Canada is a vast geographic area with a small population. Although it is the second largest country in the world (in size) after the Russian Federation, it has a total population of only 31 million people—3 million fewer than the state of California. The majority of the population lives in towns and cities that are within a few hundred kilometers of the Canada-United States border. The population of Canada is made up of a mosaic of people from many countries as well as many aboriginal peoples—First Nations, Inuit, and Metis. Reading Recovery provides support to many of the children in these groups where English is not their first language.

Despite Canada’s small yet diverse population Reading Recovery continues to expand. The implementation has grown 252% since national data collections began in 1995–1996. Over this time approximately 30,000 children have been served across the Canadian provinces.

The majority of Reading Recovery sites in Canada are located in urban areas, but administrators in remote areas have found creative ways to provide Reading Recovery to those children most at risk of not becoming literate. Rural areas face a number of challenges in providing quality education to their populations. Distance, weather, small schools, isolation, and costs are issues facing administrators in providing equity in education for children in the far North.

Despite these challenges, farsighted leaders have found solutions as Reading Recovery is implemented in some of the most remote places in Canada. Reading Recovery teachers are teaching children in schools ranging from northern British Columbia to north of the Arctic Circle. They teach at schools in Labrador on Canada’s east coast, where most of the area is accessible only by plane in winter and by boat or plane in summer; and they teach in Newfoundland, where there is an additional danger of caribou and moose herds wandering onto the roads at certain times of the year!

In order to meet the standards of the Reading Recovery training model, teachers are flown to in-service sessions every other week and to continuing contact sessions at least six times throughout the year. The small plane stops at each community to pick up teachers to take them to their training site. Children and parents are flown in for teaching sessions when necessary. On these occasions the teacher misses daily teaching, so lessons are doubled up the next day.

Weather plays a huge factor and everyone needs to be very flexible at particular times of the year. At times, teacher leaders travel by plane with the court judge or crown prosecutor who conduct field visits in the regions. In the small villages, travel is by snowmobile because roads are closed during the winter months. To their credit, school districts have committed the necessary dollars to support this travel.

In some areas teachers drive for three to four hours to get to an in-service session, and continuing contact sessions are held during the school day so that teachers are not travelling on roads after dark. Car-pooling is the preferred way of getting to training sessions; teachers can share experiences about teaching Reading
Implementation

Recovery children as well as having company when travelling on isolated roads. These challenges can be exacerbated by extreme weather, especially in the middle of winter. In remote areas, long drives through the wilderness and on icy roads make travel extremely difficult. When it is colder than –30 degrees centigrade, traveling on highways is too dangerous and cars may malfunction, so training class sessions must be rescheduled. In an attempt to preclude some of these issues, care is taken to schedule sessions at times when the weather is less problematic. In some cases, districts have built a second training center and hired an additional teacher leader to reduce the amount of necessary travel. In addition, teachers are encouraged to work in cluster groups to support each other. Telephone and fax are used frequently by teacher leaders to consult with teachers.

Reading Recovery is successful in remote regions of Canada because of creative problem solving. The issues of distance, weather, isolation, and costs have been offset by the support and vision of top-level administrators. In the Yukon Territory, Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia, support from the Department of Education has provided for strong implementations in spite of these challenges. In other northern areas such as Labrador, commitment by the district administration has ensured that all children have the opportunity to become literate regardless of location.

Despite the challenges, the enthusiasm of Reading Recovery and classroom teachers, the gratitude of parents, and the encouraging results of the program have all contributed to the continued expansion in rural areas of Canada. Consistent support from the Department of Education and district administrators over the period of the initial implementation, and their continued support as the implementation becomes entrenched, enhances Reading Recovery’s success. Commitment, flexibility, and creative problem solving will ensure that these at-risk children continue to be served well.

References


In Canada’s sparsely populated northern regions, teachers are flown to in-service sessions every other week and to continuing contact sessions at least six times throughout the year. This small plane, landing in Labrador, is typical of the planes that carry Reading Recovery teachers and teacher leaders.