Making a Difference at the Local Level

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Editor’s Note: Mona Bailey’s experience in advocating for the lowest-achieving students in her school led her to become an advocate for the implementation of Reading Recovery. The questions her administrators posed are typical of those many teachers and teacher leaders receive. Mona provides us with some ideas for gathering information to answer these questions. For additional information on how to measure the cost of Reading Recovery in your own school, district or site, see the article by Francisco Gómez Bellengé, “Measuring the Cost of Reading Recovery: A Practical Approach” in the fall 2002 issue of The Journal of Reading Recovery. Also helpful in weighing the costs of Reading Recovery is an article by Mary Lose in the fall 2001 issue entitled, “Why Do a Follow-Up Study of Reading Recovery Children?” In that article, Dr. Lose explains how to conduct a follow-up study to assess the long-term effectiveness of the intervention in a school district.

“Something has to change or I need to leave teaching. I don’t think I’m making a difference.” I was on the phone with Steve Hansell when this torrent of words flooded our conversation. Steve had been one of my instructors during my undergraduate training at Wright State University. I respected him as a literacy instructor and called him after an especially discouraging day in Title I. At the time of my call I had been teaching for nearly 8 years and was in my third year as a Title I reading teacher at Westbrook Elementary School. In the past few years I had watched the top Title I students excel in their literacy learning while the lower-performing students continued to struggle throughout their elementary years despite my best efforts. This year’s group of first graders was particularly challenging. I wasn’t willing to continue doing what I’d done in the past because I knew what the end result would be. I wasn’t sure what else to do, so I called Steve for advice and help. After a few minutes of conversation he suggested I set up an independent study project through Wright State to investigate my dilemma. I agreed. What could I lose?

What About Reading Recovery?
I first met Phoebe Ingraham, my independent study coordinator, in the winter quarter of 2001 without knowing that Phoebe also was a teacher leader for the Reading Recovery site at Wright State University. Phoebe was very attentive and identified with many of my struggles. I felt an instant connection with her. She asked about our intervention at Westbrook and mentioned Reading Recovery. I responded, “Oh, we’ve already done that, and we won’t do it again. I’ve been told it’s too costly.” Our district is a small suburban one serving approximately 1500 students. Our Title I funds are very limited and our elementary building is the only one that received Title I funding. The prior Title I teacher had been trained in Reading Recovery when it first came to the U.S. and had been the sole provider of Reading Recovery/Title I services to our school of nearly 600 students. In her judgment and that of the former superintendent, Reading Recovery was too expensive for the returns gained, and it was dropped within 4 years of initial implementation.

Phoebe didn’t press the issue. She instructed me to begin some case studies and do some closer observation. As the weeks passed I began to realize the only way I was going to get different results was by doing something drastically different. Some of the things Phoebe said during our first meeting sparked memories of Title I coordinators’ meetings I had attended. During lunch at these meetings, Title I coordinators and teachers would sit at large tables and discuss concerns with student performance in literacy. Year after year, I left those conferences thinking the only teachers at the table who really seemed to know what to do were those in Reading Recovery. What did they know that was escaping the rest of us? They seemed
so sure of themselves, just like Steve and Phoebe. Maybe I needed to look into Reading Recovery a little closer.

Questions began to form. Why did we get Reading Recovery at Westbrook the first time, and why did the program end? How much did it really cost? Was Reading Recovery what we needed at Westbrook? I talked to my principal, superintendent, and fellow teachers about my questions. I found they had exposure to Reading Recovery in a variety of ways. My principal had been a teacher in an elementary school that had Reading Recovery and she was very positive about it. She believed Reading Recovery teachers were true specialists in reading who supported students' literacy learning and other teachers' roles in literacy instruction, as well. My colleagues had only positive feedback about Reading Recovery's impact on their students. My superintendent, though, was less than enthusiastic. He not only was concerned about cost-effectiveness but especially wanted to know if the gains made by first graders in Reading Recovery were sustained over time. He wanted "hard data."

