

SPENDING MONEY WISELY

GETTING THE MOST FROM SCHOOL DISTRICT BUDGETS



ENSURING MORE STUDENTS READ ON GRADE LEVEL: Cost-Effective Strategies

Opportunity Brief • Getting Started • Lessons from the Field

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OPPORTUNITY BRIEF

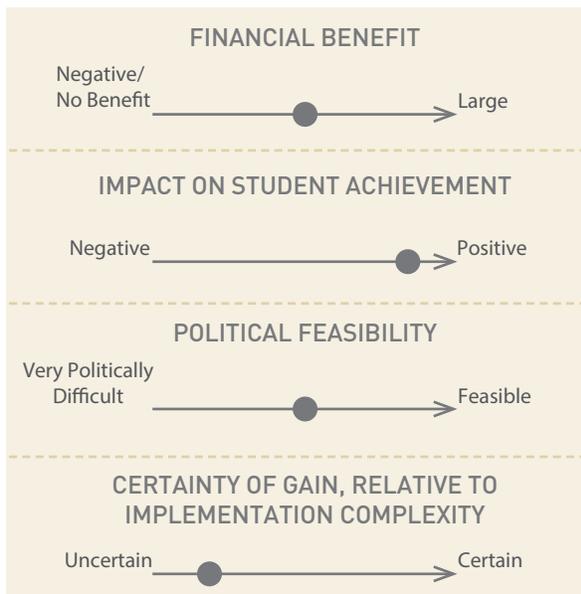
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Research confirms the importance of reading. Low-income students who cannot read on grade level by third grade are thirteen times less likely to graduate on time than middle-class peers who can read on grade level by third grade. By contrast, ensuring a child can read on grade level by third grade virtually eliminates the high school graduation gap between rich and poor students.¹ With Common Core State Standards moving into 46 states, reading skills are likely to become even more important. These new standards focus on original historic documents, deep reading, and citing evidence from the text, which render reading skills even more critical to success.

Close examination of many district budgets confirms that substantial resources are already being directed to reading; the challenge is to spend differently.



Indeed, many districts’ strategic plans set third-grade reading proficiency as a key metric of success. It is well understood that any successful effort to boost reading achievement will yield big academic gains. What is perhaps most surprising is that the incremental cost of launching a large-scale intensive reading program is zero in most districts. Although many district leaders lament that their districts lack adequate resources, close examination of many district budgets confirms that substantial resources are already being directed to reading; the challenge is to spend differently.

Reading instruction is, in fact, a prime candidate for raising achievement while reducing costs. The political pushback to improving reading is moderate. There is generally strong support externally, but significant pushback from internal stakeholders such as paraprofessionals and special education teachers who may be impacted by a large shift in staffing, roles, and responsibilities. Implementation risk is the greatest obstacle, since this effort requires many staff in many schools to implement well.

Know what is really being spent

Most districts already allocate substantial resources to ensuring all students can read. However, many of the activities and line items are not identified as such, making it difficult to fully assess what is really being spent on this effort. To allocate reading resources more effectively, the first step is to fully understand all current spending on reading.

In a typical district of 50,000 students, a review of the budget for reading expenses might turn up the items identified in Exhibit 1.

Certainly, any district of 50,000 students spends more than one million dollars on teaching reading, but this hypothetical example is typical of how reading expenses are reported. A review of budgets from a number of large urban districts showed less than one million dollars labeled as reading (or

related to reading) out of a nearly \$900 million budget (0.1 % of spending); even one of the largest districts in the country reports spending less than 2% of its budget on teaching reading.

Line-item budgets generally capture less than 0.6% of the district’s true financial commitment to teaching reading. The underrepresentation stems from two root causes. First,

Exhibit 1

ILLUSTRATIVE BUDGET FOR READING EXPENSES		
	Cost	FTE
Reading tutors	\$600,000	24
Reading curriculum materials	\$250,000	--
Software (Read 180, etc.)	\$100,000	--
Afterschool reading support	\$50,000	--
Total	\$1,000,000	24

Source: The District Management Council

Exhibit 2

CONSOLIDATED READING BUDGET EXAMPLE		
Source	Use	\$(millions)
Title I	Reading teachers	\$10.8
	Reading tutors	\$21.0
	Reading curriculum	\$15.0
	Reading software	\$10.0
	Reading coaches	\$6.2
	Reading professional development	\$0.5
Title IIa	Reading professional development	\$0.4
	Reading coaches	\$4.1
Title III	Reading PD for ELL teachers	\$0.2
	Reading curriculum for ELL students	\$3.0
Foundation Grant 1	Dropout prevention/recovery (for students who can't read well)	\$37.5
Foundation Grant 2	Summer elementary reading intervention	\$8.4
Foundation Grant 3	Afterschool reading support (as part of a comprehensive afterschool program)	\$7.2
Total		\$124.3

Source: The District Management Council

the dollars devoted to teaching reading are not in the operating budget, but are instead in grant budgets and other budgets, and thus are much less visible. Second, most reading instruction is delivered by people not identified on the budgets as reading staff.

Grant and other budget expenditures

All school districts have many budgets, not just one. The most visible, hotly debated, and tightly managed is the operating budget. Federal funds like Title grants and private foundation dollars often require separate budgets. While much less likely to be closely reviewed and managed by the superintendent and CFO, these other budgets often contain a great deal of spending in support of reading. In our hypothetical district of 50,000 students, these other budgets might include supports as shown on Exhibit 2.

In many districts, the full “other budget” list of reading-related expenses is even longer than that shown on Exhibit 2, reflecting the importance districts place on mastering reading. Creating a consolidated program budget that rolls up all related spending from every funding source is necessary to define and fully understand current efforts.

Other expenditures not labeled “Reading”

While consolidating operating and non-operating budgets is helpful, it will still fail to capture the vast majority of a dis-

trict’s spending on reading instruction. Most of the funds dedicated to reading are hiding in plain sight, just labeled as something else. Based on the experience of some districts, resources dedicated to teaching reading are estimated to include significant staff time as shown in Exhibit 3.

