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**schools**

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There is no doubt that having just one great teacher can make a difference in the life of a child. But having a series of great teachers can make a much bigger difference. The work of a single, outstanding teacher can be largely undone if subsequent teachers are less effective and engaging. And variation from one teacher to the next—in everything from terminology used to strategies emphasized—can cause students confusion as they transition from one year to the next.

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I am so proud to have *Catching Schools* in the *Research-Informed Classroom* series. The series aims to bring rigorous classroom-based research to bear on persistent challenges of classroom practice. Surely helping struggling schools become more effective in their literacy instruction is a persistent and formidable challenge, and Barbara Taylor meets it commandingly with her own research and research of trusted colleagues as well as insights from top-notch teachers and years of experience in schools across the nation. My aspiration for the *Research-Informed Classroom* series is to make research accessible, appealing, and actionable. In *Catching Schools* we learn about the actions we can take tomorrow, next week, next month, and every year to catch schools and turn them into the literacy learning environments all students deserve.

—*Nell K. Duke*

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# **schools**

AN ACTION GUIDE TO SCHOOLWIDE READING IMPROVEMENT

**Barbara M. Taylor**

HEINEMANN  
Portsmouth, NH



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# Foreword



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The title of Barbara Taylor’s new book says it all. *Catching Schools: An Action Guide to Schoolwide Reading Improvement*. The metaphor of catching schools is powerful because each of its possible meanings captures a part of the genius of Barbara’s work with schools and teachers. One can “catch” a school before it falls too far—just as we catch a toddler before she loses her balance and tumbles to the ground. Thus, Barbara talks about the importance of focusing our attention, as a profession, on those schools whose students are most at risk of failing to learn to read well. We need to catch those schools before they tumble toward, or beyond, mediocrity. One can also “catch” a school in its ascendancy, just after it has begun the improvement process, to provide just that little nudge here and there, just that perfect planning form or reflection tool at just the right time—not too early and not too late—to help accelerate the faculty’s progress on their self-determined improvement trajectory.

I had the enormous privilege of working as Professor Taylor’s collaborator in what I like to call the “middle phase” of her work on school-based reading reform—the CIERA School Change work that stretched from 1998–2004. I consider her earlier work with EIR (Early Intervention in Reading) to be the early phase and her work on Reading Excellence and Reading First in Minnesota to be the final (really the most recent) phase of the development of the approach she unfolds in this book. So I saw a lot of the principles she discusses in this book in action—in the schools we worked with in that project. More importantly, I witnessed the approach and the practices she recommends in a range of “beating the odds” and “aspiring” schools. The “beating the odds” schools were performing well beyond the level that would be predicted by their demographics; the “aspiring” schools were working to achieve that status.

The signature of this book, what sets it apart from other books that address the same challenge of guiding school reading reform, is its balance. And it is balanced in many ways—between research and practice, between different kinds of assessment, between code and meaning instruction, and between top-down and bottom-up approaches to professional development.

*Research and practice.* Because Professor Taylor has spent her career with one foot firmly planted in the research traditions of the academy and the other just as firmly planted inside classrooms in our public schools, she settles for reform activities and classroom pedagogy that serves two masters: (a) rigorous standards of empirical research (other things being equal, she directs us toward practices that come with the weight of empirical evidence), and (b) equally rigorous standards of practical wisdom (other things being equal, she directs us toward practices that acknowledge the goals, constraints, and opportunities that operate inside schools and classrooms). That is a very high bar to meet, but the good news is that those of us who follow her guidance will not be led astray.

It is important to remember that research, operationalized as gathering evidence about the efficacy of one's practice, is also critical in Barbara's approach. In fact, she is insistent that schools gather hard data from their own formative and summative assessments about student progress throughout the year; she is equally insistent that they meet as grade level and cross-grade level teams to interpret those data as a way of guiding future instruction. Again, a tight link between research and practice—but in this instance coming from inside the school.

*Balance in assessment.* Professor Taylor also gets assessment right, in terms of two kinds of balance—one between formative and summative assessment for gauging student progress and the other between assessing learning and assessing teaching. She encourages us to develop our own *school-wide system of formative assessments* that can be used to (a) evaluate progress over time and (b) to shape future instruction in the short run and to use some sort of external, standardized summative assessments to determine whether the progress that students demonstrate on our formative assessments transfer to more distant contexts of performance. She encourages teachers, and by implication schools, to evaluate their own teaching by completing self-evaluation surveys, sharing videos with peers, or inviting others into their classrooms to conduct highly analytic observations. This last balancing act—between assessing learning and assessing instruction—is critical for reform because we cannot expect learning to change unless it is preceded by changes in teaching. And we won't know that until and unless we evaluate teaching and then reflect on what we see.

