Effective Instruction for Middle School Students with Reading Difficulties:

The Reading Teacher's Sourcebook

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Table of Contents, Foreword, & Introduction

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Developed under funding from The Meadows Foundation and the Texas Education Agency

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Effective Instruction for Middle School Students with Reading Difficulties: The Reading Teacher's Sourcebook

Acknowledgments

The Reading Teacher's Sourcebook was developed with funding from The Meadows Foundation and the Texas Education Agency. It was designed with the support and talent of many individuals whose names do not appear here, but whose hard work and ideas are represented throughout this resource. The individuals who have contributed to its development include national and state reading experts, researchers, and those who work for the Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts at The University of Texas at Austin, the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas Regional Education Service Centers.

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Foreword: A Schoolwide Approach to Reading Intervention

Adapted with permission from Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts at The University of Texas at Austin. (2005). Introduction to the 3-Tier Reading Model: Reducing reading difficulties for kindergarten through third grade students *(4th ed.). Austin, TX: Author.*

Educators who work with middle school students are all too aware that not all children learn to read by the time they leave elementary school. Many students in grades 6, 7, and 8 have reading difficulties. The purpose of *The Reading Teacher's Sourcebook* is to provide middle school reading teachers with an overview of research-based instructional approaches for teaching struggling readers. We recognize that writing is an essential component of literacy instruction; however, in this sourcebook we focus primarily on reading.

Our goal for this sourcebook is that instruction provided by the reading teacher can be integrated into a coordinated, comprehensive, schoolwide approach. The goal of this schoolwide effort is to ensure that all students can read and learn from academic text, including content area textbooks and literature, and that they will be motivated to engage in reading for many different purposes.

To address this goal, the schoolwide approach is designed to meet the needs of all students by providing them with instruction specifically designed to help them comprehend the complex vocabulary and content of academic text and to increase their motivation to read. These elements are essential if students are to be successful at learning from text.

The components of the approach are:

- A solid foundation of high standards, strong leadership, instructional excellence, and a safe and positive school environment.
- Common instructional routines and strategies implemented across content areas to engage content teachers (i.e., math, social studies, science, English language arts) in teaching students content area vocabulary and practices for comprehending content area academic text.
- Strategic instruction provided in reading classes or intervention settings.
- Intensive intervention for students with more serious reading difficulties.

These components are described in detail in the following sections. Figure 1 presents an overview of essential elements of each component.

Figure 1. 3-Tier Diagram.

