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Reading First and Special Education: Examples of State-Level Collaboration

by Eve Müller

INTRODUCTION

Reading First addresses a critical need by providing high quality reading instruction to public school students throughout the nation. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 31% of fourth graders are at or above the proficient level in reading (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). Evidence suggests that scientifically based reading instruction can help young readers succeed and the Reading First program focuses on improving literacy instruction for K-3 students.

Reading First is intended to serve *all* students and a number of states have recognized that Reading First and special education can benefit from working together to meet the goal of improving literacy skills for students both with and without disabilities. The purpose of this study is to describe the collaborative relationship between Reading First and special education in six states. Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) completed this study as part of its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

ABOUT READING FIRST

In 1997, Congress convened a National Reading Panel (NRP) to guide the development of policy relating to literacy instruction (Antunez, 2002). In 2000, the NRP published its recommendations and it was from this report that the Reading First provisions in Title I of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) were created (Antunez, 2002). Reading First provides funding to states to support their implementation of scientifically based reading programs that include explicit instruction in the following five components: phonemic awareness; phonics; vocabulary development; reading fluency, including oral reading skills; and reading comprehension [Title I, Section 1208(3)]. State education agencies (SEAs) must apply to the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in order to receive Reading First funds and the ED distributes funds using a formula based on the number of children living below the poverty line within each state. SEAs may use up to 20% of their Reading First grant money to support statewide professional development and technical assistance. The remaining 80% must be

competitively sub-granted to eligible local education agencies (LEAs) to establish scientifically based reading programs in schools with the greatest need for improved academic outcomes. Reading First also mandates that participating schools be held accountable for ensuring that all students are able to read by third grade.¹ SEAs and LEAs must report data each year on students' reading proficiency and continued Reading First funding is tied to student outcomes.

DATA COLLECTION

In collaboration with OSEP, Project Forum identified 16 states that included collaboration with Reading First as a goal in their state improvement grants (SIGs) or state personnel development grants (SPDGs). Project Forum then selected six states for follow-up interviews in an effort to capture both geographical diversity and a variety of approaches to collaboration. The states included *Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Montana* and *Tennessee*. In most cases, interviewees included both special education and Reading First representatives. Interviews took place during March and April of 2007. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Atlas.ti, a software program designed to aid in the analysis of qualitative data. Results are reported in the following section.

RESULTS

Background

Three of the six states interviewed (*Indiana, Alabama, Montana*) reported that prior to Reading First, some type of state-level collaboration already existed between general education and special education related to reading instruction, though mostly informally. The other three states reported that no collaboration existed prior to Reading First.

Since Reading First began only recently, collaboration between special education and Reading First is a relatively new phenomenon. Most of the six states interviewed reported receiving their Reading First grants in 2003; receiving their SIG/SPDG grants between 2000 and 2005; and initiating collaboration between Reading First and special education between 2003 and 2005. Four states interviewed (*Alabama, Illinois, Montana, Tennessee*) reported that plans for collaboration between Reading First and special education were written into their SIG/SPDG proposals, and that collaboration was therefore "formal," although several noted that their proposals did not include details as to how collaboration would take place.

Three states reported that the department of special education had initiated collaboration; one reported that Reading First had initiated collaboration; and two reported that collaboration had been mutually initiated. Reasons for initiating collaboration between Reading First and special education included the desire to:

- promote a single, unified approach to literacy instruction throughout the state;
- extend the Reading First model to additional buildings and/or grade levels;

¹ For more information on Reading First, go to www.readingfirstsupport.us/default.asp?article_id=8.

- close the achievement gap between students with disabilities and those without;
- train special education teachers to use scientifically based strategies in the area of reading instruction;
- train general education teachers to individualize instruction for all students; and
- address state performance plan (SPP) goals.

Interviewees reported that Reading First is housed in a variety of divisions throughout the SEA—e.g., Curriculum and Instruction, Center for School Improvement, State and Federal Programs, Title I, and the Division of Teaching and Learning. Most interviewees felt that the location of Reading First within the SEA did not affect collaboration, although one interviewee noted that by housing special education and Reading First in different divisions, joint staff meetings were significantly less likely to occur.

The scope of the Reading First program throughout the six states varied considerably, from 44 buildings in *Kansas* (approximately 3% of all buildings) to 151 buildings in *Illinois* (approximately 10% of all buildings).

Elements of Collaboration

Collaboration between Reading First and special education takes a variety of forms, including shared professional development and/or technical assistance; shared staffing and/or collaboration among staff; representation on each other's advisory groups; extension of the Reading First model to additional buildings and/or grade levels; and linkage of Reading First to states' response to intervention (RTI) initiatives.

