

Thank Goodness They Listened!

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Editor's note: This is an account of how Reading Recovery functioned in a Kentucky school system as one part of a comprehensive approach to literacy reform. It illustrates how Reading Recovery professionals can partner with their colleagues to bring about systemwide improvement in literacy achievement.

The success of Washington County's Literacy Project can be attributed to one thing: the desire, at all levels of the community, to respond to a desperate need to do what it takes to improve literacy outcomes for the children of Washington County. The Washington County Literacy Project began in 1998 to address the needs of children in Grades K–3. Community leaders, administrators, teachers, and parents worked together to achieve the overall goal of raising the literacy standards of all children while narrowing the achievement gaps for students with limited literacy experience.

This case study is an investigation of the reading programs, initiatives, and strategies that were adopted as part of the project. Washington County was selected as the site for this research for the following reasons:

- All elementary schools met their Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) goals and showed significant gains on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). There was also a reduction in the number of novice readers and an increase in the number of proficient and distinguished readers.



Superintendent William Hardin was instrumental in bringing about changes in instructional literacy practices in all Washington County schools. Mr. Hardin said, "I know from experience that if you can't read, then you can't succeed."

- Demographically, Washington County is designated as rural, with over 18% of the population living below the poverty level. Two of Washington County's three schools have 53% of their student population receiving free or reduced price lunches. The third school has a low percentage population of free or reduced price lunches.
- Since there are only three elementary schools in this county, it was possible to complete a quality case study within a restricted time frame.
- One school in the county received an Early Reading Incentive Grant in 1999 to support literacy initiatives in the early years of schooling.

School #1, North Washington Elementary, has an enrollment of approximately 500 students with 250 students in Grades K–3 participating in the literacy project. Three Reading Recovery teachers serve three Grade 1 classrooms and collaborating in K–3 classrooms the other half day. School #2, Washington County Elementary, has an enrollment of approximately 500 students with 300 students in Grades K–3 participating in the literacy project. Here, too, there are three Reading Recovery teachers serving three Grade 1 classrooms and collaborating in K–3 classrooms the other half day. School #3, Fredericktown Elementary, has an enrollment of approximately 100 students with 45 students in Grades 1–3 participating in the literacy project. One part-time Reading Recovery teacher serves one Grade 1 classroom.



Leon Smith, Washington County curriculum and assessment coordinator, was an important supporter of literacy changes in Washington County.

Identifying the Needs

The drive to improve literacy outcomes for struggling readers came from a number of key players at all levels throughout both the district and the state.

State Senators Dan Kelly and Jack Westwood expressed concern that 20% of Kentucky's struggling readers were missing out on specialized assistance. The two senators were primary sponsors of Senate Bill 186 and were successful in having it enacted. This law provides funding for the establishment of the Collaborative Center For Literacy Development (CCLD). The CCLD is a collaboration among the eight Kentucky public universities and the National Center for Family Literacy, and it focuses on professional development and research in literacy, from preschool through adulthood. Through the CCLD, Early Reading Incentive Grants (ERIG) were made available to school districts to implement early literacy initiatives. In addition, the Reading Recovery university training center at the University of

Kentucky was established, and teacher leaders at state universities, regional training centers, and school districts were identified and trained.

Superintendent William Hardin was concerned that the district scores were going down and that children were dropping through the cracks. Mr. Hardin was instrumental in bringing about changes in instructional literacy practices in all the county's schools. He said, "I know from experience that if you can't read, then you can't succeed. Children not succeeding leave school, and we can't afford to lose them by sixth grade."

Lindy Harmon, then a Reading Recovery teacher, was committed to improving the literacy outcomes for children in the district. (She has since completed teacher leader training.) She first identified a pool of children needing services beyond those children eligible for Reading Recovery. The lack of a comprehensive literacy model for the entire district also led her to address the issue with teachers, administrators, and the superintendent. She hoped to broaden access to the trained Reading Recovery professionals who could work with classroom teachers as well as serve the first-grade struggling readers. This proved to be an effective professional development model as the Reading Recovery teachers demonstrated effective strategies to teachers and instructional assistants who taught small groups of students simultaneously.

