

Volume XXI ■ Number 1 ■ November 2009

SEDL Letter

Improving
School
Performance



ADVANCING RESEARCH
SEDL
IMPROVING EDUCATION

Wesley A. Hoover, PhD
President and CEO

Christine A. Moses-Egan, MA
Director, Communications

Laura Shankland, MA
Editor

Joni Wackwitz
Contributing Editor

Nancy Reynolds, MLS
Librarian

CREDITS

Jane Thurmond (Austin, Texas) designed *SEDL Letter*. The photos on pages 26–29 are courtesy of SEDL staff members. All other photos are ©Jupiter Images Unlimited.

SEDL Letter complements and draws on work performed by SEDL under a variety of funding sources, including the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. government. The publication is not supported with direct program funds related to any SEDL programs or projects. *SEDL Letter* does not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. government or any other source. You are welcome to reproduce *SEDL Letter* and distribute copies at no cost to recipients; please credit SEDL as publisher and respect the copyrights of designated illustrators, designers, and contributors. SEDL is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer and is committed to affording equal employment opportunities for all individuals in all employment matters. Available in alternative formats.

No School Is an *Island*

School improvement isn't just about schools. It's also about students and teachers, and how education leaders at all levels—state, district, school, and classroom—work together to help students succeed.

This issue of *SEDL Letter* explores school improvement in a variety of areas. The first story, “Imagining the Possibilities” describes the beginning of SEDL’s 4-year randomized controlled trial study of the *Imagine It!* reading program. Our research update then looks at recent research reports on an emerging trend for boosting achievement in low-performing schools: school turnarounds.

In “Uncharted Territory,” we examine how a growing number of high schools are using Response to Intervention as a framework for promoting student achievement. We have devoted two articles to SEDL’s Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle (PTLC), a professional development process in which teachers collaboratively plan and implement lessons aligned to their state standards. The first article, “Recovery 101,” describes how SEDL is helping Georgetown County School District in South Carolina implement the PTLC—an investment of federal stimulus dollars that can be sustained after the funding ends. Complementing this story is “Creating a Community of Professional Learners,” a more detailed overview of the PTLC and what it looks like in action.

We also look at the different ways that SEDL is supporting school improvement in Louisiana and Texas. “Building Bright Futures for Preschoolers in Madison Parish” looks at the Early Reading First project in Madison Parish, Louisiana. “Helping Texas Teachers Support English Language Learners” outlines how SEDL’s Texas Comprehensive Center is working with the Texas Education Agency to help teachers meet the instructional needs of English language learners. Although these two articles focus on different aspects of improving teaching, they both stress the importance of professional development and adapting instruction to meet students’ needs.

We hope you will find our stories and resources both informative and useful, whatever role you play in supporting high-quality instruction. We welcome any feedback you have (sedl-letter@sedl.org).



Imagining the Possibilities

SEDL Begins National Study of Well-Known Reading Program

Evidence from decades of research suggests that with appropriate instruction nearly all students can become competent readers (Denton & Mathes, 2003; Lyon, Fletcher, Fuchs, & Chhabra, 2006; Mathes & Denton, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Yet, statistics indicate that 67% of fourth-grade students fail to reach proficient-level reading scores (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Recent initiatives emphasize the critical role of early reading instruction in preventing reading difficulties and recognize that students who do not learn to read well by third grade are less likely to build vocabulary and interact with a wide variety of texts (Good, Simmons, & Kameenui, 2001). Such failure can have a long-term impact on children's self-confidence, motivation to learn, performance in school, and success in life (Harris & Sipay, 1990; Juel, 1988; Stanovich, 1986, 2000). In addition, reading difficulties are the most common reason for referral into special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Effective core reading curricula can play an important role in helping students learn to read. Only a few reading curricula reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC, 2007) have *potentially* positive effects, however. Studies reviewed by WWC focus on randomized controlled trials, the most rigorous research design according to the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES); but few, if any, of the studies reviewed have been large enough to produce findings that policymakers and educators can apply to a variety of instructional settings. Findings from large-scale trials, especially those that allow comparison between reading programs that are among the highest sellers in the core reading program market, stand to contribute unique evidence to the educational curricula and policy reform debates.

Adding to the available research, SEDL's Research and Evaluation work group has begun a rigorous 4-year study of *Imagine It!*, the next generation of SRA/McGraw-Hill's Open Court Reading series. The series is a core reading program that has been widely used since the 1960s. Two prominent

researchers will head up the project, which will include key SEDL researchers and an esteemed panel of technical advisors. Michael Vaden-Kiernan, director of Research and Evaluation for SEDL, is the principal investigator for the project. Geoffrey Borman, professor of education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and deputy director of the university's Predoctoral Interdisciplinary Research Training Program, will serve as co-principal investigator. "This is a much-needed and timely study to provide more rigorous evidence regarding the effectiveness of a reading program that has been around for many decades and has been scaled up to a national level," explains Vaden-Kiernan. The project is supported by SEDL project director Debra Hughes Jones and program associate Sarah Caverly, both of whom attended an IES-funded training opportunity on the latest designs and methods for conducting experimental studies.

A limited but growing body of research has examined the impact of the Open Court Reading series on student reading outcomes and the



program's promise in preventing reading difficulties. Findings suggest that Open Court Reading, as compared to other reading programs, is associated with significantly better student outcomes and may be particularly effective with low-performing students (EdSource, 2006; McRae, 2002; Skindrud & Gersten, 2006). Despite the program's widespread use and promising research findings, a rigorous and large-scale evaluation has not been conducted. The SEDL study will be the first large-scale, externally funded, third-party evaluation of Open Court Reading. "There have been few large-scale randomized trials that test the effectiveness of replicable educational interventions deployed across many schools," says Borman. "This is an exciting opportunity to study *Imagine It!*, and the results are sure to be of considerable consequence to policymakers, researchers, and educational practitioners across the nation."

One of the largest of its kind, the study will use a multisite cluster randomized trial design. It will include school districts in rural, urban, and suburban locations across the United States and is intended to produce findings that can be applied to a wide range of educational settings. Researchers will investigate whether *Imagine It!* shows significant positive effects on reading outcomes for students in kindergarten through fifth grade and how the effects vary across students, schools, and districts. "Our goal in conducting this study is to provide policymakers and practitioners with evidence to make decisions about program adoptions that can be costly, both literally and in terms of time and teacher resources, before noticeable improvements in student reading are achieved," explains Jones. "By conducting a national study, we will be able to test whether *Imagine It!* has positive effects on students when implemented under normal conditions and in a variety of settings. This has the potential to offer sound evidence about a widely used reading program, which would advance the field significantly."

SEDL's project is currently underway. The first-year planning period includes critical activities that will affect the success of the overall study, and researchers have begun recruitment planning to find districts to participate in the study. In addition, SEDL has enlisted a panel of reading experts and nationally recognized methodologists to participate in a consortium version of the technical working group. The working group has revisited the project design and discussed critical elements of sampling and recruitment strategies, the first major activity undertaken this year. Along with the principal investigators, Vaden-Kiernan and Borman, the following national experts are

members of the working group: Russell Gersten, executive director of the Instructional Research Group and professor emeritus, College of Education, University of Oregon; Thomas Cook, professor of sociology, psychology, education, and social policy at Northwestern University; Johannes Bos, vice president of Education, Human Development and the Workforce at American Institutes for Research; and Carol Connor, associate professor, Florida State University, College of Education, Reading and Language Arts, and research faculty at the Florida Center for Reading Research. "The working group discussed and made recommendations regarding the design of the research, the comparison group, and classroom observations," says Connor. "These recommendations contributed to an already rigorous study design."

References

- Denton, C. A., & Mathes, P. G. (2003). Intervention for struggling readers: Possibilities and challenges. In B. R. Foorman (Ed.), *Preventing and remediating reading difficulties: Bringing science to scale* (pp. 229–251). Timonium, MD: York Press.
- Donovan, M. S., & Cross, C. T. (2002). *Minority students in special and gifted education*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Retrieved from www.nap.edu/catalog/10128.html
- EdSource. (2006). *Similar students, different results: Why do some schools do better?* Retrieved from www.edsource.org/pub_SimStu6-06_SummaryReport.html
- Good, R. H. M., Simmons, D. C., & Kame'enui, E. J. (2001). The importance and decision-making utility of a continuum of fluency-based indicators of foundational reading skills for third-grade high-stakes outcomes. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 5, 257–288.
- Harris, A. J., & Sipay, E. R. (1990). *How to increase reading ability: A guide to developmental and remedial methods* (9th ed.). New York: Allyn & Bacon.
- Juel, C. (1988). Learning to read and write: A longitudinal study of 54 children from first through fourth grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80, 437–447.
- Lyon, G. R., Fletcher, J. M., Fuchs, L., & Chhabra, V. (2006). Learning disabilities. In E. Mash & R. Barkley (Eds.), *Treatment of childhood disorders* (3rd ed., pp. 512–591). New York: Guilford Press.

Continued on page 12

Using Tiered Intervention to Improve High School Performance

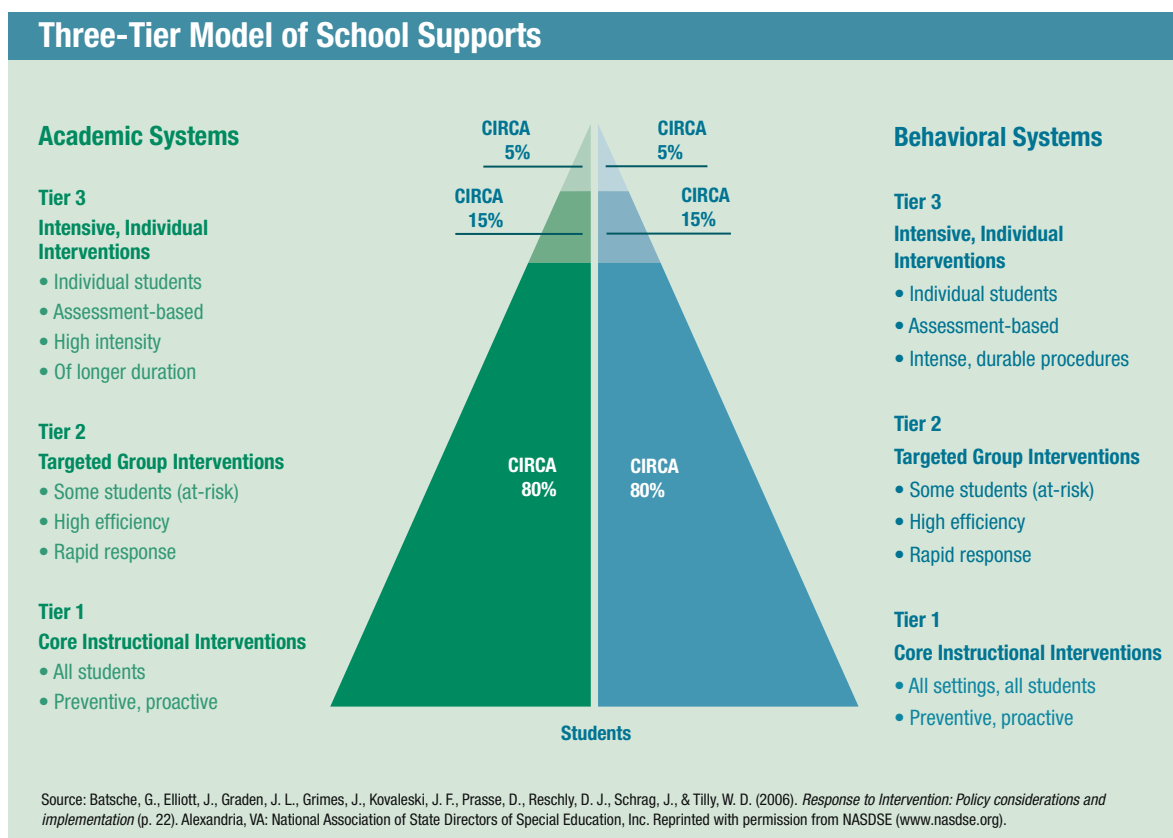
Uncharted Territory

By Ada Muoneke and Laura Shankland

As research becomes more important in educational practices, educators face a dilemma: They want to use research-based practices; but, oftentimes, for such research to exist, someone must have assessed the effectiveness of the strategies. High school leaders who want to use Response to Intervention (RtI)—also called tiered intervention or tiered instruction—to improve student achievement find themselves in this situation. While they may find research to guide individual components of their use of tiered intervention, strong evidence identifying exemplary practices for high school RtI is not yet available. Instead, high school educators have only limited studies on high school RtI, reviews of the literature, and case studies on

which to depend while researchers work to study these practices.

RtI is used at the elementary level, and as the evidence of its effectiveness at that level increases and the research base expands, high school leaders also seek to use RtI to increase student success. Implementing RtI at the high school level, however, is not a matter of simply replicating what has taken place in elementary and middle schools. High school leaders who adopt RtI encounter new challenges and must discover new ways to use its framework. This article provides an overview of how educators might implement the RtI components at the high school level, identifies some challenges unique to the secondary setting, and outlines potential solutions to some of those challenges.



What Is RtI?

