

Supporting Struggling Readers: How School Leaders Contribute to Effective Reading Programs

>> School administrators play a critical leadership role in helping students learn to read. They make literacy a school priority, identify important literacy goals, and enable teachers to achieve those goals through supervision and support.

Students with learning disabilities often struggle with learning to read, and so they have the most to gain when their school leaders are invested in literacy instruction.

>> I think the best practices that school leaders can bring to supporting students with learning disabilities is, truly understanding what a learning disability is. I think it's really important for students to get reading support early on. A lot of times, we will say things like, "We'll wait and see because maybe they'll catch up," but every time that you wait, you're really just widening that gap, which means you have to fill in more of the gap in the future.

>> The teachers, they're in control of the planning for their classrooms and for the reading programs that are in place. Of course as a principal, you know, it's my job to be in those classrooms and to see what's going on, and make sure that things are appropriately planned and delivered.

>> In order to establish goals and implement effective reading programs, school leaders draw on data to inform their decisions. Let's take a look at how Athol-South Marysburgh Public School, a K through 8 school in the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board, is supporting students with learning disabilities, by using assessment practices to inform their reading program.

>> What we were really looking for here at the school in terms of the hierarchy of reading were the foundational concepts. So we know that students really have to have well-developed oral language, and the basic phonological concepts in place before they can move into the process of decoding. Sometimes it's difficult to really piece out those parts of the reading process, and know which ones to address.

We planned for the students, first of all, by trying to gather as much data as we could. So we needed current reading records or running records on those students, to make sure that we knew where their reading level was. If they weren't reading at a level high enough where we could gather that data, we needed to move down to screeners, and really just trying to identify exactly where it was that we needed to begin.



>> When they come to kindergarten, we very rarely would have anyone who has a diagnosis or has identified. But through different testing that we do, and that we very quickly can tell the difference between kids that are coming into school may be just immature or lack of exposure to different reading materials, and those kids that are really struggling with the basic things.

>> If a student is struggling, we do some different assessments on them. So I would do a phonological awareness test on them to see where their gaps are in their reading. And from that information, I can gather resources to support them with their learning. But I think it's really important to assess them to see where their gaps are so that the instruction can be direct and purposeful, to move them forward.

>> And that's what we wanted to do here, was to systematically see if we could understand what the needs were of the students that we served, and if we could find the gaps that existed and close them in an appropriate way so that we could move them into the next phase of reading.

>> Using this data, schools can implement the tiered approach, to offer effective interventions and support struggling readers that align with the overall reading program.

>> Well, the tier one support is really in the classroom. So the teachers are just providing lessons for everybody; it's an opportunity for everybody to be involved. For the tier two, that's where we're looking at smaller group instruction that could be done in small group in the classroom or outside of the classroom. But it's the tier three that's really the, you know, where they're removed from the classroom, and they're just working in their own group, away from the other students.

>> At tier one, educators provide effective instruction to the whole class and perform ongoing assessments to monitor each student's progress.

>> Well, I think what we've started really doing, even with our JKs, we start screening them and testing them right in the fall, when we get them. Then we're starting to get them grouped into the centre groups, where we can really maximize their learning when they're with us.

>> We develop games and different centres that they can move from, and that will help hone in on the skills that they either need to focus a little bit more on, or just to refine and maybe expand.

>> We try to do our centre work, our alphabet work, in as many different ways as we can to try to find that one way that they might respond to better, whether it's working with Play-Doh or



using different picture cues, or using the iPad. So I think it's important to try to get those kids early and just see what might work with them.

>> At tier two, Athol-South Marysburgh Public School has a speech language pathologist and a communications disorder assistant to help guide teachers on how to instruct and assess students with reading challenges.

>> I think the communications disorder assistant, or the CDA, is the person who's offering the most direct support right now in the building. She's been an extremely positive influence, or support for us as we move through the project.

>> We tend to target the students who need that little bit of extra boost. We find that it's -- if we're targeting those few students specifically, it helps with their overall growth within the classroom. So oftentimes, the teacher's already doing a lot of oral language within her everyday schedule. But for those students who are struggling a little bit, more direct intervention on that is helpful.

>> To determine what kind of supports that we do in the classroom, we look at the needs of the student, as well as the grade that they're in. For example, we have a kindergarten program that we run where, based on the screening results of speech and language screening, as well as phonological awareness, my communicative disorders assistant runs groups in the classroom in collaboration with the teacher. So she focuses on the students that have oral language or learning needs, but then other students can come and go from the group as well.

