What difference does Reading Recovery make—for a district?

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This year, as I embark on my 38th year as an educator dedicated to improving the learning and lives of young people, I realize that the only viable educational vision is a long-term one. Change is hard, and raising the achievement of students is not a task for the shortsighted or the fainthearted. The work and nurturing we do today or this year—for students or a school system—may not bloom into full fruition for a decade. I have learned, as an educational leader, to be patient and to focus relentlessly on the practices that produce positive results for kids. Because of this long-term vision for both the students I serve and the districts that employ me, I have had a 25-year love affair with Reading Recovery.

For 25 of those 38 years, I have worked in a variety of central office administrative positions—from director to assistant superintendent to superintendent. For two-and-a-half decades, every position I have held has included direct responsibility for instructional programs and how well students are learning. During this time and in every position, improving teaching and learning—and thus increasing student achievement—has been my central focus.

In 1984, I was fortunate to attend a session in Columbus, Ohio, on a new program for our lowest-performing students. It was called Reading Recovery. From the beginning, I understood that this program was different. Rather than waiting for students to struggle for a few years and then intervene—as was the norm—Reading Recovery focused on the lowest first graders and provided intensive support early to move them into the mainstream of classroom learning. This was revolutionary in 1984; in 2009, this has become recognized as best practice.

During these 25 years, I have been able to implement Reading Recovery in three very different districts, from rural to suburban to urban. As Reading Recovery was implemented in each district, I watched as the intervention rescued the academic lives of our lowest students, helped to increase student achievement overall, developed the capacity of teachers, and transformed the instructional program. These changes were never immediate. Like the academic abilities of our lowest students, strengthening performance and changing teaching practice is an evolving process. The benefits of Reading Recovery—to both the students and the districts—take time to realize.

For these struggling students, the benefits are by now well documented. The great majority—somewhere around 70-80% who complete the program—experience such growth that they move into the middle of the class during first grade. Academic growth for most of these students is sustained well into successive grades and shows up in later indicators such as school grades and standardized test performance. The professional literature is well populated with statistical and anecdotal research about the short-term and long-term benefits of Reading Recovery for students.

What is less well understood are the substantial long-term benefits of Reading Recovery to the school and district. Because the focus of this intervention is on the lowest-emerging readers, Reading Recovery can also have a dramatic effect on several cost factors. For example, when fully and properly implemented, my districts have realized a significant decrease in retentions in first grade, saving between $5,000 and $8,000 per student per year. Also, in all three of my districts, these lowest students—who previously demanded the greatest level of support and intervention—have required significantly less support after their Reading Recovery lessons were discontinued, resulting in reduced need for such additional expenditures as continued Title I intervention. Even greater savings result from the fact that significantly fewer of these lowest-performing students are referred to special education placement, which often resulted in more than a decade of additional support and cost. Beyond the dramatic impact on the academic lives of these students, Reading Recovery can and does result in significant financial savings for the district, even after taking into the consideration of the cost of the one-on-one intervention.

Over the years, I have also watched Reading Recovery raise the level of understanding and knowledge of reading instruction among my elementary teachers. Many of my Reading Recovery teachers have brought the strengths of increased knowledge and expertise in how to serve
the emerging reader to their classroom and then to the building at large. In all three districts, by virtue of their enhanced understanding of reading, Reading Recovery teachers have often become both formal and informal leaders in literacy and instruction within the building and have served as mentors for other primary teachers. Of course, this is not true of all Reading Recovery teachers; like all other educators, Reading Recovery teachers cover the gamut of different personalities, strengths, and personal abilities. But many of my Reading Recovery teachers have gone on to serve as building leadership team members, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators.

For all three districts I have served, Reading Recovery has also provided the impetus for change in the primary language arts program. Because of the insight Reading Recovery teachers bring to both their intervention and classroom instruction, they often help colleagues see the teaching of reading in a different light. Under the leadership of Reading Recovery teachers, other teachers often have raised their instruction closer to best practice, transforming the primary language arts program to be more effective and student-centered. In all three districts, Reading Recovery has become the cornerstone of the evolution of primary reading instruction to best practice.

