

DCN FORUM

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The legal mandates to use scientifically research-based reading instruction and interventions means that both beginning and veteran special educators need to be knowledgeable of a range of instructional approaches and strategies. Laura A. Denton, DCN Education Specialist, authored this Spring issue of the DCN FORUM, addressing key focus areas for reading instruction. Look for our Fall issue to continue Laura's discussion and recommendations.

Meeting the Challenge: A Focus on Reading

Improvement of reading skills is the predominant goal for most students with a specific learning disability or a speech-language impairment. The National Reading Panel identified five key areas of focus for reading instruction:

- Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension

These apply to all effective reading instruction, yet for the special needs and "at risk" students educators must frequently look deeper. What can the special educator do to move beyond the research-based instructional programs that are designed for a broad range of learners?

Phonemic Awareness (PA): A limited set of sounds (44 in English) combines and recombines to form a seemingly unlimited variety of words. PA is such a critical foundation for reading and spelling that it must always be investigated as a potential cause of reading difficulty. For some, these skills develop almost effortlessly; yet, for others it is a major stumbling block. PA continues to grow through phonics and reading. It is well worth finding a brief screening tool for the areas of rhyme, segmentation and blending. Tips:

- Keep in mind that PA is not an end in itself but the means to becoming a reader.
- Research has demonstrated that about 18-24 hours targeted instruction can meet the needs of the struggling student.
- Be alert to how sounds are pronounced. Sounds must be clipped, without an added vowel sound on the end. The added vowel will interfere with sound blending work later. The sound is short and sharp /b/, not "buh".
- Demonstration and drill can be extended with poems and chants, stories and songs.

Phonics: Linking the sound system to the letters and letter patterns within written words. All currently adopted reading programs address this area, yet special needs students often require more than they provide. Tips for improving phonics instruction:

- Solidify skills. Develop student mastery with a limited set of letter-sounds before moving on.
- Work initially with sounds that are distinctly different.
- Practice the same sounds for both reading and spelling - these are reciprocal processes.
- Provide meaningful contexts to increase motivation. Learning these skills serves a communicative purpose: reading the messages of others and conveying our ideas to persons who are not present.

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Fluency: Smooth and automatic reading is the hallmark of fluency. What fluency entails varies by the student's reading proficiency. Consider where a student's skills are and work to move them to the next level: individual letters (sound blending); letter patterns (vowel teams, blends, digraphs, common endings); whole words; phrases; sentences (including attention to punctuation); and ultimately, the appropriate stress and intonation of smooth and meaningful passage reading. Fluency tips:

- Fluency is about pace, not speed.
- Students with slow retrieval speed may never reach "grade level" standards. Judge them by their own improvement. When they level off at a smooth pace, begin work at the next higher text level.
- Repeated readings are the single most effective practice to increase fluency. Be creative about establishing a purpose for re-reading the same text. Prepare for a performance, practice with tapes, make recordings, read for peers and lower-grade students.
- Drill of words and phrases can help, but limit this isolated skills work. It doesn't always carry over to real reading.

Vocabulary and Comprehension: These inter-related areas support reading and are outcomes of reading. Check the DCN Forum Fall 2007 issue for a discussion of these last two key areas of the National Reading Panel report.

Resources

National Institute for Literacy. Put Reading First
www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading_first1.html

National Center for Learning Disabilities. Effective Reading Instruction in the Classroom. Grades K-8
www.nclid.org

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities
www.nichcy.org/resources/lieracy2.asp

Idonline. National Joint Commission on Learning Disabilities
www.idonline.org/indepth/reading

International Reading Association
www.reading.org

Laura Denton brings dual specializations in reading and learning disabilities to her DCN roles of assessor, training presenter, and consultant for curriculum and instruction. Laura applies her many years of experience in general and special education to provide comprehensive and practical recommendations for teachers of struggling learners.