It was early in the spring of 2021, that I was finally able to take my mother for a drive near her home in Carlisle, PA. After a year of distancing, the chance to be in the same physical space with my mom was its own tonic. Add to that her 96 years of wisdom and perspective, and you have the makings of a memorable car ride.

The trees were still quite bare, and the surrounding farms were brown and dormant. My mom gazed out the window while I concentrated on the narrow hilly road. After some time, she turned to me and said, “Winter reveals structure, doesn’t it?” Puzzled, I asked, “What do you mean, Mom?” She went on to say that during summer, when everything is lush and leaf-filled, we can’t see the underlying architecture of living things.

Mom’s observation prompted me to research how master gardeners approach designing a landscape. I discovered that most experts find the effusive display of full bloom distracting and suggest that winter is the time to consider and plan a garden’s structure. During a lecture I attended at the Chicago Botanic Garden, Maria Smithburg encouraged gardeners to “always let the winter tell you something about the garden.”

According to Marie Clay (2001), using a different lens grants us the capacity to gain perspective. She says such a lens “is used for limited purposes for which it is particularly suited (like viewing things in detail or taking a panoramic photograph)” (p. 41). It occurred to me that winter could be a type of Marie Clay’s unusual lens, since it offers an opportunity to see what lies hidden from view during the growing season.

We have been in a winter season of sorts, pared down to the essentials during the pandemic. In light of the clarity this unusual lens provides, I’ve noticed some characteristics of our Reading Recovery Community’s landscape. I’ve reflected on our community’s navigation of the events of the past year and how we’ve viewed and tended our own garden. This atypical season gave us the rare opportunity to examine our structure, unencumbered by the excessive foliage of past growing seasons.

The Reading Recovery community’s vision is to “ensure the competencies necessary for a literate and productive future for children learning to read and write.” According to our mission statement, we aim to “construct collaborative partnerships to change the trajectory of literacy achievement.” Measured against these aspirations, how did we fare during the past year? I would like to suggest some tangible indicators of the vitality of Reading Recovery that another, more typical year may have obscured.

Incredibly, Reading Recovery students who achieved Accelerated Progress outperformed their random sample peers in each and every measure of growth on the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (International Data Evaluation Center, 2021). This remarkable accomplishment is unprecedented and comes during a year when some of us did not see a single student in person! What seemed a dormant season proved quite the opposite, as the blooming of strong readers and writers revealed when spring returned. Whether teachers taught remotely in a hybrid manner, or in person with social distancing protocols in place, learning and acceleration happened. The strength of the lesson framework, combined with the deliberate and dexterous expertise of teachers, ensured that children received the high-quality, responsive teaching that is at the heart of Reading Recovery instruction. Good soil (a sound theory), strong roots (a history of thoughtful practice), and plentiful sunlight and rain (a commitment to daily instruction) led to vibrant growth.

We proved to ourselves and to others that our intervention is effective in all seasons because we do whatever it takes to find a way to teach children to read and write.

This past winter also allowed us to see parts of our structure that were hidden by the foliage of previous springs, such as the vital support of a child’s family in the process.
of learning to read and write. Due to the necessities of online learning, many of us were able to connect with the families of our children in more authentic and tangible ways. Families welcomed us into their homes, and we traded the more sterile environment of the classroom for the warmth of kitchens and family rooms. Of course, our families have always been there, but the recent winter of the pandemic reminded us that family connections are critical when growing readers and writers.

In addition, our technical expertise grew exponentially and surprised us. Teachers and teacher leaders, with the support of trainers, found creative ways to maintain the integrity of the Reading Recovery lesson while delivering instruction through a variety of virtual platforms. This is knowledge that will serve us in many ways in the future — from coaching opportunities to increased collegial collaboration. Our attention to the whole child seated (albeit virtually) beside us deepened. We proved our ability to respond proactively through innovation and collaboration and were elated to see the positive effects on children’s learning.

Since a garden’s structure is more apparent in the winter, gardeners can more easily see gaps in the design, opportunities for new growth.

This is true in our community as well. New initiatives at RRCNA have grown out of a careful look at ways in which our mission can be strengthened and enhanced. The pared-down nature of the past year gave us an unusual lens for noticing and elevating possibilities for new growth.

