Reflections on a 20-Plus-Year Implementation of Reading Recovery in a Large Suburban School District

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Retirement offers an opportunity to reflect on one’s profession and to consider contributions made, missed opportunities, and lessons learned. As a director of special programs and chief academic officer at the time of my retirement, my career included many aspects, but one aspect in particular—my role as site coordinator for Reading Recovery/Descubriendo la Lectura in a large, suburban district—is an area I have often revisited.

I am a staunch advocate for this reading intervention and a big fan! My pride in being part of a team that adopted and implemented Reading Recovery for over 20 years is substantial. However, it is tempered somewhat by a realization that I was in a key position that allows me now to see what we might have done differently, especially given the fact that 3 years after my retirement, my former district discontinued Reading Recovery.

Upon reflection, there are places where we got our implementation right and times when ‘more’ or ‘different’ was needed. Our implementation ran both long and deep—over time, full implementation in over 40 elementary schools in the district—and in that regard there is much to ponder. While we successfully served thousands of children, the outcomes we achieved did not always come easily. And in some ways, as the years progressed, the work became more daunting in terms of keeping our large-scale, long-term implementation going. But let me go back to the beginning and then elaborate on our story in a way that hopefully will provide some meaningful lessons learned that can inform the work of others.

Our Beginning

I was a member of the team back in 1994 that was actively involved in making the decision to implement Reading Recovery in our school district. It is noteworthy that our team did not make this decision impulsively. Rather, we deeply researched our options in providing a proven, effective literacy program for our struggling early learners, and we made a very thoughtful, fully considered decision based upon our findings.

At that point in my career, I was not a ‘newbie’ in education. I fully understood the capricious nature of school district decision making, having been involved in several well-intentioned, fly-by-night implementations that were abandoned early on in favor of yet another promising practice. This pattern of constantly changing school improvement agendas obviously did not produce desired results and served to foster an attitude among skeptical teachers “that this too shall pass.” I would characterize these efforts as examples of ‘implementation light’ with minimal results.

When we researched Reading Recovery over 20 years ago, our team was dedicated to changing this implementation pattern. Our goal was to find a proven innovation that fit our needs, to implement this innovation with high quality, and to sustain it over time. And in this manner and attitude, we began our Reading Recovery implementation. Based upon its track record, it was a best bet in terms of tackling one of our thorniest issues—ensuring that our students were successful readers and writers by Grade 3. This was a challenging goal, given the diversity of our student population in terms of countries of origin and economic status, but one that we were fervent about addressing. Our task was to implement this very promising intervention with the attention and quality needed for it to succeed in our district over the long term.

The Implementation Plan

From the start, our plan was to put into place “anchors” to sustain the intervention over time and to implement it with integrity and high quality to achieve maximum results across the diverse populations we served. These anchors consisted of both structures and attitudes that we believed would help us achieve excel-
ience and overcome the tendency to step through that trapdoor of revolving, serial implementations. A discussion of what I considered to be a few of our key anchors follows.

“We” attitude
A cornerstone of our plan was to embrace the ‘we’ attitude upon which Reading Recovery is founded. Looking at the structure of its implementation, our team was struck by the multilayered system of university trainers, site coordinators, teacher leaders, and teachers working in tandem to achieve positive outcomes for students. We were impressed by this network of oversight and support. Ultimately, we expanded upon this collaborative, layered approach to further anchor our own implementation within the district. Our ‘we’ included me as the site coordinator, teacher leaders, and Reading Recovery teachers, as well as principals, other campus-level teachers and staff members, central office personnel, board members, and community members.

Though the teacher leader/Reading Recovery teacher interface is a critical one, we also recognized the need to build a strong, active partnership between the teacher leaders and myself as site coordinator. The respective roles of each position are critical, but different, in achieving a highly effective implementation. And from the start, we adopted an attitude that regular communication and collaboration were keys to functioning as an effective team. Consequently, the teacher leaders and I conducted monthly meetings and came together in a summer retreat. Within our meeting structure we saw ourselves as problem finders and problem solvers, keeping a very watchful eye on our implementation and proactively addressing issues that detracted from our mission.