RtI is the professional practice of providing research-based academic and behavioral instruction and intervention in multiple tiers of increasing frequency and intensity. Tier 1 is instruction in the core curriculum/program based on a state's content standards. Students who receive Tier 1 instruction but do not meet set learning objectives or standards receive targeted, small-group supplemental interventions (Tier 2) in addition to core instruction. In Tier 3, intensive, one-on-one interventions are implemented for students who do not reach proficiency levels in Tier 2. Students who undergo multiple tiers of intervention but still show little or no mastery as measured by progress monitoring may be referred for special education testing. Although different ways of implementing RtI exist, the framework typically has some essential components: high-quality research-based instruction, universal screening, research-based interventions of increasing levels of intensity (tiers 1, 2, and 3), progress monitoring, and the use of data to make instructional decisions.

RtI is the professional practice of providing research-based academic and behavioral instruction and intervention in multiple tiers of increasing frequency and intensity.

RtI can be implemented by using two approaches: the problem-solving method or the standard treatment protocol. The problem-solving method is a decision-making system in which teacher teams work collaboratively to define the academic and/or behavioral challenges experienced by a student; analyze why the student is experiencing difficulties; develop a specific plan to address the weaknesses; and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention plan (Batsche et al., 2005). This process can occur at all tiers of instruction or intervention.

In the standard treatment protocol, a single standard intervention is chosen, and the prescribed intervention protocol is implemented for all students in a grade level who score below benchmark standards set by the school or district (Hall, 2008). Schools may choose to implement either one or a combination of the two methods.

RtI gained national attention in education policy in the late 1990s as an alternate way of identifying students with learning disabilities. With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 2004, states were given the option to use RtI to make determinations of specific learning

disabilities; however, schools have not limited RtI to this use. With greater focus on academic rigor, student achievement, and school and teacher accountability, many states have adopted and are implementing RtI fully in general education settings, primarily in elementary schools.

A growing research base supports these efforts. In 2009, the What Works Clearinghouse—an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences that assesses the rigor of research evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and produces research-based practice guides for educators—released two practice guides on RtI. One offers recommendations for using RtI to help students struggling with literacy in the primary grades (K–2) (Gersten, Compton, et al., 2009); and the second, to help elementary and middle school students (K–8) struggling with mathematics (Gersten, Beckmann, et al., 2009).

RtI at the High School Level

Like many innovations and reform efforts to improve student outcomes, RtI initiatives have focused largely on elementary schools, due in part to preexisting infrastructure and RtI-like practices created through the implementation of programs such as Reading First. The encouraging results of the impact of RtI on students' reading skills in early grades (Gersten, Compton, et al., 2009) led districts and schools to explore the possibility of expanding RtI initiatives to high schools.

While much is still unknown about the RtI process in high schools, some districts across the country are implementing the practice in their high schools and are sharing anecdotal reports of positive impacts on learning and student gains. Measures of RtI outcomes have included increases in the number of students who transition from remedial to mainstream or even AP classes, pass the state assessment, and graduate from high school. These reports also cite declines in drop-out rates, behavior referrals, and the number of students referred to special education (Barton, 2008; Burns, 2008; Duffy, 2007).

Currently, there are no randomized controlled trials on the implementation of the RtI process in high schools. Nevertheless, some research findings and evidence provide guidelines for using RtI for literacy (Torgesen et al., 2007; Kamil et al., 2008) and mathematics instruction (Jayanthi, Gersten, & Baker, 2008), as well as proven instructional strategies (Pashler et al., 2007) for secondary students.

How Do the Key Components of RtI Relate to High School?

The ways in which RtI components are operationalized in high schools depend on the context of the school, which is vastly different from that of elementary and middle schools. Although RtI can be designed to fit the philosophy, personnel, experience, needs, structure, and organization of a given school or district, some core elements are essential to an RtI framework (Canter, Klotz, & Cowan, 2008).

Universal Screening

An important premise of RtI is that educators should identify and help struggling students early—before they fail (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008). Without universal screening, students who perform poorly in elementary and middle school may not be identified for additional supports until high school (Duffy, 2007). To implement universal screening, schools must screen their students in essential areas for academic and behavioral difficulties early in the school year. Based on students' performance on these screening measures, teachers select research-based core instructional programs and provide instruction/intervention to whole groups of students in the general education classroom. This is Tier 1 instruction.

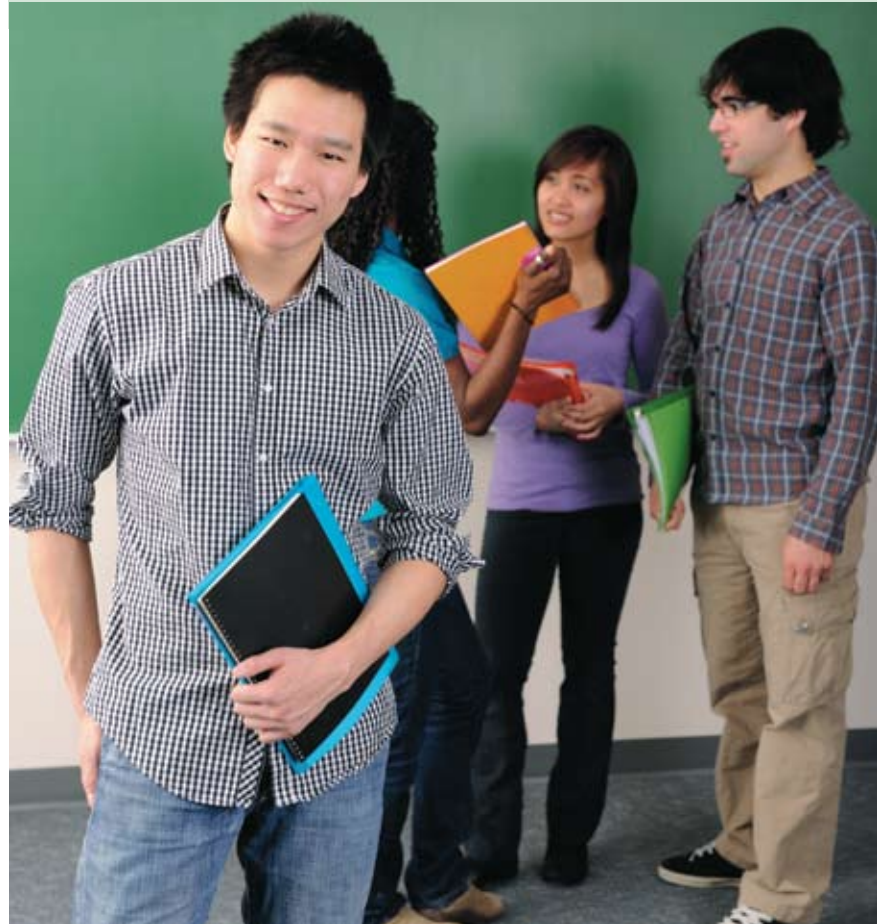
During high school, student learning is focused on highly specialized subject matter content, and key to screening is the use of multiple sources of data to improve student learning (Bernhardt, 2006). A combination of indicators can be screened and tracked. Screening in the following domains can provide useful data to educators for identifying students who need additional support: report card grades, grade-level common formative assessments, benchmark assessments, state assessments, end-of-course exams, behavior and disciplinary referrals, retention rates, attendance (especially for ninth-grade students), risk of dropout, and risk of not graduating.

Because of their departmental structure and schedule constraints, high schools can screen students at the grade level, department-wide, or schoolwide. Kurns and Tilly (2008) have outlined basic steps to universal screening for all grade levels:

- Identify content area(s) and skills to be screened (e.g., reading comprehension, algebra).
- Identify screening measures.
- Set proficiency cut-points to identify students with differing levels of risk or need.

RtI Resources

Additional information about resources for implementing RtI in high schools can be found on SEDL's Web site: www.sedl.org/hsrti/.



- Determine frequency of screening (e.g., once, twice, or three times per year).
- Identify teachers to conduct screening.
- Collect universal screening data.
- Decide what to do with the data (enter, organize, summarize, and display data).
- Respond to results.

High-Quality Research-Based Instruction

Tier 1 (core curriculum) instruction takes place in the general education classroom and is the foundation upon which all supplemental and individualized interventions are designed for students who are struggling with content areas. Kurns and Tilly (2008) note that to implement RtI, principals and teachers must define what constitutes universal Tier 1 curriculum and instruction and take steps to determine if the core program is sufficiently

meeting the needs of the majority (80% or more) of students.

Tier 1 instruction might include some of the following components:

- Research-based programs and strategies in content areas
- Core curriculum that is aligned to state content standards
- Differentiated instructional strategies to meet the unique needs of learners
- Sound instructional techniques across content areas
- Curriculum aligned with the demands of post-secondary settings such as higher education and the workforce
- Positive behavioral supports
- Lessons on study skills, organizational skills, and motivational strategies
- Content that reflects the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners
- Electives that help underrepresented groups (e.g., students from low-income families) gain admittance to 4-year colleges and universities

On the basis of students' performance on screening measures, teachers select research-based core instructional programs and provide instruction/

intervention to whole groups of students in Tier 1. Although tiered interventions primarily address academic problems, students can also be screened for behavior difficulties and provided with interventions consisting of schoolwide behavioral and social expectations, rules, and procedures (Sandomierski, Kincaid, & Algozzine, 2007).

In addition to screening data, high school students' developmental, emotional, and social needs and academic and cognitive abilities, coupled with the unique demands of particular settings, should be considered when selecting core instructional approaches or designing instructional strategies (Ehren, 2009). Universal instructional design principles such as direct instruction, teacher modeling, scaffolded instruction, metacognitive instruction, and engagement approaches proven to be sound are important parts of core instructional techniques (Deshler & Kovaleski, 2007).

Research-Based Interventions

After outlining core instruction, the next step is to identify students for whom the core instruction is insufficient, determine why (Kurns & Tilly, 2008), and then delineate Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions for those students. Additional resources will likely be required to address areas of need (Ehren, Ehren, & Proly, 2009). When outlining Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions for students struggling in Tier 1, principals and teachers may consider their methods for providing the interventions, what programs are available, and other factors. In addition to features of the core instruction, Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions might include the following:

- Academic support through remedial courses, additional instructional time, tutoring, extended learning programs, study skills, or small-group instruction
- Graduation support through course and credit recovery programs or preparation classes for state assessments
- Behavioral support programs through student support teams and behavior plans

Because of the structure and unique characteristics of high schools, interventions should focus on helping students stay in school and experience postsecondary success (Barton, 2008). Instructional decisions about the appropriate interventions for each student must be based on the student's performance data from multiple sources. "The goal is to offer a variety of services in varying degrees of intensity to address learning needs" (Ehren, Ehren, & Proly, 2009, p. 40).



Progress Monitoring

Progress monitoring consists of administering brief assessments to measure student progress on a regular basis (weekly or monthly) to determine whether students are responding successfully to instruction/intervention. Progress monitoring is an essential feature of RtI (Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008). The structure and process for monitoring progress include identifying the content area(s) and skills to be assessed (e.g., reading fluency, vocabulary, and writing for a literacy intervention), the progress-monitoring measure to be used, how often to administer assessments, who administers and scores the tests, what to do with the data, and how to respond to meet students' needs.

Using Data to Make Instructional Decisions

Analyzing progress-monitoring data and universal screening that measure academic skills and/or behavior provides evidence of the effectiveness of the core curriculum in meeting the academic needs of all learners and the effectiveness of teachers' instructional practices. On the basis of student data, teachers choose ways to adjust and further differentiate instruction for learners who are struggling. Teachers gather, display, and analyze data to determine whether what they are doing is working and, if not, why (Bernhardt, 2006). Also, data analysis helps teachers identify students who may require targeted and intensive interventions in core content and/or behavioral areas. High school principals and teachers implementing RtI may find the following types of data useful:

- Grades in core academic subjects, especially grades for first-quarter freshmen and end-of-year course
- Benchmark and high-stakes assessment results
- Attendance records, especially for ninth-grade students who miss 10 days or more of school in the first 30 days
- Promotion status, especially for ninth-grade students who will not be promoted to 10th grade because they failed too many core subjects
- Disciplinary records (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008)

If the available data are insufficient for pinpointing the problem, then additional in-depth diagnostic assessments in the specific content areas of difficulty are recommended (Ehren, Ehren, & Proly, 2009). For students with persistent behavioral problems that affect their achievement, additional psychological and behavioral assessments could be recommended. Ultimately, the data will become part of a comprehensive evaluation for making

eligibility decisions for students referred for special education testing.

Challenges and the Road Ahead

Although a growing number of high schools are implementing RtI, many challenges remain. For example, the screening and progress-monitoring tools that can be applied across content areas are limited. Many high schools implementing tiered interventions use curriculum-based measures to monitor progress. This procedure, in which multiple probes are administered repeatedly to provide student progress data over time, has proved to be effective in improving student outcomes (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2008; McMaster & Espin, 2007). Another challenge is the limited availability of effective instructional techniques and interventions that work across content areas in high schools. Content materials written at lower grade levels for high school students with reading problems are not readily available. Intervention tools and strategies are available for reading; however, mathematics, writing, and other high school content areas often lack such tools.

