Teaching All Students to Read: Is it Really Possible?

Dr. Joseph K. Torgesen
Florida State University and
Florida Center for Reading Research

IDA, Hawaiian Branch, October, 2007
There have been at least three major reformations in American Education within the last century, and we are in the middle of the third one.

1. The first started in 1900, and lasted about 30 years.
   - School year increased from 144 to 174 days.
   - Absences decreased by 19 days.
   - Enrollment in 6-12 grew 15 times faster than 1-5.
   - High school graduation grew from 6.8% to 28.8%.
   - No. of college degrees grew from 27,000 to 122,000.
There have been at least three major reformations in American Education within the last century, and we are in the middle of the third one.

2. The second started after WWII and the Korean war.
   - College enrollment grew from 2 million to 6.9 million.
   - Community colleges doubled in number.
There have been at least three major reformations in American Education within the last century, and we are in the middle of the third one.

3. We are now in the third major educational reform.

   During the 1980’s nearly every state raised its graduation requirements.

   In the 1990’s almost every state adopted legislation mandating testing of students. Minimum standards were set, and schools were expected to make progress in improving the number of students meeting standards.

   The “standards based education” reform matured in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002.
This standards based educational reform has not been driven by educators, but by legislators.

And legislatures have been influenced primarily by the business community.

The business community’s basic concern was that the bottom half of students graduating from high school were not prepared for the literacy demands of an increasingly technical workplace.

Thus, the major focus of current reform is increasing the percentage of students that can meet grade level standards.
Two important goals for improvement:

1. Increase the percentage of students reading “at grade level” each year at each grade level from kindergarten through third grade

2. Decrease the percentage of students with serious reading difficulties each year at each grade level

Our most important measures of success in doing this assess student performance on reading comprehension measures at the end of the year—particularly at end of third grade
We know that many schools must provide particularly strong instruction, because so many of their students are not strongly prepared for learning to read when they come to school.

Most poor children:
1. Are delayed in the development of phonemic awareness
2. Have had less exposure to print and the alphabet
3. Have vocabularies that are usually less well developed – ½ size in poor children
4. Have a range of experience and conceptual knowledge that is often limited or different compared to other students
5. Frequently do not have good models of reading or support for academics in their homes
Relationship of “school challenge” to student performance

587 RF schools in Florida

% of 1-3 Students Performing At Grade Level at the End of Year

Level of School Challenge based on % of students qualifying for FR lunch
The Adult Learning and Performance Gap

Level of School Challenge based on % of students qualifying for FR lunch

% of 1-3 Students Performing At Grade Level at the End of Year

- Top 15% Schools
- Low 15% schools

Approx. 20%

Approx. 27%
Whether or not we achieve these goals depends on the strength of our instruction to accomplish two things during the year:

All students who begin the year meeting grade level expectations continue to meet grade level expectations at the end of the year—they make expected yearly growth.

All students who begin the year reading below grade level accelerate their development so they make expected yearly growth plus catch-up growth.
Whether or not we achieve these goals depends on the strength of our instruction to do two things during the year.

- Insuring all students make expected yearly growth

- Strong core reading instruction for all students
- Enough time spent to meet the needs of many students who do not typically receive powerful support at home
- Enough quality so that the increased instructional time is spent effectively

\[ \text{Time} \times \text{quality} = \]
Whether or not we achieve these goals depends on the strength of our instruction to do two things during the year.

- Insuring students who are behind make expected yearly growth plus catch-up growth.

Effective differentiated instruction by classroom teacher.

Effective school-level systems and resources to provide additional intensive intervention in small enough groups for enough time, and with enough skill.
In order to effectively prevent early reading difficulties, we need to apply two kinds of knowledge: 

- From the “science of reading”:
  - Information about the *individual* components of instruction and assessment that are most effective in raising literacy levels

- From effective schools:
  - Information about leadership, organizational, and classroom practices that are most effective in raising literacy levels

Understanding, and Motivation to Apply
Lessons learned from the Kennewick, Washington school district:

Located in southeastern Washington

Has about 15,000 students – 13 elementary schools, four middle schools, and 3 high schools

25% of students are ethnic minorities, and 48% elementary school students qualify for free or reduced price lunch
Lessons learned from the Kennewick, Washington school district:

In 1995, the school board in Kennewick challenged the elementary schools to have 90% of their students at grade level in reading by the end of third grade – within 3 years.

