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Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Teachers and Students

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education's Bureau of Learner Strategies and Supports

Note to Readers

This is a combined November-December issue. Your next issue will come out right after the New Year. In the meantime, enjoy your upcoming winter break. You've worked hard, and you deserve some down time. Let us be the very first to say, See you in 2013!

Increased learning time = significant results

Based on new research, we now know that teaching students how to read must continue throughout a student's school career. But when a student enters high school effectively unable to read at even a basic level, that puts educators in a tough spot: Do you run a series of interventions and forge on with skill development and hope for the best?

Until a couple years ago, that answer was a reluctant "yes" at Benton County Community School District in east-central Iowa. But that was before the district teamed up with Grant Wood AEA and the Iowa Department of Education to create a new approach: They dramatically increased reading time. And they were astounded by the impressive results.

"We saw unbelievable data growth across the board," said Benton's special education director and principal Ryan Junge. "We didn't have a single kid in which it wasn't working."

The emphasis on reading was simple, Ryan said.

"Reading is used in everything," he said. "So if they struggle with reading, they will struggle with everything."

All students with reading goals on their IEPs are now assessed for specific instructional needs, and highly focused individualized plans are created. It required a paradigm shift among the staff.

"In the past, the role of the special education teacher – especially at the secondary level – was split between providing interventions on the students' IEP goals, and helping their students pass their classes and earn graduation credits," said Grant Wood's Deanna Thursby. "Unfortunately, those roles were not in balance and the scale tipped more toward the second role. We have provided the teachers with the training about high-quality reading instruction, the diagnostic tools to make better decisions, and the research-based intervention materials they need to provide instruction. My teachers now have the tools to teach reading, the time to teach reading, and they believe they can teach reading."

The change wasn't done overnight.

The entire high school team, from educators to administrators to counselors, worked together to create block times into the existing school day for reading instruction. Then, students were put into groups of no more than five, and instruction was matched to their skill level and needs. The amount of time, and number of sessions, vary depending on the individual's needs. Some specifics:

- The specially designed reading intervention time is in addition to the language arts time that these high school students receive.
- Educators believe the block schedule actually helps them with finding additional time. It allows for instruction on Iowa Core standards and skill instruction.
- In order for teachers to have the skills to identify a student's needs and what instruction to provide, special education teachers are involved in research-based professional development that is focused on improving the literacy outcomes for students with reading disabilities.
- Teachers have received focused professional development on reading materials and strategies that are designed with struggling adolescent readers in mind.

To ensure success, the commitment has got to be strong.

"This is top-down," Ryan said. "The superintendent has to want to do this, and let every administrator know this isn't optional."

Teacher Michelle Smith is confident she's reaching each and every one of her students.

"My job is harder, in some respects, because some of the kids feel that this new program is foreign to them," she said. "They haven't received this kind of instruction in years.

"But my job also is easier because I know what do to day to day – it's a great planning component."

The effects go far beyond improved reading comprehension.

"This has not only increased their comprehension, but it's built their confidence," Michelle said. "One student told me, 'I'm getting better.' And even though you may encounter some push back from the students initially, you know they do appreciate it because you haven't given up on them. And they see the results themselves."

Intensifying instruction

Last month, we explored differentiating instruction to ensure we are meeting the needs of each child. We conclude the series in this issue, which was researched and written by Dr. Sharon Vaughn of the University of Texas at Austin.

Increasing learning time is one of the most important ways to intensify academic interventions in areas such as reading (Torgesen, 2000). Of course, time is a precious commodity in schools, so deciding how to best increase intervention time is essential. Educators can increase intervention time in several ways.

First, one can increase the frequency of intervention. For example, an intervention provided five days a week may be more intensive than an intervention provided three days a week. Educators can also increase the frequency of intervention by providing more than one session of intervention per day. For example, with younger students (kindergarten, first grade), shorter-duration interventions several times a day can better capitalize on young students' attention and interest.

Second, one can increase the length of the instructional sessions. If a student currently receives 20 minutes of instruction per intervention session, providing 40 minutes may intensify the intervention if student engagement remains high. Increasing both the frequency of intervention and/or the length of the instructional sessions allows struggling students to receive additional, targeted instruction and increased opportunities for practice with feedback.

For students who have not responded sufficiently to previous interventions, longer and/or more frequent instructional intervention sessions might accelerate learning. Make decisions about learning time based on each student's circumstances:

- How far the student's achievement level is below grade-level expectations;
- The length and frequency of the previous interventions; and
- The complexity of the learning tasks at hand (for example, letter naming in kindergarten is less cognitively complex than comprehension of a third grade science textbook).

Intensive interventions vary in time (30 to 120 minutes) and frequency (three times per week to two times per day). If scheduling or student engagement is a concern, a teacher might increase intervention time with two shorter sessions per day rather than one long session.

NOTE: Intervention time is increased to accelerate learning and allow for more instruction, rather than the same amount of instruction in a longer period of time. When increasing the frequency, length of sessions, and/or duration of intervention, use the additional instructional time to accelerate student learning by:

- Teaching additional skills and strategies;
- Providing additional practice opportunities with feedback;
- Delivering more explicit, systematic, (step-by-step) instruction; and
- Monitoring student progress in the interventions to ensure that the additional learning time increases student mastery of skills.

Dr. Sharon Vaughn of the University of Texas at Austin is a nationally recognized special education expert. She is the H.E.Hartfelder/Southland Corp Regents Chair of Human Development and executive director of the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk at The University of Texas at Austin.

She is the author of more than 10 books and over 100 articles that address issues related to research and practice with learning problems.

A note from the author

I think you do such a terrific job with this newsletter. It is such an attractive and readable document. I'm proud to be a small part of it.

Small groups can make the difference

Although increasing instructional time helps some struggling students make academic gains, one of the most practical methods for intensifying intervention for highly at-risk students is providing small-group instruction. Instruction in smaller groups can improve student outcomes. However, small group instruction raises logistical concerns for schools, such as securing adequate resources (e.g., interventionists, instructional specialists, space, materials), so being mindful of the most efficient and cost-effective ways to implement small-group instruction is of the utmost importance.

Research has not found one ideal intervention group size that increases outcomes for all or most students. The literature suggests that small groups of two to four students or one-on-one instruction may provide the most intensive intervention and that some students make sufficient progress in larger groups.

Congratulations!

Southeast Polk Community School District's Willowbrook Elementary has been named the best school in the state in bridging the education gap between students on IEPs and those who are not. Willowbrook will be honored in Des Moines Nov. 15 during the Breaking Barriers: Teaching and Learning Awards sponsored by the State Board of Education.

New criteria and a vetting process were launched this fall to determine the winner. Math and reading data were examined at all schools statewide to determine the highest proficiency rates. In addition, the top schools needed to be able to clearly describe specific, evidence-based strategies that created these results.

Subsequent interviews with the principals revealed commonalities among the top schools: the use of evidence-based practices, a staffwide commitment to high standards, unwavering top-down support, high expectations and substantial teacher collaboration.

Iowa Students with Autism: Who are they, how are they served, and are they achieving?

A new report marks the first comprehensive look at the prevalence of autism among students in Iowa's public schools. Findings include student demographics, communities where students with autism are enrolled in public schools, the extent to which students with autism are included with nondisabled peers, services provided to students, Individualized Education Program goals for a sample of students, and student achievement on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. You can find the report at http://www.educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2730.