Shared Professional Development and/or Technical Assistance

Interviewees from all six states described shared professional development as a major component of the collaboration between Reading First and special education. For example:

- *Illinois*—Reading First staff collaborate in the provision of regional and building-level trainings throughout the state as a part of Illinois ASPIRE (Alliance for School-based Problem-solving and Intervention Resources in Education), a project funded by the SPDG that includes a focus on research-based literacy instruction for all students and supplemental research-based reading interventions at-risk students and students with disabilities.
- *Tennessee*—As part of its SIG, the department of special education invites Reading First staff to help present throughout the state on RTI, focusing particularly on the concept of tiered instruction, which overlaps significantly with the Reading First model.
- *Indiana*—Reading First's annual state-wide literacy conference always includes a special education strand, and the state's division of special education promotes participation by special educators from both Reading First and non-Reading First schools.

- *Kansas*—In addition to the Kansas Reading Academy held each summer (to which *all* teachers are invited), the state sponsors an annual four-day academy specifically intended to help special education teachers learn more about the Reading First model.
- *Montana*—In addition to receiving bi-monthly Reading First training as members of their school-based teams, special education teachers receive specialized instruction from the state’s Reading First/special education liaison on implementing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions.² Also, the annual four-day Montana Reading Institute—which includes a special education strand—is offered to all teachers throughout the state, including both Reading First and non-Reading First schools in grades K-9.
- *Alabama*—The Alabama Reading Academy provides week-long training in literacy instruction to the entire K-3 faculty (including administrators and special education staff) of both Reading First and non-Reading First schools throughout the state (for a total of almost 1000 schools).

Two states also described collaborative efforts between Reading First and special education relating to the provision of technical assistance. *Kansas*’ department of special education is preparing a team of special education professionals to provide technical assistance to Reading First schools in the area of literacy and disability and *Montana*’s Reading First/special education liaison provides technical assistance to special education teachers in Reading First schools.

Shared Staffing and/or Collaboration Among Staff

Montana was the only state interviewed that has a full-time SEA-level staff person specifically dedicated to serve as a liaison between Reading First and special education. Although funded by the division of special education, she participates in trainings and meetings alongside the four state-level Reading First specialists. However, interviewees from all six states described opportunities for Reading First and special education staff to collaborate with one another. For example, *Alabama* holds an “accountability roundtable,” a formal group made up of representatives from each division of the SEA, which includes Reading First and special education, that meets four days per month to discuss collaborative projects. Interviewees also frequently mentioned less formal collaboration, such as phone calls and face-to-face meetings held on an as-needed basis. For instance, the interviewee from *Tennessee* described working “shoulder to shoulder” with one another to prepare presentations for state-wide education conferences and interviewees from *Alabama* described sharing responsibility for fielding questions from LEAs in order to ensure a “unified” state-level response.

² Commonly referred to as a type of Response to Intervention (RTI) program, a three tier model starts with Tier 1 in which all students receive the basic intervention. In Tier 2, students identified as needing more services or time receive this assistance. Tier 3 is typically reserved for the few students who require more specialized interventions, even if for only a short amount of time.

Representation on Each Other's Advisory Groups

In four states (*Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Montana*), one or more special education staff are included on the state-level Reading First advisory group. Less commonly, interviewees reported that Reading First staff are represented on the SIG/SPDG or other special education-related advisory groups (*Alabama, Tennessee*), although two other states (*Illinois, Montana*) mentioned that Reading First staff, while not standing members, are frequently invited to present to these groups on literacy-related issues. Although *Kansas* does not have either a Reading First or SIG/SPDG advisory group at this time, interviewees reported that they are soon planning to convene an advisory group that would include staff from both sections.

Extension of Reading First Program

Interviewees from three states reported that part of their collaboration included an extension of their Reading First **curriculum** to other, non-Reading First school buildings. *Illinois* ASPIRE, for example, is currently promoting the Reading First model in schools throughout the state that do not receive Reading First funds, and *Alabama* has extended the Reading First model to all K-3 school buildings in the state. Two other states, *Kansas* and *Montana*, have extended **trainings**, using a Reading First approach to literacy instruction, to teachers representing non-Reading First school-buildings.

Linkage of Reading First to States' RTI Initiatives

Interviewees from five states (*Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Montana, Tennessee*) reported that part of their collaboration included or will include establishing linkages between Reading First and the state's RTI initiative. Most commonly, interviewees described collaborative professional development activities and stressed the fact that Reading First and RTI rely on a similar three-tiered approach to instruction/intervention. *Kansas*, for example, will be integrating RTI into all of its Reading First schools during the 2007-2008 academic year.

Other

Interviewees from several states also described other collaborative activities, including developing curriculum guides for teachers providing reading instruction to special education students (*Alabama*), designing a Reading First website that includes special education training modules (*Montana*), compiling a frequently asked questions (FAQ) sheet that addresses issues relating to Reading First and special education (*Montana*) and mailing out supplementary materials on literacy and disability to LEA-level administrators (*Tennessee*).

Students Served

Interviewees from all six states emphasized that collaborative activities shared by Reading First and special education were intended to address the needs of *all* students, although interviewees from several states emphasized the importance of serving at-risk students and students with disabilities. Several also noted that collaborative activities may focus on a broader grade range than the K-3 grade range targeted by Reading First programs.