The complexity of high school organization also poses challenges in defining the tiers in the RtI process (Ehren, Ehren, & Proly, 2009) and providing support to students who need individualized instruction or intervention (Canter, Klotz, & Cowan, 2008). The students' day is fragmented as they move from one class to another for instruction from different teachers. Block scheduling can provide an option for modifying instruction by making it easier for intervention during study halls or skills labs. Burns (2008) suggests that schools using a 50- or 60-minute course block could combine interventions in reading with other content area instruction. For example, a social studies teacher might integrate reading comprehension activities with social studies instruction, using the social studies curriculum as instructional material. A principal could also coordinate Tier 2 and Tier 3 services with interventions that already are being used (Canter, Klotz, & Cowan, 2008). Some schools schedule a second content area class to provide remediation and also use time before and after school.

Other challenges are not limited to high school: identifying and staying focused on key goals, securing appropriate resources, finding adequate time for collaboration and planning, and providing appropriate professional development. Clearly, these challenges have not deterred high schools from adopting RtI. As more high schools implement the RtI framework and new studies add to the research base, high school leaders can expect to find more tools and resources to guide their work in the future.

High school leaders who adopt RtI encounter new challenges and must discover new ways to use its framework.

Although different ways of implementing RtI exist, the framework typically has some essential components: high-quality research-based instruction, universal screening, research-based interventions of increasing levels of intensity (tiers 1, 2, and 3), progress monitoring, and the use of data to make instructional decisions.

The High School Tiered Intervention Initiative

The High School Tiered Intervention Initiative (HSTII) is a collaborative project undertaken by staff from the Center on Instruction (COI), the National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI), and the National High School Center (NHSC). The purpose of the project is to enhance understanding of how tiered-intervention models are emerging in high schools.

Lead project staff note that although the current research base for RtI in high school is limited, educators are interested in and are exploring how they can use tiered interventions to meet the education needs of high school students. “We have the research demonstrating how much [RtI at the elementary level] could improve achievement for struggling kids, . . . and I think high school principals and leaders see the relevance of the framework for the work that they do,” explains Lou Danielson, director of research at NHSC and senior advisor at NCRTI.

As educators expand the scope of RtI from identifying students with learning disabilities to identifying and helping struggling students, it offers greater relevance at the high school level. Joseph Harris, project director at NHSC, points out that a growing emphasis on student achievement has prompted high school leaders to consider implementing RtI. “Over the last 5 years or more, there’s been an increased focus on more rigor, increased graduation rates, . . . higher-level courses. At the same time, there’s been this steady progression of students coming up through elementary and middle school who are significantly below grade level or who have specific issues with literacy and numeracy, and there’s been no venue to address that,” he says.

The HSTII activities began in Winter 2009. Various stakeholders identified 51 high schools that were using some type of tiered intervention in their schools. Project staff scheduled and conducted 20 interviews with high school administrators who agreed to participate in the project. In early Spring 2009, the project convened a technical advisory group of national experts to discuss themes that emerged from the interviews and select eight high schools for further investigation. After sites were identified, the project staff conducted four site visits in late Spring 2009 and plan to conduct the remaining four in Fall 2009.

Because the project is still underway, the team members can share only preliminary findings. What they have discovered so far, along with other education leaders who have explored the implementation of RtI at the high school level, is that the ways educators are implementing RtI can differ significantly at the high school and elementary levels. Where RtI at the elementary level has typically provided a framework for identifying students who are struggling academically and assisting in the identification of learning disabilities, RtI at the high school level can serve as a framework for drop-out prevention and content recovery to ensure that students pass core courses and exams and ultimately graduate. “We are looking at RtI as a way of identifying instructional needs and [providing] the instructional resources [that are] necessary,” says Greg Roberts, director of the Special Education Strand at COI, summarizing how high schools use RtI.

In addition to academic outcomes, some high schools are using RtI for behavioral interventions and integrating it with programs like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS; see www.pbis.org for further details). Students are sometimes more directly involved in the process at the high school level. In fact, student participation and input can be fundamental to an intervention’s success. Tessie Rose, NCRTI co-coordinator of technical assistance, points out that when a high school is focusing on whether a student passes a class, the outcome depends on behaviors like completion of homework assignments. “It is difficult to develop an effective homework strategy for a student without asking him what the problem is and what support he needs to be successful in passing the class,” she says. “The student involvement piece is critical at high school.”

Next steps of the project include compiling and analyzing data from site visits. In Fall 2009, the HSTII group plans to release a publication entitled *What Is High School RtI?* that will serve as a foundation for future products and activities on the topic. They will also produce a series of planning guides for leaders at regional comprehensive centers, state education agencies, and local education agencies. Each guide will have a specific focus, such as how to address scheduling issues when implementing RtI at the high school level. Finally, the group plans to host a series of high school RtI webinars that will be open to the public.

Learn About High School RtI Research

Visit the Web sites of participating organizations to learn more.

National High School Center
www.betterhighschools.org

National Center on Response to Intervention
www.rti4success.org

Center on Instruction
www.centeroninstruction.org



References

- Barton, R. (2008). The "Wa-High Way." *Northwest Education*, 14(1), 21–25.
- Batsche, G., Elliott, J., Graden, J. L., Grimes, J., Kovaleski, J. F., Prasse, D., et al. (2005). *Response to Intervention: Policy considerations and implementation*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc.
- Bernhardt, V. L. (2006). *Using data to improve student learning*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, Inc.
- Burns, M. K. (2008). Response to Intervention at the secondary level. *Principal Leadership*, 8(7), 12–15.
- Canter, A., Klotz, M. B., & Cowan, K. (2008). Response to Intervention: The future for secondary schools. *Principal Leadership*, 9(2), 12–15.
- Deshler, D. D., & Kovaleski, J. F. (December 2007). Secondary applications of RtI: A guided discussion. Presented at the Response to Intervention Summit, Arlington, VA. Available from www.nrld.org
- Duffy, H. (2007). *Meeting the needs of significantly struggling learners in high school: A look at approaches to tiered intervention*. Washington, DC: National High School Center, America Institutes for Research. Retrieved from http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_RTIBrief_08-02-07.pdf
- Ehren, B. J. (2009). *Response to Intervention in secondary schools: Is it on your radar screen?* Washington, DC: RtI Action Network. Retrieved from <http://www.rtinetwork.org/Learn/Why/ar/RadarScreen>
- Ehren, B. J., Ehren, T. C., & Proly, J. L. (2009). *Response to Intervention: An action guide for school leaders*. Alexandria, VA: Educational Research Service.
- Fuchs, L. S., & Fuchs, D. (2008). *What is scientifically-based research on progress monitoring?* Washington, DC: National Center for Student Progress Monitoring. Retrieved from http://www.ctb.com/media/mktg/ypp/other_media/Fuchs_Progress_Monitoring_ResearchvB_pb.pdf
- Gersten, R., Beckmann, S., Clarke, B., Foegen, A., Marsh, L., Star, J. R., & Witzel, B. (2009). *Assisting students struggling with mathematics: Response to Intervention (RtI) for elementary and middle schools* (NCEE 2009-4060). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides/>

While much is still unknown about the RtI process in high schools, some districts across the country are implementing the practice in their high schools and are sharing anecdotal reports of positive impacts on learning and student gains.

- Gersten, R., Compton, D., Connor, C. M., Dimino, J., Santoro, L., Linan-Thompson, S., & Tilly, W. D. (2009). *Assisting students struggling with reading: Response to Intervention and multi-tier intervention for reading in the primary grades. A practice guide* (NCEE 2009-4045). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides/>
- Hall, S. L. (2008). *Implementing Response to Intervention: A principal's guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Jayanthi, M., Gersten, R., & Baker, S. (2008). *Mathematics instruction for students with learning disabilities or difficulty learning mathematics: A guide for teachers*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.
- Kamil, M. L., Borman, G. D., Dole, J., Kral, C. C., Salinger, T., & Torgesen, J. (2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Effective classroom and intervention practices: A practical guide* (NCEE 2008-4027). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>
- Kurns, S., & Tilly, W. D. (2008). *Response to Intervention: Blueprints for implementation—school building level*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc.
- McMaster, K., & Espin, C. (2007). Technical features of curriculum-based measurement in writing: A literature review. *The Journal of Special Education, 41*(2), 64–84.
- Pashler, H., Bain, P., Bottage, B., Graesser, A., Koedinger, K., McDaniel, M., & Metcalf, J. (2007). *Organizing instruction and study to improve student learning* (NCER 2007-2004). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Research, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ncer.ed.gov>
- Sandomierski, T., Kincaid, D., & Algozzine, B. (2007). Response to Intervention and positive behavior support: Brothers from different mothers or sisters with different misters? *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Newsletter, 4*(2), 1–4. Retrieved from <http://www.pbis.org/news/New/Newsletters/Newsletter4-2.aspx>
- Stecker, P. M., Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. S. (2008). Progress monitoring as essential practice within Response to Intervention. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 27*(4), 1–11.
- The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. (2008). Response to Intervention: Possibilities for service delivery at the secondary school level. *The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement Newsletter*. Retrieved from www.centerforcsri.org
- Torgesen, J. K., Houston, D. D., Rissman, L. M., Decker, S. M., Roberts, G., Vaughn, S., et al. (2007). *Academic literacy instruction for adolescents: A guidance document from the Center on Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Corporation, Center on Instruction.

Imagining the Possibilities, continued from page 4

- Mathes, P. G., & Denton, C. A. (2002). The prevention and identification of reading disability. *Seminars in Pediatric Neurology, 9*, 185–191.
- McRae, D. J. (2002). *Test score gains for Open Court schools in California: Results from three cohorts of schools*. Retrieved from www.sraonline.com/download/OCR/Research/testscoresgain.pdf
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2007). *National assessment of educational progress: 2007 reading assessments*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.
- Skindrud, K., & Gersten, R. (2006). An evaluation of two contrasting approaches for improving reading achievement in a large urban district. *The Elementary School Journal, 106* (5), 389–407.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly, 21*, 360–407.
- Stanovich, K. E. (2000). *Progress in understanding reading: Scientific foundations and new frontiers*. New York: Guilford Press.
- What Works Clearinghouse. (2007, August). *What Works Clearinghouse topic report: Beginning reading*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/BR_TR_08_13_07.pdf

Ada Muoneke is a program associate with SEDL's Texas and Southeast Comprehensive Centers. She holds a doctorate in special education. You may contact Ada at ada.muoneke@sedl.org.

Laura Shankland is a communications associate in SEDL's Communications Department. You may reach Laura at laura.shankland@sedl.org.

Research Update

School Turnarounds

Statistics and studies indicate that improving student achievement in low-performing schools continues to be a challenge for states across the nation. Researchers and policymakers refer to schools that have low graduation rates and fail to meet academic benchmarks as indications of this ongoing struggle. In the 2005–2006 school year, for example, four of the nation’s five-largest school districts had an averaged freshman graduation rate (an estimate of the percentage of high school students starting at ninth grade who graduate on time with a regular diploma) of 55%, compared to a national average of 73% (Garofano & Sable, 2008).

Another measure of school performance is adequate yearly progress (AYP). AYP is a state’s measure of progress toward 100% of its students meeting the state academic achievement targets in reading/language arts and mathematics as defined in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). If a school fails to make AYP for 5 or more consecutive years, it must undergo restructuring. In the 2007–2008 school year, more than 3,500 schools were in the planning or implementation phases of restructuring, a 50% increase from the 2,302 schools reported for the 2006–2007 school year (Scott, 2008).

These numbers have prompted education leaders to reexamine the most effective way to help low-performing schools. School turnarounds—implementing dramatic school interventions that lead to more expedient improvements than seen in the past—have emerged as a strategy for helping low-performing schools. Here, we summarize three research reports on school turnarounds that provide a conceptual framework and suggested actions for education leaders.



Recommendations Target Leadership, Instruction, and Staff

In the Institute of Education Sciences practice guide *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*, Herman et al. (2008) identify four recommendations for school turnarounds:

1. Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership.
2. Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction.
3. Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (quick wins).
4. Build a committed staff.

These recommendations, suggest the authors, can help educators quickly and dramatically improve student achievement in chronically low-performing schools. For each recommendation, the report summarizes the level of research evidence supporting it. The authors then provide case studies of schools to illustrate how to implement each recommendation. The report also provides a checklist for implementing

the recommendations and discusses possible roadblocks and solutions for each one.

The authors based their recommendations in part on 10 case studies that looked at turnaround practices at 35 schools (21 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 6 high schools). For the purpose of the study, turnaround schools were defined as those that have shown a dramatic improvement in student outcomes over a short period of time. Consequently, the case studies focus on schools that improved student achievement in 1 to 3 years.

SEDL Supporting Turnarounds

SEDL is working with state and district leaders who are at different points in the turnaround process. Program staff and researchers are helping schools to stay focused on improving instruction and to identify early improvements through SEDL's Working Systemically approach to systemic improvement.