In June, Past President Amy Smith, President-Elect Maeghan McCormick, and I attended a presidents’ retreat, hosted by RRCNA Executive Director Billy Molasso. Together we reflected on past and present, while imagining prospects for future initiatives. The events of the past year gave us a renewed sense of urgency to examine possibilities for new growth. One of the most important topics we discussed was Kivvit’s work on our behalf. For those of you new to Kivvit, this public affairs strategist has been working with us since January 2021, to assist our organization by crafting a concise, compelling message for the public. Because of Kivvit’s deep dive into opposition research, as well as testing what messages from our community have the greatest resonance, we are positioned to have a more targeted and robust impact on the literacy conversation taking place in the public square.

We found another opportunity to cultivate new growth in the formation of our Legislative Response Team (LRT). It has been a while since our community focused on advocacy at the state level. The LRT will help us identify and respond to legislative initiatives that directly or indirectly impact the implementation of Reading Recovery at the state and local level. Responses can be quickly crafted and mobilized in real time, to sustain and grow our spheres of influence.

My mom opened my eyes, and hopefully yours as well, to the beauty and clarity that a winter season lays bare. And once we’ve gazed through this unusual lens, we can’t unsee what we’ve discovered. We can’t waste what we’ve learned. The challenges of the last year revealed a vibrant community, and I’m excited to see what new growth springs from our proposed initiatives. Tending a healthy and robust garden requires constant attention and expert care. We’ve learned a lot about ourselves as a community from the past winter. As we move into yet another, I believe we do so as more evolved gardeners with a deeper understanding of our landscape.

References

Let me guess: You became an educator because you adore thoroughly digesting reams of “legal-ese” and analyzing the means and motivations behind rules, regulations, and mandates.

No? Maybe not.

I’ll try again. You became an educator because you deeply care for the well-being of your students and want to use your voice to help them learn. A true advocate for kids, especially those struggling with literacy.

I bet that’s closer to the mark.

Depending on how long you’ve been in education, you’ve likely found yourself treading in the wake of at least one tsunami of bad policy, be it testing mandates, overly prescriptive methods, or other “red tape” measures that—however well-intentioned in their inception—have contributed to educator overwhelm and presumably even the national teacher shortage. If only those laws had been shaped by or had the voices of true advocates behind them!

In “Interpreting Policy for Practice: A 4-Part Process” (page 17 of this issue), Rachael Gabriel outlines a framework through which educators can “systematically analyze policy so that they may respond to it with integrity” (p. 17). Gabriel offers multiple examples of policies enacted over the past several years and examines where legislation slanted toward science of reading “has codified a narrow and often misleading brand of certainty about what counts as appropriate reading instruction and intervention” (p. 23). Gabriel illuminates where the underlying sentiment of a law may have been pure in its intent toward helping struggling readers, but where over-prescriptive measures often leave out those who may not fit into the narrow view of those who crafted the legislation.

Gabriel posits, “Since this batch of new laws is increasingly prescriptive about what to teach and assess, it is increasingly important that educators have tools and frameworks with which to productively engage with policy in order to ensure it is implemented with integrity in relation to both learners and the law” (p. 23).

That is exactly where the Reading Recovery Community comes in!

The time is long past where educators can sit by and assume that the laws and policy enacted will be thoughtfully laid out with the needs of our students in mind. Now is the time when real educators contribute to legislative conversation — to have their wisdom from the field, the classroom, and the intervention office be heard by those shaping policy. This need was the impetus for us to create the Legislative Response Team, which recently had its inaugural meeting to outline its goals and strategies for amplifying the voice of our members in state-level advocacy.

And when we say the “voices of our members,” this includes yours! This is officially your call to action. In the coming weeks and months (and hopefully years and decades), watch for opportunities to make your voice heard on legislative issues that affect our students.

This is officially your call to action. In the coming weeks and months (and hopefully years and decades), watch for opportunities to make your voice heard on legislative issues that affect our students.
As the board of directors continues to revamp the existing committee structure to best serve our members, check out these two opportunities for our members to get involved:

NEW! Community Advocacy Committee  
*Currently seeking chair, chair-elect, and members*

Calling passionate proponents of Reading Recovery to help us spread success stories in your community and beyond! The Community Advocacy Committee facilitates resources and strategies for Reading Recovery professionals to advocate in their local communities, including with other teachers in their buildings, with building and district leadership, school boards, parents and families, and others at the local community level. The Community Advocacy Committee will work in coordination with a new Legislation Response Team that will focus on state-level advocacy issues.