Kathy Fields, a Title I coordinator, had become dissatisfied with the way Title I funds were spent: "Title I money was being used to employ instructional assistants who helped classroom teachers. We were spending a lot of money, but it was not showing up in our students' results."

Components of the Early Literacy Plan

A six-part plan was developed to address literacy needs in the school district. The plan included full implementation of Reading Recovery as the safety net for early readers, small group early literacy instruction for Grades K–1 readers, guided reading for Grades 2–3, ongoing professional development for teachers, and multiple methods of assessment to inform reading instruction. Additionally, ongoing parent and community support was sought and considered to be a key component in a comprehensive literacy plan.

1. Full Implementation of Reading Recovery

In the initial year of the project, six Reading Recovery teachers-in-training served the county. By the second year of implementation, the number grew to seven Reading Recovery teachers, which allowed the district to fully serve the lowest-achieving population of students. It took 3 years to realize full implementation.

The Reading Recovery team completes the early literacy screening of all kindergarten and first-grade students in all schools. The team sets baseline scores for all students and identifies the pool of Reading Recovery students. Scores are compiled in spreadsheets with classroom, school, and district averages that are shared with classroom teachers and administrators districtwide. The team then moves Reading Recovery teachers within the district based on the level of need in each school.

During the year, each child's assessment results are sent to the child's parents. The early literacy curriculum (K–1 classroom collaboration) is

designed around these assessments. The assessments also provide instructional data for classroom teachers to use in their classroom reading programs.

2. Small Group Early Literacy Instruction for Grades K–1

In Grades K–1, 30-minute early literacy sessions are provided for all children in addition to the regular classroom reading program. The sessions involve small group instruction with the assistance of trained Reading Recovery teachers, literacy teachers, classroom teachers, and instructional assistants who have also participated in the teacher training sessions. The team of literacy teachers works with classroom teachers in the classrooms; this allows the teacher-student ratio in each class to be reduced to 1:6.

Groups of students are rotated every 3 weeks to aid teachers in learning to meet the needs of all students. The groups are flexible, and students move from group to group based on their demonstrated knowledge of reading strategies and processes. Each lesson focuses on the promotion of independent reading. Running records are completed each week for every child. These are then analyzed and instructional decisions regarding the content of lessons, lesson focus, grouping, and text selection for the following week are determined.

Every Friday, teachers meet to collaboratively plan for the coming week. These meetings provide an opportunity for ongoing professional development and close monitoring of children's progress. The K–1 component of the literacy project has reaped major overall benefits. In addition to helping reduce the number of students identified for Reading Recovery, it has aided teachers in making

instructional changes in their classroom reading programs and raised the literacy achievement of all students. It has also quelled many of the cost-effectiveness questions about Reading Recovery because the Reading Recovery teachers serve large numbers of students in their other half day and serve as literacy professionals in their schools and the district.

3. Guided Reading for Grades 2–3

Guided reading instruction is provided to second- and third-grade students for 30 minutes on a daily basis. This is in addition to the regular classroom reading program. The sessions include reading and writing instruction with a focus on higher-level reading strategies, the use of graphic organizers, and writing journals to promote comprehension. The use of the Reading Recovery teachers, literacy teachers, and classroom teachers reduces teacher-student ratios to 1:6. Ongoing professional development, collaborative planning, and the sharing of ideas and resources are integral to this component of the literacy initiative.

4. Ongoing Professional Development for Teachers

As the superintendent so aptly said, "As far as I am concerned, you stop being trained when you are in a casket." The central office was firmly committed to training and professional development for teachers. In the first year of implementation, all teachers, instructional assistants, and administrators attended nine professional development workshops spread throughout the school year. These workshops helped create a framework for early literacy instruction based on the work of Marie Clay. In addition, the workshops included information about guided reading instruction.