The Working Systemically approach offers a way for all stakeholders—from the state level to the classroom—to identify and maintain focus on key academic goals. Although the Working Systemically approach emphasizes long-term improvements, the strategy offers a way for educators to create coherence in their work, align curriculum, and focus on improving school performance. SEDL's Texas and Southeast Comprehensive Centers have both provided extensive professional development on the Working Systemically approach to state and regional leaders in the regions they serve. They have also provided resources and ongoing technical assistance to help leaders make crucial decisions as they implement the Working Systemically approach. During development of the Working Systemically approach, SEDL found mixed results for its outcomes across 16 districts in the Southwest. SEDL is currently collecting outcome data through intermediate units that are using the approach in several Texas districts, as well as from a few districts in Louisiana and South Carolina where SEDL is directly supporting its implementation.

In addition, SEDL is helping states strengthen their statewide systems of support. These systems are state-led efforts to support schools in their improvement efforts. All states, however, are reaching a point with some chronically low-performing schools where they are exploring options like school turnarounds. SEDL staff are helping state and district leaders find more effective ways to strengthen their systems of support and identify turnaround strategies that can have a greater impact than traditional school improvement models. In May 2008, SEDL's Southeast Comprehensive Center hosted a regional institute on turnarounds to help state education leaders better understand and apply the research. (Resources from the institute are available online at <http://secc.sedl.org/forum/08/index.html>.) SEDL's Texas Comprehensive Center, in collaboration with the Texas Center on District and School Improvement, will co-host a district symposium on school turnarounds on December 1–2, 2009.

The report also includes secondary analyses of primary studies (school profiles) and identifies common strategies across successful turnaround schools. In addition, the authors drew information from a report on turnarounds with new leaders and staff, and incorporated evidence from business turnaround research.

The authors acknowledge that the research base on school turnarounds is limited, and the recommendations all rely on low levels of evidence as defined by the IES practice guide standards. According to the IES levels of evidence, “low refers to expert opinion based on research and theory on other topics and evidence from studies that do not meet the standards for moderate or strong evidence” (Herman et al., 2008, p. 3). The evidence supporting the recommendations includes expert analyses of turnaround practices, case studies of seemingly effective schools, and correlational and longitudinal studies of patterns of school improvement, all of which characterize the two other reports described in this article. The authors were unable to find any studies that met the What Works Clearinghouse's (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>) high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental standards, which provide the strongest evidence of causal validity.

Key Actions of Successful School Leaders

In *School Turnarounds: Actions and Results*, Brinson, Kowal, and Hassel (2008) discuss what actions must take place and what new leaders must do for school turnaround to occur. The authors examine the five AYP restructuring options: (1) reopen the school as a public charter school; (2) replace all or most of the school's staff; (3) contract with an outside entity to operate the school; (4) turn the operation of the school over to the state educational agency; or (5) implement another form of restructuring that makes fundamental reforms. They indicate that options 1, 3, and 4 rarely have been used; most states have chosen option 5 (another form of restructuring) rather than implement stronger interventions.

The authors state that in 2006, of those districts utilizing stronger interventions, 42% of states appointed an outside expert to advise the school, 24% extended the school day or year, and 14% restructured the internal organization of the school. Only 14% of schools undergoing restructuring replaced a large portion of the school's staff, and almost none of the districts invited private firms or state agencies to take over schools or to reopen them as charter schools.

The report identifies 14 leader actions associated with successful school turnarounds:

1. Collect and analyze data.
2. Make an action plan based on the data.
3. Concentrate on big, fast payoffs in Year 1.
4. Implement practices even if they require deviation from the norms or rules.
5. Require all staff to change.
6. Implement necessary staff changes.
7. Concentrate on successful tactics; discard others.
8. Report progress, but focus on high goals.
9. Communicate a positive vision.
10. Help staff personally feel problems.
11. Gain the support of key influencers.
12. Silence critics with quick success.
13. Measure and report on progress often.
14. Require all decision makers to share data and participate in problem solving.

The recommendations are based on qualitative research, primarily case studies, of organizations that have successfully turned around performance. Citing a limited body of research on school turnarounds, the authors augment research in their literature review with research about effective turnaround strategies and leaders in business, nonprofit, and government sectors.

The authors define a successful turnaround as a school that experiences significant gains in student learning in Year 1 and then sustains those gains over time. Although the literature the authors reviewed did not support this long-term view, it did indicate that researchers considered successful turnarounds to be schools that achieved AYP after failing to do so for 3 years prior to the turnaround efforts.

Learning From Past Successes and Failures

In *The Turnaround Challenge*, Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, and Lash distinguish *turnaround* from *school improvement* by explaining that a school turnaround initiative “focuses on the most consistently underperforming schools and involves dramatic, transformative change” (2007, p. 10). They explore both the causes of school failure and strategies for rapid school improvement in their research.

The authors’ research methodology includes a literature analysis; individual and group interviews with practitioners, researchers, leading policymakers, and reform experts in more than a dozen states; extensive interviews with directors of school intervention and school management and/or support organizations; and a review of the report’s major findings and recommendations by more than two

dozen national reform leaders and project partners.

On the basis of their research, the authors identify three key elements for a comprehensive state turnaround initiative: changing conditions, building capacity, and clustering for support (Calkins et al., 2007, p. 12). Changing conditions refers to dismantling common barriers to reform through state intervention or measures taken by district leadership. To build capacity for effective school turnaround, the authors look to the state to take responsibility for providing the means and expertise. Finally, the authors argue that school turnaround cannot be accomplished in small numbers; rather, districts and states should undertake the effort in clusters of schools, organized around needs, such as school type, student characteristics, feeder patterns, or region. The authors also provide a self-audit for states to measure the probable impact of their approach to school turnaround.

References

- Brinson, D., Kowal, J., & Hassel, B. (2008). *School turnarounds: Actions and results*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement. Retrieved from www.centerii.org
- Calkins, A., Guenther, W., Belfiore, G., & Lash, D. (2007). *The turnaround challenge: Why America’s best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst performing schools*. Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education & Research Institute. Retrieved from www.massinsight.org/DownloadHandler.ashx?fn=~/resourcefiles/TheTurnaroundChallenge_MainReport.pdf
- Garofano, A., & Sable, J. (2008). *Characteristics of the 100 largest public elementary and secondary school districts in the United States: 2005–06* (NCES 2008-339). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/100_largest_0506/
- Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., & Darwin, M. (2008). *Turning around chronically low-performing schools: A practice guide* (NCEE 2008-4020). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides/>
- Scott, C. (2008). *A call to restructure restructuring: Lessons from the No Child Left Behind Act in five states*. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.

SEDL is working with state and district leaders who are at different points in the turnaround process. Program staff and researchers are helping schools to stay focused on improving instruction and identifying early improvements through SEDL’s Working Systemically approach to systemic improvement.

Recovery 101

Stimulus for School Improvement



GEORGETOWN COUNTY

By Geoffrey Alan

Patti Hammel witnessed something remarkable in her school district at the start of this school year. Elementary and middle school principals, meeting to discuss teaching and learning issues, committed their schools to an ambitious slate of “non-negotiables.” Topping the list was a mandate for quarterly instructional conferences with teachers based on the SEDL model of professional learning teams. In these teams, teachers, administrators, and other school professionals collaborate to develop standards-based plans for addressing identified student needs.

What is causing such changes in places like South Carolina’s Georgetown County School District? Improvements stem directly from some \$100 billion in federal education aid slowly making its way to school systems and education organizations nationwide under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), the economic stimulus law passed by Congress in February.

In Georgetown County, ARRA-funded efforts already are stimulating a culture shift among educators. The seismic effect, according to Hammel, the district’s executive director for student performance and federal programs, is a culture where educators are working collaboratively rather than in isolation to improve instruction systematically.

That educators can work in this way comes as no surprise to Robin Jarvis, a program manager in SEDL’s Improving School Performance work group. What is rare, in her opinion, is the chance that ARRA offers school systems to implement changes on such a systemic scale. “This is an opportunity for them to look at the whole of what they do, to pull all the pieces together, and really have a comprehensive plan for improvement,” Jarvis says. “We’ve never had funding at this level before.”

Online Resources for Unraveling ARRA

SEDL Decodes ARRA for Educators
www.sedl.org/recovery/index.html

U.S. Education Department on Stimulus Funds
www.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/index.html

Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board
www.recovery.gov

Innovation Investments

Overall, ARRA aims to pull the country out of its lingering economic downturn. But the law's narrower education goals include providing targeted cash infusions over a 2-year period to prevent teacher layoffs; raise student achievement; and improve professional development, extended-learning, and related programs (see sidebar).

SEDL can play a special role here, says Jarvis, drawing on her vast experience, which ranges from that of classroom teacher, to professional development director for the Louisiana Department of Education, to superintendent of the Recovery School District in New Orleans. The first round of ARRA disbursements, which began trickling out in the spring, primarily backfilled recent cuts made in the face of shrinking school budgets. In addition, districts such as Georgetown County have been able to apply a portion of the funds to improvement efforts such as SEDL's Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle (PTLC), a job-embedded professional development process enabling teachers to collaborate on instruction aligned with state standards.¹

"Districts and schools are always bombarded by people who have the answer to their problems, people who have the prepackaged, silver-bullet answer that is going to make every child perform—but education is a lot more difficult than that," she says. "The process we use with schools looks at what is happening and what needs to be done. It helps you think through all the different strategies and programs you could use, and what's the best thing for your particular situation."

SEDL's process provides a way for school systems to make short-term investments that produce long-term gains, backed up by extensive evaluation—some of the biggest priorities of funding streams coming from ARRA. Edward Tobia, a project director in SEDL's Improving School Performance work group, is leading the ARRA-supported SEDL effort in Georgetown County. SEDL's approach succeeds, Tobia says, because it gets educators "moving from doing a lot of unconnected acts of improvement to focusing on the needs of their schools and students." SEDL's Research and Evaluation work group also plays an integral role, working with educators early on in the professional development process to help them plan for assessing the impact of their efforts.

Systemic Change

In truth, the district's previous improvement efforts had prepared educators to take advantage of the opportunity presented by SEDL, says Georgetown County's Hammel. Local educators had consulted various data sources—including the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress and the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards, South Carolina's state assessment—to identify instructional weaknesses and address them. District leaders believed that SEDL's PTLC supported the direction in which the district had already decided to go, continues Hammel.

By implementing the PTLC, Georgetown County staff are creating professional learning communities in a way that improves professional development, alignment of content with state standards, instruction, assessment, collaboration, data use, and leadership support. SEDL will provide support for the PTLC in Georgetown County's 19 schools over a 2-year period. From May 2009 through June 2011, SEDL will not only help build district, school, and classroom leaders' capacity to sustain systemic improvement but also help design and implement an ongoing teacher development process, including building teachers' content knowledge in reading or math. To support this process, SEDL is committing staff members with expertise in core academic content areas, district and school improvement, professional development, and research and evaluation. Tobia, who is working closely with Hammel, stresses the PTLC's emphasis on simultaneously changing several components of instruction: how teachers and principals work, how educators' time is organized, and how teachers need to be supported differently to have the "deep conversations about teaching and learning" that represent the centerpiece of the process.

In Georgetown County, this process began a few months ago with a 4-day summer institute to develop the leadership team at each school. Each leadership team—consisting of a principal, assistant principal, and instructional coach—learned how to introduce teachers to the PTLC and help them work through the process. "It's more than just providing some professional development—it's creating a culture of learning within schools through a set of processes that change the way teachers think about their job," says Tobia. "Their job is to diagnose student needs by having conversations with other professionals about how well students are learning, what challenges students might be facing, and how they can adjust instruction."

"The process we use with schools looks at what is happening and what needs to be done. It helps you think through all the different strategies and programs you could use, and what's the best thing for your particular situation."

— Robin Jarvis,
SEDL
Program Manager

¹ A more detailed description of the PTLC is provided in "Creating a Community of Professional Learners: An Inside View," on page 20 of this issue of *SEDL Letter*.

A Focus on Literacy

Georgetown County school and teacher leaders are pinpointing literacy as the core content area to target through the PTLC. “We realized that with all the things that were crowding our day, all the demands for the different things, reading instruction probably wasn’t getting the number of minutes it needed,” says Hammel. “So we’ve taken a hard look at reading instruction, and we’ve gone back to basics.”

School leaders are working in teams to identify relevant state standards, instructional strategies, and assessment techniques. Some of the approaches include independent reading, shared reading, read-alouds and think-alouds, and guided reading and writing. After developing and carrying out common lessons, teacher teams are holding follow-up meetings to talk about their experiences and refine their practices.

“The content of what we’re talking about is literacy—reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, anything related to communication,” says Ramona Chauvin, a SEDL program associate with expertise in K–12 literacy issues. Chauvin points out that some educators have failed to teach literacy across the curriculum in recent decades. “We’ve done a pretty good job in teaching kids how to analyze stories, but we haven’t done a whole lot with teaching them how to access information from informational texts.”

Whereas past federal funding for literacy mostly targeted young children, such as in Reading First, the ARRA’s priorities reflect a growing emphasis on later grades, Chauvin observes. “Now there’s this urgency across the country to help students beyond Grade 3, because those K–3 children are now moving up into intermediate grades and middle school, and they don’t know how to pull the information out of a text. And for the most part, their teachers don’t know how to teach them how to do that,” she says.

A Common Language

The key to the PTLC approach is collaboration. Georgetown County teachers, many of whom did common planning previously, now are meeting again to review student work and discuss evidence of learning. “The idea is to have them begin to be reflective about their own teaching,” says Tobia. “That’s when some real changes begin to occur in what teachers do. And that’s very different than typical staff development.”