Including the operating budget line items, grant-funded expenditures, and associated staffing costs, a hypothetical typical district of 50,000 students can spend up to \$162 million on reading.

Three shifts in resources to raise reading achievement

Given the importance of reading, significant investment in this area seems reasonable and necessary. However, many districts have not seen significant returns in terms of improved student outcomes. In response, many districts scrounge for new funds to layer a “fix” on top of current efforts. Some of the more common uses for these sought-after reading dollars are to add dedicated reading teachers and reading tutors, to expand before-school, after-school, and summer reading instruction, to purchase new curriculum, and to offer more professional development.

Instead of adding new funds, reallocating existing resources and strategically managing a district’s reading efforts can improve results for students and improve the efficacy of current spending. While by no means a comprehensive list, three

Exhibit 3

STAFF TIME (AND THUS EXPENSE) DEVOTED TO TEACHING READING		
Role	Estimated % of time spent teaching reading	Notes
Elementary classroom teachers	25%	In many districts, teachers spend 90 minutes or more on reading instruction per day.
Special education paraprofessionals	30%	In some districts, up to 30% of special education paraprofessionals’ time is devoted to delivering reading instruction, based on time studies conducted by The District Management Council (DMC).
Special education teachers	40%	Struggling to read accounts nationally for 40% of all referrals to special education. The figure might be even higher in districts with above-average special education identification rates, since 80% of students with mild “disabilities” like specific learning disability (SLD) have reading as their primary need. ²
Speech and language therapists	85%	Up to 85% of speech and language therapists’ time is dedicated to language concerns like comprehension and vocabulary, which are closely connected to reading. Nationally, it is only approximately 15% of speech and language services that focus on more traditional speech challenges like articulation or helping non-verbal students.

Source: The District Management Council

shifts in resources can raise reading achievement and reduce overall costs.

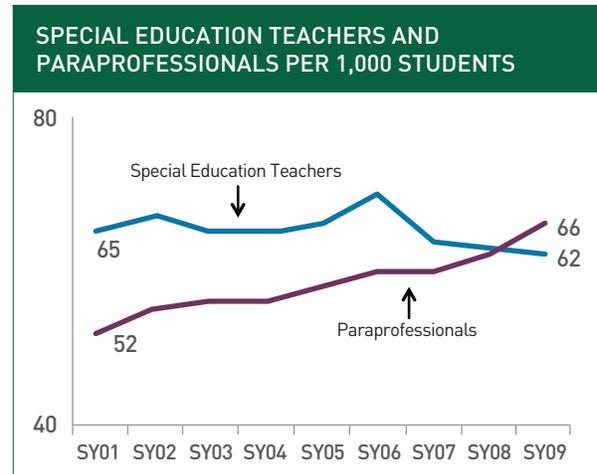
1 Focus on teaching quality, not teacher quantity or small group size

Many districts have adopted a strategy of more, rather than better. A review of actual practice suggests that many districts have sought to improve reading outcomes by focusing on having more instructors and very small instructional groups rather than focusing on improving the quality of instruction. To be fair, few districts, if any, would identify this as their strategy, but their actions seem to indicate that this is the operating assumption.

The wide use of paraprofessionals to teach or support reading instruction is one proof point. Some districts rely on a great many non-certified staff to help students who struggle to read. This is a common use for Title I funds and special education dollars. These staff members are not teachers, have no formal training in teaching reading, and may or may not have college degrees, yet they provide a great deal of reading instruction and support. In a study of one large district, fully 75% of paraprofessional time was devoted to providing academic support, much of it on reading at the elementary level. The popularity of this practice stems from the fact that many more paraprofessionals can be hired because they earn much less than teachers.

Nationwide, the number of paraprofessionals, adjusted for enrollment, has grown steadily in recent years and now exceeds the number of special education teachers (Exhibit 4). Certainly, not all the growth is attributed to providing reading instruction, but in some districts these extra paraprofessionals have an active role in providing reading support. This is seldom a cost-effective or even effective use of funds.

Exhibit 4



Source: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, "Shifting Trends in Special Education," 2011, 10, http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2011/20110525_ShiftingTrendsInSpecialEducation/ShiftingTrendsInSpecialEducation.pdf (accessed July 2013).

Trouble Teaching the Teachers

A recent National Council on Teacher Quality study reports that teacher preparation programs are "an industry of mediocrity,"¹ inadequately equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge needed in the classroom. This includes teachers of reading:

- Three out of four teacher preparation programs are not teaching proven methods of reading instruction. Instead, the teacher candidate is all too often told to develop his or her own 'unique approach' to teaching reading.
- Key content such as phonemic awareness and fluency are addressed adequately in only 33% of the teacher preparation programs.
- Only 4% of special education teacher preparatory programs require adequate training in Common Core-level content for which the candidate will be certified to teach.

¹"Teacher Prep Review: A Review of the Nation's Teacher Preparation Programs," National Center on Teacher Quality, 2013, 1, http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Teacher_Prep_Review_2013_Report (accessed November 5, 2013).

The wide use of special education teachers to teach struggling readers also merits review and consideration. This may be surprising, but most special education teachers have little or no formal training in teaching reading; however, in many school districts, students who struggle to read and have IEPs rely heavily on special education teachers as reading teachers.

While supplemental reading instruction is not always delivered from staff highly-trained to teach reading, it is often delivered in very small group settings. The focus is on attention and intensity, but it is efficacy that should be at the forefront. A review conducted by The District Management Council of the schedules of special education teachers and paraprofessionals from a variety of districts across the country shows that it is common for extra reading help to take place with just two to four students in the room at any one time.

It is rare to find a district, especially an urban district, in which most struggling readers receive extra help from skilled reading teachers who have extensive training in teaching reading. Having highly-skilled reading teachers is not only more effective, but can be more cost-effective. Highly-skilled reading teachers are paid the same as special education teachers, but often serve 30-50 struggling students a week, whereas a typical special education teacher supports only 15-25 students a week. This reduces the cost to serve a struggling reader by half or more in some cases.