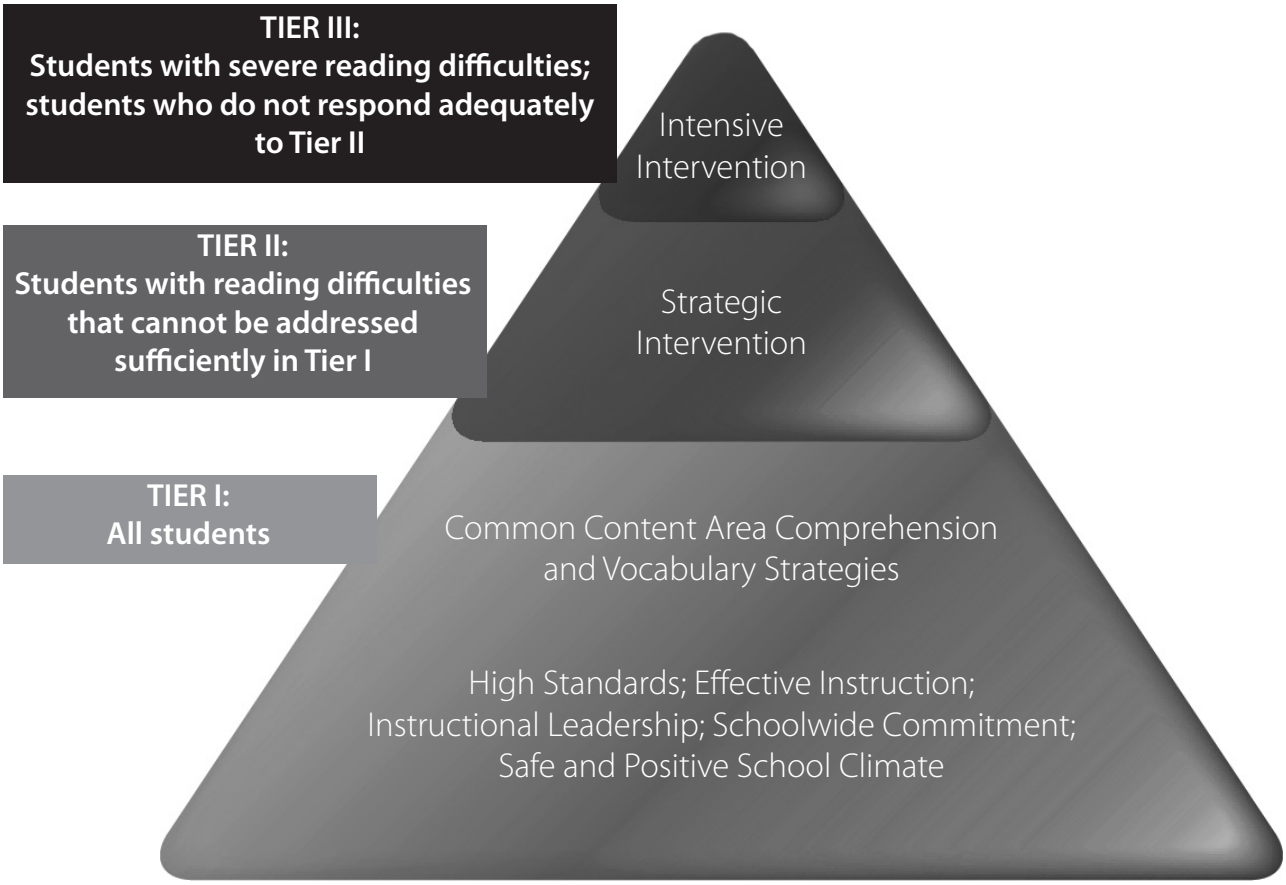

Figure 2. A Schoolwide Reading Intervention Approach for Middle School.

	TIER I	TIER II	TIER III
	Strong Schoolwide Foundation & Content Area Strategies and Routines	Strategic Intervention	Intensive Intervention
Definition	Instructional routines and activities implemented by content area teachers in the general education setting to support vocabulary and reading development for all students; implemented within a safe and positive school environment in which there is a schoolwide commitment to excellence	Reading classes or small-group instruction specifically designed to accelerate the reading growth of students with marked reading difficulties	Specifically designed and customized reading instruction delivered in small groups or individually to students with serious and persistent reading difficulties
Students	All students in content area classes	Students with marked reading difficulties	Students with severe and persistent reading difficulties; students who do not make sufficient progress in strategic intervention
Focus	Academic vocabulary and comprehension of academic text; collaboration among content area and reading teachers within a safe and positive schoolwide environment	Multisyllable word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension	Phonemic awareness, word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension; individualized to address specific needs of the students
Program	None	Specialized, scientific research-based reading program(s) emphasizing word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension	Specialized, systematic, scientific research-based reading program(s) emphasizing the specific areas of needs of individual students

(figure continued on the next page)

	TIER I	TIER II	TIER III
	Strong Schoolwide Foundation & Content Area Strategies and Routines	Strategic Intervention	Intensive Intervention
Instruction	Implementation of a consistent set of instructional routines and activities that have evidence of effectiveness from scientific research	Carefully designed and implemented explicit, systematic instruction	Carefully designed and implemented explicit, systematic instruction
Teachers	Science, social studies, math, reading, and English language arts teachers	Intervention provided by personnel determined by the school; usually a reading teacher or other interventionist	Intensive intervention provided by personnel determined by the school; usually a reading teacher or other interventionist
Setting	Science, social studies, math, reading, and English language arts classrooms	Appropriate setting designated by the school; usually the reading class or supplemental tutoring	Appropriate setting designated by the school
Grouping	Regular content area class groupings	Homogeneous instruction provided within class sizes of 10 to 16 students	Homogeneous small-group instruction (no more than 1:4)
Time	In all content area classes throughout the school day	30-50 minutes per day for 1-2 semesters	50-60 minutes every day for one or more school years
Assessment	Schoolwide benchmark assessments at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year	Progress monitoring twice a month on target skills to ensure adequate progress and learning; diagnostic assessment to determine the focus and pacing of instruction	Progress monitoring twice a month on target skills to ensure adequate progress and learning with instructional changes made when students do not demonstrate adequate growth; diagnostic assessment to determine the focus and pacing of instruction

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TIER I: SCHOOLWIDE STRATEGIES AND ROUTINES

Tier I, the first component of the schoolwide approach, is implemented schoolwide and affects all students in the school. It consists of:

- Assuring that there is a safe and positive schoolwide environment in which all student receive quality instruction based on high academic standards.
- A schoolwide commitment to support the reading development of all students, supported by strong instructional leadership.
- A set of research-validated instructional routines and activities implemented consistently across all content area classes.
- Benchmark testing of all students three times per year to identify students who need supplemental reading instruction.
- Quality, sustained professional development related to the development of reading skills and strategies in adolescents, with time and opportunities for teachers to collaborate within and across subject areas.