Rather than urging teachers to adopt an off-the-shelf approach, SEDL encourages them to develop the habits and skills of sharing and assessing their own best practices, strategies, research, and expertise. “Because this process is much more job-embedded and teachers are having these conversations during their planning times, it’s really about their own teaching,” Tobia adds.

In a recent meeting, for instance, teachers discussed students’ failure to remember the steps of the scientific method. “They said, ‘We have to have a common language for how we talk about the scientific method.’ Apparently they didn’t before,” says Chauvin. “You have teachers who’ve been there for many years, and they talk about it their way. And you have new teachers coming in, and looking at it with different terminology. That was the piece that came out in their professional learning team.”

Research supports this emphasis on collaboration, Tobia explains. “When teachers are working together, there’s a great deal more that happens in terms of changing teacher behavior. It adds a level of accountability, so teachers are holding one another accountable.”

“For a long time, we went into our rooms and we went into private practice,” reflects Hammel. “We never shared what we knew. Now we’re allowing teachers to look at it all and talk about strategies they’re going to use together. If I’m a new teacher or a teacher who has difficulty with particular content, this gives me an open door with my colleagues so I can get some ideas.”

Evaluating Effectiveness

Evaluation is an essential component of this process. As the evaluator for the Georgetown County effort, Erin McCann, a SEDL Research and Evaluation program associate, will process and analyze data from a variety of sources: forms completed by meeting facilitators, discussion logs, focus group feedback, survey questionnaires, observations made by instructional coaches and administrators during classroom walk-throughs, student grades, and student achievement on standardized tests.

In addition to providing district leaders with summative evaluation results at the end of the process, McCann will offer formative evaluation findings on teacher and student progress at regular intervals, so any necessary adjustments can be made along the way. To evaluate teacher collaboration, for example, McCann will examine reading logs, process monthly reports, and interview technical assistance providers three times a year. An added benefit of this ongoing formative evaluation is that it will document short-term gains, which can be vital to building credibility and maintaining momentum, she says.

By using a variety of evaluation strategies, SEDL also is helping Georgetown County take a proactive approach to meeting the Department of Education’s expectations for evaluations under ARRA. “They haven’t been specific about what they want reported back from districts and schools that get these funds, so I’m trying to cover as many bases as I can to make

How SEDL Is Helping				
ARRA Education Funding Categories				
	Title I, Part A Recovery Funds	Title I, School Improvement Grants (103G Funds)	Educational Technology State Grant	IDEA Recovery Funds for Services to Children and Youths with Disabilities
SEDL's Expertise				
Elementary Literacy	❖	❖		
Adolescent Literacy	❖	❖		
Mathematics and Language	❖	❖		
Integrating Technology and Core Content Areas			❖	
Response to Intervention (RtI)				❖
Extended Learning	❖	❖		
Community Engagement	❖	❖		
Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle	❖	❖		
Professional Learning Communities	❖	❖		
Program Evaluation	❖	❖		

“For a long time, we went into our rooms and we went into private practice. We never shared what we knew. Now we’re allowing teachers to look at it all and talk about strategies they’re going to use together. If I’m a new teacher or a teacher who has difficulty with particular content, this gives me an open door with my colleagues so I can get some ideas.”

— Patti Hammel, Executive Director for Student Performance and Federal Programs, Georgetown County School District

sure we have data once those instructions become explicit,” McCann says.

In the final analysis, though, evaluation’s biggest value is in providing the feedback that teachers need to fuel improvement. “If teachers can really start engaging in these things, they begin seeing some immediate benefits for themselves,” notes Tobia. “It really makes their job easier when they collaborate. But getting over that hurdle of opening up to other teachers, when they haven’t done that in the past, is one of the things that our structure helps to provide.”

Capacity Building

SEDL provides this structure in the form of technical assistance. More important, though, SEDL’s role as an external facilitator entails building school leaders’ capacity for educational improvement. “And as we build their capacity, we’re working our way out of the job,” Tobia laughs.

“One of our goals in anything we do is that gradually we withdraw, and they take the lead,” says

Jarvis. “Educators change. The principal changes. Teachers change. But that process of continuous improvement that we’ve taught them—looking at student work, analyzing what you’re doing, planning lessons together—all of that should remain in place, no matter who the educators are in the school.”

Looking at the process beginning to take hold in Georgetown County, Hammel appreciates the way school leaders already are practicing new roles. “We’re following a prescriptive plan for professional learning teams,” in which principals, teachers, and coaches collaborate to lead school efforts, she says. “This happens now with a prescribed pattern. It’s our belief that after 2 years it’ll be automatic. It will be the way we do business.”

For now, SEDL’s work in Georgetown County is still in its early stages. Nevertheless, Hammel can barely contain her pride and optimism: “We didn’t just jump into something because it looked like something we could do. It was really mirroring the direction we were going. It was a logical next step. It really was. There is more buy-in than I’ve ever seen. We’re excited. We think we’ve turned a corner.”

Geoffrey Alan is a freelance writer who frequently covers education issues.

Creating a Community of Professional Learners

*An Inside View*¹

By D'Ette Cowan

If you're like me, you often glance over announcements of new books from publishers to see what is capturing the attention of educators across the nation. In doing so, you've likely noticed an increased number of books on professional learning communities. Although I'm pleased that the concept is gaining the attention of educators, I'm often concerned when I hear the term used indiscriminately to describe any group of teachers that meets from time to time for any purpose whatsoever. In such instances, I worry that these meetings will lack clarity in their focus, norms to which teachers hold one another accountable, and processes for learning collectively and for constantly improving instructional practices. Without these critical aspects, the term *professional learning community* implies superficial interactions that fail to acknowledge the significant cultural shift that must occur for a school to operate in this way (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Shirley Hord, a pioneer in this approach and SEDL scholar emerita, notes that professional learning communities shape the ways schools operate on all levels:

In these schools, collaboration is the norm. It is characterized by the staff's interdependent relationships, with all individuals engaged in a common purpose and where people rely on each other to reach agreed-upon goals that they would not be able to achieve independently (Huffman & Hipp, 2003, p. x).

A professional learning community, thus, is an *infrastructure* that supports and nurtures continuous instructional effectiveness, and is not an end in itself.

Furthermore, it is not an endeavor separate from the total improvement effort, but rather a *means* to achieve high levels of student learning.

Although the literature provides descriptions of professional learning communities, it offers limited direction in how to create and sustain them. In this article, I describe the Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle (PTLC), a process for creating a professional learning community while focusing on a factor essential to reaching high levels of student learning—the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to state standards (Airasian, 2004; Cawelti, 2004; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Marzano, 2003). The process provides a structure for collaboration on teaching and learning that promotes continuous job-embedded professional development to improve teaching and learning (Cowan, 2006; Tobia, 2007).

The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle

The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle (PTLC), originally developed as a joint effort by SEDL and the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2005),² consists of six steps: (1) study, (2) select, (3) plan, (4) implement, (5) analyze, and (6) adjust. Implementation of the PTLC is supported by three leadership strategies: communicating clear expectations, building capacity, and monitoring and reviewing.

¹ Portions of this article appeared in the book Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B. (Eds.). (2010). *Demystifying professional learning communities: School leadership at its best*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Adapted with permission.

² The process has been refined and is now described in the following publication: Cowan, D., Joyner, S., & Beckwith, S. (2008). *Working Systemically in action: A guide for facilitators*. Austin, TX: SEDL.

Step 1: Study

In this step, teachers work in grade-level, vertical, or departmental teams to examine and discuss student achievement data and learning expectations for selected state standards. Often the selection of standards for study is predicated by high or low student performance on annual or periodic standards-based assessments. The purpose of this collaboration is to develop a common understanding of

- the concepts and skills students need to know to meet the expectations in the standards;
- how the standards in a grade or course are assessed on state and local tests; and
- how the standards fit within a scope and sequence of the district curriculum (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, p. 178).

Examining standards and objectives on which students perform at a high level helps identify possible strengths in the curriculum, instructional resources, and strategies. Similarly, examining standards and objectives on which students perform at a low level helps identify possible weaknesses in the curriculum, instructional resources, and strategies. Often, these processes require paying close attention to the wording used in the standards and student learning expectations to determine critical concepts to be learned and skills to be mastered. Focusing attention on these concepts and skills helps build a shared understanding of how standards are connected across grade levels and subject areas.

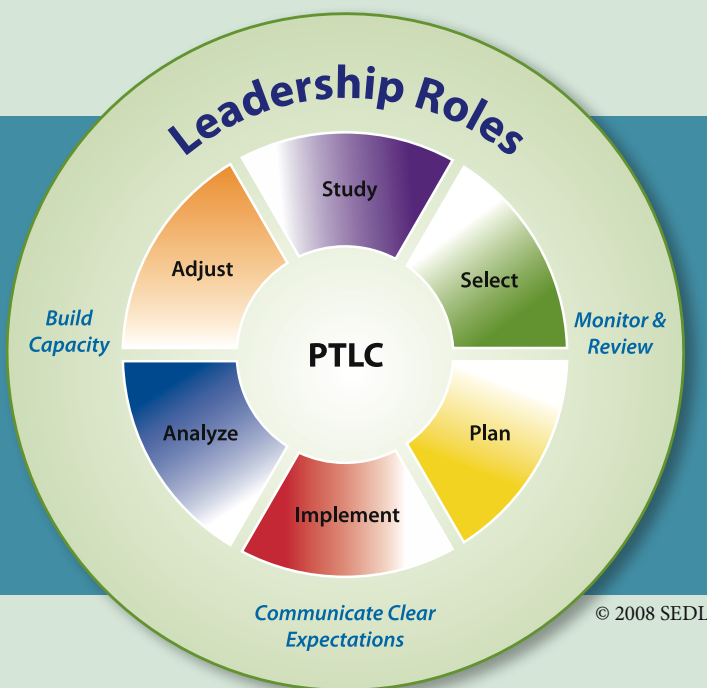
Step 1 in Action. Principal Tate at Cimarron Middle School has organized a campus leadership team charged with the primary responsibility for school improvement. The team is composed of teacher representatives from each of the four core areas (mathematics, reading/language arts, science, and social studies), as well as from fine arts, physical education, special education, and the bilingual/English as a second language program. A district-level math coach and a district-level literacy coach, who have curricular and instructional responsibilities, complete the team.

The leadership team meets on a regular basis each month to monitor the implementation of the campus improvement plan and to deliberate on significant issues as they arise. In recent years, the team's shared norms have helped it to explore a range of perspectives on key improvement initiatives and to prioritize school needs.

Now, at the beginning of the school year, the team examines the previous year's state test data and notes that student math performance is beginning to plateau. Team members discover that the school's previous achievement level in mathematics will not meet the state target at the end of the current year because performance standards have increased. The team identifies the level of proficiency it wants students to attain on the next state assessment. Principal Tate is somewhat surprised, and gratified, to see that teachers' expectations for math achievement in the next school year exceed the minimum state-level standards.

Later that week, Principal Tate and the math and literacy coaches meet with all the math teachers during their common planning period to discuss trends and patterns in math data over the past 3 years. The team identifies specific standards and objectives on which student performance has shown little or no improvement over that time period.

After collaborating, the coaches develop a plan for helping the math teachers dig more deeply into the state standards to identify the concepts and skills required for student proficiency in specific objectives. After comparing the concepts and skills in specific standards and objectives at the grade levels below and above the grade they teach, the math teachers become more aware of how concepts and skills are progressively built from grade to grade. Finally, the math coach directs teachers' attention to specific items on previous state assessments on which the objectives are tested. The coach emphasizes the prerequisite and problem-solving skills required of students in order to demonstrate proficiency on the objectives.



Step 2: Select

In this step, teams investigate research-based strategies and resources needed to promote student mastery of the targeted standard(s). Teachers collaborate to

- identify effective research-based strategies and appropriate resources that will be used to support student learning of selected state standards; and
- agree on assessment techniques that will be used to provide evidence of student learning (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, p. 179).

This step requires instructional coaches and teachers to determine whether instructional strategies they have used in the past are supported in research and challenges them to adopt new and more effective strategies. As trust develops within teams, the teachers become more open to trying new strategies and reporting the outcomes to their colleagues.

Step 2 in Action. Following the meeting with the math teachers, Principal Tate asks the literacy and math coaches to work with the math teachers to develop a plan for professional development that builds teachers' capacity to provide effective instructional strategies on identified standards and learning objectives. The coaches are becoming increasingly aware of teachers' pedagogical needs and ways to help increase teachers' instructional effectiveness in these areas.

The coaches examine the district's benchmark assessments to see how students are being tested on the objectives throughout the school year. They discover a major discrepancy between the demands of the state assessment on measures of central tendency and how students are tested quarterly on local benchmarks. They set a date to discuss this inconsistency with the district's curriculum specialist in order to make needed changes on the local benchmark assessment. The math coach speculates that additional work will need to be done with math teachers to examine how students are being tested on this standard on weekly or unit tests.

The literacy coach focuses on strategies for teaching key vocabulary terms related to measures of central tendency and makes special note of how (or whether) these terms have been introduced in the district's scope and sequence. She identifies two research-based strategies for teaching these key terms and for helping students write cogent explanations and justifications for their problem solutions—a proficiency where performance had been notably lacking on the state assessment.

