

# Closing the Gap in 3rd Grade Reading Levels

## Lessons from Three Inner City Elementary Schools

By Rhonda H. Lauer

For years, we have known that children who read at grade level by 3rd grade are more likely to graduate from high school. High school graduates, in turn, are more likely to pursue further education and be employed, with higher incomes and better health, than their peers who drop out. But many of the nation's minority and disadvantaged children fail to achieve early academic success because, all too often, they are already behind when they start kindergarten. The deficit is too vast to overcome in just a few years.

As a lifelong educator, I cannot accept that some children's destinies are set by age 9. In 2002, the organization I lead, Foundations, began working with the Philadelphia school district in three urban elementary schools where 98 percent of the students are African-American and living in poverty. At the time, these were among Philadelphia's lowest-performing schools. Since then, the percentage of 3rd graders meeting targets for reading in these schools has increased, from 33.4 percent in 2002 to 44.4 percent in 2007, catching them up to their counterparts at other district schools.

How have we narrowed the gap and, more importantly, how can we narrow it even more? Here are seven suggestions:

- **Establish a quality instructional program.** All three schools follow the Philadelphia district's core curriculum, which was implemented in 2003. Adhering to a course of study that is consistent across schools is vital, because more than a third of Philadelphia schoolchildren change schools each year. Guided reading is one staple of the core curriculum. Each day, teachers work with small groups of students, observing, guiding, and encouraging them as they read texts matched to their level. Another key element in our schools is Systematic Instruction in Phoneme Awareness, Phonics, and

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Sight Words, or SIPPS, a phonics-awareness program that teachers in the early grades use for small-group instruction several times a week.

- **Take advantage of the modern child's affinity for technology.** A comprehensive survey by the National Center for Education Statistics found that in 2003, 66 percent of children in nursery school were computer users, as were 80 percent of those in kindergarten. Although many parents and educators bemoan such statistics, we know that children who use technology to read are more often those who read every day. Beginning in 2nd grade, all our schools use a computer-assisted tutorial, SuccessMaker, to supplement traditional reading instruction. It offers standards-based lessons focusing on word identification, reading comprehension, and vocabulary building. Students progress at their own pace, with sessions tailored to their needs. One school also uses in grades K-2 the LeapPad program, a multisensory technology and learning system that creates individual learning paths for each child based on reading ability.

- **Use data as a strategy to drive instruction, not merely as a record-keeping device.** Each of our three schools houses a dedicated data room where walls are lined with easy-to-read charts and graphs depicting reading levels for each grade, class, and student. Upon entering these rooms, teachers and administrators can see—in color-coded reality—the overall challenges facing them, as well as which students require early intervention and intensive reading assistance.

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• ***Provide extra support for the teachers and caregivers of disadvantaged youths.*** Many students in our schools are being raised by single parents or grandparents who may not be able to make education a top priority. At our schools, literacy workshops, monthly parent meetings, home and school associations, and numerous other special events offer families extra encouragement to participate in their children’s education.

Teachers of disadvantaged youths need a boost as well. Each of our elementary schools has a school-based teacher-leader focused on literacy who, in turn, is supported by a literacy consultant. These consultants do whatever it takes to promote reading achievement: assist in classrooms, model lessons, coach teachers, facilitate professional development, or other tasks.

• ***Engage the entire community.*** Underserved youths require extra attention not only from their schools, but also from their communities. In our Philadelphia schools, older adults trained to help struggling readers work in classrooms and provide one-on-one reading instruction throughout the year. Neighborhood churches and community centers also sponsor ongoing tutoring sessions that focus on fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary building.

• ***Start early.*** We must intervene earlier in children’s lives, before they enter school, when their brains are growing the fastest. We must provide them with quality preschools, proper nutrition, and regular checkups. One of the Philadelphia schools houses an on-site day-care center as well as a preschool, so that local children can enter kindergarten healthy, eager, and ready to learn. Many more such programs are needed.

• ***Make school fun again.*** Our schools use a variety of initiatives to help students enjoy learning, and reading in particular. On “Pajama Read Night” in the fall, children and their parents return to school in the

evening dressed in pajamas, with pillows and stuffed animals, to read together and enjoy milk and cookies. The “One Book, One School” program helps maintain excitement for reading during the final month of school, when energy and enthusiasm often lag. Every child in the school receives a copy of the same title—in pop-up form for kindergartners, and early readers or novels for older children. Teachers incorporate the text and its themes into lessons, and the school sponsors related field trips, parades, and fairs. Students at all three elementary schools also participate in an annual spelling bee.

**T**he students in our three elementary schools have made great progress, but many enter kindergarten at such a disadvantage that even the best programs and the most motivated teachers cannot catch them up. To make a greater impact, we need to reach children earlier and engage a variety of resources to prepare them mentally and physically for school. Once they arrive, we must provide them with data-driven, literacy-focused programs that employ technology and community supports.

We also need to make school fun for them, so that they have something to look forward to each day. With today’s emphasis on testing, many inner-city schools cannot devote time to art, music, and gym, even though children at these schools are the ones who need the biggest incentive to come to school. If we do not restore the fun to learning, they will view school only as work. And some, particularly struggling readers with inadequate family supports, may decide to skip it altogether.

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