



SUMMARY

Because students enter kindergarten in varying states of readiness, meeting the national challenge that every child read by the end of third grade is no easy task for primary teachers. Here, one classroom professional offers a host of proven strategies to help meet this goal.

Kristin Dale has taught for 18 years, 14 of them at Wingdale Elementary School in Dutchess County, where she teaches first grade. She is an instructor for NYSUT's Education & Learning Trust, focusing on the master's literacy program. A member of the Dover-Wingdale Teachers Association, she is a building representative and served as a member of the union's contract negotiating team. She also consults in the area of reading comprehension, struggling readers and guided reading.

Early Literacy in School: Getting off on the Right Foot

Most five-year-olds

in New York state arrive in kindergarten with a palpable excitement about learning to read. They see this task not as work but as an exciting learning experience; the key to participating in the grownup world of print. However, these young learners arrive in our schools with a wide range of reading readiness and motivation. Some know and understand sounds, letters and words from television, computer programs or home play and instruction. Some have no concept of the interrelatedness of sounds and symbols. Some have been read to every night from birth and some have been deprived of this language-building experience because their parents or caregivers cannot read, are not home at bedtime or do not realize its critical importance.

These factors make the national challenge of NCLB's Reading First — that every child read by the end of third grade — a monumental challenge for every teacher of young children.

What, then, can we do in schools to increase the likelihood that all children will achieve literacy by the end of third grade? What is it, exactly, that we expect them to be able to do?

What can we do as educators to enhance their abilities?

This we can say with certainty: If a child in a modern society like ours does not learn to read, he doesn't make it in life (McPike, 1995). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has created a goal that every healthy child born in the 21st century should be reading at or above the basic level by age 9. When it comes to reading, the months of first grade are the most important in a child's learning career.

Primary children need explicit, systematic instruction in phonics and lots of exposures to rich literature in both fiction and nonfiction genres. Attention to meaning and comprehension strategies is essential right from the start. Decoding and comprehension strategies should be taught at

Reading First FAST Facts

Grant from NCLB:

New York received \$443,135,000 from 2004-08

Participants:

Number of districts: 98
Number of schools impacted: 308
Number of teachers impacted: 10,000
Number of students impacted: 78,000

by Kristin Dale
Dover-Wingdale Teachers Association

the same time. We need to teach children that reading is thinking guided by print right from the beginning of their instruction (Calkins, 2001). This would help alleviate the comprehension gap many students encounter in upper elementary grades. In writing, conventional spelling should be developed through focused instruction and practice. One of the best ways to do this is with the use of word walls in the primary classroom (Wagstaff, 1998). Primary students should be able to correctly read and spell previously studied words.

Learning to monitor their own comprehension is one of the major tasks for beginning readers. As readers are exposed to a variety of reading materials and experiences, they begin to develop a self-extending system of autonomy and regulation. This self-awareness is critical for achieving reading comprehension success. Proficient readers are successful when given instruction and modeling in fluency. An emergent reader becomes a fluent reader when he is engaged in reading a just right text and has multiple opportunities to feel what it is like to read smoothly and with fluency; young students and other less fluent

readers may not always know what fluent reading should be like (Rasinski, 1989). Support during the process of reading, in a guided reading group, allows the teacher to give learners direct instruction and feedback while the readers are engaged in the process of reading. Children need access to a large supply of books of appropriate difficulty. This means books they can read fluently while also understanding the story or information (Allington, 1998).

Research shows that parent involvement, especially in activities that directly support their children's school success, is correlated with reading achievement (Learning First Alliance). Reading aloud to a child is the single most beneficial language-building task parents or caregivers can engage in with their child. Reading aloud to a child is a critical activity in helping a child gain the knowledge and language skills that will enable good comprehension strategies later on. Benefits from reading aloud to children include: developing background knowledge about a variety of topics, building vocabulary, becoming familiar with rich language patterns,

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METHODOLOGY

Parents Helping Their Kids to Read

The 1,000 Book Project was started by two teachers in the Albany suburb of Bethlehem with a goal that parents read 1,000 books to their children by the age of 6. The teachers filled 100 sturdy bags with 10 books each and let parents sign out the bags free for two weeks at a time.

The concept has since spread to communities across the state. One community with a large Latino population makes bags of dual-language books available, exposing Spanish-speaking parents to English as they provide their children exposure to Spanish.



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developing familiarity with story grammar, acquiring familiarity with the reading process and identifying reading as a pleasurable activity (Hall & Moats, 2000). Teachers can provide parents with opportunities to visit the classroom and read aloud to the students as well. This helps model for students how adults live their lives as readers, enhances the home-school connection and helps to continually foster a love and joy for reading.

The most effective approach in helping children with reading difficulties is prevention. Diverse learners face the tyranny of time on a daily basis in which the educational clock is ticking while they remain at risk of falling farther and farther behind in their schooling (Kameenui, 1993). Children who are behind in language development are in a never-ending battle to catch up with their peers. This delay may be caused by second language learning issues, poverty, developmental delay or disability. The probability that a child will remain a poor reader at the end of fourth grade if the child was a poor reader at the end of first grade is 0.88 (Juel, 1988). The research of Stanovich (1986) refers to this cycle as the Matthew Effect — the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Those who are able to read do so more often. As a result, their schema, vocabulary, strategies and skills continue to grow and improve. Those who do not read well avoid the task and the gap between the

rich, successful readers and the poor, unsuccessful readers continues to grow. Children who play with language and writing are more likely and eager to learn.

Phonemic awareness has a strong and direct relationship to the success of a beginning reader; it is both a prerequisite to and consequence of learning to read (Yopp, 2000). As an alphabetic orthography, English does not have a one-to-one correspondence between all of the speech sounds and letters. This relationship between written symbols, which we know as letters, and sounds, makes it difficult to learn to read our language. The awareness that our speech stream consists of a sequence of smaller units, known as phonemes, and the ability to manipulate those phonemes, is called phonemic awareness. Extensive research has indicated the importance of phonemic awareness as a prerequisite for understanding the alphabetic principle, namely that letters stand for the sounds in spoken words (Griffith & Olson 1992). As a result, it is essential that our classroom instruction builds on that understanding. We need to build on the language foundation our children come to us with and teach reading from speech to print. The auditory manipulation of sounds, through rhyming, blending and segmenting of sounds, capitalizes on this foundation and sets the reader up for future success.

Richard Allington states, “It is the quality of the teacher, not variation in curriculum materials that is identified as the critical factor in effective instruction.” He goes on to state, “Expert teachers produce more readers than other teachers, regardless of the curriculum materials used” (Allington, 1998). As classroom teachers, it is essential for our students’ success that we continue to develop as professionals. We must know what is best for the learning of our students and continually learn and improve as practitioners of reading. Young children learn to read when immersed in classrooms rich with language, music, word play and poetry. They need exposure to large volumes of rich, beautiful literature from both fiction and nonfiction genres. It is imperative that children spend the greatest portion of their reading instruction actually engaged in the process of reading. Children need to have books in their hands to read that are at their just-right instructional level. If engaged in the process of strategy instruction, young readers benefit from reading books at their independent level so as not to focus on decoding and free up their minds to focus on mastering the reading strategy.

During the primary years of education, young children learn the prerequisite reading readiness skills to set them up for a lifetime of reading and writing success. For young readers, it is not just about mapping sounds to print, decoding or thinking aloud. We must teach our children the joy and love of reading as we model for them how we live our

lives with books. Modeling the exciting journeys and travels we take as readers who understand and connect with characters is the best way to show our emergent readers what it is all about: Reading is thinking guided by print!

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