
School Psychologists and Student Reading Achievement (Reading Rockets, 2005)

School psychologists play a critical role in the lives of children who are struggling to learn. More and more, for example, school psychologists are leaders in developing and carrying out the assessments and placements decisions that impact students from the beginning of their school careers. With your help, schools can reduce the number of students who lag behind grade level – and increase the number of successful readers.

Effective reading instruction in the early grades can prevent reading difficulties for many children who might otherwise be referred for remedial or special education programs. Research indicates that, today, 37 percent of our nation's fourth graders are performing below the "basic" level, meaning they cannot read well enough to understand a simple story or can barely read at all. We also know that more than two-thirds of high school students receiving special education are three or more grade levels behind in reading, and 20 percent are behind by five or more grade levels. Research shows that reading problems are much more difficult to remediate in later grades, even with the services of special education.

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, school psychologists are in an unprecedented position to significantly contribute to efforts to ensure that all children receive the most effective scientifically-based reading instruction possible. Below are some suggestions on how school psychologists can help more students become good readers.

- **Assess your knowledge of reading**

Consider what coursework you have had, your professional development activities, and how familiar you are with the latest research findings and recommendations regarding effective scientifically-based reading instruction. Consider pursuing professional development opportunities as needed through your district, through state and national professional associations, and through your local university.

- **Assess the needs in your schools and district**

If you have not already done so, become familiar with the actual curriculum materials and instructional techniques that are used in your schools and district. This is important because it will help to ensure that the recommendations you make for students are developmentally and grade appropriate, as well as evidence-based. It is also important to know what types of tiered interventions are available for at-risk readers and how decisions are made to assign students to different programs. Is your school a "Reading First" school? What training has been conducted? How is data used to make instructional decisions? Is progress monitoring used to provide frequent feedback? Once you have assessed these needs, it may become clear how you can best provide support.

- **Assess student needs**

School psychologists are in a great position to assist teachers with students who are struggling to learn to read. You have the background and skills needed to assist in selecting appropriate assessment methods to identify a child's level of reading performance. Be sure to familiarize yourself with research-based early assessment tools that have been proven to be effective.

- **Provide leadership**

School psychologists understand the structure of schools and have the ability to pull various district groups and resources together to benefit students. You can:

- Review published reading programs in the context of reading research to evaluate their technical validity and reliability.
- Serve as advisor to administrators and teachers as they select appropriate instructional programs and curriculum for use in the district.
- Provide or facilitate district-wide in-service training for teachers, other school psychologists, paraprofessionals, and administrators regarding selected programs.
- Contribute to or facilitate parent information sessions dealing with literacy.

- **Conduct in-service workshops for teachers**
 Many K-3 teachers received limited college instruction on how to effectively teach reading skills. You can present a series of one-hour sessions designed to explore the five elements of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Video modules available from Reading Rockets can be used as a starting point for providing in-depth information about research-based practices that focus on reading interventions. You can also recognize that assessment issues can be particularly challenging for teachers. Consider training teachers in how to use appropriate assessment tools to identify students who are struggling to learn to read. When teachers understand the importance of their contribution to assessment – and the benefits to students – they are often more willing to participate. In addition, you can help teachers adopt research-based, instructional practices to ensure student success.
- **Conduct joint workshops for parents and teachers**
 As a school psychologist, you can also bring teachers and parents together to focus on reading. School psychologists can provide a starting point for developing critical collaborative relationships to enhance student success. You can discuss how parents and teachers can work together to support students' development of reading skills. When you dispel the mystery of how children learn to read, parents are more likely to become willing partners in helping children with homework and volunteering in the classroom.
- **Conduct in-service workshops for administrators**
 Also focus on developing a collaborative relationship with school administrators in order to address literacy. Arrange with the superintendent to make a presentation to all district administrators to ensure that they are aware of the latest research and resources available in reading. Attend district administrators' meetings and assist in policy-making decisions that will affect all students in your district. The use of screening and progress-monitoring assessment tools is an area of particular confusion for many school administrators. They might value the input of a knowledgeable school psychologist.
- **Conduct in-service workshops for speech and language pathologists**
 Speech and language pathologists already have significant knowledge regarding the importance of language development and phonological processing. They are a natural resource that we often overlook. Develop collaborative relationships with these professionals, which will benefit many students. Speech and language pathologists are particularly interested in research-based assessment tools used to determine early intervention needs.
- **Facilitate cooperative activities with parent-teacher associations**
 School psychologists with a strong background in reading can facilitate workshops for parents. Parents need to know what is expected of their children and what measures are used to determine if their children are meeting those expectations. Provide opportunities for discussion and hand out print materials to parents so that they have something to refer to at home.
- **Understand the design and implementation of research**
 You can also support data-driven assessment and progress monitoring. Since school psychologists are trained in research methods, you are a logical choice to direct efforts to track the implementation and effectiveness of research-based interventions.
- **Consult with teachers**
 Current research indicates that improved academic outcomes result from effective classroom management, positive teacher-student interactions, and increased academic time in the classroom. School psychologists can assist teachers in designing intervention plans that will lead to student success. You are in a position to demonstrate the links between the assessment data that teachers are required to gather, the selection of appropriate interventions, and the evaluation of intervention effectiveness.