The primary responsibility for accomplishing this was assigned to the school principals.
Lessons learned from the Kennewick, Washington school district:

From David Montague, a principal:

“We thought the board and the superintendent were crazy… I saw in the White Paper that elementary principals were responsible, and said ‘Why don’t they come down to our building and see the kids that come to our school?’ I mean, our kindergarten kids seem to enter school every year with lower skills…”
The District passed a bond that provided a district reading teacher for each school, and began to hold public meetings at a different elementary school every two weeks.

“After that, the whining died down. The goal started to grow legs….Principals are messengers. When you’re in the message business, it doesn’t help to criticize the message. It drives a wedge. It empowers those who don’t want to change. Since we’re responsible for implementation, it makes no sense to send a mixed message. Principals cannot play ‘loyal opposition’ harping against accountability and at the same time provide effective leadership for growth”
At the schools…
“We began to have serious staff meetings…we began ….looking at the test data to see how far behind some of our kids were. It was the first time Washington had ever had such precise data. In the fall of 1995, 23% of our 3rd graders were reading at second grade level and 41% of our 3rd graders were reading at a kindergarten or 1st grade level.
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## Washington Elementary School

**Growth in % of 3rd grade students meeting grade level standards**

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Working harder and more effectively at 3rd grade

Baseline year
From the Principal:

“By the 3rd year, we had exhausted our work-harder-at-third-grade strategy...More of the catch-up gain had to be made at second and first grade. Our first-and second-grade teachers realized that they had to become more accountable for their students' learning. Even our kindergarten teachers, who had spent most of their class time on social activities, began the transition to teaching phonemic awareness along with letter and sound recognition.”
Washington Elementary School

Growth in % of 3rd grade students meeting grade level standards

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Baseline year

Working harder and more effectively at 3rd grade

Began testing in 2nd grade and focusing on earlier improvement

Result of improvement at both 2nd and 3rd Grade

Began providing intensive interventions in the afternoon to many students
“In the United States, public schools deliver 85% or more of their curriculum by reading textbooks, whiteboards, worksheets, and computer screens. Students must read well to do well. It matters little what else they learn in elementary school if they do not learn to read at grade level. Even math depends on reading. There are far more words than numbers in math books. As the math concepts become more complicated, the verbal descriptions become more involved as well. As Kennewick has focused on reading, our math scores have improved at a rate similar to our reading scores. The reading problem becomes more obvious in middle school where students who cannot read well struggle to absorb content in all other subjects.” P. 49

Washington Elementary School

School Characteristics
55% Free/reduced lunch
28% Minority
85% Stability

Teaching Staff
2 half-day kindergarten teachers
3 classroom teachers each in 1-5
1 District Reading Specialist
3 Title I Teachers
1.5 Resource room/special ed teachers
1 PE teacher
1 librarian, 1 Librarian secretary
3 Specials teachers
9 paraprofessionals
How they get additional instructional power in first grade

During the Morning Reading Block
Small group reading during 1st hour of the day

It puts 13 adults with 75 students during the first hour in first grade

Struggling students get 1:3 with most skilled instructor
Advanced students get 1:7 ratios with paras and others

In the afternoon

Many students get additional small group or 1:1 instruction time as interventions
Washington Elementary School

The reading block for 3 first grade classrooms

1st hour (8:45-9:45)

Small group instruction
3 classroom teachers
1 District Reading Teacher
2 Title I teachers
Specials teacher
PE teacher
6 paraprofessionals
The bell rings at 8:35 a.m. and a new school day begins in Stephanie Walton’s first-grade classroom.

After the flag salute and lunch count, her 22 students swiftly break into six small groups for the first hour of the morning reading block.

**Three students** go to the district reading specialist, **three to the Title 1 teacher**, while **four head next door** to learn with other students of their ability level. The teacher in the neighboring classroom sends over **three** of her students, and they take their places with **three** of Stephanie’s students.

In the back of the room, **seven students gather** for direct instruction with a para-educator who follows Stephanie’s lesson plan as is within her listening range.

In the hall, **two students join a small reading group** with the P.E. teacher.
Washington Elementary School

The reading block for 3 first grade classrooms

1st hour (8:45-9:45)  2nd hour (9:45-10:45)
Small group instruction  Whole group instruction
3 classroom teachers
1 District Reading Teacher
2 Title I teachers
Specials teacher
PE teacher
6 paraprofessionals
It's 9:43. Glancing up, Stephanie smiles at the students who are returning from other classes. “Your options are cards or workbook.” They know exactly what to do, and get right to work. She continues teaching until the rest of the students are back.