>> She will pull different kindergarten, senior kindergartens to work on pronoun use, different things like that, and works with a small group on whole language acquisition. So they're retelling stories, beginning, middle and end, proper pronouns and grammars, and that type of thing.

>> We tend to do it within the classroom, though, because the classroom teacher can see what I'm doing. And then we have that communication back and forth where, you know, this week we're going to be working on vocabulary, the next week we're going to be working on some phonological awareness skills. Then I can focus more directly on that, whereas the classroom teacher, sometimes she's blanket-targeting rhyming, where I can be a little bit more specific.

>> So in order to support our individuals or children who have learning disabilities within the classroom, we do a lot of one-on-one, or we do a lot of small-group, guided centres. If we do some small-group guided centres, it helps the children learn as a whole, learn in a team setting. That helps bring up the speed. And because we individualize the programming for each one, we



can do it in a discreet manner so that they don't know, or don't see that they're learning something a little bit altered than everybody else.

At tier three, principals should become familiar with different reading approaches and commercial programs, in order to choose an effective reading program based on school data and identified gaps within the student population.

>> We had tried other programs with these students, that they just weren't successful. I knew that the corrective reading, the direct instruction, was something that works very well with students with learning disabilities. So we were excited to put that into place in the school. And what we also wanted to do was make sure it wasn't just for one child. So we identified a number of students that we felt had similar needs and a similar learning profile. So we grouped them together in a small group, where they would be getting that direct instruction piece every single day.

>> The children that are involved are readers who have struggled and not been successful with other approaches that we've taken. So this corrective reading program has done wonders for them, and they've made huge gains. In collaboration with the classroom teacher, we identify which areas they need support in. And then I, either in small groups or one-to-one, would work within the classroom, or withdraw them to the resource room and offer them support by breaking it down into manageable pieces for them, the work that they're doing. Sometimes making accommodations -- again, coming in here, such as the resource room, and finding a quiet work space -- just making whatever they're doing more manageable.

>> Before this school started planning their reading program for students with learning disabilities in mind, one student with learning disabilities struggled with reading for a long time.

>> Donald is a grade five student. And I had the pleasure of meeting him in his grade four year. So I'd read his psych, and I knew his profile a little bit. He was a very low-performing student, very anxious in class, spent a lot of time out on body breaks and getting drinks, and visiting the washroom, to get out of class where he could sort of release some of that anxiety.

>> Ever since grade one and two, I've fallen a little behind, and I had trouble reading.

>> We tried him on a couple of programs in September that weren't successful, and that's when we introduced the direct instruction, the corrective reading, which we knew was a great fit for students with learning disabilities, especially severe ones like Donald has. So he's really flourished in that program, we've seen in a very short time. He's closed one year worth of



reading gap already, so we're very proud of that progress. We're seeing him decode, we're seeing him stay in class now. He's far more confident with his skills.

>> Last year, Donald would say, "I can't read. I can't write." And this year, he is so excited. You can see the positivity, the eagerness. He will come in and tell me that he's writing at home, that he has a little book that he writes words in. He's excited.

>> Last year, I would get frustrated with my work. This year, I got lots of help and I get my work done.

>> Donald's abilities and how he feels about himself have just -- he's blossomed. And he's a delight. He's a delight every day.

>> I enjoy reading books now. And I enjoy the program.

>> But the students aren't the only ones who benefit. The school leaders' involvement in literacy programming has been a positive experience for the educators as well.

>> It's been a great experience to be able to work with such a positive staff. We all see each other with lots of information to bring to the table. We have lots of skills and lots of diversity in our trainings.

>> I really do emphasize the importance of closing that gap early. I'm just so thrilled this year that the focus really has been on the early primary.

>> We've had such great success here by looking for the little small gains that we could make. So we're not trying to save the world in one great bit school improvement goal, but we're looking at the little tiny steps. And the more that we do the small ones, we're finding that the gains are getting bigger and the momentum continues to build from that.

The gaps are closing, and the data is really showing that these students are moving forward. I think that's incredibly motivating. Everyone is feeling validated by the progress we're making.

>> For more information on how to support your students with learning disabilities in reading, visit LDatSchool.ca.