Most schools in which students are successful in spite of serious challenges, such as poverty and language differences, have some common characteristics. Educators in these schools have high standards for all their students, based on grade-level expectations, and teachers are committed to providing effective instruction in all classes. Most successful schools have strong instructional leadership, either from the principal or other persons such as team leaders or professional development coordinators. These leaders understand the components of effective instruction for students who perform above average levels, those performing according to grade-level expectations, and those who struggle. Administrators prioritize academic achievement in budgeting and scheduling, and they support teachers who work with challenging students. Educators in effective schools have a firm commitment to the reading success of all their students, and they work together to develop solutions to problems and overcome obstacles. There is a sense of urgency in their approach to reading intervention for students who are still behind when they reach middle school. Finally, effective schools have a safe and positive environment. If students, teachers, and others in the school do not feel that the school is a safe and supportive place that is conducive to learning, the first step in the schoolwide intervention process is to implement schoolwide positive behavior supports or some other consistent and effective strategy.

The second part of Tier I is the implementation of effective instructional routines and practices within content area classes to teach students strategies for reading, understanding, and learning from content area text. Implementing these routines should both increase active student involvement and support the learning of all students in the class.

Tier I is not designed to turn content area teachers into reading teachers, but to teach students how to read and comprehend content area text. Consider that math text, which is dense with sample problems and concepts, is different from the more narrative format of social studies text. Social studies and science texts often include diagrams and other graphic sources of information that are essential to understanding the content. Finally, literature texts used in English classes include both complex narratives and expository pieces.

In addition, each content area has its own specialized vocabulary. Teachers who are knowledgeable in a particular subject area are best able to teach students how to learn from content area text. The Tier I instructional routines are specifically designed to give content area teachers the tools for this instruction.

Tier I of the schoolwide model has three basic goals. Essentially, it is designed to support the development of vocabulary and reading comprehension in all students. Many students, even those achieving at average levels, are unable to understand and use the specialized vocabulary and comprehend the complex text structures found in academic texts in the various content areas. In turn, Williamson (2006) found that texts students are typically asked to read in postsecondary settings including community colleges, universities, the workplace, and the military are significantly more demanding than high school textbooks.

The second goal is to encourage students with reading difficulties to apply the vocabulary and comprehension strategies emphasized in supplemental intervention lessons throughout the school day and in different kinds of text. Typically, struggling adolescent readers develop habits in the ways they approach reading and writing tasks. These habits are often counterproductive, and they often have been practiced over a period of years. For example, these students may skip difficult words or even entire sections of challenging text. Some students attempt to complete assignments such as answering questions about text by searching the text for specific words they find in the questions and copying from the text in the hope that this will result in correct answers. Other students are disruptive or disrespectful when asked to complete reading or writing tasks that are too difficult for them. Even though these students may learn key reading skills and productive reading strategies in reading intervention classes, they do not tend to automatically apply these strategies whenever they read and write. It is far easier to fall into old habits. When all content area teachers include a small but consistent set of the same reading routines and practices in their instruction, struggling readers are encouraged to apply important reading skills and strategies each time they encounter text in school. Students have multiple opportunities to practice and apply skills and strategies in different kinds of text and are more likely to replace old, inefficient habits with newer, more productive habits.

A final goal is to provide content area and reading teachers with the tools and support they need to teach students who can be difficult to teach. The schoolwide approach is based on a commitment to improving literacy for all students. Collaboration among teachers is a key element of the approach, and it has a large impact on the success of schoolwide intervention in any school.

The Assessing Struggling Readers section of *The Reading Teacher's Sourcebook* describes benchmark testing. In addition, several of the vocabulary and comprehension activities described in this manual are appropriate for content area instruction, and a set of modules developed as part of the Texas Adolescent Literacy Project can be used to provide professional development to content area and reading teachers in a small set of key instructional routines designed to support the comprehension of academic text.

TIER II: STRATEGIC INTERVENTION

Tier II, **strategic intervention**, is specifically designed to provide supplemental reading classes or tutoring to students who need intensive, focused instruction in reading. Strategic intervention is intended to be relatively short-term (usually lasting for one or two semesters) and to focus primarily on instruction in comprehension and vocabulary strategies, with instruction in multisyllable word reading and/or reading fluency provided when needed. The goal of strategic intervention is to provide explicit instruction and practice in a set of strategies that will enable striving readers to be successful in their content area classes. *The Reading Teacher's Sourcebook* provides information about assessing and instructing striving readers, along with sample lesson plans to guide teachers who provide strategic intervention.