Even compared to lower-cost paraprofessionals, certified reading teachers can be cost neutral. Fully loaded, a reading teacher is two to three times more expensive than many

reading paraprofessionals, but increasing group size to five or six students can offset much of the cost of switching from many paraprofessionals and special education teachers to fewer highly-skilled reading teachers. And, of course, nothing is more expensive than providing services that do not actually improve reading skills.

2 Shift resources to improve core instruction

In urban districts, where often the majority of students are struggling readers, the demand for extra help in reading is strong. Many districts have invested heavily in reading teachers, Title I teachers, and paraprofessionals or tutors as part of their Tier 2 or Tier 3 reading interventions under the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. This is an example of districts' shifting resources to support strategic priorities, but it can prove not to be cost-effective.

RTI originated in suburban schools, and the model assumed that only 15-20% of students would be identified for supports beyond core classroom instruction (Exhibit 5). For a school of 500, for example, 100 students would get extra help, requiring approximately three intervention teachers. For the same size school in an urban district, as many as 400 students could need extra help, requiring approximately 12 additional teachers, nine more than the suburban school. For a district of 50,000 students, this represents a difference of about 450 more elementary intervention teachers. Because the need for staff is so great, many urban districts hire lower-cost paraprofessionals to

Benefits to students with IEPs

Improved core instruction can also have tremendous benefits for students with disabilities. In many cases, struggling readers are identified for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). In fact, nationally, 80% of students with mild "disabilities" like specific learning disability have reading as their primary need.¹ For example, one large county district's literacy reforms focused on implementation of a common curriculum in all classrooms and regular assessments for all students, including students with disabilities. From 2005-2009, the percentage of students with disabilities scoring proficient or above on state assessments increased from 60% to 77%. During this time period, more of these students were being educated in the general education classroom than ever before.

Eventually, improving core reading instruction can significantly decrease special education costs as fewer struggling readers are identified for special education.

¹ "Seeking Effective Policies and Practices for Students with Special Needs," Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, Spring 2009, 2, http://www.renniecenter.org/research/SeekingEffectPolicies_SPED.pdf (accessed November 5, 2013).

provide the extra instruction, even though they have no formal training in teaching reading. This creates two problems: (1) classroom teachers start to rely on the “extra help” intervention to remediate struggling readers, and (2) the quality of the extra help is not sufficient for the task.

In one urban district with an overwhelming commitment to reading, it was not uncommon to see 18 of 24 elementary students leave the room to get Tier 2 support from paraprofessionals. The irony was they left a classroom with a certified teacher who had received extensive district-provided training in teaching reading; instead, they went to work with paraprofessionals or others who had no formal training in teaching reading.

For many urban districts, concentrating efforts on core classroom instruction has yielded a higher return on investment. The above-mentioned district shifted their literacy interventions to focus on improving the effectiveness of the core classroom teacher. Reading blocks were extended to 90 minutes per day (some districts have provided as much as 2.5 hours per day), allowing classroom teachers to provide the additional, intensive reading instruction needed. Targeted small group instruction was still provided, but without students going to another teacher.

In order to make this extended time effective, the instruction must be effective – more time with an ineffective teacher is unlikely to help. Many elementary teachers still have limited formal training in how to teach reading and the key content of reading instruction, and even less in how to help struggling

readers. In raising the expectations for core instruction, some districts have made the commitment to help teachers improve their practice. Some districts have adopted school-based coaching models in which strong reading coaches observe teachers, model lessons, and attend common planning time, data meetings, and faculty meetings.

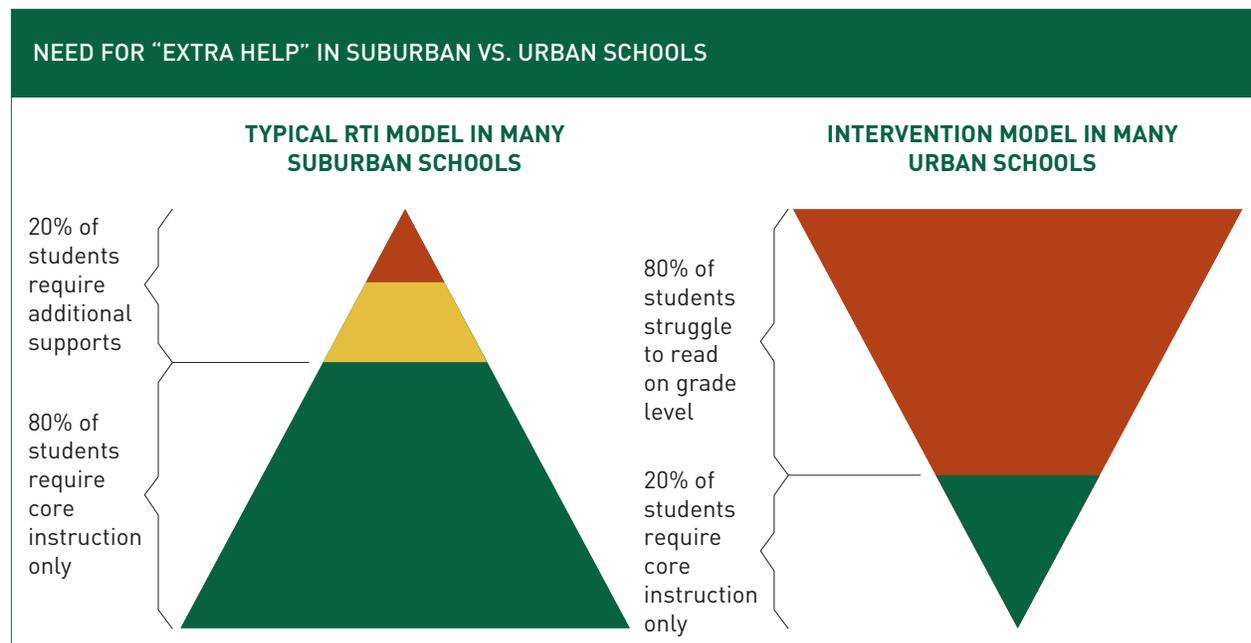
The economics, both in terms of time and money, of intensive, effective coaching to improve core instruction can be very cost-effective. In the example of an elementary school with 500 students, 12 reading teachers could provide 30 minutes of extra help each day to each struggling student. This leaves the 90 minutes each day of core instruction unimproved. Conversely, just two reading coaches could provide intense support to 25 classroom teachers, who could use a two-hour literacy block to help all students. Each coach could work with each teacher for two hours a week on average, which is a significant level of support.