Perhaps most important of all, in all three districts, Reading Recovery has become the critical safety net for our lowest first-grade students. By providing targeted support for these struggling students, Reading Recovery has enabled these districts to realize sustained academic improvement. For example, in Xenia Community Schools, an urban district of about 5,000 students, we have been able to maintain a 12-year trend of continuous improvement in student achievement. Although we have focused on several improvement strategies, I am well aware that Reading Recovery is one contributing factor of this improvement.

It has been said that the success of a civilization can be judged by how well it cares for the least able; I believe this argument is analogous to schools as well. Many of our lowest students encounter huge challenges when they walk into our schools. Far too many come from homes of meager means, have very limited literacy backgrounds, and even more limited literacy experiences. As educators we have learned, sometimes the hard way, that few strategies or approaches can effectively support these neediest students. After 25 years, it is now clear that for almost all these students Reading Recovery can rescue them from illiteracy and academic failure. And after 25 years of administrative experience in three different districts, I have come to realize that Reading Recovery can help to conserve the very limited district financial resources, develop teacher leaders, and invigorate primary reading instruction.

Lessons learned

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As a Reading Recovery site coordinator in an urban school district for over 10 years, I have learned many lessons, two of which I would like to share with you. These lessons illustrate the importance of advocacy by highlighting the visibility and value of Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL).

Visibility is often high when Reading Recovery and DLL are first implemented. Originally, our implementation began with 60 Reading Recovery and DLL teachers, and three teacher leaders to support our 17 Title I campuses. Campus administrators wanted as much support and assistance as they could secure to educate their staff on the tenets of the program and how it could support the classroom. All campuses worked to implement the use of running records, both as a part of the intensive intervention and in the regular classroom. Consequently, the teacher leaders were very busy providing professional development districtwide. Reading Recovery teacher leaders and teachers were also involved in providing campus professional development on an ongoing basis.

One very active teacher leader led the charge to make sure all principals and the district administrators received data reports and understood the interpretation. She made results visible through reports to the board of trustees and at principals’ meetings. Another teacher leader worked actively to ensure visibility with the bilingual teachers. She was responsible for the continuing contact of all of the bilingual teachers and often was asked to offer campus and districtwide professional development for the bilingual staff. The third teacher leader was a former special education teacher and conducted ongoing professional development for many of the special education teachers. Together, they advocated for Reading Recovery and DLL.
across the district and on all Title I elementary campuses. Classroom teachers embraced guided reading and running records, which were implemented districtwide, with the Reading Recovery teacher leaders and teachers assisting with professional development at all levels.

**Lesson 1: The work to maintain visibility requires continuous effort over time.** Changes at the central office level and at the school level require continuous attention to keeping Reading Recovery visible and viable. Specifically, visibility is aided by the development of district and campus plans.

A formal and visible plan provides a mechanism for all stakeholder groups to contribute to and feel a part of the success of Reading Recovery. The formal plan is best when it is an integral part of the district language arts plan. Annual reports documenting the progress made by Reading Recovery and DLL children may highlight cost effectiveness impacts by showing reductions in retentions, reductions in more-costly remediation, and the cost savings of fewer referrals and placements in special education.

Another recommendation is to establish a parent support group. Parents are valuable advocates and their input can lead to greater voices in decisions to maintain or eliminate Reading Recovery.

The final recommendation would be to publicly recognize outstanding administrators who support Reading Recovery both locally and nationally.

Value, according to Webster, is defined as follows: A fair return; relative worth or importance; degree of excellence; precise significance; something intrinsically valuable or desirable. (Merriam-Webster, 2005). I like the last definition most of all because the ability to read is intrinsically valuable or desirable, and is, therefore, what we want for the struggling first grader who has limited understandings of concepts of print or knowledge of letters entering first grade. Initially, these children have not grasped the reading process. However, in 12–20 weeks most reach the average reading levels of their peers. The children are socially, emotionally, and academically rewarded when they become readers and writers. Therefore, the true value of Reading Recovery can be found in the success of the children served. Reading Recovery prevents reading failure and opens the doors for academic success.

