

School Improvement Process Targets Increasing Reading Proficiency

Onward to Excellence—the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory’s nationally known school improvement process—has taken on a new target. Now called OTE II, the process is helping schools ensure that all students become proficient readers—especially at the secondary level.

OTE II’s Focus on Reading provides comprehensive training and ongoing support to middle and high schools to significantly boost the number of students who measure up to state reading standards. “With the original OTE II model, it takes a considerable amount of time to narrow down specific goals during the school improvement process,” says Deborah Davis, manager of NWREL’s Improving School Systems Program. “With Focus on Reading, schools struggling with low rates of reading proficiency can get right to work on an area they know requires immediate schoolwide attention.”

A unique feature of Focus on Reading, says Davis, “is the coherent weaving together of all the aspects that schools face—the schedule, tutorial programs, materials, and content instruction—into an approach designed to help struggling readers reach the level of proficiency required to comprehend the content.”

The teaching and learning inventory (TALI) is another key feature that distinguishes Focus on Reading from one-size-fits-all reading programs. During the intensive, multiday inventory, a team of reading and school reform experts observe classrooms of different levels and disciplines; conduct peer focus groups with students, staff, and parents; and hold one-on-one interviews with teachers and administrators. All these activities go into forming a customized professional development program that recognizes the school’s strengths and weaknesses. Depending on the school’s needs, workshops might focus on using evidence-based practices to help students read in every content area, forming a schoolwide curricular focus, or making data-driven decisions.

NWREL literacy expert and TALI team member Maureen Carr summarizes the benefits of the inventory: “Whatever comes out of it shapes the rest of the program—what we recommend in terms of training and support.” During one recent TALI at a middle school, the team identified a critical strength that simply needed to be articulated. “The entire teaching staff echoed the ideal that improving literacy is everyone’s job,”

Carr notes. “But they lacked a schoolwide plan incorporating a set of reading strategies that would be used in every content area, in every classroom. Forming, implementing, and sustaining this plan is one way Focus on Reading could help this school.”

The team proposed that teachers from different grade levels and subject areas develop a set of reading strategies. To aid in the process, OTE II trainers helped organize and train professional learning teams to monitor, support, and sustain change.

A COMPANION GUIDE

Participants in the Focus on Reading process—and others interested in helping secondary school students—receive guidance and inspiration from NWREL’s *Improving Adolescent Reading: Findings From Research*. The book centers on six guiding questions that must be addressed to improve reading schoolwide:

1. What are the research-based instructional practices that help more students access required reading in content classrooms?
2. What types of additional support do struggling readers need?
3. How should assessments be used to determine appropriate instruction for students who struggle with reading?
4. How can the school organization and outreach to families reflect a coordinated effort to boost achievement of struggling readers?
5. What role does student motivation play in reading development for middle and high school students?
6. What are the most effective ways to provide middle and high school teachers with professional development related to adolescent reading?

In the book, each question is followed by research-based best practices, implications for schools, and teacher resources. To order a copy of *Improving Adolescent Reading: Findings From Research*, visit NWREL’s online product catalog (www.nwrel.org/comm/catalog/) or call 800-547-6339, ext. 519. To discuss bringing the Focus on Reading professional development program to your site, call Deborah Davis at 800-547-6339, ext. 644 or e-mail david@nwrel.org. ■