3 Integrate other existing systems, departments, and spending

If reading is a top strategic priority, then it should be a top priority in the design of most systems, procedures, and departments. The question is, “Do other departments and procedures reflect that reading is critical?”

Two other areas warrant special attention: evaluations and schedules. One already gets much senior leadership attention,

Exhibit 5



Source: The District Management Council

Reading in middle and high school: Big opportunity or big expense?

In nearly all urban districts, there are many middle and high school students who struggle to read and experience particular difficulty with comprehension. Few districts, however, offer direct instruction in reading to the majority of these struggling readers. Often, only a handful of students receive reading instruction, mostly through special education. For example, in one particular urban district, 52% of secondary students could not read well enough to handle grade-level English, math, science and social studies, but less than 10% of these students got any help to improve their reading. The system acted as if they could read, even though they knew who (by name) could not. The very scale of the problem often drives districts from addressing it. The idea of extra instruction for half of all middle and high school students seems daunting in times of scarce resources.

Drawing from the strategies for improving elementary reading, there are ways that districts can cost-effectively improve reading outcomes and expand support. In fact, a number of cost-neutral options exist:

- Districts can shift from generalists like special education teachers to reading teachers. In many districts, each reading

teacher serves many more students than a special education teacher, so this actually can end up being a lower-cost option.

- Reading comprehension can be offered as a for-credit course. This will increase the number of reading teachers required, but could reduce by an equal amount other staff for other credit-bearing courses. If students take the same number of credit-bearing courses with the same average class size, no additional staff is required; it is *different* staff that is required.
- If a district does not want to create a new course, reading instruction could be combined with other courses such as social studies by hiring teachers who are dual certified in reading and social studies. Such a class would place equal emphasis on building reading skills as mastering the content.

As at the elementary level, a small investment in a cabinet-level position for secondary reading can help develop, coordinate, and manage cost-effective reading instruction at the secondary level.

Addressing this large need may seem too costly, but failing to address it comes at an even higher price.

and the other might not.

Evaluations are a front-burner topic in many districts, and some districts are closely connecting their teacher and principal evaluation systems to their efforts to improve reading. This includes ensuring that a large percentage of elementary walk-throughs and observations take place when reading is taught, aligning the evaluation rubric to include specifics related to district-endorsed reading practices, and evaluating elementary principals based on reading growth in their schools.

Schedules, the use of time during the day, however, are not often a topic of review, debate, and revision; many school schedules do not support improving reading. In some schools, students are pulled out of reading instruction for speech or occupational therapy; in many schools, the amount of time devoted to reading is based on what is “left over,” rather than what they think is required. Some schools provide 2½ hours of literacy a day K-5, while others with the same 6½-hour school day say such a long block is impossible. Some middle schools find time to teach reading and English, but many cannot fit both into the schedule, so choose to teach English and not reading.

While this is a partial list, it makes the point that many parts of a district must work together to ensure all students can read. All of these functions already exist, and no new dollars are needed. Reading needs to be made a priority, and existing resources need to be deployed in support of reading. It takes a shift of mindset, not more money.

Win-win

Strong reading and comprehension skills are critical to student success. As discussed, there are often quite a lot of resources within a district directed toward reading when all the various programs and funds are included. Consolidating and reallocating resources strategically and ensuring that students are getting the most effective instruction can result in improved student outcomes without requiring an increase in spending. In fact, over time, as more students become proficient readers, further savings may be realized as a result of reduced referrals to special education and less remediation in the older grades. It is truly a win for students and the budget.

¹ Donald J. Hernandez, “Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation,” The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011.

² “Seeking Effective Policies and Practices for Students with Special Needs,” Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, Spring 2009, 2, http://www.renniecenter.org/research/SeekingEffectPolicies_SPED.pdf (accessed November 5, 2013).

Do your district's actions demonstrate that reading is a priority?

- Are your district’s hiring and tenure practices aligned with the stated belief that reading is critical?
 - » Do the special education and human resources departments screen new teacher candidates for their training and skill in teaching reading? Is this even part of the interview process? Are they asked to teach a sample lesson to struggling readers?
 - » Do elementary principals know that the teachers they are hiring have training and skill in teaching reading and have strong content knowledge in all five domains of reading instruction?
- Can an elementary teacher be awarded tenure if his or her students do not make much growth in reading? Does a principal have this data before making the decision?
- Are a significant number of elementary faculty meetings dedicated to improving reading instruction?
- Does the professional development calendar reflect the disproportionate importance of reading?
- Has the Curriculum and Instruction Office established a best-practice-based approach to teaching reading in the district?
- Does the use of data in the district support the reading effort?
- Does data and assessment closely monitor student growth in reading and identify effective and ineffective teachers of reading?
- Do data teams and PLCs regularly look at reading scores?

GETTING STARTED

ENSURING MORE STUDENTS READ ON GRADE LEVEL: Cost-Effective Strategies

Research has shown that the ability to read on grade level by third grade is a predictor of future achievement and success. Given the importance of reading, most districts invest significantly to increase the number of students reading on grade level, but are often disappointed by lackluster or stagnant results. By reallocating existing resources, many districts can fund a robust and effective reading program without increasing total costs.

HERE'S HOW TO GET STARTED:

1 PUT SOMEONE IN CHARGE OF READING DISTRICT-WIDE

Despite its importance and strategic value, reading instruction and intervention does not have a clear leader in name or in practice in many districts. Appointing a reading director and holding this individual accountable for results can help ensure that reading efforts are integrated and cohesive.

2 LOOK NO FURTHER THAN YOUR CURRENT BUDGET

Most districts already spend enough money on reading efforts to fund a robust best-practice program. However, existing resources are often spread across many different budgets and funding sources and each are managed independently. Consolidating existing resources under the reading director can increase the cost-effectiveness of reading efforts.