Lindy Harmon, coauthor of this article, was a Reading Recovery teacher when the Washington County Literacy Project began. Lindy is shown here with a student.

Professional journal articles outlining best practices in reading and writing instruction were distributed, and teachers reflected and shared their experiences of teaching reading and writing. Prior to implementation of this plan, professional development had consisted of one-day workshops in August. Teachers noticed the drastic change; it was also seen as a strong commitment to reading and literacy as a priority in the county.

5. Multiple Methods of Assessment to Inform Reading Instruction

Washington County uses an extensive assessment component to track the reading progress of all children, and the information collected informs instructional practices. The Reading Recovery team conducts early literacy screening. The evaluation includes the Observation Survey in kindergarten and Grade 1 at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. Evaluation for Grades 2 and 3 uses Rigby's Benchmark Kit administered at the beginning and end of the school year.

In addition, weekly running records, teacher observations, reflections, checklists, and writing samples are completed. Children are monitored closely to ensure continuous progress in the area of literacy achievement.

6. Ongoing Parent and Community Support

The district encourages parent and community involvement. Trained volunteer reading coaches, annual literacy celebrations, family literacy events that include preschool and Head Start parents, and America Reads are just some of the cooperative endeavors linking the school and community. Schools also encourage parents and community volunteers to reinforce the strategies used in classrooms, and Reading Recovery site-based teams provide training.

Putting the Plan Into Action

A 5-year plan was developed and this time frame proved reassuring for

teachers in terms of stability and commitment. The superintendent explained, “We could not afford for teachers to see this as a one-shot idea or a flash in the pan project. It had to be one that was closely monitored and supported over 5 years. The seed was planted in the teachers’ minds. They saw that teaching could be done differently and that it would work, and they began to question their own practices. They were looking for answers.”

Principals were enrolled in the vision when the central office team made school visits to support them in the initial, somewhat difficult implementation phase of the 5-year plan. Leon Smith, curriculum and assessment coordinator and member of the central office team, acknowledged the need for support for personnel at all levels of the change process. “We needed to support one another, and we knew effective leadership was crucial in the process.”

Teachers were trusted to support the plan and were provided with ongoing, focused professional development and resources. Monthly meetings allowed teachers input in adapting the literacy models to meet the unique needs of the students. The first year was spent implementing the lesson framework, adapting instructional practices to meet individual needs, and changing the teachers’ focus from product to process teaching. The superintendent stated that it was not necessary to micromanage the implementation: “I will ask questions because I want the job done right, but I also want to allow teachers to do their job.” The teachers interviewed agreed that they understood the administration’s commitment to the project.

Making the Plan Happen

The Best People for the Job

The resource goal was to replace unqualified instructional assistants with trained staff who could work with children to improve literacy outcomes. Many of the instructional assistants’ positions were eliminated, and Reading Recovery teachers were trained to provide the literacy safety net for the district. This commitment to having the best people in jobs impacting children’s learning had serious repercussions for the county. Seeing people lose their positions, other staff members started to question their own practices. Ms. Fields, the Title I coordinator, described the paradigm shift: “Their ears were up, their eyes were open, and they were suddenly alert. They could see what was happening with the Title I money, and they saw that the county was intent on eliminating what didn’t work. Some teachers made a conscious choice to do a better job.”



Nancy Tatum, Reading Recovery teacher at Fredericktown Elementary Schools says, “My efforts are rewarded daily when I see that spark in children’s eyes as they use strategies to attack a word, correctly pronounce it, determine meaning from context, and successfully complete a writing assignment.”

Shared Vision

There was a shared vision for the project and it was supported with a sound theoretical base built around Clay's theory of early literacy acquisition. The Reading Recovery safety net was a strategic part of the implementation plan, providing trained literacy professionals to staff each school and to work in collaborative classroom literacy models.

