By Jill B. Slack

A large portion of children in the United States are not learning to read by the end of 3rd grade. In 2000, the most recent year for which data are available, more than one-third (37%) of the nation’s 4th graders scored below the basic level on the reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Poor and minority children fare worse: 58% to 63% of African-American, Hispanic, limited-English speaking students, and those from impoverished homes fail to meet the basic level on the NAEP (Donahue et al., 2001). This crisis in literacy confronts every community and every school in the country.

Through the Reading Success Network (RSN), which originated at the Southern California Assistance Center, 15 U.S. Department of Education-funded comprehensive assistance centers across the country are helping strengthen K-3 reading programs by providing teachers with ongoing professional development in early literacy. While many improvement efforts focus on either content or process, the RSN helps teachers with both. Teachers use research-based practices to teach reading, and they change the way they teach after coaching, a process research shows to have the greatest likelihood to support classroom-level improvements.

Teachers from Sherwood Forest Elementary School in New Orleans work at a Reading Success Network session this past summer. They are, from left, Jeannine Boutte, Tiffani Shaw, and Christian Arceneaux.
The RSN complements existing curricula and other improvement initiatives already operating at the school site, which makes it quite different from many programs that focus on reading improvement.

“At first, many teachers think the RSN is ‘just another program,’ and they become apprehensive,” says Kathleen Theodore, New Orleans Public Schools teacher and RSN coach. “Once they hear it is a process and learn more about it, they begin to view RSN as a structure that will help them to reach their benchmark goals in reading.”

**FIVE COMPONENTS**

The RSN helps teachers provide quality K-3 reading instruction through five key components: coaching for results; diagnosis and assessment; data analysis; intervention strategies; and support networks. Coaching takes place at the school and supports and teaches teachers how to use the next three key components — assessment, data analysis, and intervention strategies. Support networks connect teachers to outside resources, such as through regional meetings.

**1. Coaching for results.**

The RSN works with experienced reading teachers to help them become reading coaches for peers at their schools. Typically, staff developers from one of 15 regional centers supporting RSN go to the school site to provide the initial training for teacher-coaches. Coaches learn proven strategies for teaching a specific reading skill, see the strategies modeled, and have time to practice the strategies with peers in the session. Center staff model using assessments of areas ranging from phonemic awareness to comprehension by having a teacher play the role of a student. Afterward, pairs of teachers practice administering the assessments, with one acting as the teacher and the other as the student. The teacher-coaches then learn to analyze assessment data. This experiential learning — the discussions, modeling, and practice teachers experience in the sessions — reinforce the information and help cement teacher learning. These sessions last three consecutive days, with a series of one-day follow-up meetings set one to two months apart during the first year. The center’s staff developer also visits between those times to offer added support.

Since the RSN work is federally funded, there is no cost to the school, except for released time for teachers. The sessions usually occur during the workday, with teacher-coaches given released time to attend. Some schools use substitutes, and others use team teaching (or some other creative way to find time) for teachers to attend. Some sessions may occur before or after school, if released time is not possible. In these cases, the training and follow-up occur in shorter, more frequent sessions.

The center staff helps the school or district develop a professional development plan based on their timeline for change and their assets, including logistical issues such as released time provisions and teachers’ current knowledge and use of effective reading practices.

Coaches, with initial support from the RSN staff, then work with teachers in their schools to form peer study groups. Teams typically include between four and eight teachers, depending on the school size, and ideally include more than one grade level, when common planning times allow. This configuration helps teachers (one grade level above and/or below) share and learn more about their students and grade-level expectations.

The coach organizes meetings and facilitates discussion. The groups are completely voluntary since teachers often see a coach as an observer who...
critiques them. Making the process voluntary increases teachers’ comfort level and feeling of trust as they learn how peer support can benefit them.

In the peer study groups, teachers learn to better diagnose student needs and design appropriate instructional activities in the key reading skills of phonemic awareness; phonics; fluency; vocabulary development; and comprehension.

The collaborative discussion/study team experience allows teachers to get to know the coach better before the coach visits the classroom. In most instances, as a result of the collaborative/study team experience, teachers invite the coach and their colleagues into their classrooms to model and observe teaching.

Coaches provide hands-on instruction in using assessments so teachers have regular, diagnostic data to use to design appropriate instructional and learning activities. Coaches work with teachers on how to administer various assessments that measure student performance in the key reading skill areas, how to score and analyze the assessment data, and how to use the assessment data to develop learning activities in one or a combination of key reading skills. Many teachers analyze student work alone at their desks or at home, and mostly to assign grades or report scores. However, in the RSN, coaches help start and maintain a collaborative discussion about student work in which teachers share and reflect on ways to develop new reading practices and change existing ones.

For example, a group is shown a piece of student work, but told nothing about the assignment or the individual student until after teachers have looked at it. They describe and ask questions about it to develop a deeper understanding of the student’s strengths and needs, and of the teaching and learning environment. Not knowing the context forces the teachers to study the work more closely — without preconceptions. Teachers learn that working with others brings out resources, ideas, and strategies that make their individual efforts more productive.

“I’m glad we were encouraged to do this,” says Paula Crose, a kindergarten teacher at Delta School in Rohwer, Ark., “because it wouldn’t have happened otherwise.”

“Looking collaboratively at student work with our peers was an important strategy for us,” Crose said. “We began to learn from each other, with each other, and for each other, and this helped us improve our reading and writing instruction and make a difference for all our students, especially our at-risk readers.”