3 SHIFT RESOURCES TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY, NOT THE QUANTITY, OF INSTRUCTION

Small group sizes and extra time for intervention and remediation are often not enough to raise reading achievement, unless they are taught by an effective teacher. Shifting resources from paraprofessionals to larger groups working with highly-skilled reading teachers can be a more effective – but not more expensive – intervention strategy. Additionally, investing in improving core classroom instruction can be more cost-effective than expanding extra-help programs.

4 DEFINE A COMMON APPROACH TO TEACHING READING

Implementing a common approach to teaching reading (including materials, curriculum, and assessments) can ease implementation and leverage limited financial resources.

5 MONITOR FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Establishing a common approach to reading instruction is relatively straightforward; implementing it in the classroom is far more complex. Tools for teachers such as pacing guides and common formative assessments can help. But, leaders must also monitor for implementation during classroom walk-throughs.

A word to the wise: ACT LIKE READING IS KING

Most districts say that reading is one of their top priorities. If that is the case, then reading should be a top consideration in the design of most systems, procedures, and schedules. When implementing more cost-effective reading strategies, ask, “Do other policies and procedures reflect that reading is critical?” Often, district practices can unintentionally undermine the effort.



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A goal in many strategic plans is to ensure that all students can read on grade level, typically by second or third grade. Given the importance of reading to future success, it is not surprising to find that so many districts make it a top priority and invest heavily in this area. For a hypothetical typical district of 50,000 students, the investment in reading can reach \$162 million, or over \$3,000 per pupil.¹ Despite these efforts, 80% or more of fourth graders in urban districts are not proficient in reading, according to the NAEP reading test.² Many districts therefore search for additional funding to strengthen their literacy efforts.

Lessons from the field

LESSON 1 Treat reading as the priority you say it is

LESSON 2 Put one person in charge and pool resources

LESSON 3 Establish a common approach

LESSON 4 It is not the materials, but how they are implemented

The truth is that many districts already have the necessary funds to implement a best-practice elementary reading program. By focusing on teacher quality, shifting resources to improve core instruction, and incorporating “no cost” elements, districts can increase reading achievement and potentially realize cost-savings.

Four lessons learned in districts like Montgomery County Public School (MD), School District of Lancaster (PA), and others demonstrate how to raise reading achievement without raising costs.

LESSON

1

Treat reading as the priority you say it is

More than a few urban districts have written strategic plans prioritizing early literacy, and soon thereafter cut half of their reading teachers to balance the budget. Many districts that have successfully increased the number of children reading on grade level have made reading a top strategic priority and demonstrated this commitment in the budget process and in the realigning of nearly all aspects of their organizations to elevate reading above all else. Not only does this prioritization strategy increase the likelihood that all students master reading, but it is a more effective use of resources; it leverages existing systems, processes, and procedures as opposed to piling on new ones.

In the School District of Lancaster, a mid-sized urban district, evidence that reading matters was visible at all levels.³ During the development and implementation of a multi-year reading initiative, the leadership team devoted a significant amount of their time to ensuring the success of the new reading efforts. They dedicated more than half of their regular, full-day monthly meetings of principals and the cabinet to reading issues; they also expected many of the principals to work many hours a month on this initiative with their peers outside the building. Taking a principal out of school is never an easy decision, but if reading mattered most, it needed this level of attention from the leadership. While some principals grumbled a bit about the time being spent out of the building, they knew reading could be a real game changer for their students, and noted that they attended many meetings that mattered much less. To ease the pushback, the district co-opted existing meeting times first, rather than adding new ones. If reading was the priority, then their meeting agendas should also reflect this. For added emphasis, the superintendent attended several planning and monitoring meetings throughout the year to demonstrate support and to push through any roadblocks.

All elementary school schedules were modified to include at least 90 minutes of literacy instruction every day. Other subjects, especially social studies and science, were expected to incorporate content-related reading and writing skills. To support the emphasis on literacy, all staff who taught reading – including classroom teachers, special education teachers, Title I teachers, and others – received 50 hours of sustained professional development per year on literacy alone, led by in-house experts, including teachers.

This intensive focus on reading did not cost an additional

dollar. The School District of Lancaster reallocated how it used time and was able to make improvements despite a 10% reduction in their operating budget over the two years of planning and initial implementation.

Realizing that roughly half their middle and high school students also struggled to read, they made the decision to reallocate resources to support reading at the secondary level despite a shrinking budget and staff cuts. Starting with sixth and ninth grade, they set out to offer a credit-bearing course in reading. When a much-hoped-for grant to support secondary reading did not materialize, they reasoned that if reading mattered most, most everything else mattered less. Having created a culture that prized reading, the special education director stepped up and significantly reduced her department to free up funds to hire reading teachers. The district's steadfastness was worth it: nearly 40% of struggling secondary students achieved a full year's gain in reading in just five months.

Montgomery County Public Schools also saw significant reading gains by making it one of the district's top priorities, even in the face of political opposition. When Superintendent Jerry Weast arrived in the district in 1999, he and his team first concentrated on early literacy in the neediest schools as an important lever to achieving equity. They implemented full-day kindergarten for schools in the "Red Zones," a district-within-a-district of mainly high-poverty, high-minority, and low-performing schools. The program included literacy-based curriculum and 100 hours of mandatory training for all kindergarten teachers. This was accomplished

If reading was the priority, then their meeting agendas should also reflect this.

despite significant pushback from parents in the low-poverty, suburban "Green Zones," who worried that shifting resources to the "Red Zones" would lead to declines at their neighborhood schools. By 2008, 93% of all kindergarteners were reading at or above standards.⁴ Between 2003 and 2010, the proficiency gap between white and minority students for third-grade reading proficiency decreased by 21 percentage points, even as proficiency levels for white students increased by more than ten percentage points.

Another cost-free way to improve reading proficiency is to message the importance of reading through the district's hiring and promotion practices. In some districts, district and school leaders are promoted or given additional responsibilities based on their reading expertise and demonstrated results. Principals' evaluations are tied to their school's reading progress, and highly-effective reading teachers are identified for coaching or other leadership positions. As budgets continue to tighten, taking full advantage of no-cost improvements and shifting existing resources can turn hope into reality.