The importance of accelerated progress made in first grade can often be disregarded as literacy achievement demands in higher grades escalate. Schools are tempted to pull support from first grade in order to provide tutoring for students facing high stakes tests in the upper grades, or they become focused on the quantity of students served rather than the quality. As a site coordinator, I have learned the real value that Reading Recovery teachers can bring to a school — both in their ability to accelerate the progress of first-grade readers and the knowledge that they can provide when working with teachers and students in the other part of their day. Our Reading Recovery teachers and teacher leaders have been invaluable resources across the grades by leading book studies, professional learning, and demonstration lessons that support classroom instruction beyond first grade. The literacy training that Reading Recovery teachers receive contributes greatly to the effective implementation of literacy coaching and response to intervention models currently valued in schools.

**Lesson 2: It is vital to continuously articulate and advocate the value of Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura.** Too often, the success of Reading Recovery becomes taken for granted. As district and school leaders, we must continue to proclaim Reading Recovery and DLL as powerful interventions that not only build capacity in our schools and teachers, but also result in initial and ongoing academic growth. As historically documented by the data, positive, sustainable changes are made in the academic lives of the former struggling learners. What a valuable investment!

Reading Recovery needs to be recognized for the contribution it makes to student success across the grades. Longitudinal studies support the continued gains made by students who received Reading Recovery and DLL in first grade. Reading Recovery teachers can partner closely with classroom teachers across the grades and contribute actively to the literacy learning of the school as a whole.

Please remember, it is critically important for each of us to be strong advocates for Reading Recovery. To communicate the value of Reading Recovery, it may be useful to establish a local Reading Recovery website and embed a link to the Reading Recovery Council of North America (RRCNA) website. Solicit advocacy and membership for RRCNA on an ongoing basis. Continue to share the research. Articulate the value of one-to-one instruction for struggling learners and aid schools in distinguishing for whom one-to-one instruction is essential.

In closing, to ensure that Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura become a foundational part of the school and district comprehensive literacy plan, site coor-
dinators, teacher leaders, and teachers must work together to make the intervention both visible and valued to all stakeholders.

The gift of Reading Recovery

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The gift of Reading Recovery that has been given to school districts over the past 25 years is quite noteworthy, and I am honored on this celebratory occasion to contribute my thoughts on its impact. I have been very fortunate to be the Fort Bend ISD Reading Recovery/Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL) site coordinator for the past 15 years and as such I have had the opportunity to observe and be a part of the quite positive results that have been achieved through the implementation of this intervention in our district.

In writing this piece, I am reminded of a recent “graduation ceremony” for our Reading Recovery and DLL teachers-in-training. This event provided an excellent opportunity for me to reflect upon our implementation as we celebrated our 15th anniversary. Today, those reflections seem quite apropos for a 25th anniversary tribute.

As the honorees received their recognition, several things came to mind regarding the influence of Reading Recovery in Fort Bend ISD. First, Reading Recovery has become part of the fabric of our district and has been instrumental in building a “community of support” for every child in our district to become a successful reader and writer. As I looked out over the graduation audience, I noted that there were both current and former Reading Recovery/DLL teachers. These highly trained teachers are valued presenters and curriculum writers in our district. Many campus administrators were also there, several of whom were former teachers in our implementation. Their influence in terms of quality early literacy instruction in the classroom is powerful. Central office staff were in attendance as well, many of whom were also once Reading Recovery/DLL teachers. Along with the assistant superintendents who were our speakers for the occasion, they are collaboratively shaping our district’s sharp focus on literacy for all.