The central office took on the responsibility of giving schools the very best information about programs and models for reading. At the same time, administrators were receptive to new ideas grounded in research. The superintendent was adamant that all schools had to get on track and stay on track.

Sound Understanding of Reading and Writing Development

The teachers we interviewed acknowledged that Marie Clay's theory played a major role in informing them about the reading process and current research in reading. They generally felt that they had a firm and sound understanding of how to help readers, particularly struggling readers. Ms. Polin, a kindergarten teacher, reflected on the success of the program: "The program's success is the result of staying on focus. It touches all students by providing small group instruction at each child's level and extra support for students in need. Last year's CTBS scores were higher than ever before. After 26 years of teaching, we are teaching smarter, we are more focused, and we are getting it right."

Professional development is ongoing and consists of monthly meetings of Reading Recovery teachers, newsletters, site-based literacy teams, and professional development workshops

throughout the year for all Reading Recovery teachers, classroom teachers, and instructional assistants involved in the literacy sessions. Site-based literacy teams are established in each building to collaborate, support, and explore instructional strategies and to coordinate all literacy activities within the building.

A Range of Texts and Reading Materials

Across all three schools, a range of reading materials and programs is in place. Teachers are encouraged to seek new ideas, programs, and materials as a way of informing the ongoing development of future literacy plans. The only requirement is that all new ideas, programs, and resources must be justified in terms of the Washington County Literacy Project.

Complementary programs enhance the strong philosophical base of the Washington County Literacy Project. The Washington County elementary schools use several programs in conjunction with Reading Recovery. The programs were selected because they complemented the philosophy of Reading Recovery (See Table 1).

Outcomes

The success of the Washington County Literacy project is reflected in testimonials from staff and administrators as well as in improved test results. The majority of Washington County teachers supported the initiative even though in the first few years there was both skepticism and criticism of the change process. Ms. Payne, a Reading Recovery teacher, recognized that change is always hard but acknowledged the willingness of the administration to support the teachers' efforts. She recognized that the ongoing dedication of time, peo-

Table 1.
Reading Programs and Books

Grade K	Building Blocks
Grade 1	Four Blocks
Grade 2	Four Blocks
Grade 3	Basals and Trade Books
Grades 4/5	Basals Junior Great Books Trade Books
Grades 6/7/8	Trade Books Four Blocks

ple, and funding kept the process going. The superintendent concurred: "I did not want someone to say to me, 'I can't do a good job because I don't have something.' Teachers could not give excuses because they lacked materials." Ms. Mattingly, a Reading Recovery teacher, suggested that the results have been positive: "Since the program was introduced, we are thrilled. Teachers have embraced it, and our scores are up."

The phrase, "Thank goodness they listened!" was common throughout interviews with teachers, principals, and administrators countywide. Integral to the change process was a sense of ownership by all stakeholders. Whether at the level of classroom teacher, literacy coordinator, or superintendent, there existed a strong sense of being heard and supported by those responsible for implementing the initiative. At the central office, the project was regarded as a team effort, continually supported by strong leadership. The team was determined to do whatever was best for the children. Additionally, parents and the Washington County School Board were well informed and supportive of

Table 2.
Improved Performance* on State Commonwealth
Accountability Testing System (CATS)

School	1999–2000**	2000–2001
Washington County Elementary	67.7	76.7
Fredericktown Elementary	108.7	108.8
North Washington Elementary	69.0	77.2

* Performance level based on average of 2 years' scores.

** First year of implementation was 1998–1999.

the change process. The evidence for their ongoing support was firmly attached to the improved learning outcomes for children.