Our site coordinator/teacher leader team expanded to include principals. Interestingly, the recent Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) report on the i3 scale-up of Reading Recovery (May, Sirinides, Gray, & Goldsworthy, 2016) notes the critical importance of the principal’s buy-in and prioritization of the program in maximizing results. We certainly found this to be true in our implementation, and we cultivated this partnership from the start by putting a number of structures in place — including our application process for becoming a Reading Recovery campus, the teacher interview process, the requirement of school literacy teams, and principals’ in-services for effective literacy instruction. An essential component of each was the active involvement of the principal and a commitment to implement each of these with integrity. Principals not only committed to attend four required meetings each year in order to grow their literacy leadership and Reading Recovery oversight, but they also agreed to implement school literacy teams at their campuses in order to monitor results and to enhance literacy outcomes throughout the school. They also were expected to regularly review their teachers’ Reading Recovery data and to monitor student progress.

The teacher leaders and principals also worked as a team to interview prospective Reading Recovery teachers and make agreed-upon selections. As the i3 evaluation report underscored, teacher selection is a high-stakes matter (May et al., 2016, p. 146). Our team interview process helped ensure that our pool of teachers was top-notch and their skills and dispositions were well matched to this challenging yet very rewarding position. In the few instances where Reading Recovery was not a good match for a selected teacher, the principal, teacher leaders, and I worked as a team to counsel the teacher out of the program and place him or her back into a better-matched instructional setting.

The collaborative efforts of our central Reading Recovery team along with campus-level principals were essential, as were such efforts at the district level. The ‘we’ factor within our central office played an important role in our longevity and success. Reading Recovery was not housed within the district’s curriculum department, but rather within special programs, creating a scenario where we may have been working at competing purposes. Therefore, throughout our implementation, building a strong collaboration with our curriculum folks was a focus. One way we created teamwork was through the structure of a districtwide early literacy planning team whose function was to align early literacy instructional efforts throughout the system, with Reading Recovery being an essential component of a comprehensive plan to ensure all students were effective readers and writers by Grade 3.

Our ‘we’ also extended beyond the campus level to include a district-level advisory team whose purpose was to support and advocate for the long-term implementation of Reading Recovery. The teacher leaders and I were responsible for recruiting members and developing the meeting agendas. Our membership was diverse and included representatives
of the school board, central office staff, principals, Reading Recovery and general education classroom teachers, parents of Reading Recovery students, and community members. At each meeting we shared positive results of our implementation, but we also solicited input on issues such as Reading Recovery teacher recruitment and retention and funding. At our annual new teacher graduation, our members were prominent and often had a part in the program. They also visited lessons and training sessions to further give teachers the lift of their positive presence.

It is important to note that while a ‘we’ attitude was critical to our success, alone it was not enough in our minds to achieve our overall goals. Other components of our plan, such as our focus on data, were equally important.

Focus on data
Among the many positives of Reading Recovery is the focus on data. The depth and breadth of its data collection that is coordinated by the International Data Evaluation Center (IDEC) at The Ohio State University are gifts to any school district implementation. Of course, that statement only applies if something is done with the data. From the start, our team’s attitude was that data is important and we agreed that we would regularly collect and use data in a meaningful way to inform our work. Therefore, it was important that we have structures in place to ensure that the data analysis process occurred and appropriate actions were taken based upon our findings. A few examples follow.

Although the teacher leaders and I met monthly and regularly reviewed data, our annual retreat was especially important in framing our implementation goals for the coming year. We pored over the IDEC results and additional data not captured through the Reading Recovery evaluative process. The teacher leaders were quite effective in sorting and sifting teacher- and campus-level data within the umbrella of our overall district data to give us a clear picture of our strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Our discussions led to our plan for the coming year in terms of teacher training topics, development of training dates to maximize results, principal training topics, and campus selection for improvement and teacher leader oversight. These same strengths, weaknesses, and needs became our talking points and areas for monitoring at each of our monthly meetings as well.

At one point, our district became deeply involved in the Data Team Process developed by Doug Reeves (Besser, Anderson-Davis, & Peery, 2006). This process requires regular data analysis resulting in specific action plans. Although primarily designed for teacher-led data teams, this process was also utilized at the district level. The teacher leaders and I formed a team with our chief academic officer. We identified our lower-performing teachers and developed specific plans based on the data to enhance their results within their Reading Recovery lessons.