*Balance between code and meaning.* Barbara has long been an advocate of ensuring that students possess the enabling skills (word identification, decoding and phonemic awareness, vocabulary and fluency) that contribute to comprehension, but she rightly points out that those skills are never ends unto themselves but only a means to the greater end of comprehension. And she makes it clear that when it comes to priorities, comprehension is first amongst equals. My favorite feature of her recommendations about instruction is that she demands that teachers model and guide students in USING decoding, vocabulary, AND comprehension strategies “on the fly” during real time reading. She knows that you have to get ALL strategies off workbook pages and into the flow of everyday reading (and there is no question whatsoever about her commitment that EVERY child spend a sizeable fraction of EVERY reading period doing everyday independent reading. Otherwise kids will draw a “workbook activity box” around those strategies and put them away when they are reading. For Professor Taylor, the value of any skill or strategy is indexed by its capacity to help readers solve the problems they encounter along the way in authentic reading activities.

*Balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches to professional development.* No one has worried more about how to balance teacher agency versus demonstrated teacher needs as the primary basis for determining a school's professional development agenda. This is the classic tension between grass roots (the bottom-up model) and externally imposed (the top-down model) approaches to setting the agenda. If you examine Barbara's approach, it has a little bit of both. The agenda is really set by a confluence of forces: (a) any and all district level standards or mandates that are in place, (b) the evidence emerging from both formative and summative assessments used in the school, and (c) the collaborative negotiations



that go on inside a faculty as they determine specific professional development activities for the year. But when push comes to shove, Barbara ultimately sides with the bottom-up model because she knows that when the agenda is entirely determined by external mandates or decision-makers, teachers will engage in “mock compliance,” going through the motions while waiting for the current regime to run its course. She knows that when teachers have a major (not the only but a major) voice in setting the agenda, buy-in and compliance are much more likely. It breeds the right kind of accountability—one based on a keen sense of professional responsibility.

But when all is said and done, the most important feature of this book is its practicality. It may be grounded in research—about reading development, reading pedagogy, and professional development (and I, for one, am glad it is so grounded), but it is ultimately a “how to” manual to help teachers and administrators build strong and vital programs of schoolwide reform. You’ll find suggestions for each and every facet of reading program change, from assessing needs, to setting goals, to establishing priorities, to developing assessment systems, to settling on schoolwide instructional principles, to setting the professional development agenda, to using data to evaluate progress, to recalibrating in light of new evidence. About the only thing she doesn’t tell us how to do is how to organize a celebration of student and school progress. She leaves that to us. I guess she figures we’ll figure that one out for ourselves. School leaders who are committed to student learning through teacher learning and improved curriculum and pedagogy will find everything they need in this book. I wish you well in “catching schools” in your corner of the educational world.

*P. David Pearson*  
Berkeley, CA

# A Good Beginning to School Reform? Schoolwide Reading Improvement

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Considering any kind of schoolwide change can be like getting ready to create a beautiful garden. Imagine looking at the backyard where you want to put the garden. How do you start? How do you envision it will look when you're done? How will you nurture it and keep it growing and changing? These are the kind of questions you might be asking yourself about schoolwide reading reform as well. This book will show you the way.

A considerable body of research indicates that one sound route to improving student achievement and teacher effectiveness overall is by improving reading instruction. When students achieve as readers, many other facets of effective teaching and learning come into high relief. The children's reading advances, they are thinking, happier, more engaged, and on task, and you will find there will be greater collaboration among staff. School reform needs a starting point, and reading is a great one. The processes used for reading improvement are ones around which other reforms can be carved.

Let's begin by considering some key questions this book will help you answer:

- ▶ How do we teach children today to become successful readers, people who read with good comprehension throughout their lives?
  - ▶ How do we combine the research of the past decades with our own expertise to help us as individuals—and as a school staff—develop a clear vision of effective reading instruction?
-

The good news is, we know a lot about teaching reading and the critical role teacher expertise plays in student learning. This knowledge is the engine that powers this book. I share the practices for teaching reading that have been proven to work along with a model for a schoolwide change process that is embedded in practice. It's a model deeply rooted in the belief that when teachers see what works and are given a way to work alongside one another to hone their teaching abilities, student learning improves. I show you how you can put the practices into action in your own reform effort.

Whether you are a teacher, staff developer, college professor, or administrator, the accounts of school reform and the professional development model in this book will help you bring change to your school. Wonderful things are possible when teachers and administrators commit to ongoing conversations about and examinations of the school culture (both spoken and unspoken), the reading curriculum, reading assessments, and, most importantly, reading instruction. See Figure 1-1

## Some Questions to Start the Journey

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Throughout this book, I encourage you to maintain a questioning stance. Pause and reflect on how the ideas sit with you and how they relate to the school within which you teach. Jot down notes, underline, express doubt, and talk with colleagues. Use a list like the one that follows in Figure 1-2 to draft your own school's version of starter questions discussed at staff meetings to launch your collaborative professional learning journey. Many of your questions and responses will need to be revisited as you continue on your journey. Reform takes reflection and, like much in life, it's done best at a slow but steady pace. In time, as a result of this experience, teachers more purposefully and effectively instruct in ways that meet students' varied needs, reading scores increase, and students become more successful, motivated learners in the classroom.