Secondly, Reading Recovery has given us great opportunity to think more deeply about our work in early literacy. One of the graduates came up to me to say, “This was the best decision I ever made. I thought I knew how to teach reading and now I know I didn’t. This training has taught me what I needed to know.” As she said that, I recalled that 15 years ago we had silos of reading programs/interventions, all operating within our district as distinct entities. Some of these efforts were even contradictory in their approach to reading instruction. Once we began our implementation of Reading Recovery/DLL, it opened our minds and eyes to the necessity for us to reconsider what we were doing. As a result, today we have an integrated, districtwide literacy plan that serves us quite well.

Thirdly, our implementation has given rise to systems for positive change in early literacy. Our new graduates are part of schoolwide literacy teams operating on each of their campuses. While these teams began as monitoring systems for shepherding the ongoing success of our former Reading Recovery/DLL students, today they could be characterized as professional learning communities. Conversations at these team meetings center on continuous improvement of literacy instruction in the schools. At the district level, we also have a K–8 literacy team that serves a similar function. And, at the same time, our Reading Recovery/DLL advisory board keeps us on track in terms of maintaining high quality in our implementations.

Finally, Reading Recovery has helped ensure that we do not lose sight of the individual child. Before our ceremony began, a slide show prominently displayed the faces of our teachers and their students. You could see the teachers smiling broadly as they saw the pictures of each child they had served, each an individual memory of progress. At the same time, some 8,000 faces representing a very diverse population of struggling readers flashed before me as I recalled 15 years of success — success we have achieved one child at a time through Reading Recovery/DLL.

Of course there were even more positive remembrances of our implementation that flooded my mind that day. For example, there is so much to be said about the positive influence of our teacher leaders. But for today, I will stop here. Hopefully by honoring at least in small part the considerable impact of Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura in our district, I have also paid tribute to the extensive, positive influence of Reading Recovery over the past 25 years throughout North America! Our story, I know, is not unique in terms of the power of this intervention.
The impact of Reading Recovery:  
A university perspective

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When Marie Clay posited that the most-tangled learners could be assisted by supportive teaching which scaffolds learning and addresses the unique way in which each individual learns to read, she may not have realized the profound impact that this would have on the role and skills of teachers in the classroom and on those who work in the preparation of teachers at the university level. Reading Recovery training programs for teachers, teacher leaders, and trainers have helped to create communities of learning within schools and have decimated the isolating barriers among teachers who used to be consigned to working alone in their classrooms.

University faculties have become more visible and more engaged in schools assisting, monitoring, and analyzing data side-by-side with Reading Recovery teachers. Administrators are attending conferences and professional development related to reading and literacy. The conversation in schools is changing as students, who might otherwise have been identified as special education students or who might have been left behind, are now able to maintain their appropriate level of literacy because of the teaching which supports their learning.

Teachers are becoming researchers as they maintain running records, conduct case studies, and use data gathered in their own work and with their own students to modify their teaching. This is tremendously empowering and enlightening. Some states, like Arkansas, have seen these changes to be so beneficial that they have committed ongoing support to the training center.

Much-needed conversations have evolved among deans of colleges housing reading programs and Reading Recovery. Those conversations network with dialogues among teachers and school administrators. These broad and deep discussions of fundamental issues with regard to student learning have engaged our licensure candidates, helped us assist schools in meeting national expectations with regard to student achievement, and provided the bridge to other important conversations and partnerships along the K–20 continuum. Those of us who work with and worry about literacy achievement in our PreK–12 schools have literally become a community of learners because of the impact of Reading Recovery, directly on students and indirectly upon us.

From this base have evolved intervention models and partnerships that a decade ago would have been the stuff of our imaginings. As has been the case for years in K–12 education, many of the successful strategies employed in Reading Recovery have been adopted and adapted for use in early childhood programs and these strategies are working well there. The lessons and impact of Reading Recovery from the university perspective lend credence to Norman Vincent Peale’s observation: “Change your thoughts and you change your world.” The work and implementation of that work—plus the designs for learning that Marie Clay inspired—have changed the thoughts of many educators. In so doing, we are changing the futures of youngsters in our schools, thereby providing them with new opportunities and with the literacy tools for academic and lifelong success.