Are the Gains Sustained Over Time?
I began to answer his questions by looking at fourth-grade proficiency results. Because we first implemented Reading Recovery before Ohio's 4th Grade Proficiency Test was a reality and kept it for such a short time, there was only 1 year of data for students who had received Reading Recovery as an intervention in our school. I contacted another local school which was similar to ours in location, size, and population served.

This school had Reading Recovery service in place for a long time and had several years of data that could be used to compare Reading Recovery students to Title I students and the average population. The results were surprising. The percentage of students who received Reading Recovery service in first grade and later passed the fourth-grade proficiency test was higher than that of the students who received Title I small-group instruction. An even bigger surprise was that the pass rate for Reading Recovery children was also higher than our building's average pass rate in 3 out of 4 years of compared data. I also checked the current course enrollment of the former Reading Recovery students who remained in our district. The majority of these high school students were taking advanced level courses in English, foreign language, and math.

Is Reading Recovery Cost-Effective?
These findings were encouraging answers to my superintendent's question about sustained gains, but what about cost-effectiveness? I had no idea how to determine costs, so I went to our district's treasurer. I took with me the number of students I had served each year that I had worked in Title I. I also included the number of students who received repeat service and the number of years of repeat service each child received. The treasurer took my information and in a matter of minutes calculated how much our district was spending for Title I small-group instruction repeat service, versus how much it would cost to serve a student one time in Reading Recovery. She included my salary and benefits as the cost and divided this by the number of children served. This gave a cost per child. The cost per child increases when that child receives multiple years of service. She averaged these figures using data that spanned a 3-year period. At the time of her calculations we were spending tens of thousands of dollars just to provide 2 years of repeat Title I service. That figure did not include students who had received 3 and 4 years of Title I support. Her figures revealed it cost little more than $1,000 per child to provide Reading Recovery service to a child one time. This figure rose to less than $2,000 per child when all the start-up costs were included in the cost of the initial year of implementation and not spread out over a longer term. Start-up costs are not incurred each year so the actual cost per child was closer, in our district, to the $1,000 per child figure. The

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treasurer was convinced of the cost-effectiveness by the time she finished her calculations!

**Communicating the Results**

I made a presentation of my findings to the staff and to my principal and superintendent. As a result the superintendent agreed to implement Reading Recovery the following school year. I was still concerned about attempting implementation in a building of nearly 600 students and only one Reading Recovery/Title I teacher. I believed under-implementation had been one of the main reasons Reading Recovery had not been seen as successful the first time. This concern became a sticking point that almost kept us from going ahead with the implementation. I wanted two teachers to be trained for our implementation and the superintendent did not want to create any more positions. After much discussion a compromise was reached. I would implement Reading Recovery alone the first year and the following year a second teacher would be trained.

**What’s Happening Now?**

Today our district employs three Reading Recovery teachers. Two of us work full-time with half of our day committed to Reading Recovery. The third teacher is employed part-time. We use Title I monies and other state funding to pay for the Reading Recovery services we offer. In 2003 we installed a one-way mirror so our building could serve as a training site. This summer my principal and I completed a review of all of our primary students’ standardized test results to help us determine the effectiveness of the various reading interventions our school offers. This information will be presented to our staff and board of education to inform their decisions about programming, support, and funding.

The story of how Reading Recovery was successfully implemented at Westbrook Elementary School is a story of sustained effort and clear communication at various levels. The necessary research and discussions with administrators and teachers continued over an entire school year. There were many roadblocks, and several times I was told flatly, “No, we are not going to do this.” Phoebe’s encouragement and support and my own persistence fueled by desperation for positive change, combined with careful analysis of data, were keys to building a strong case. Clear communication of the findings to interested parties at all levels also was a necessary step in our success. Additional support is now found from parents, administrators, classroom and special education teachers, as well as board members. Many of these stakeholders have come to observe lessons. Each of these groups bears witness to the benefits of Reading Recovery in children’s lives in our educational setting. Living through this process has helped me believe even more strongly that one teacher’s effort on behalf of children makes a big difference.

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**About the Author**

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