Our teacher leaders also exhibited great interest in data analysis in order to closely monitor teacher outcomes on student performance. Weekly book graphs that indicated each child’s progress up the set of leveled books are one example. The graphs were regularly submitted by the teachers and became indicators that signaled teacher leader intervention, teacher reminders, or celebrations of children’s progress. Principals were also trained to review the book graphs as an opportunity to ensure daily lessons and as conversation starters with teachers.

School literacy teams were also a structure for data analysis and monitoring. Topics for the meetings held every 6–8 weeks focused on data and problem solving within the teacher teams. These teams were critical in terms of monitoring student progress and discussing ways to lift the literacy learning across grade levels.

Principal meetings always included agenda items focused on data, and the principals were given numerous opportunities to utilize data to inform their campus implementations of Reading Recovery. We shared data in advisory board meetings and utilized our data to enhance the work of our district-level literacy planning
team. Uses of our data were multiple and powerful in strengthening our implementation. As well, our results were used widely to support a critical third piece of our plan — marketing for sustainability.

Marketing for sustainability
As mentioned earlier in this article, we were well aware of the capricious nature of school districts in terms of implementing innovations over time. Given that knowledge, we knew it was of critical importance to market Reading Recovery. This is not, of course, an activity that comes naturally to most school folks who have such a heart for their work that they cannot imagine that everyone does not immediately feel likewise about a certain intervention.

In our work together, the teacher leaders and I problem solved often and deeply about how to market our Reading Recovery implementation for long-term sustainability. As alluded to earlier, our ‘we’ attitude was in part a marketing endeavor. In our mind, the more people knowledgeable and involved in our work, either directly or tangentially, the more people we would have on our team. We wanted to grow advocates throughout the system and endeavored to do so on a regular basis. As an example, we initiated the idea to form a districtwide team to develop the previously discussed literacy plan. This resulted in a plan into which Reading Recovery was embedded and also helped promote classroom instruction that welcomed and built upon the strengths of our Reading Recovery students. It also grew our advocate pool among the ranks in the central office and on campuses.

Marketing efforts also included presentations and written materials targeted to cabinet-level administrators and school board members. Although we were not successful in our requests to conduct annual presentations to the board regarding our results, we did have that opportunity on a couple of occasions. One unique idea was volunteering to have a small number of current and former Reading Recovery students present a thank you gift to our board members during Board Appreciation Month. We also had schools invite board members to view lessons and congratulate our students. In addition to these and other face-to-face marketing efforts, we created numerous evaluation reports and highlights of our implementation for broad distribution.

Marketing was a main function of our district advisory board, and we encouraged this group to promote our work throughout the district and community. Additionally, we asked for input from our members on how to ensure our sustainability over time. It is interesting to note that when the question of dropping Reading Recovery came before the school board, several of our former advisory board members either wrote letters supporting its continued implementation or spoke directly to school board members via phone or at that meeting.

A few years ago, with the assistance of the Reading Recovery Council of North America (RRCNA), we conducted a Friend Raiser for Reading Recovery and invited influential community members to learn about this intervention. Again, one of our main purposes was to grow advocates.

Our marketing efforts did not remain solely in-district, however. We were actively involved within the RRCNA network and took every opportunity to present at regional and national conferences utilizing principals, teachers, and even board members as our speakers. This resulted in positive press coverage and enhanced the favorability of Reading Recovery at the district level.

And last, but certainly not least, a main recipient of our marketing campaign was always the current superintendent. We endeavored to keep our leader regularly informed about our positive results through evaluation reports, parent testimonials, and principal reports of campus implementations. We also invited him or her to be a part of our implementation by speaking at teacher and principal training sessions. Invitations were also extended for the superintendent to attend training sessions and student lessons. Talking up Reading Recovery in various committee meetings with the superintendent also served us well. This part of our plan was important, and we thought creatively and deeply about different ways to keep the positives of Reading Recovery in their view. We also thought of ways to promote the superintendent through Reading Recovery, such as through a nomination to the RRCNA Superintendent’s Advisory Board and as a recipient of an Advocate for Literacy Award presented annually at the Texas Woman’s University conference for Reading Recovery professionals and educators in the field of early literacy.