Teachers and principals remain enthusiastic about the progress made in literacy. Ms. Abell, a Grade 2 teacher, describes the changes in her classroom: “This is one of the first years in which all of my students are able to read at grade level, even my lowest students. Another positive link to our literacy program is the fact that most of my students are able to write complete sentences and paragraphs.” The principal of Fredericktown, Mr. Abell, revealed how he had noticed a change in students’ attitudes: “I can say that there is an excitement about reading that was not there in the past. When I see students in the hall, they all tell me how they are doing, the book they are reading, how many words they know. By doing these programs, they are more aware of the important part reading plays in learning, and their parents are much more aware of this as well.”

Similarly, Ms. Tatum, a reading teacher, reflects on the changes she has noticed: “My enthusiasm is sincere

and my efforts are rewarded daily when I see that spark in children’s eyes when they use strategies to attack a word, correctly pronounce it, determine meaning from context, and successfully complete a writing assignment. I can’t imagine a more rewarding job.”

Improved Test Results

Staff, administrators, and the community could document the improved results as measured by two standardized tests, the State Commonwealth Accountability Testing (CATS) and the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). All three schools showed improved results on the CATS test in the third year following implementation, 2000–2001 (see Table 2). For Grades 1 and 2, the CTBS scores increased for each CTBS sub-test in 2000 and 2001. Grade 3 had less favorable results in 2000, as scores dropped in Reading and Vocabulary. However, all Grade 3 CTBS sub-tests increased in 2000–2001, as shown in Table 3.

In 1999, 60 Reading Recovery report questionnaires completed by classroom teachers, administrators, and parents indicated that

- improvements were observed and verified in reading and writing,
- a marked improvement was observed in all other classes as well,
- students were better able to read with understanding and were more focused and independent,
- students demonstrated increased confidence and self-esteem, and
- students expected to be successful and were more willing to try new things.

It was clear that the success of the program was due to the level of support received from parents, teachers, and administrators in Washington County. All stakeholders were strongly committed to creating a lifelong love of reading in all Washington County students.

Conclusion

Washington County started from a vision of what needed to change and then developed a plan for best practice. The six components of the literacy project provided a comprehensive literacy framework. Full implementation of Reading Recovery—staff development and capacity building using Marie Clay’s theory of literacy acquisition and the use of Reading Recovery teachers as school- and district-level literacy professionals—was central to the plan’s success. The county implemented its 5-year plan and adjusted the program as necessary.

Good instructional practice, whether driven by a program, a shared vision, or a philosophy, needs to include the following:

- early intervention as a vital component of literacy instruction,
- ongoing professional development leading to quality instructional practices and informed decisions,
- active family and community participation,
- ongoing assessment and monitoring of student progress that informs instruction and the selection of a program driven by student needs and the understanding that no one program can do all things for all students,
- tested reading programs based on sound instructional practices grounded in quality research,
- strong leadership at the district and school levels includes individuals with expertise in early literacy learning, and
- proactive literacy teams in each school to foster active learning and problem solving.

This model is not replicable simply by adding funds, resources, and administrative support to existing programs at the district level. The plan's success depends on helping teachers develop a growing knowledge base of the reading and writing process, enabling them to make better-informed decisions about instructional practice. The plan depends on ensuring all programs and models adopted are complementary. A trained Reading Recovery professional needs to be designated to keep the process going and to make sure that the decisions made about literacy acquisition are set with-

in a sound theoretical framework. One day in the future, the children of Washington County will appreciate and proclaim, "Thank goodness they listened—listened to our needs and decided to act!"

Table 3.
Improved District Reading Scores* on Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS)

Year	Reading	Vocabulary	Language
Grade 1			
1998–1999**	45.1	43.6	48.4
1999–2000	47.8	47.2	52.4
2000–2001	55.2	52.0	60.8
Grade 2			
1998–1999**	45.5	45.5	47.2
1999–2000	48.5	49.1	48.1
2000–2001	51	50.4	49.4
Grade 3			
1998–1999**	45.1	45.7	46.5
1999–2000	45.6	44.5	48.1
2000–2001	48.9	49.8	48.3

* Scores based on national curve equivalent.

** First year of Washington County Literacy Project.