Blog Review Committee  
*Currently seeking members*

Blog Review Committee is looking for educators who love reading and Reading Recovery to recruit and give feedback to aspiring bloggers. This is an easy volunteer opportunity with a minimal time commitment that allows you the first look at key issues from the field — perfect for those who like to keep up with the latest in literacy.

Interested in serving? Log in to the Reading Recovery Community Forum and go the Volunteer tab to find these and more volunteer opportunities.

In whatever way you choose or are able to contribute, we urge you to be vocal in your support; be louder than the detractors. Who knows? Yours could be the voice that helps inform the next wave of policy. Let’s use our collective voices in support of the learners who need us most.

share one of your own, or otherwise use your expertise to enlighten those in your sphere of influence about Reading Recovery as a non-negotiable piece of literacy curriculum.

Would you like to contribute on an even deeper level? Sign up for the new Community Advocacy Committee to facilitate resources and strategies for Reading Recovery professionals to strongly advocate for Reading Recovery, DLL, IPLE, and Literacy Lessons in their local communities—including with other teachers in their buildings, with building and district leadership, school boards, parents and families, and others at the local community level.
Teacher Leader Awards
Support Training for Three

Three teacher leaders are in training thanks to a generous donation from Pioneer Valley Books. These awards are funded to school districts that have demonstrated a commitment to Reading Recovery and have selected a qualified teacher leader candidate.

School District of Waukesha, Waukesha, WI
Lisa Lawrenz brings over 12 years of teaching to her training as a teacher leader. She has a master’s degree in bilingual education and ESL certification from University of Wisconsin-Madison. Lisa is looking forward to expanding her knowledge and supporting the growth of the district’s Reading Recovery teachers so they can provide the most expert instruction to struggling readers.

Gwinnett County Public Schools, Gwinnett, GA
Sharon Smith brings 20 years of experience to her training as a teacher leader and has a PhD in language and literacy education from University of Georgia. Gwinnett County Schools has been a Reading Recovery site for 26 years and is working to significantly increase the amount of Reading Recovery teachers in the district. Sharon is dedicated to place a high priority on building relationships as the foundation for all learning, both for Reading Recovery teachers and students. Sharon is training at Georgia State University.

University Consortium at National Louis University, Lisle, IL
Dana Hagerman brings 18 years of teaching experience and a doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in literacy from The University of Wisconsin. She is committed to partnering with diverse communities to strengthen education programs to ensure that Reading Recovery teachers are ready to teach in diverse classrooms. Dana is training at National Louis University.

Professional Development Awards Help Fund LitCon 2022 Registration
Generous donors have contributed awards to help offset the cost of registration for LitCon 2022. Awards will be presented to Reading Recovery teachers, teachers-in-training, teacher leaders, university trainers, or administrators who support the implementation of Reading Recovery.

Applicants must be current members of RRCNA to qualify. More information can be found on the RRCNA or LitCon website.

Geri Stone Memorial Fund awards will also be awarded to help offset the cost of attendance, teaching supplies, and more.
Virtual Teacher Leader Institute Informs and Inspires

Hailed by some as “The best TLI ever!” the 2021 Teacher Leader Institute was held virtually June 15–18, 2021. The theme of this year’s event was “Stronger Together: A Collaborative Inquiry on Theory & Practice,” and offered opportunities for teacher leaders, site coordinators, and trainers to connect, collaborate, and strengthen their bonds as educators on a mission. Top notch presenters included keynotes by Mary Fried and Jeffery Williams, plus informative sessions on data, equity, and much more. Read what some attendees had to say.

“Extraordinary speakers, rich audience participation, relevant content, numerous takeaways—best of literacy PD experiences!!!”

“TLI is rejuvenating, inspiring, and collaborative! My first experience was amazing, and it will have you thinking/planning for the upcoming school year. Thanks!”

“It is such a great experience to close out one year and start a new fresh with new questions and new thinking. I would do just about anything to go every year, online or in person!”

SAVE THE DATE!

Teacher Leader Institute

JUNE 21 - 24, 2022
IN LEGENDARY LOUISVILLE, KY