

Educators, parents, and national leaders recognize that the limited reading skills of many children across our nation must be addressed systematically and cost effectively. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that approximately 40 percent of students cannot read at a basic level. When considering subgroups of students, almost 70 percent of low-income fourth-grade students, and almost 50 percent of students living in urban areas cannot read at a basic level. Performance trends over a 10-year period show no progress for average-performing readers and less progress for the lowest-performing readers (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Poor reading skills, as a nationwide problem, affect special education because reading difficulties are a manifestation of many types of disabilities. It is widely believed that many children are found eligible for special education services due to their lack of reading skills. Special education providers must share the responsibility for improved reading skills for all students. Therefore, it is essential for special education providers to participate in nationwide initiatives to improve reading instruction.

Scientifically Based Reading Research. Research indicates that prevention of reading problems is significantly more cost efficient than remediation. Therefore, it is essential to implement early, effective reading instruction and programs (Doherty, 2002). The Reading First program emphasizes the implementation of scientifically based reading research (SBRR) programs, beginning with systematic, explicit reading instruction in kindergarten.

High-Quality, Professional Development. States must provide professional development activities aligned with Reading First and coordinate these activities with other federal, state or locally funded activities. The State Reading First program must ensure that teachers can teach according to SBRR and effectively screen, identify and overcome reading barriers facing students. The professional development activities should have (a) a supportive context with strong state and local leadership, (b) strong content grounded in research, and (c) an effective implementation process that will include practices that reduce referrals for special education services.

The Special Educator and Reading First

The Reading First Initiative

Reading First. Reading First is a focused effort to improve reading skills of students in kindergarten through third grade. Reading First is authorized under Title 1, Part B, Subpart 1 of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* as a nationwide effort to improve reading skills of students in kindergarten through grade three. Utah applied for and was awarded Reading First funds for up to six years.

Statewide Alignment With Reading First. In Utah, districts have submitted competitive proposals to receive Reading First funds. These funds are substantive and must equal or exceed the present Title 1 funding for the building. Not all districts received Reading First funds. As a condition of receiving Reading First funds, *all* Utah districts will be required to align with the curricular and pedagogical priorities of Reading First.

Program Evaluation and Reporting. States receiving Reading First funds must provide annual implementation reports that include achievement gains and program effectiveness reports. The Reading First program at the state and building levels must provide findings on a periodic basis. Among other factors, building leaders must document *the impact of the Reading First program on students' referral to, and eligibility for, special education services.*



Reading First requires the use of valid and reliable screening, diagnostic, progress monitoring and classroom-based reading assessments to ensure that students receive appropriate reading instruction. In the Reading First classroom, supplemental programs are required to support the diagnostic assessment and monitoring tools. These supplemental programs are required in addition to a comprehensive or basal program.

Reading Programs. Reading First requires implementation of reading programs with a coherent design in accord with SBRR. Programs should include explicit instructional strategies, coordinated instructional sequences, ample practice opportunities, aligned student materials, and an uninterrupted block of time (at least 90 minutes) each instructional day. Reading First requires both **comprehensive and supplemental** programs. A comprehensive program includes five core components of reading instruction. A supplemental program provides additional instruction in one or more areas of reading. **Supplemental** programs must be coordinated with a core comprehensive program and effectively address the needs of students performing well below grade level. These supplemental materials must demonstrate their effectiveness in closing the achievement gap with at-risk individuals and groups.



Essential Components of Reading Instruction

All reading programs funded through Reading First must be based on SBRR and emphasize the following five essential components of reading instruction.

- 1. Phonemic Awareness.** The ability to focus on and manipulate smallest units of sound in spoken language.
- 2. Phonics.** The relationship between the letter symbols of written language and the sounds (phonemes) of spoken language.
- 3. Vocabulary Development.** The stored information about the meaning and pronunciation of words.
- 4. Reading Fluency.** The ability to read accurately, quickly, and with expression.
- 5. Reading Comprehension.** The ability to understand or gain meaning from text.

Accountability

Reading First requires accountability for program effectiveness and improved reading achievement in K-3 students. While many states currently do not begin statewide accountability testing until the third grade, it is essential to implement reading program accountability measures prior to the third grade to ensure students receive preventative, appropriate, reading instruction. For special educators, this will be the first time a major national reading initiative will be required to include: (a) intervention and assessment programs for students and special education, and (b) assess the impact on special education students as a part of the accountability requirements.

Leadership Roles

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) recommends:

Special education providers must be involved in these nationwide Reading First efforts to improve reading skills. One way for special educators to be involved is to be an active part of the state Reading Leadership Team required by Reading First. A state's special education department can also take the lead in improving reading instruction and work with the general education field and institutions of higher education.

Special educators must provide direct and assertive advocacy to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are represented in the building, district, and state decisions required under Reading First practices. Too often special education involvement begins with the referral for special education services to address reading failure. The research is clear: **Most of these referrals could be prevented with more effective beginning reading instruction (Doherty, 2002).**

References available upon request from the Utah Personnel Development Center