Step 3: Plan

In this step, teachers collaborate to plan a formal lesson that incorporates selected research-based instructional strategies. They also agree on the type of student work they will collect and share with one another as evidence of student learning, as well as the criteria for measuring proficiency. In collaboration, teachers

- develop a common formal plan outlining the lesson objectives (relevant to the standards), the materials to be used, the procedures, the time frame for the lesson, and the activities in which students will be engaged; and
- decide what evidence of student learning will be collected during the implementation (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, p. 179).

Planning the lesson collaboratively is a critical feature of the PTLT. Through this process, teachers use their collective knowledge and experience to design a lesson that everyone understands and feels comfortable teaching, to formulate one or more measures of proficiency, and to identify common student work to collect across classrooms as evidence of learning.

Step 3 in Action. The math teachers at each grade level meet to develop a common lesson on measures of central tendency, which they agree to implement within a specified period of time. Having a common lesson for each grade level will give teachers a common frame of reference when they discuss the delivery and outcome of the lesson. It will also enable them to identify nuances of the lesson or classroom context that are associated with higher (or lower) student performance levels. The teachers decide they will begin by incorporating one of the new vocabulary strategies—the Frayer model—they learned from the literacy coach to ensure that students understand the terms *mean*, *median*, and *mode*.

Teachers first identify the lesson's major objectives that are critical to student proficiency in the standard and write these down. They want to ensure that students can compute these measures of central tendency using the same set of numbers and then justify which measure is best for particular situations. Teachers decide to use three word problems with different sets of numbers for students to calculate to determine the effectiveness of the lesson. The teachers also formulate a simple rubric for judging student proficiency on written justifications of the best measure of central tendency to use for each word problem. The teachers decide to spend 3 days of instruction on the concept of measures of central tendency and design an informal assessment to administer at the end of the third day. They then agree to bring 10 randomly selected samples of student work from this assessment back to the group for closer examination.

Step 4: Implement

In this step, teachers present the planned lesson, make note of their successes and challenges, and collect evidence of student work. They

- deliver the lesson as planned within the specified time period;
- record the results, especially noting where students struggled or where instruction did not achieve expected outcomes; and
- collect the agreed-upon evidence of student learning to take back to the collaborative planning team (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, p. 179).

This step places the teacher in the role of an action researcher who collects data to reveal successes and challenges in the lesson. This process encourages active reflection to promote ongoing self-assessment and internal dialogue about the lesson as it was planned and presented.

Step 4 in Action. Using the plans they developed together, the math teachers return to their classrooms and teach the lesson over a 3-day period. They incorporate the Frayer model graphic organizer to help students understand the three measures of central tendency. Teachers also use the rubric they developed to evaluate student justifications for the best measure of central tendency to use in different contexts. Throughout, the teachers note aspects of the lesson that went as expected, as well as unanticipated occurrences. They also make note of specific areas they or their students found particularly challenging or easy and record them. These notes will be useful when teachers meet again to examine student work in Step 5. The teachers collect student work from the informal assessment and randomly select 10 samples to bring back to the group.

Step 5: Analyze

In this step, teachers meet to examine the student work they collected to serve as evidence of student understanding of the standards. Teachers work together to

- revisit and familiarize themselves with the targeted standards before analyzing the student work;
- analyze a sampling of student work for evidence of student learning;
- discuss whether students have met the expectations outlined in the standards;
- make inferences about the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of instruction; and
- identify what students know and what skills or knowledge needs to be strengthened in future lessons (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, pp. 179–180).

The most important aspect of this step is the dialogue that occurs about lesson effectiveness as reflected in the student work. Whether conducted through formal or informal processes, the focus of examination is not on teacher evaluation but rather on lesson effectiveness.

Step 5 in Action. At the specified time, the math teachers reconvene to examine samples of student work. The math and literacy coaches also attend this meeting primarily to lead the discussion on student work and to ask probing questions as teachers are learning how to establish a culture of respectful critical inquiry. The literacy coach listens for indicators that teachers have provided a sound foundation on essential vocabulary for the lesson by using the Frayer model. The math coach is interested in hearing teachers' perspectives about how the student work enhances the development of critical math concepts and reflects effective pedagogy. Although coaches are prepared to lead the discussion in the initial meetings, they realize that their presence at every meeting in the future will not be so essential as teachers become more adept at the process of analyzing student work in an objective and respectful manner.

Before the team analyzes the student work, the coaches have the math teachers shield the students' names from view. This anonymity helps prevent preconceived notions about individual student competency based on past achievement or other factors from creeping into the assessment of the work.

Next, the math teachers at each grade level combine the samples of student work from the informal assessment into one stack of papers. The coaches have the teachers review the objectives of the lesson on measures of central tendency as specified in Step 3. The teachers also refer to the rubric they developed to ensure that indicators of proficiency on the written justifications are still appropriate. The teachers work together to review each piece of student work and place it into one of three stacks: (1) students who excelled in meeting all the learning objectives; (2) students who show proficiency in most of the learning objectives; and (3) students who are clearly far from meeting the learning objectives. The coaches help prevent the conversation from drifting toward factors other than the work that is before the teachers.

Then, looking at each stack, the teachers identify the overall characteristics that are reflected and what elements of the commonly planned lesson might have influenced the student learning results. Teachers may want to speculate about anything that occurred in their classrooms during the lesson that might have influenced the results.

The teachers also examine each stack for any trends or patterns in strengths and errors, and discuss what it would take to move student work in that stack to the next level. Although the focus of the conversation is on lesson effectiveness, the teachers realize they also can use information in these stacks to group students for enrichment or additional instruction.

Step 6: Adjust

In this step, teachers reflect on the implications arising from the analysis of student work. They discuss alternative instructional strategies or modifications to the original strategy that may better promote student learning. In collaboration, teachers

- reflect on their common or disparate teaching experiences;
- consider and identify alternative instructional strategies for future instruction;
- refine and improve the lesson; and
- determine when the instructional modifications will take place, what can be built into subsequent lessons, and what needs an additional targeted lesson (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, p. 180).

Instruction is constantly evolving during this step as teachers design the most effective lessons possible. Follow-up instruction also becomes strategic in nature as decisions are made about which students need additional instruction and how this instruction should be provided.

Step 6 in Action. The math and literacy coaches next guide the conversation toward possible changes that could be made to the lesson to increase its effectiveness. The coaches also help the teachers see where small groups of students might be formed for immediate instruction on critical aspects of the learning objectives that were missed. In addition, the coaches help the teachers plan how to integrate the missed objectives into future lessons. These measures increase the efficiency of the instructional program by targeting the specific learning needs of students and reducing the number of students who need additional instruction. Throughout this process, the coaches communicate with Principal Tate and make recommendations for ways to continue to support teacher effectiveness.



Conclusion

The PTLC provides an ongoing, job-embedded strategy for increasing the alignment of instruction and assessment to state standards and local curriculum. The process itself offers a means for promoting a community of professional learners by fostering effective collaboration, collective learning, and shared personal practice. Furthermore, this process focuses professional development to provide continual support and assistance in building teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge and skills. The leadership roles that support the implementation of the PTLC are critical to its success. As the PTLC graphic on page 21 illustrates, leaders must clearly communicate, through both words and actions, their expectations for collaboration focused on student learning goals. Leaders must also continuously seek ways to build the capacity of instructional staff to implement each step of the PTLC successfully. In some cases, pedagogical and content skills need to be improved; in other cases, interpersonal skills. Finally, leaders must develop a system for reviewing formative and summative data pertinent to the implementation of the PTLC and its impact on students. These data provide important information about where to commit additional resources and how to ensure learning opportunities of the highest order for all students.

References

- Airasian, P. W. (2004). *Classroom assessment: Concepts and applications*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2003). Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform. *Educational Leadership, 60*(6), 40–45.
- Cawelti, G. (2004). A synthesis of research on high-performing school systems. In G. Cawelti (Ed.), *Handbook of research on improving student achievement* (3rd ed., pp. 10–24). Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.
- Cowan, D. F. (2006). Creating learning communities in low-performing sites: A systemic approach to alignment. *Journal of School Leadership, 16*, 596–610.
- Cowan, D., Joyner, S., & Beckwith, S. (2008). *Working Systemically in action: A guide for facilitators*. Austin, TX: SEDL.
- Huffman, J. B., & Hipp, K. K. (2003). *Reculturing schools as professional learning communities*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Education.
- Kannapel, P. J., & Clements, S. K. (2005). *Inside the black box of high-performing high-poverty schools*. Lexington, KY: Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence.
- Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. (2005). *Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle: Introduction*. Austin, TX: Author.
- Tobia, E. (2007, April). The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle: Implementing a standards-based approach to professional development. *SEDL Letter, 19*(1), 11–15.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2004). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

D'Ette Cowan is a project director with SEDL's Texas Comprehensive Center. She has an EdD in educational administration. You may reach D'Ette at dette.cowan@sedl.org.

Building Bright Futures

for Preschoolers in Madison Parish

By Chris Times



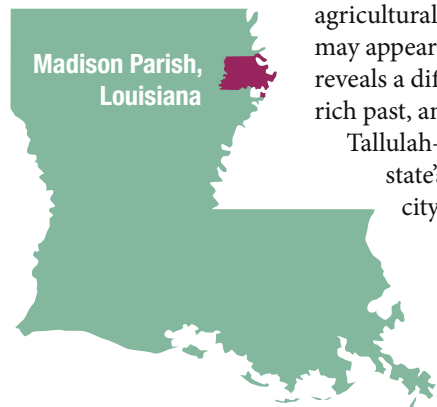
Preschoolers work in the writing center while a paraprofessional engages them in conversation about their work.

Like many rural areas in the United States, Madison Parish has its share of economic problems—high poverty, abandoned and blighted properties, and limited job opportunities. A largely agricultural area in Northeast Louisiana, Madison may appear to have little to offer. But a closer look reveals a different picture—scenic landscapes, a rich past, and lots of hope for the future.

Tallulah—the seat of Madison Parish—had the state's oldest airport and was the first U.S. city to build an indoor mall (National Register of Historic Places, n.d.). In the early 1900s, the U.S. Department of Agriculture established Delta Laboratory in Tallulah as a base for groundbreaking insect research and aircraft dusting experiments. At the

urging of the lab's director, the crop-dusting company Huff Daland Dusters moved its headquarters to nearby Monroe and eventually evolved into present-day Delta Airlines (Delta Heritage Museum, n.d.).

Today, Madison Parish is pioneering work of a different kind. Nestled among fragrant magnolias and towering oaks are three preschool centers working together to build bright futures for students in their community. Madison Parish Public Schools (MPPS) has partnered with Delta Community Action Association-Tallulah Head Start and SEDL to create the Bright Futures Early Reading First (ERF) Project, which oversees the centers. Bright Futures is a multiyear initiative to improve the school readiness of prekindergarten students from low-income homes, while providing high-quality professional development to teachers and paraprofessionals.



MPPS was the first Louisiana district to receive ERF funding from the U.S. Department of Education in 2007.

Patricia Candler, assistant superintendent/ chief academic officer of MPPS, serves as project director of Bright Futures and works with other key personnel, including management staff from Delta Community Action Association-Tallulah Head Start, an ERF coordinator, three ERF reading coaches, a parent involvement coordinator, and several SEDL consultants. “Our biggest challenges have been coordinating three preschool centers at separate sites and improving classroom environments, as required by the ERF grant,” says SEDL program associate Kathleen Theodore, who is providing literacy professional development in Madison Parish. “Management team meetings have helped in the process of becoming one center at three sites.”

The Role of Research-Based Curriculum and Professional Development

The mission of ERF is to ensure that all children enter kindergarten with the necessary language, cognitive, and early reading skills for continued success in school. Research suggests that nearly all students can become competent readers, but they need high-quality instruction at an early age (National Research Council, 2000). Success in narrowing the achievement gap among students in low socioeconomic groups depends on providing young children with specific knowledge in preschool curricula before they start kindergarten (Klein & Knitzer, 2006). To ensure their students are ready for kindergarten, Bright Futures leaders have implemented a common curriculum of research-based instructional programs in the preschool centers. The curriculum includes methods to develop oral language that focus on word play, listening and responding to literature selections, and vocabulary development exercises. Also, the instructional programs help ensure that children with special needs or disabilities receive additional targeted instruction that is informed by regular assessment to meet individual needs.

Bright Futures seems to be having a positive impact on instruction and learning at the preschool centers. A recent peek into a classroom at Tallulah Elementary School revealed a teacher working with preschoolers during whole-group instruction time. Most of the students smiled shyly, while some gave little waves. As the teacher began calling out letters, the children all raised their hands to point to the correct answers on the alphabet chart. Also, the students introduced themselves by saying, “My name

is _____. I am ___ years old. I am a _____ (boy or girl), and I am happy to be here,” demonstrating their oral language skills by speaking clearly and in complete sentences. At Delta Head Start (DHS), preschoolers were busy clapping and singing during circle time, listening to stories in Read Aloud, and zooming down raceways in the developmental center.