Elements of Strategic Intervention

In order to implement strategic intervention, educators:

- Use the results of benchmark assessments administered three times per year to identify students who need supplemental intervention.
- Provide regular explicit, systematic instruction to homogeneous groups of students within reading classes or supplemental tutoring sessions.
- Use materials and instructional approaches validated by scientific reading research.
- Focus on teaching vocabulary, reading comprehension, reading fluency, and multisyllable word identification, depending on student needs.
- Monitor student progress two times per month and use the results to make instructional decisions.
- Provide quality, sustained professional development related to scientific research-supported instruction for struggling readers, with time and opportunities for reading teachers to collaborate to support the progress of all students.

TIER III: INTENSIVE INTERVENTION

The purpose of Tier III, **intensive intervention**, is to provide intervention to students with more severe reading difficulties, usually those who failed to make adequate progress after two semesters of strategic intervention. The sections of this *Reading Teacher's Sourcebook* that deal with instruction in word recognition will offer guidance to those who provide intensive intervention.

Elements of Intensive Intervention

Intensity of an intervention is increased when teachers:

- Decrease group size.
- Increase instructional time. Instructional time is increased in three ways: (1) by extending length of intervention sessions, (2) by providing intervention every day of the week, and (3) by extending the duration of the intervention to an entire school year or longer.
- Increase student time-on-task with active student involvement in relevant activities.
- Make instruction more explicit and systematic.
- Increase individualization of instruction.
- Monitor student progress every 1–2 weeks and use the results to revise instruction to meet student needs.

IMPLEMENTING THE SCHOOLWIDE READING INTERVENTION APPROACH

Schools must address key questions as they begin to implement the schoolwide reading intervention approach. Figure 3 includes some of these questions.

Figure 3. Planning Checklist for Implementing Schoolwide Reading Intervention.

REVIEW CURRENT READING PRACTICES WITHIN THE SCHOOL.
• Does the school have a unified vision and plan for ensuring that all students are able to read and learn from academic text and are motivated to read? Are administrators and teachers committed to implementing the plan?
• Is there a safe and positive schoolwide environment?
• Do teachers and administrators have high academic standards for their students, based on grade-level expectations?
• Do teachers provide effective instruction supported by strong instructional leadership from the principal or another person or persons in the school?
• Is academic achievement given priority in scheduling, budgeting, and allocation of personnel?
• Have content area teachers received quality professional development related to teaching vocabulary and comprehension strategies?
• Do content area teachers consistently teach and encourage students to implement a small number of research-based vocabulary and comprehension strategies? Are the same strategies used across all classes?
• Are benchmark reading assessments administered three times per year to identify students who need supplemental reading classes or intervention?
• Do reading teachers or tutors implement research-supported programs and teaching approaches to provide strategic intervention to students who perform somewhat below grade level and/or have problems comprehending academic text?
• Do reading teachers or other intervention specialists implement research-supported, explicit, systematic reading programs to provide intensive intervention to students with severe reading difficulties?
• Is the progress of students in strategic and intensive intervention monitored two times per month to determine whether they are responding adequately to intervention?
• Have reading teachers or other interventionists received quality professional development emphasizing scientific research-based practices in teaching struggling readers?

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DEVELOP A PLAN FOR COLLECTING, MANAGING, AND USING BENCHMARK AND PROGRESS MONITORING DATA.

- Who will administer benchmark assessments?
- Who will organize the results and analyze them to determine which students need strategic or intensive intervention?
- Reading teachers or interventionists should administer progress monitoring assessments, but may need some assistance. If so, who will assist them?
- Who will compile progress monitoring data and display them as easily interpreted graphs or in other accessible formats?
- It is recommended that groups of reading teachers, other teachers, and possibly administrators meet regularly to examine the progress monitoring data so that they can identify students who are not making adequate progress and collaborate to make plans for accelerating the progress of these students. Who will organize these meetings?

DEVELOP A SCHOOLWIDE PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTING CONTENT AREA STRATEGIES AND ROUTINES.

- If there is a need for professional development in a system of positive behavior supports to ensure a safe and positive schoolwide environment, who will provide this professional development, and who will ensure that the system is implemented?
- Is there a plan for providing quality professional development to content area teachers? Does this plan include ongoing support in the form of regular study group sessions and/or coaching?
- Are content area teachers committed to implementing the same set of research-based strategies and routines across classes in order to assure that students learn key vocabulary and are able to read and understand academic text in each discipline?
- Are content area and reading teachers given adequate time to plan and collaborate to overcome obstacles to integrating these strategies and routines into their instruction?
- Is a system established for problem-solving and decision-making related to this component of schoolwide intervention?

