagnostic teaching.
14. At least 30 to 45 minutes a day is spent on teaching reading.
15. Staff development is directly related to instructional program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

It may appear from what I have said that comparing effectiveness of reading programs is a fairly clear-cut process. Of course, it is really not
Figure 1: Sample Information from Educational Projects That Work—Project: The Glassboro Right-to-Read Project

- **Description**

  The Glassboro Right-to-Read Project is an individualized diagnostic/prescriptive reading program based on a district assessment of staff and community needs. The performance goal is to raise the reading level of pupils 1.5 years in an eight-month instructional period. Children are placed at their instructional reading level and given individualized teaching at that level. The project uses various forms of classroom organization to allow for flexibility and individualization.

- **Materials used**

  The diagnostic battery includes criterion-referenced testing, a measure of potential, an informal reading inventory, a readiness measure, and a kindergarten screening. A variety of instructional materials are used. The project provides A Guide to Program Planning, A Guide to Program Implementation, and Guess Who's Coming to School?—a guide to parent and community involvement.

- **Service available**

  Awareness materials are available; visitors are welcomed by appointment (schedule published in the fall); training is conducted at the project site (adopting site pays only their own costs); training is conducted out-of-state (exemplary project staff costs must be paid for); project staff may be able to attend out-of-state conferences (expenses must be paid).

- **Descriptors**

  Diagnostic/Prescriptive Reading
  Parent-Community Involvement
  Staff Development
  Needs Assessment

- **Target audience**

  All students, pre-K through 3.

- **Financial requirement**

  Start-up costs: $21.73 per learner per year if a reading specialist is hired; $5.73 per learner per year if a reading specialist is already under contract.

  Maintenance: Reading specialist salary and/or substitute pay for release time unless otherwise provided.

- **Program evaluation**

  First year of program implementation—2.14 years growth in an eight-month instructional period.
  Second year of program implementation—1.52 years growth in an eight-month instructional period.

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