“Children are actively engaged and learning and loving it,” says Corine Holmes, ERF reading coach at Tallulah Elementary. “One of the biggest impacts has been the partnership between the two district schools [Wright and Tallulah] and the Delta Head Start center. I can see growth in the 3-year-olds from DHS as they enter into the district’s 4-year-old preK program. Their oral language and expression are exceptional. They also follow oral directions well, and their early writing skills are on target.”

In addition to establishing a common curriculum and a print-rich classroom environment at the preschool centers, Bright Futures provides more than 220 hours of intensive, ongoing professional development annually for principals, teachers, and reading coaches. Since Fall 2007, SEDL’s Theodore has worked closely with teachers and project staff to provide focused training in language, cognitive, and early reading development that will improve preschoolers’ oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, and alphabet knowledge. Recently, she conducted a study group for preschool teachers at Wright Elementary to evaluate data (samples of student work). The group reviewed anonymous self-portraits and renderings of letters, numbers,

Kathleen Theodore (in center), a SEDL program associate, models and facilitates a study group with teachers and Early Reading First staff at Tallulah Elementary.





Chris Ferguson, a SEDL program associate, facilitates a community- and parent-involvement planning meeting.

and figures to get a sense of the children's developmental and skill levels. Teachers shared thoughts on what the work conveyed and ideas for related lessons, as well as ways to help students move forward in prereading literacy skills. The group expressed positive feedback on the session and requested more information on the process.

Before the study group session, Theodore and SEDL program associate Stacey Joyner modeled the process for the ERF coordinator and reading coaches, who will conduct additional sessions at their preschool centers. "The coaching process has supported classroom teachers by modeling, demonstrating, and facilitating study groups," says Rena Lucas, ERF reading coach at DHS. "With the support of SEDL, professional development and other resources have allowed me to provide follow-up for teachers."

In addition to providing targeted support and helping with project oversight, Theodore has offered teachers 3-day summer institutes that focus on scientifically based early literacy instruction, grade-level expectations, the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, implementation of the reading programs, and the use of assessments to inform instruction. "The research strategies that we've used have helped us align our preK to kindergarten programs so that our students are having greater literacy success," says Nancy Smith, ERF coordinator. "The district preK teachers have commented that the children transitioning from the Head Start program are much better prepared than children who have not previously attended school."

Involving Families and Community

Another key focus of Bright Futures is increasing parent engagement both at school and at home. In Spring 2008, the first Family Literacy Night was held at Tallulah Elementary, during which parents learned about literacy activities, created take-home activities with their children, and observed a group book-reading experience. More than 70 parents attended with their children, and 90% of those who completed the evaluation indicated that they were more likely to do similar activities with their children at home after attending the literacy night. Staff members also planned a literacy night for Fall 2009 and expected an even larger turnout, based on participants' feedback.

To continue these efforts, Chris Ferguson, a SEDL program associate, is collaborating with Pat Buchanan, ERF parent involvement coordinator, to plan literacy activities that educate parents in the skills that support their child's development, are responsive to the family's language and culture, and engage the entire community in supporting literacy. Ferguson has conducted staff training and coaching in strategies for increasing parent engagement. "While this work with parents is vital to the success of the project, the efforts to engage the larger community in the literacy work are also important," says Ferguson. "In a community such as Madison Parish, which has a long history of poverty and low [academic] performance, implementing literacy improvement throughout the system is central to sustained improvement and to building a culture of shared responsibility for student literacy."

Since May 2008, SEDL staff have supported parish staff in activities that engage businesses, faith-based organizations, community organizations, support agencies, and individuals in exploring their role in supporting literacy outside of school. In September 2009, SEDL staff facilitated an intense conversation with key community stakeholders on how to move their "talk to action," in the words of Reverend Theodore Lindsey. In coming months, Madison Parish staff, parents, and the community plan to move forward with this initiative.

Seeing Results

SEDL's Research and Evaluation work group has been instrumental in supporting Bright Futures by evaluating the implementation efforts and the impact of the project. SEDL staff have maintained a student assessment database for tracking the progress of student outcomes over time and have collected baseline data. Sarah Caverly, a SEDL program associate, has trained teachers and project

staff on administering assessments, analyzing assessment data, and using assessment data to make instructional decisions. She and colleagues also have completed periodic site visits to the preschool centers to interview teachers, conduct classroom observations, and coordinate data collection and management of student assessment data.

Many of the evaluation results are encouraging. Using the assessments and evaluation data, SEDL has identified strategies for improvement and worked with Bright Futures staff to strengthen classroom environments and resources to support early literacy and language development. “Results on classroom resources compared to baseline data show significant growth as measured by the Early Language and Literacy Observation Tool,” explains Caverly. “Results on the classroom environment quality were in the basic-to-strong range.”

SEDL staff also have conducted evaluation activities to guide ongoing improvement, measure child outcomes, and contribute to the knowledge base in the field of early childhood education. In Fall 2007 and Spring 2008, students were assessed in vocabulary skills, phonological awareness, print awareness, and alphabet knowledge in pre- and post-tests. Preschoolers have shown statistically significant improvement in all four areas. While lacking control-group comparisons, “early indications are promising, particularly regarding teachers making critical structural changes to their classroom environments to support and enrich literacy activities in their classrooms,” says Michael Vaden-Kiernan, director of Research and Evaluation at SEDL.

In Year 3 of Bright Futures, SEDL will continue its work in the partnership by

- conducting quarterly leadership trainings for management, project staff, and preschool center personnel;
- providing data-driven, targeted assistance and training for teachers and coaches;
- providing intensive training on how to administer, collect, interpret, and use assessment data; and
- assisting with development of a series of parent and community events to demonstrate and provide hands-on training for participants on their role in supporting literacy.

“During the duration of the program, both teacher practice and student performance have shown tremendous growth,” says Candler. “The classroom environments of all the Early Reading First teachers continue to improve as materials are purchased and put in place through the guidance of SEDL consultants, the director, the coordinator, and coaches. Also, coaching has shown to be valuable in



changing teachers’ classroom practices.”

Based on progress so far, Madison Parish has taken key steps in building bright futures for preschoolers in rural Louisiana.

Students participate in small-group writing activities with a paraprofessional.

References

- Klein, L., & Knitzer, J. (2006). *Pathways to early school success: Effective preschool curricula and teaching strategies (Issue Brief No. 2)*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty.
- Lecky, C. S., & Murphy, M. S. (1936). *History of Tallulah laboratory, Bureau of Entomology, U.S. Department of Agriculture*. Retrieved from www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~lamadiso/articles/bughistory.htm
- National Register of Historic Places. (n.d.). Louisiana—Madison County. Retrieved from www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/LA/Madison/state.html
- National Research Council, Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy. (2000). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. B. Bowman, S. Donovan, & S. Burns. (Eds.). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- The Delta Heritage Museum. Delta History: Facts. A history of service. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://deltamuseum.org/M_Education_DeltaHistory_Facts_History.htm
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. (2009). BEARFACTS 1997–2007, Madison, Louisiana (22065). Retrieved from www.bea.gov/regional/bearfacts/action.cfm?FIPS=22065

Chris Times is a communications associate with SEDL’s Southeast Comprehensive Center. You may reach Chris at chris.times@sedl.org.

Helping Texas Teachers Support English Language Learners

By Joni Wackwitz and Jackie Burniske

The number of English language learners (ELLs) in our nation's public schools has skyrocketed over the past decade and continues to grow. Ensuring the academic success of these students is a critical component of school improvement. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), public schools are rated on the performance of all students, including ELLs. More than ever, educators face the challenge of ensuring that ELLs receive the support they need to succeed academically and in life.

In Texas, SEDL's Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) is helping state educators meet this challenge. The TXCC is one of two comprehensive centers that SEDL operates (the other is the Southeast Comprehensive Center). The comprehensive centers are charged with building the capacity of state education agencies and statewide systems of support so that they can better help underperforming schools and districts close achievement gaps.

In 2008, the TXCC received supplemental funding from the U.S. Department of Education to help the Texas Education Agency (TEA) build the capacity of schools and districts to meet the instructional needs of ELLs. Working side by side with the TEA in a consultative role, the TXCC is providing technical assistance, professional development, and research to help educators select the appropriate linguistic accommodations for ELLs in Texas.

Challenges for Supporting ELLs in Texas

Texas has good reason to focus on the quality of its ELL programs. The number of ELLs enrolled in the state's public schools has risen dramatically over the past decade, a trend that parallels what is happening nationally. In 2008, more than 800,000 students—nearly 15% of K–12 students in Texas' public schools—were ELLs (TEA Student Assessment Division, 2009). Moreover, ELLs often experience lower graduation rates and scores on the

state proficiency exam, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

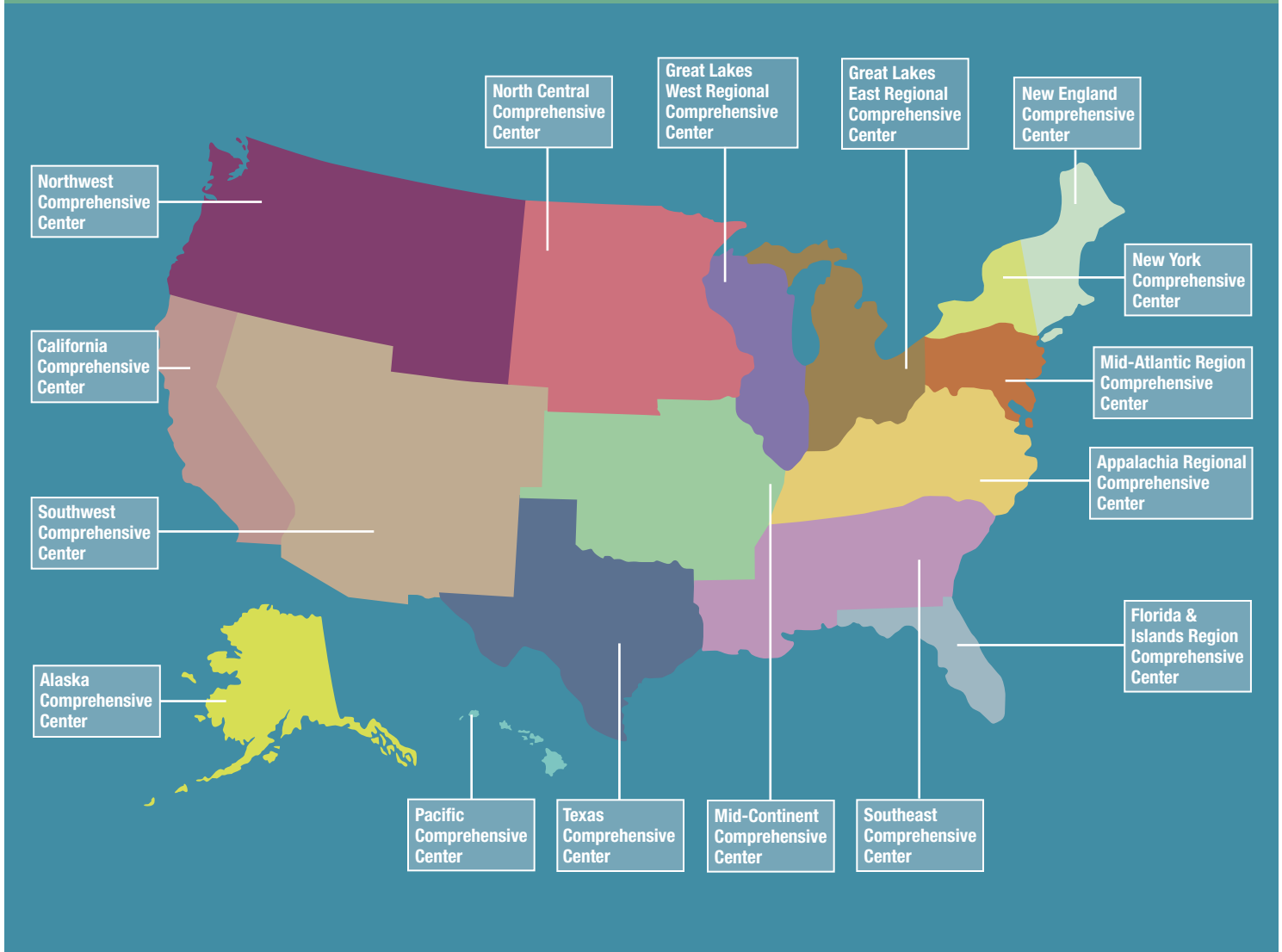
Before the TXCC and TEA undertook this project, educators in Texas already had improved instructional support for ELLs. In accordance with NCLB, all Texas teachers who instruct ELLs must implement both the state's English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) and its academic standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Texas also has aligned its English language and academic standards with the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System, which is used to assess a student's English language proficiency level and progress in the domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The results determine the linguistic accommodations the student may receive during instruction and on assessments.

The TEA provides guidelines to help teachers select and implement appropriate linguistic accommodations during instruction and on the version of the TAKS that has accommodations for limited English proficient (LEP) students. In addition, Language Proficiency Assessment Committees help local education agencies determine the needs of ELLs, select instructional interventions, monitor student progress, make assessment decisions, and maintain required documentation.