**LESSON
2**

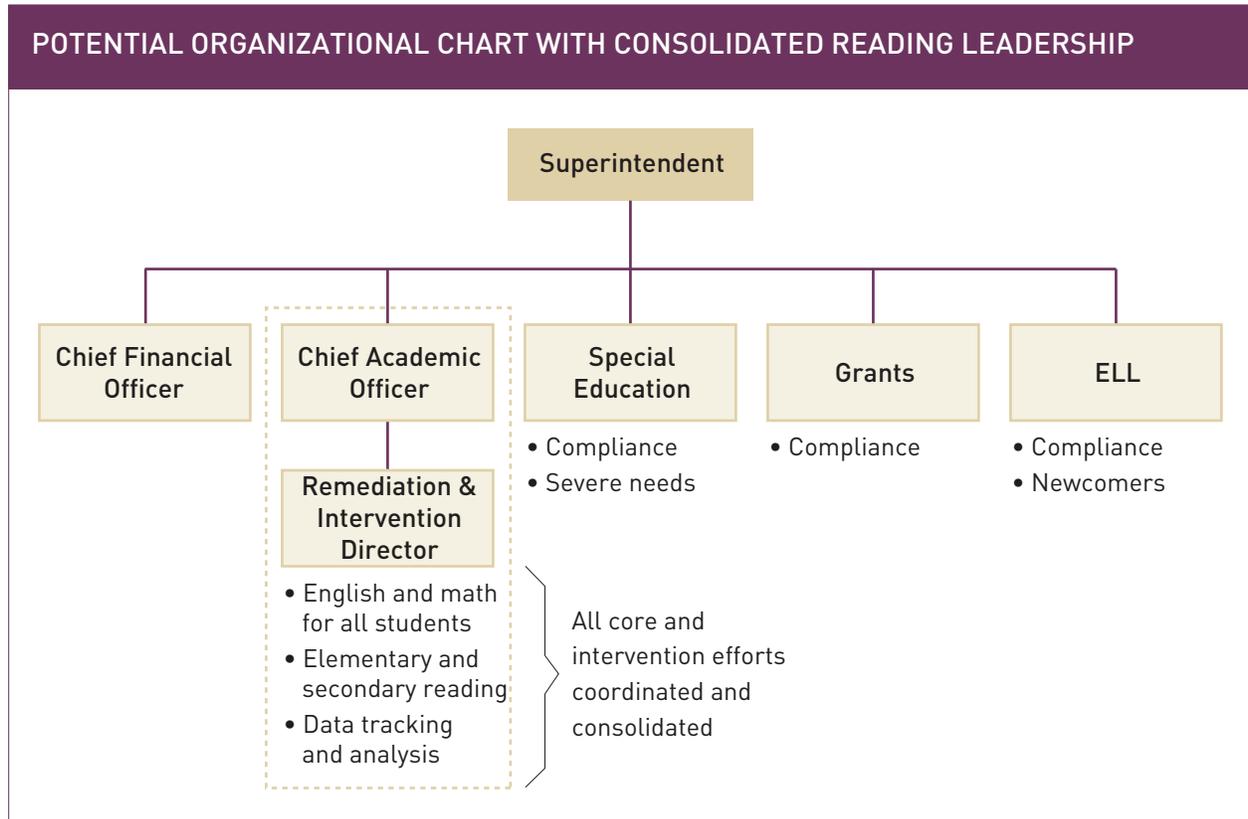
Put one person in charge and pool resources

Perhaps because reading is so important, a multitude of people and departments in a typical district are involved in managing reading efforts, but often no one person or department is actually in charge or fully accountable for results or resources. When a group of superintendents was asked, “Who is in charge of reading in your district?” few could answer. More than a few marveled at the simplicity and complexity of the question. One superintendent immediately texted his deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction. The deputy superintendent replied, “That is a very complex question with no simple answer. Perhaps a flow chart or a table might be useful?” On returning to his district, the flow chart revealed dozens of managers, but no leader. Principals, curriculum coordinators, special education administrators, ELL central office staff, the Title I grant manager, and the professional development department all claimed a role. While many departments were involved, there was no reading department and no individual in charge of all the efforts.

Mirroring or perhaps causing this diffuse leadership is the fact that funding for reading comes from a variety of sources (operating budget, Title I, Title IIa, IDEA, etc.) that are all managed by different people who often support different approaches. This is not only pedagogically ineffective, as some students may receive a smattering of assorted and perhaps contradictory interventions each week, but it is not cost-effective. To support a robust reading program, it is often necessary to integrate and coordinate efforts and funding sources. While the superintendent could charge everyone on the flow chart and all the grant managers to work together, the easiest way to do this is to consolidate leadership (Exhibit 1). Investment in a leadership position is small compared to the potential impact. Creating a cabinet-level director of reading would cost just 0.02% of our typical district’s spending on reading instruction, or the cost of about five paraprofessionals or two teachers.

But, who should be in charge? This can reopen the debate of instructional leadership versus organizational leadership. Many districts that have closed the achievement gap through a literacy-centric approach have concluded it is not one or the other, but needs to be both. They have sought candidates with deep content knowledge and strong leadership qualities,

Exhibit 1



Source: The District Management Council

backed by a proven record of student achievement results. Too often, the scale is tipped far in favor of domain knowledge, yet a key challenge is to coordinate many previously independent departments, fuse professional development efforts, integrate a great many budgets, support principals who most likely are not direct reports, and align and improve the practice of nearly half the teachers in the district.

One district, for example, had a “star” reading director. She had been a reading teacher, was an officer of a major reading association, and had deep knowledge of pedagogy. However, she was not a strong manager and was uncomfortable debating with building principals. Implementation of the district’s efforts had stalled and results had not budged much. In a politically delicate move, she was replaced as district-wide head, but remained an important advisor. An able manager with both content knowledge and a record of raising achievement took the existing plan and turned it into a reality. The number of struggling readers declined by 65% over three years. The plan had not changed, but the leadership had.