At 9:47 Stephanie asks the entire class to come to the carpet area in the front of the room. In less than two minutes they are settled in the story area gazing at the cover of *Things that Go*.

In 25 minutes, they use the same thematic material to do five different exercises to build vocabulary and comprehension.

Then the students move to their seats and spend the next 10 minutes on two workbook exercises reinforcing the meaning of five position words they just learned. They spend the rest of whole group time spelling on white boards.
Ten years ago we would have seen three reading groups with seven students each. Stephanie would have been the only adult, except on the days when she was able to get a mom to volunteer to help with the art project that accompanied the reading unit.

Stephanie would have spent 20 minutes providing direct instruction to each group, while the other two groups did seat work or read silently.

The 60-minute reading block would have predominantly focused on comprehension utilizing whole-language techniques. Often the worksheets would be from yesterday’s social studies, math, or health lesson, attempting to integrate reading instruction with other subjects.
Washington Elementary School

The reading block for 3 first grade classrooms

1st hour (8:45-9:45)
Small group instruction
3 classroom teachers
1 District Reading Teacher
2 Title I teachers
Specials teacher
PE teacher
6 paraprofessionals

2nd hour (9:45-10:45)
Whole group instruction
1 District Reading Teacher
2 Title I teachers
Specials teacher
PE teacher
6 paraprofessionals

Also, during the second hour, paras, Title 1, and others work in small groups with 2nd-5th grades

In the afternoon, many students are provided an additional 40-90 minutes of intervention
Targeted Accelerated Growth

The TAG Loop

1. Diagnostic Testing
2. Proportional increases in direct instructional time
3. Teaching to the deficient sub-skill
4. Retesting to be sure the skill has been learned
Children vary enormously in their talent and preparation for acquiring proficient phonemic decoding skills.
David
Alexis....
From David Motague

”By the fifth year, I was convinced high performance reading was about more time and better use of that time. Students who were behind needed more direct instruction. Some of them started getting 60 to 90 minutes extra each day for a total of 180 to 210 minutes a day. We spent that time on the sub-skills they hadn’t mastered.”

“For most of Kennewick’s high performance elementary schools, increasing the amount of time spent on direct reading instruction was an intuitive decision. They tried more time. It worked, and they kept on doing it. It was merely an extension of what remediation was about. Principals and many teachers at these schools saw the direct connection between increasing instructional time and increasing reading growth. Students who were a little behind needed a little more instructional time. Students who were a lot behind needed a lot more time.” P. 38.
“Growth is directly proportionate to the quality and quantity of instructional time. When we looked at our data student by student, we saw a painful fact with painful clarity. Most students who start behind stay behind. Time-starved reading programs that rely on sudden growth bursts from extraordinary instruction rarely move students from the 5th-30th percentiles up to grade level.” P. 48

“Catch-up growth is driven primarily by proportional increases in direct instructional time. Catch-up growth is so difficult to achieve that it can be the product only of quality instruction in great quantity.”
Teacher quality \times \text{time} = \text{growth}

“Quantity of instructional time can be doubled or tripled in a semester. Quality of instructional time cannot. Improving quality occurs over extended periods of time, at different rates for different teachers in the same school, as a constant process of arduous, intelligent labor.

Teacher quality (1) \times \text{time} (1) = \text{growth} (1)
Teacher quality (1) \times \text{time} (2) = \text{growth} (2)
Teacher quality (1) \times \text{time} (3) = \text{growth} (3)
Teacher quality x time = growth

“This is why the primary and immediate strategy for catch-up growth is proportional increase in direct instructional time.

Catch-up growth rarely occurs unless principals and teachers have good data, know each student’s learning needs, and schedule proportional increases in direct instructional time.”
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To Order:

Do advanced search in Google for “Annual Growth for all students”

Click on The National Children’s Foundation

It is listed as one of the books there.
Some important questions for reflection

What are the most important ways your school, or classroom is different now than three years ago?

If large numbers of your students continue to struggle to make expected yearly growth, have you considered increasing the length of the reading block?

Do students who struggle receive time for intervention instruction that is proportional to their difficulties?

Do some students receive as much as 60-90 minutes of intervention every day?
It matters little what else they learn in elementary school if they do not learn to read at grade level.
The best reason for working toward continuous improvement....
Thank You