DEVELOP A SCHOOLWIDE PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC INTERVENTION.

- Who will provide strategic intervention?
- Will strategic intervention take place in reading classes or in tutoring sessions?
- When will strategic intervention be provided?

(figure continued on the next page)

DEVELOP A SCHOOLWIDE PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC INTERVENTION (cont.)

- Where will strategic intervention be implemented?
- Is a system in place for monitoring the progress of strategic intervention students two times per month and using the results to guide instructional decisions?
- Are criteria established for entry and exit from strategic intervention?
- How will assessment data be used to group and regroup students, to plan targeted instruction, and to make adaptations to ensure students meet grade-level benchmarks/objectives?
- Is a system established for problem-solving and decision-making related to strategic intervention?
- Is time provided for collaboration among reading intervention teachers?
- Is professional development on the progress monitoring instrument, the use of assessment data to inform instruction, and scientific research-based reading instruction planned for intervention teachers?

DEVELOP A SCHOOLWIDE PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTING INTENSIVE INTERVENTION.

- Who will provide intensive intervention (e.g. specialized reading teacher or special education teacher)?
- When and how often will intensive intervention be provided?
- Where will intensive intervention be implemented?
- What scientific research-based, explicit, systematic program will be used to provide intensive intervention?
- Is the relationship of intensive intervention with dyslexia, Section 504, and special education services determined?
- Is a system in place for monitoring the progress of intensive intervention students two times per month and using the results to guide instructional decisions?
- Are criteria established for entry and exit from intensive intervention?
- How will assessment data be used to group and regroup students, to plan targeted instruction, and to make adaptations to ensure students meet grade-level benchmarks/objectives?
- Is a system established for problem-solving and decision-making related to intensive intervention?
- Is time provided for collaboration among reading intervention teachers?
- Is professional development on the progress monitoring instrument, the use of assessment data to inform instruction, and scientific research-based reading instruction planned for intervention teachers?

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Introduction

We hope that this guide provides you with some much needed and welcome insight into improving reading outcomes for adolescents with reading problems. As you know, reading problems are not eliminated when students move from elementary to secondary settings.

The fact of the matter is that the current state of reading performance for older students is grim. In 2003, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was administered to approximately 343,000 students in grades 4 and 8 across the nation. It is especially concerning that, according to the NAEP data, there was no significant change in progress for students between 1992 and 2003, and grade 8 scores in 2003 actually decreased (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Fortunately, we have federal legislation in place designed to reduce the number of students falling behind in reading (NCLB, 2002); however, many students in the upper grades still require reading remediation. Ultimately, reading becomes an unpleasant obligation for these students as they struggle to keep up in school and society in general.

Over the past decade, students have become responsible for learning more complex content at a rapid pace to cover the material assessed on statewide outcome assessments (Woodruff, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2002). Despite any reading difficulties a secondary student might have, our educational system has expectations that these students will be able to decode fluently and comprehend material with challenging content (McCray et al., 2001). Although research shows that students who fall behind rarely catch up without intensive intervention (see, for example, Juel, 1994), there is some research with older students that does indeed show that students can make significant gains with the proper instruction (Archer, Gleason, & Vachon, 2003).

It is essential that districts, schools, classrooms, and teachers are educated about reading instruction and ways to help older struggling readers. In a climate overwhelmed with the idea of leaving no *child*

behind, an equally valuable goal is that no *teacher* is left behind. This requires high-quality and ongoing professional development to improve the knowledge and practice of teachers. To assure success for students, teachers need guidance about best practices.

Teachers should be well informed about how to interpret assessment data and to design instruction according to student needs. Having a system in place to assess students in order to identify struggling readers and guide decision-making regarding instructional needs, grouping, and scheduling can help older struggling readers achieve success. Therefore, this guide will focus on the assessment of struggling middle school readers, determining instructional needs and setting short- and long-term goals based on assessment results, and designing instruction to address student needs. We include many sample lesson plans for research-supported instructional activities that have a track record of success with struggling readers.

The assessments and lessons in this guide reflect what we know about the critical elements of reading for students with reading difficulties. Knowing best practices for teaching and integrating critical reading elements allows teachers to design appropriate instruction.

As a reminder, no one program will be an easy fit for all, and providing the appropriate instruction for struggling adolescent readers is no small task. It is our hope that this guide will serve as just that — a *guide* to inform educators about best practices for adolescents with reading difficulties so that educators can better serve this special group of students.