With a talented leader in place, it is important to let him or her build a team. This step is often overlooked. It can seem unnecessary, given that the district already has a multitude of people devoted to improving reading, but all these people already have their own teams: curriculum and instruction, special education, school-based teams, etc. Patrick Lencioni wrote in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* about the idea of first and second teams.⁵ The first team is where your loyalties lie, and the second team may be defined by which meeting you attend. Successful districts have made sure to build a true “first” reading team to lead the effort. The reading team can be augmented by an advisory group of principals, top-performing teachers, and coaches to help steer the initiative, provide feedback, and serve as liaisons to schools.

One large, diverse urban district centralized leadership in a three-person literacy team embedded within the Curriculum and Instruction Department. The team has a direct line of communication with school-based coaches, principals, and teachers. Everyone in the district knows, “If you have a question about reading, the literacy team is whom you call.” In another district, coaches who support teachers in implementing new reading curriculum and instructional strategies report directly to the reading director in addition to their principal. Everyone who teaches reading is “part of the team” and receives the same literacy training, materials, and support

from the reading director and his office.

The last step to creating a unified and effective leadership structure is to explicitly map out roles and responsibilities. Asking the following questions can help get started:

- Who do staff who teach reading report to?
- Who hires and evaluates staff who teach reading?
- Who sets their approach to reading instruction?
- How is reading professional development determined?

Based on the successes of districts that have significantly raised reading scores, there are no right answers, but the answers do need to be clear. Failing to spell out roles and responsibilities, typically in writing, undermines leadership, creates friction, and squanders resources. Some districts try to make many of these decisions through joint ownership. This can be difficult, unless a dispute resolution mechanism exists.

A more effective framework for collaboration can be to give decision rights to one person, but require consultation with other identified players.

Lastly, the leadership must have control over the resources they need to be successful. In both the districts mentioned above, all funding that supports reading is pooled and managed by the reading leadership. This includes Title I, Title IIa, IDEA, other grants, and operating budget dollars. Reading materials, accompanying technology, coaches’ salaries, and training for teachers are all funded through the reading leadership.

This creates a clear separation between those who determine how money is used versus those who administer the grant paperwork and compliance reporting.

Very often, the grant administrator de facto becomes head of a reading fiefdom. In one mid-sized urban district, reading teachers and coaches paid for by Title I funds were hired and supervised by the Title I director, while staff doing the same work but paid from the operating budget where under the domain of the principal; in addition, coaches paid for by Title IIa funds reported to the director of curriculum, and not surprisingly special education teachers who taught reading reported to the special education director. They all had different professional development programs and used different materials. This splintered approach ensured that each of these efforts was only marginally funded or effective. More successful districts have found that consolidating leadership and funding has streamlined implementation, maximized the strategic use of existing resources, and held leadership accountable for results.

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LESSON

3

Establish a common approach

Urban districts today are testing and refining how best to divide responsibility and authority between central office and school leaders. Districts have seen success via principal empowerment, centralized managed instruction, and a wide range of combinations along a continuum. Without taking sides on the issue, districts have found that implementing and monitoring a common, best-practice-based approach to reading allows them to more effectively leverage limited financial resources and ease implementation.

If central office expertise is to be available to support teachers and principals, then a common program and approach helps a lot. A typical district of 50,000 students has 1,000 elementary classroom teachers. Central office cannot reasonably support 1,000 different approaches to teaching reading, or even the approaches of 50 elementary school principals if they each have a different plan. In a principal empowerment model, principals can still have a large say in who teaches and other operational aspects, but perhaps not on curriculum, materials, and assessments.

Some leaders may be surprised at how varied the reading materials, curriculum, and approaches can be. One urban district, years into a district-mandated reading program, sampled classrooms across the district. To the surprise of central office, more than 27 different materials were in use across the district; some teachers opted to teach very little phonics, a cornerstone of the program; and some classes spent 20% more time on teaching reading than others.

Formally assessing all of the approaches to reading across the district is a good first step. One district conducted two surveys – one for principals and one for teachers – that identified the time, materials, topics, and strategies they employed to teach reading. Principals were amazed at the varied activities occurring within their schools, let alone the differences across schools. This begged the question, “Is this intentional or historical?” It is, in part, a result of teacher training. The National Council on Teacher Quality reports: “Three out of four elementary teacher preparation programs still are not teaching the methods of reading instruction that could substantially

lower the number of children who never become proficient readers from 30 percent to under 10 percent. Instead, the teacher candidate is all too often told to develop his or her ‘own unique approach’ to teaching reading.”⁶

After assessing all of the reading approaches, the next step is to decide on common materials, curriculum, and assessments. Some districts have relied on high-performing reading teachers within the district. The School District of Lancaster, for example, tasked highly-effective teachers from across the district with developing curriculum maps and pacing guides based on common materials. Once the unified approach was identified, it was messaged consistently through coaching, videos, faculty meetings, peer observations, and webinars. This created economies of scale. One series of meetings with 20 principals could help 20 schools. Coaches could be shared across schools and not have to master a wide array of programs. Perhaps the greatest benefit was that it created a learning network that allowed staff and principals to share what was working and roll it out to all their schools. This had not been possible when each school (or classroom) had different materials and approaches. Without having to spend more, the effectiveness of the effort was greatly increased.

Another way to build commitment is to give schools the option of adopting the common approach or not. One district did not mandate that schools adopt common reading materials, assessments, and training, but would not support any other reading efforts in schools unless they adopted the program. By doing so, central office ensured its resources were maximized for program success, but gave principals limited autonomy. In the end, nearly all schools adopted the common approach by choice, not central office “mandate,” which increased enthusiasm for the program.

A common and well-communicated approach to literacy curriculum and instruction can ease the implementation of a large, district-wide reading effort; it also can reduce costs of supporting the effort and can reduce future remediation costs as well. For children whose families are highly mobile, the absence of a consistent approach can mean new textbooks, new expectations, and varying forms of instruction at each new school, compounding the learning loss from each move. A consistent approach can reduce this barrier to success.