Our implementation plan was ambitious and evolved as we moved along our implementation pathway. It was a plan that required nurturing and constant oversight and one which resulted in many positive outcomes.
Our Outcomes
Certainly it is important to note that we sustained our implementation over more than 20 years. This was no small feat given the fact that during that time period, we had several different superintendents who embraced its continuing implementation in the district. Thousands of students, representing the wide-ranging diversity of our population, were served. On our 20th anniversary we had successfully served 12,077 students. Our discontinuing rate mirrored that of the averages in the United States, and in several of our schools a 100% discontinuing rate was common and continuous. We also had evidence of sustained gains such as when we tracked the Grade 3 state reading assessment scores for our former Reading Recovery students. Their performance notably increased our districtwide passing rate percentage so as to move our district’s rating on this reading indicator up one level to the highest ranking.

Hundreds of teachers received the outstanding professional development that Reading Recovery provides. Their expertise had an impact on students in the Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura programs as well as on the students they served the other part of their day. Many of our teachers were also general education classroom teachers, serving approximately 21 students daily within that setting, and those students also gained benefit from their instructional expertise.

There were other, less-obvious effects as well:

- A cadre of principals made early literacy a priority in their schools and utilized their acquired training through Reading Recovery to improve literacy instruction in the early grades at their campuses.
- Leadership of our Reading Recovery team in collaboration with the central office curriculum team resulted in the development of a comprehensive K–3 literacy plan which served to improve literacy instruction in the district as a whole.
- The influence of Reading Recovery directly impacted the district’s utilization of more-effective tools for monitoring student acquisition of early literacy skills.
- Reading Recovery was a key, critical component of the district’s response to intervention (RTI) plan. The number of students referred for special education was significantly reduced.
- Reading Recovery teachers trained hundreds of general education classroom teachers in effective literacy instruction.
- Data analysis became more routinized through the implementation of school literacy teams and data discussions at principal meetings.
- Over time, Reading Recovery-trained professionals were placed in a variety of key, decision-making positions and were influential in supporting the longevity of our implementation.
- A team of school board members became Reading Recovery advocates and spread the word about its excellence at conferences outside the district. Two former members wrote an article in a statewide publication for other board members about the important questions to ask when districts propose innovations, using Reading Recovery as the example.

While proud of these accomplishments and the positive influence Reading Recovery had on instruction throughout our district over time, as well as the contributions we made beyond our local level, we were not by any means perfect in our implementation. Looking back, there were other proactive actions we could have taken to support our success and longevity.

Reflections for Improvement
Given the fact that Reading Recovery has been discontinued in the district, I am prompted to reflect on why this occurred. And while answers to the reasons for its removal may not guarantee longevity, I believe we could have strengthened our position and made it more difficult for this intervention to be upended.

Energizing and re-energizing our advocacy efforts
What first comes to mind is that despite our ‘we’ attitude and marketing efforts, we did not sustain or grow enough committed advocates throughout our system over time. Early in our implementation, we
We should have stayed more focused on our implementation plan. With time, some of the structures and attitudes we so clearly valued at the onset lost their punch. We let other priorities interfere and did not fight hard enough or energize ourselves enough to keep those structures vibrant and meaningful.

were quite energetic about making our implementation a team effort and emphasizing the ‘we.’ However, our district, like many others, had significant turnover in its leadership ranks at both the district and campus levels. Keeping that energy and focus alive takes a lot of ongoing work. We attempted to grow the commitment and understandings of each new principal, but we often found that a different mindset occurs when a leader inherits rather than applies for a program. We needed to make a greater effort in bringing these new administrators to the Reading Recovery table and communicate clearly and concisely the value of this innovation to their overall instructional program at each of their specific campuses.