Karen Anderson, former 1st-grade Delta School teacher and current Delta School principal, concurs. “I needed to know if my students were mastering certain skills and what to do if they were not. My peers helped me recognize that certain students were having difficulty with medial sounds, and they helped me plan my instruction to meet their specific needs.”

—Irene Anderson, Delta School

2. Diagnosis and assessment.

RSN coaches help teachers learn to use a variety of reading assessments of the main components for teaching reading, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension. They learn to administer the assessments, score the responses, and record the results.

In the past, reading specialists or special education psychological staff usually tested students, while teachers were mainly familiar with large-scale assessments and used assessments linked to published curriculum products such as basal text series. Diagnosis and assessment are key to improving classroom reading instruction.

“Many teachers view assessment as something that happens once or twice a year,” states Lois Haid, reading...
instructor and RSN coach at Kennesaw State University in Georgia. “As a result, they rarely meet the individual needs of their students. We help teachers see that when they use a variety of diagnostic assessments, they acquire meaningful reading data to plan instruction effectively.”

3. Data analysis.

Teachers also learn various ways to interpret reading data, and learn how to design learning experiences for all students. Coaches work with teachers to examine data patterns and show how the data can reflect the effectiveness of various teaching practices, and can be used to create reading groups and determine interventions. Learning how to analyze data has helped teachers recognize how much their students vary and find better ways to meet children’s needs.

4. Intervention strategies.

Teachers learn about research-based reading instruction and how to help students develop high levels of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The coach defines the skills, reviews the evidence from the research, and describes proven strategies for teaching the skills. Then the coach models a strategy so teachers can experience it and ask questions. Most important, teachers practice on their peers in small groups to refine their new teaching skills in a safe context, supported by the coach and each other. Coaches share resources and materials and model instructional strategies. Teachers invite peers to observe in their classrooms and provide feedback.

Teachers throughout the region reported that each of these steps helps them effectively transfer new practices to their classrooms.

“Practicing the new strategies first with my peers was very helpful,” said Jeannine Boutte, 3rd-grade teacher at Sherwood Forest Elementary School in New Orleans. “I found out that some strategies were not as easy to learn as they looked, and I started to have questions about them that were addressed right away by my coach and my peers. This helped me gain the confidence I needed to use the strategy with my students.”


Teachers use a range of resources to enhance their reading program. In addition to support from a coach, teachers are able to draw on leading educators outside their own school and share strategies with others facing similar challenges. In the Southeast Comprehensive Assistance Center (SECAC) region, school staff attended periodic regional meetings.

“The RSN gave our teachers and administrators the opportunity to experience ‘true’ collaboration,” said Carla Dearman, assistant director of training for the Barksdale Reading Initiative in Mississippi. “We all valued the chance to meet with and learn from reading experts and our RSN peers in a stimulating environment away from our sites.”

Becky Gibson, principal of Parkin School in Parkin, Ark., agreed. “The networking was the most important thing for us, especially since we’re a small rural school. We made new
friends and gained new perspectives on how to solve our most pressing reading issues.”

RESULTS SHOW

Since 1998, SECAC has trained, supported, and provided follow-up to hundreds of reading coaches, teachers, and administrators who work primarily in high-poverty, low-performing schools. Three-quarters of the schools involved were identified by their states as needing improvement. In addition, 92% percent of the students in these schools received free or reduced-price lunch, and 95% of the students were ethnic minorities, factors traditionally used to excuse reading failure. Such was not the case for these schools.

In these schools, three major changes occurred.
- **Teachers’ expectations of what low-achieving students can do changed dramatically.**
  
  In the past, teachers had found that students who fell behind in 1st grade continued to do poorly as they progressed through the grades.

  Now, however, teachers reported on survey data that the regular examination of data to plan instruction, more frequent use of diagnostic assessment, and more effective use of instructional strategies has convinced them that their lowest-achieving students can make progress in reading and writing.

- **Teacher practice has changed.**
  
  For example, teachers now routinely examine student data, monitoring student progress on a regular basis. The continual focus helps them meet the needs of struggling readers. “Learning how to make effective decisions about one child’s learning helped me make better decisions about all my students,” said Crose, the Delta School kindergarten teacher.

- **Students improved their reading.**
  
  A study of RSN by researchers at the University of Oklahoma revealed that students in RSN sites experienced more growth in key reading skill areas than students in comparison sites. Throughout the SECAC region, schools reported a 23% to 41% increase in the number of students reading at or above grade level each year as measured by state-mandated tests. In a regional evaluation study, 2nd-grade teachers reported 36% of students entered on or above 2nd-grade level. By year’s end, 77% of students were reading on or above grade level, and 49% of these students were reading on or above 3rd-grade level. Similarly, 3rd-grade teachers reported that 48% of students started the year reading on or above grade level, but by year’s end, 71% were reading on or above grade level and 36% of these were reading on or above 4th-grade level. And in 2001-02, kindergartners at Delta School in Rohwer, Ark., increased from a 1.0 reading level in October to a 2.1 grade level equivalent score in May on criterion measures of phonemic awareness, alphabet recognition, decoding, and sight words. Likewise, 3rd graders at Sherwood Forest Elementary School in New Orleans increased their post-test scores an average of 15 points on norm measures of reading comprehension, vocabulary, and word analysis.

SECAC and partner regional centers are working to improve reading across the country. The Reading Success Network is helping provide a safety net for early elementary students having difficulty with reading. It offers teachers the keys they need to drive reading improvement.

REFERENCE