Sample process for implementing a common approach to reading



LESSON

4

It is not the materials, but how they are implemented

Good curriculum can be a powerful tool in the hands of an effective teacher, but it is not enough to change teacher practice. Too often, new reading efforts begin and end with the purchase of new materials, software, and curriculum. In successful literacy efforts, more attention was focused on how materials were used than which materials were used. The What Works Clearinghouse, an independent research arm of the Institute of Education Sciences, has not found that one particular program works miracles; districts that have made great strides have used various materials. Many districts have gone and purchased the same material and curriculum as high performers like Montgomery County Public Schools (MD), but were not able to duplicate their results. When allocating scarce resources, managing and monitoring implementation

often yields a better return than big purchases of new materials.

One district exemplifies a common scenario. After careful and extensive research and assessment of needs, the district purchased a program with which it would launch a district-wide elementary literacy initiative. Reference checking confirmed it had been “effective” in many other districts. This was a substantial line-item in the budget for the year, backed by much costly outside training. It was rolled out to every classroom teacher in the district. However, after several years of very modest improvements in students’ reading and comprehension, the district investigated how the program was being used. The results were surprising: not every teacher was even using the materials, and those who were were often using them very differently.

The district faced a choice: should they look for a new reading program or should they work harder to ensure the existing program be used effectively and consistently in every

Shifting culture

» **T**he use of common curriculum, materials, and assessments can be a dramatic cultural change for many schools and districts. Some districts that have implemented a common approach to reading have found that leaders must first demonstrate the change in beliefs they want to see district-wide. They have also found that changing teacher behavior first helps shift culture in the end. Once teachers share growth data from common formative assessments and see that the new approach is working in their classrooms and/or other classrooms in their school and district, their beliefs start to change. After seeing the evidence, more and more teachers will “buy in” to the common approach.

The Process of Shifting Culture



classroom? Leaders chose to double down on implementation. First, they visited classrooms and sought feedback from teachers in an effort to better understand why implementation had failed. They learned that the reading materials were not comprehensively covering all five domains of literacy, and teachers were assembling various pieces to create an effective lesson.

To remedy this, the district brought together a group of highly-effective reading teachers from several schools to develop reading maps and pacing guides for the common 90-minute reading blocks. These guides covered all strands of literacy and helped teachers integrate the various materials into their lessons. During walk-throughs, principals and instructional coaches looked for evidence that the tools were being employed in the classroom and used them as the basis for immediate feedback.

In the end, the district's choice to focus on implementation instead of switching materials was a shrewd one. Thanks to the new teacher-developed tools and monitoring of implementation, reading gains improved significantly, teachers' morale was boosted by the increased support, and the district did not spend limited funds on a new program.

In another district that achieved significant gains in reading, an accountability office designs, runs, and publishes formal implementation evaluations of their reading programs. Interviews with teachers and administrators, classroom observations, and training records are used to answer the question, "To what extent is the program being implemented in schools as designed?" Data is then analyzed by Ph.D.-level staff, and findings are published district-wide; individual interview and observation data is anonymous to most. If the program is being implemented as designed across all schools, then a further evaluation of program-effectiveness will be conducted; if it is not, the program will be modified or abandoned.

Spend differently, not more

Virtually all districts consider it an imperative to teach students to read to prepare these students to be successful in college and careers. Yet, many districts lament that they lack the necessary funds to fully address this challenge. Districts can, however, have a top quality, intensive reading program that costs no more, or perhaps less, than current efforts. By pooling all reading resources, focusing on effective core instruction through a common approach, and ensuring faithful implementation, many districts will be surprised that they have more than enough funds already.

**They reasoned that if
reading mattered most,
most everything else
mattered less.**

¹ The total investment in reading includes the value of the time elementary teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and speech and language therapists spend teaching reading. It also includes grant-funded support for reading, as well as reading programs and materials for elementary and secondary students.

² Jack Buckley, "National Assessment of Educational Progress: 2011 Reading and Mathematics Trial Urban District Assessment," National Center for Education Statistics, December 7, 2011, http://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/commissioner/remarks2011/12_07_2011.asp (accessed November 20, 2013).

³ "Teamwork Transforms the School District of Lancaster," *The District Management Journal*, Winter 2013.

⁴ Stacey M. Childress, Denis P. Doyle, and David A. Thomas, *Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in Montgomery County Public Schools* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2009), 41.

⁵ Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

⁶ "Teacher Prep Review: A Review of the Nation's Teacher Preparation Programs," National Council on Teacher Quality, June 2013, 2, http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Teacher_Prep_Review_2013_Report (accessed November 15, 2013).

SPENDING MONEY WISELY

Getting the Most from School District Budgets

This chapter is from *Spending Money Wisely: Getting the Most from School District Budgets* by Nathan Levenson, Karla Baehr, James C. Smith, and Claire Sullivan of The District Management Council. To access this chapter and the rest of the series, please go to www.dmcouncil.org. Topics in this series include:

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3. **Adding Precision to Remediation and Intervention Staffing Levels: Data-Driven Guidelines Improve Schedules, Building Assignments, and Workload**
4. **Finding Politically Acceptable Ways to Increase Class Size or Teaching Load: Freeing up Funds for Strategic Priorities**
5. **Strategically Spending Federal Entitlement Grants: Making the Connection to District Priorities**
6. **Ensuring More Students Read on Grade Level: Cost-Effective Strategies**
7. **Improving the Cost-Effectiveness of Professional Development: Reducing Expenses While Increasing Impact**
8. **Rethinking Purchasing: A Strategic Approach to Increasing the Value of Each Dollar Spent**
9. **Lowering the Cost of Extended Learning Time: Creating Financial Sustainability**
10. **Targeting New Investments: Funding a Better Future Despite Declining Resources**

About the Authors

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About the District Management Council

The District Management Council (DMC) partners with public school district leaders to help improve student outcomes, operational efficiency, and resource allocation. DMC was founded in 2004 to address the most pressing and important management challenges facing American educators. The trusted advisor to school district leaders, DMC works with districts on these important issues to achieve measurable results. With the firm belief that leadership and management matter, DMC helps to strengthen and increase the managerial capacity of the people leading school districts to systemically improve the performance of the American public education system. To learn more, visit www.dmcouncil.org.

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