Another obstacle to building the advocacy and commitment of principals was that assistant superintendents were not always in alignment with our efforts. And while we worked to keep these cabinet-level professionals a part of our team by inviting them to join our advisory board and informing them in other ways, our efforts were not always supported. This most often occurred with turnover, as some new assistants had other priorities. In those cases, we needed a stronger plan to cultivate their interest and support. Also, at some point this group of assistant superintendents determined that principals should not be taken off their campuses for meetings unless approved, and our Reading Recovery principal meetings were cancelled. Our marketing efforts failed us in this regard, and we did not garner enough active principal support to continue the meetings. A question for us to ask ourselves at that point was whether our principal training plan was as compelling and meaningful as possible.

In the CPRE report referenced earlier, it is clear that principal leadership is a key, critical piece of an effective, long-term implementation of Reading Recovery. I would absolutely agree and wish I could have another go at cultivating their role as leader of literacy in the school.

Creating and maintaining a positive, collegial atmosphere
I think we sometimes inadvertently cultivated a culture that made us look “better than thou.” Perhaps we would have reflected a more collegial attitude had we paired Reading Recovery and classroom teachers as trainers in early literacy instruction. Or maybe we needed to give more recognition to the many hats a principal wears, and come to them with a “How can we help?” attitude. At times, we probably sent out a message that “Reading Recovery knows best” and failed to factor in how our listeners might be hearing that as arrogance.

Proactively planning for longevity
We should have developed a succession plan. Prior to my retirement, I was promoted to a cabinet-level instructional position. And while I was a key decision maker in who replaced me, I held onto my role as Reading Recovery site coordinator. Had I thought more long-term, I would have seen the value of cultivating a strong site coordinator who would embrace the role with great energy and enthusiasm. Instead, I
hurriedly crafted a plan soon before my leave-taking, which left little time to cultivate the necessary mindset for an incoming site coordinator. And while I had placed someone in a top curriculum leadership role that was an advocate for Reading Recovery and recommended placement of the program within the curriculum department, my effort fell short of what was needed.

Related to a lack of a succession plan was the lack of a plan to respond quickly to any effort to discontinue Reading Recovery at any level within the district. Essentially, we were so focused on supporting sustainability that we failed to consider what would be needed if the continuation of the program was imminently threatened. Rather than responding to such a threat with flat-footed surprise, we should have had a plan we could immediately and forcefully put into action. The time to respond most effectively and powerfully is NOT when a final decision is being made by a school board.

Final Analysis and Considerations

It can be concluded that we had a wonderful run in our implementation of Reading Recovery. But given its eventual outcome, there remain pertinent questions we needed to ask ourselves along the way to strengthen our positives and reduce our risks. For me, those questions include these:

- Are we valuing the structures and attitudes we have in place that strengthen and sustain our implementation and doing so in a manner that keeps them viable, visible, and vibrant?
- Are we adapting to changes and proactively placing ourselves in a position to be a meaningful part of those changes?
- Are we continuously maintaining and building our pool of advocates throughout the system?
- Are we continuously building the commitment of principals and supporting the very important role they play in the success of Reading Recovery?
- Are we viewed as integral, positive partners within a comprehensive literacy plan? If not, why not, and how do we improve our relationships to achieve increased success for students?
- Do we have in place a strong succession plan?
- Do we have a ready-for-immediate-action preparedness plan in case our implementation is threatened?

And if there was one thing I wish I had done that I didn’t, it would be to make sure the following occurred: When a new superintendent search was being contemplated, I wish I had made sure that Reading Recovery had a strong presence in brainstorming sessions as to what kind of superintendent the district wanted. I would have made sure board members included, as one criteria, that the newly hired superintendent would strongly support the continuation and sustainability of Reading Recovery as a key, necessary initiative in the district.

In summary, I was most fortunate to be a part of the implementation of Reading Recovery in our district. That work was a highlight of my career. At various times I was resolved, renewed, reflective, repentant, and reinspired—one student, one teacher, one teacher leader at a time—over and over again. And now! I am hopeful at some point Reading Recovery can be resurrected in the district! For the students who need its services, that time needs to come sooner rather than later.

References


About the Author

Dr. Mary Jackson is retired chief academic officer of a suburban school district in the Houston area. In that role, and in her earlier role as director of special programs in the school district, she was also the Reading Recovery site coordinator. An avid supporter, Mary has been actively involved in the work of RRCNA and has, among other contributions, served as both president and treasurer of the Council’s Board of Directors.

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