Even with this guidance, however, Texas educators face a number of challenges in meeting the needs of ELLs. Many content-area teachers are unfamiliar with the ELPS and have only a superficial knowledge of the types of linguistic accommodations needed to meet them. Furthermore, while the linguistic accommodations provided on state assessments are fairly consistent among teachers, those provided during instruction vary widely.

In working with the TXCC to improve support for ELLs, the TEA determined that schools and districts need more guidance and professional development in making consistent decisions about linguistic accommodations. This consistency is needed to

Regional Comprehensive Centers



ensure that ELLs receive equal access to a challenging curriculum and an equal opportunity to learn and demonstrate what they know.

The TXCC and TEA identified three main needs:

1. Building the capacity of districts and schools in following the TEA guidelines for selecting assessments and linguistic accommodations for LEP students
2. Providing assistance to ensure that the same linguistic accommodations provided to LEP students on assessments are also provided in instruction
3. Providing assistance in using the results of state assessment data to learn which linguistic accommodations best ensure that ELLs are able to demonstrate their level of achievement

ELL Focus Groups

In early 2009, during the first phase of the Texas ELL project, a team of TXCC staff conducted 14 focus groups across the state to learn how districts and schools make decisions about ELL accommodations. Focus group participants included teachers, campus administrators, district-level staff, department chairs, content coordinators, testing coordinators, and directors of bilingual/English as a second language (ESL) programs. Although some focus groups included participants from only one district, most included representatives from a number of districts addressing linguistic accommodations in different ways.

With each focus group, facilitators used a protocol containing the same questions. Participants first discussed ELL practices and services at the district

Focus Group Themes

Facilitators identified the following cross-cutting themes in focus group responses:

1. The classroom teacher is critical as the main support to ELLs. Whether content-area teachers, grade-level teachers, or ELL teachers, they know the students best and are the first point of access in working with ELLs.
2. School leaders need to provide on-site guidance and support. To do so, they need sufficient information about linguistic accommodations.
3. Professional development plans should extend beyond initial awareness; they should also address follow-up and the implementation of accommodations.
4. Professional development, especially in sheltered instruction and in understanding language development of ELLs, needs to be provided to all teachers, not just select groups.
5. Geographic differences may play a role in addressing the needs of ELLs.
6. The state can help by providing more examples of linguistic accommodations during instruction and assessments, as well as more funding and strategies to allow time for teachers to develop the skills they need.

A summary of the focus group findings and the proceedings

of the summit are available on the TXCC Web site at

http://txcc.sedl.org/resources/ell_materials/summit_march09/index.html.

and school levels. Discussion then moved to questions about professional development and the role of the district and state in providing guidance on linguistic accommodations.

Haidee Williams, a project director at SEDL and director of the Texas ELL project, reflects on the value of the focus groups. “We talked to practitioners about the challenges they faced when working with ELLs and what their needs were. We found out what is really going on in the field and used that to shape our work.”

Focus group responses varied both across and within districts and showed the complexity and variation of ELL services in Texas. Some districts and schools with long-established ESL programs reported that their main challenge often is getting students and parents to place enough emphasis on learning English in a community where Spanish is spoken widely. Other participants reported having students who speak languages other than Spanish, such as Arabic, Farsi, and Russian. Still other participants were from districts with small ELL populations and noted that they often lacked the funding to provide adequate instructional support. Some districts reported that their teachers primarily make decisions about the proper use of linguistic accommodations; in other districts, leaders or other staff are the main decision makers.

ELL Research Summit

To build on the results of the focus groups, the TXCC and TEA, in partnership with the Center on Instruction, held a 2-day research summit titled “Making Consistent Decisions About Accommodations for English Language Learners.” The summit took place in March 2009 at SEDL headquarters in Austin, Texas.

The research summit’s purpose was to review the findings from the focus groups, learn from the research of ELL experts, and stimulate dialogue among researchers and state leaders on how best to help educators select and implement ELL accommodations. Four essential questions guided the dialogue:

1. What do research and best practice tell us about selecting and implementing linguistic accommodations in instruction and on assessments for English language learners?
2. What is the state of current practice in the selection and use of linguistic accommodations in instruction and on assessments for English language learners?
3. Where should we begin in helping educators select and provide appropriate linguistic accommodations for English language learners in instruction and on assessments?
4. What questions require further study with regard to linguistic accommodations for English language learners in instruction and on assessments?

A panel of seven experts spoke; Dr. David Francis, director of the Center on Instruction ELL strand,

served as the discussant. In addition, TEA staff gave a presentation on the state's current ELPS and guidelines regarding ELL accommodations. Summit participants then broke into small groups to reflect on what they learned from the panel presentations and focus group summaries.

SEDL program director Vicki Dimock, who directs the TXCC, explains, "The summit presented an opportunity for an in-depth dialogue among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as a means for bringing evidence to bear on practice, which has long been a focus of the work of the TXCC and SEDL."

The outcomes of the summit helped the TXCC and TEA team determine how best to improve ELL support in Texas. "The presentations and reflective dialogue of the summit," says Williams, "helped identify priorities about how the TXCC could best assist the TEA in providing a clear and consistent message to districts and schools on the appropriate selection and implementation of linguistic accommodations for ELLs."

Collaborating to Put Research Into Practice

TXCC and TEA staff used the findings of the research summit to inform the development of a plan to standardize the selection and implementation of ELL accommodations across the state. The plan involves three phases:

- Collect and analyze data about ELLs and the linguistic accommodations used on the TAKS and their impact.
- Clarify the criteria for selecting appropriate linguistic accommodations for instruction and assessment based upon student characteristics (e.g., level of English proficiency), content area, and grade level.
- Create an online professional development course to build state educators' capacity to make consistent, data-based decisions regarding the use of ELL accommodations in instruction and on state assessments.

The TXCC is working with an outside developer to create the introductory online course, which will help educators understand the need for linguistic accommodations, explore what linguistic accommodations during instruction actually look like in practice, and learn the state requirements for integrating the ELPS.

"This project has merged findings from focus groups and research in an applied approach to increase knowledge and awareness of the importance

of using linguistic accommodations with English language learners," explains Dr. Mabel Rivera, deputy director of the Center for Instruction's ELL strand and one of the presenters at the research summit. "The online module will bring all concepts to life, as teachers will have access to definitions, resources, and virtual experiences on how to decide and implement linguistic accommodations depending on the students' level of proficiency in English."

Roberto C. Manzo, program specialist for TEA's School Readiness and Partnerships division, says, "We hope all administrators and teachers hear about this great online resource for our ELL students."

During the coming year, the TXCC will continue to work with a cross-division team of TEA staff on the ELL initiative. Future plans include developing additional online courses for teachers, as well as an asset map of the TEA initiatives and programs that focus on ELLs. The TEA also plans to provide professional development for educators regarding the ELPS and the availability of the new online course. In addition, the TXCC plans to expand the ELL section on its Web site to provide research-based knowledge and strategies to support the state's capacity to assist districts and schools in the instruction of ELLs.

"In summary," says Williams, "this project is an example of how the TXCC is working to address both its objective to increase and strengthen the knowledge, skills, and resources needed for school improvement and SEDL's mission to solve significant problems facing educational systems and communities to ensure a quality education for all learners."



Joni Wackwitz is a communications specialist with SEDL's Communications Department. You may reach Joni at joni.wackwitz@sedl.org.

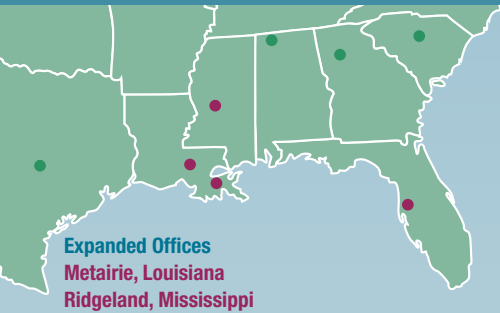
Reference

TEA Student Assessment Division, Title III Management Institute. (2009). *ELL statewide assessment update: Where we are and where we're headed*. Retrieved from http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/resources/conferences/esl/Apr_09_TitleIII_MI_ELL.ppt#3

Jackie Burniske is a program associate with SEDL's Texas Comprehensive Center. You may reach Jackie at jackie.burniske@sedl.org.

SEDL News

New Offices



Expanded Offices
Metairie, Louisiana
Ridgeland, Mississippi

New Offices
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Lutz, Florida

Existing Offices
Smyrna, Georgia
Elgin, South Carolina
Killen, Alabama
Austin, Texas

New Offices in the Southeast

SEDL recently expanded its offices in Metairie, Louisiana, and Ridgeland, Mississippi, and added offices in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Lutz, Florida. These improvements complement the current offices in Smyrna, Georgia; Elgin, South Carolina; and Killen, Alabama; and SEDL's headquarters in Austin, Texas.

“With the addition of new staff and an increased scope of work, adding offices and expanding other offices was necessary,” says SEDL program manager Robin Jarvis. “The work for the Southeast Comprehensive Center has increased along with work for SEDL’s Center for Professional Learning. Adding offices addressed the needs of our state departments of education and other educators,” explains Jarvis.

New Products



A Toolkit for Title I Parental Involvement

www.sedl.org/connections/toolkit

Title I is a set of programs administered by the U.S. Department of Education to address the needs of schools and school districts with a high percentage of students from low-income families. Title I, Part A includes parental involvement provisions that stress shared accountability between schools and parents for high student achievement, local development of parental involvement plans, and parent education in improving their child’s academic achievement.

A Toolkit for Title I Parental Involvement is designed to help schools receiving Title I funds meet these parental involvement provisions. The toolkit was developed by SEDL’s National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools and includes resources for working with parents of English language learners and increasing their involvement in their students’ education.



Afterschool Research Briefs

www.sedl.org/afterschool/resources/rb.html

SEDL’s Afterschool Research Consortium (ARC) brought together SEDL researchers, key staff from afterschool research projects, and experts in the field to discuss and share accomplishments, challenges, and solutions that arose during completion of three randomized controlled trials SEDL was overseeing on the impact of specific afterschool curricula. The ARC developed papers and presentations documenting the lessons learned to advance the effective use of rigorous experimental research approaches in applied afterschool settings. Recently, the ARC released a three-part series of research briefs on randomized controlled trials in afterschool settings:

- *Implementing Randomized Controlled Trial Studies in Afterschool Settings: The State of the Field*
- *Key Issues and Strategies for Recruitment and Implementation in Large-Scale Randomized Controlled Trial Studies in Afterschool Settings*
- *The National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning Randomized Controlled Trial Studies of Promising Afterschool Programs: Summary of Findings*

New Projects

Autism Partnership

www.autism.sedl.org

SEDL's Disability Research to Practice (DRP) work group has formed a partnership with the University of Central Florida Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (UCF-CARD). The partnership is focusing on research investigating effective strategies to support individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in obtaining and maintaining employment. The research will identify best-practice examples from effective local providers of employment-related services for persons with ASD. Statewide vocational rehabilitation service systems are key audiences for the research findings, which will enable them to more effectively serve persons with ASD. The research will also inform personal and employer supports and accommodations that facilitate successful employment for people with ASD. Ultimately, the research may inform family members and other advocates about effective services and contact people for helping individuals with ASD find employment.

SEDL and UCF-CARD staff will conduct two systematic reviews; implement a rigorous process of identifying and validating vocational rehabilitation best practices; study the university-based statewide network of CARD centers in Florida; and conduct case studies of individuals with ASD, their families, and employers. As the research progresses, SEDL staff will disseminate the findings through Web-based resources, webcasts, and subscriber e-lists.

Knowledge Translation for Technology Transfer

<http://kt4tt.buffalo.edu>

The Center on Knowledge Translation for Technology Transfer (KT4TT), located at the State University of New York at Buffalo, strives to increase technology transfer results to improve the quality of life for persons with disabilities. The Center on KT4TT and SEDL are participating in a project that will focus on three key outcomes: improved understanding of the barriers preventing successful knowledge translation for technology transfer and ways to overcome the barriers; advanced knowledge of best models, methods, and measures of knowledge translation and technology transfer for achieving outcomes; and increased utilization of these validated best practices by technology-oriented grantees (funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research). SEDL's DRP work group is serving in an advisory capacity and supporting dissemination efforts through webcasts, technical briefs, and a community of practice.

MyMoon Program Evaluation

www.lpi.usra.edu/mymoon

In partnership with the Lunar Planetary Institute, SEDL's Research and Evaluation work group is evaluating a new educational portal, MyMoon: The Public's Portal to Lunar Science Exploration Through New Media. The portal will provide science and lunar content, media exhibits, and opportunities for the public to interact with lunar scientists and experts. The work is funded through the Research Opportunities in Space and Earth Sciences-2008 (ROSES-2008) program at NASA's Education & Public Outreach for Earth & Space Science.



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Imagining the Possibilities: SEDL Begins
National Study of Well-Known Reading Program
PAGE 3

Uncharted Territory: Using Tiered Intervention
to Improve High School Performance
PAGE 5

Research Update: School Turnarounds
PAGE 13

Recovery 101: Stimulus for School Improvement
PAGE 16

Creating a Community of Professional Learners:
An Inside View
PAGE 20

Building Bright Futures for Preschoolers
in Madison Parish
PAGE 26

Helping Texas Teachers Support
English Language Learners
PAGE 30

SEDL News
PAGE 34