Local-Level Collaboration

Most interviewees reported that collaboration between Reading First and special education also takes place at the local level. In the words of one interviewee, collaboration is “becoming ingrained in the culture of the schools.” Interviewees stressed that joint professional development activities for general and special education teachers promote collaboration, as does the inclusion of special educators on local-level Reading First leadership teams.

Fiscal and Human Resources

Most interviewees described one or more ways in which Reading First and special education share fiscal and/or human resources. For example:

- *Illinois*—Reading First staff contributes training time to the special education department’s Illinois ASPIRE project.
- *Montana*—Reading First sponsors the annual Montana Reading Institute, and the SPDG pays for a special education strand. Also, SPDG funds pay for a full-time liaison between Reading First and special education to manage collaborative activities.
- *Indiana*—The SEA combines SPDG funds, Title I and IDEA Part B dollars to extend the Reading First model to additional schools throughout the state.

Several interviewees reported collaborating on the writing of grant proposals and/or reports. For example, the writing of four states’ SIG/SPDG proposals (*Illinois, Kansas, Montana, Tennessee*) included input from Reading First staff; and *Alabama*’s Reading First proposal included sections written by each major division of the SEA, including special education. Interviewees from *Montana* also noted that evaluators for the state’s SPDG and Reading First program share outcomes data with each other.

Outcomes

All six interviewees reported that their states disaggregate Reading First outcomes data for students with disabilities. Only *Tennessee* reported that data is also disaggregated by disability category. Most interviewees reported that data is collected by individual student, building and LEA, although several noted that the state does not report individual student data to the federal

government. Four states (*Illinois, Kansas, Montana, Tennessee*) described some type of public reporting on data relating to students with disabilities and *Indiana* noted that data were available if requested. All six states reported that Reading First had been linked to improved literacy outcomes for students with disabilities. For example, *Indiana* reported a 15% increase in reading comprehension scores among third grade students with disabilities participating in Reading First programs.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Barriers to Collaboration

Interviewees were almost unanimous in reporting that the collaborative relationships between state-level Reading First and special education staff were positive and most interviewees had difficulty identifying more than one or two barriers to collaboration. The few barriers reported included:

- lack of time for state-level Reading First and special education staff to meet and plan regularly together;
- unwillingness on the part of some local-level general and special educators to engage in professional “role release”;
- lack of educator awareness of effective literacy instruction for all students;
- lack of facility on the part of local-level staff with Tier 3 interventions; and
- confusion over where early intervening services end and special education begins.

Benefits of Collaboration

Interviewees were emphatic in stressing that the benefits of collaboration between Reading First and special education outweighed any possible barriers. Identified benefits included the following:

- decrease in special education referrals as a result of improved ability to differentiate between reading difficulties and reading disabilities;
- improved student achievement;
- loosening of professional boundaries and a greater willingness on the part of general and special educators to serve *all* students;
- greater availability of assistance for students who are “at risk;”
- increased use of co-teaching and differentiated instruction; and
- increased use of data-based decision making.

One interviewee also mentioned that Reading First schools are often better prepared than other schools to adopt additional statewide initiatives, particularly initiatives based on a three-tiered model such as RTI or positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS).

Recommendations

Interviewees generated a number of policy recommendations. Most stressed the importance of securing support among the state's education leadership for literacy initiatives that serve *all* students; scheduling regular meetings between state-level Reading First and special education contacts; and modeling collaboration between Reading First and special education at the state level (e.g., via joint facilitation of professional development activities) in order to encourage local-level staff to become less "departmentalized" and to adopt a more collaborative approach. Other recommendations include the following:

- Bring together state-level Reading First and special education staff prior to grant writing (i.e., Reading First and SIG/SPDG) in order to ensure that collaboration is an integral part of program planning and not just an afterthought.
- Train and employ "hybrid" staff at the state level (i.e., individuals with expertise in both special education and reading instruction) and consider paying salaries using a combination of Reading First and special education funds.
- Include as a part of Reading First and/or SIG/SPDG grants the requirement that building-level Reading First teams include special education staff.

SUMMARY

All six states interviewed described positive collaborative relationships between Reading First and special education. These collaborative partnerships include shared professional development and/or technical assistance (6 states); shared staffing and/or collaboration among staff (6 states); representation on each other's advisory groups (5 states); extension of the Reading First model to additional buildings and/or grade levels (3 states); and linkage of Reading First to states' RTI initiatives (5 states). Interviewees described a number of benefits and barriers to collaboration, emphasizing the importance of focusing on improved literacy outcomes for students both with and without disabilities. Recommendations for states considering initiating a collaboration between Reading First and special education focused primarily on the importance of infrastructure changes that would support such collaboration (e.g., identifying official Reading First and special education contacts, scheduling routine planning meetings, and creating one or more jointly-funded staff positions).

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