## Why This Reading Improvement Model Works: Research Highlights

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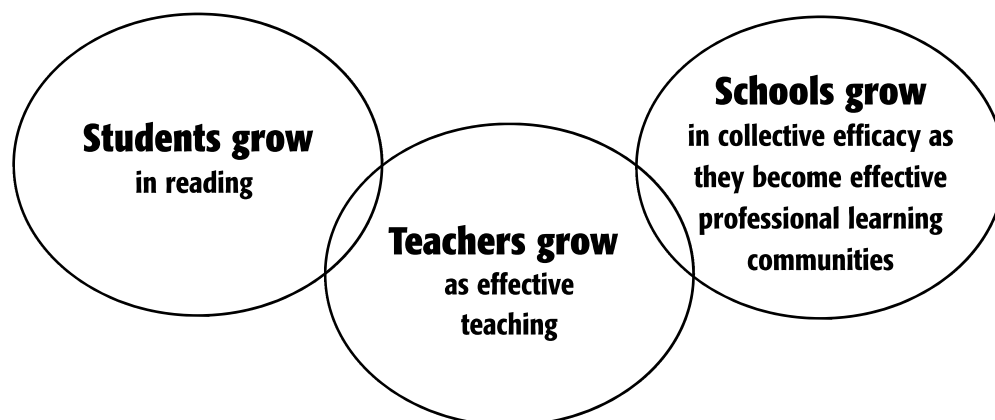


Figure 1-1 Outcomes of This Model

See pages 16–18 at the end of this chapter for summaries of the supporting data.

Questions to Discuss as a Staff	Notes/Next Steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What do we currently do well as a school?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What are our current strengths?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ In general, what are our weaknesses as a staff?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What do we consider effective, engaging reading instruction for students?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What are we not on the same page about?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What is our schoolwide approach to reading? Do we have one?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What are the hallmarks of a successful lesson?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ How do we measure if students have learned from it?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ In addition to the state and district tests, what assessments do we have in place?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What are teachers using to make instructional decisions? Are we looking at data effectively in order to help bring about optimum achievement?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What reading materials and/or literature anthologies or curriculum do we have in place and what do we think of them? What kinds of texts are we missing?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ How are we meeting the needs of our English language learners and students who need more support as readers?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What do we need to do to be the best teachers we can be?</li> </ul>	

Figure 1-2 Sample Starter Questions to Launch Your Professional Learning Journey

## Listening to the Language of Change: Quotes from Participants

---

I want to share with you some comments from the participants in the School Change in Reading (SCR) process that is the focus of this book. So often school improvement is voiceless, faceless—goals and statements that are hard to get excited about. I want you to hear the participants' voices, letting their language wash over you as a way to pick up on the recurring qualities of successful professional development and reform. In later chapters I'll go into these elements in more detail. As you read these quotes, think about:

- ▶ collaboration
- ▶ staff relating to each other in new ways and with common goals
- ▶ high expectations for students' academic abilities
- ▶ high expectations for students to become ever more independent as learners as they proceed through the grades
- ▶ the benefit of a reform effort operating with a clear structure of "why and how" as well as "who, what, and where," as opposed to rigid mandates for change, to make the process less stressful for participants
- ▶ the benefits of professional learning communities focused on a specific content—reading—rather than floundering in the changing winds of overly general improvement initiatives
- ▶ a developing sense of ownership and collective efficacy

These educators work in four elementary schools that are engaged in a multiyear journey to improve their reading program and students' reading scores as part of the SCR process. The firsthand experiences of principals, literacy coordinators, and teachers reveal the elements that make professional learning successful and lasting. Most of all, these stories convey the teachers' and administrators' enthusiasm for the process. Without engagement and enthusiasm, school improvement is impossible. (These teachers and schools will be revisited in subsequent chapters.)

### Lincoln Elementary

#### *The context*

Lincoln Elementary is a K–5 urban school in a large midwestern city. For many years Lincoln was a small, neighborhood school, but a few years ago it merged with a nearby school as part of district reorganization. Eighty percent of the students at Lincoln receive a subsidized lunch, 10 percent are special education students, and 25 percent are English language learners (ELLs). Lincoln is a culturally diverse school: almost half of the students are black; a little more than half, in fairly equal numbers, are white, Asian, and Hispanic; and a few are Native American. In the past, the school was on the state's adequate yearly progress (AYP) watch list, but the school made AYP in reading for the past five years, the first three of which the SCR process was in place. During those three years, students in grade 3 went from the thirty-sixth to forty-fifth percentile on average on the spring score in

comprehension on a standardized test. Grade 2 students went from a mean spring score in comprehension at the forty-sixth percentile in the first year to the sixty-first percentile in the third year.

### ***The principal***

Janet Jones sees her role as “the instructional leader and manager of daily operations with the ultimate responsibility of making sure we provide the best educational programs possible to ensure student success.” To accomplish this success, she visits classrooms, reviews data, talks to teachers, and encourages them to talk to her. She has her most highly skilled teachers work with the students who are at the lower end in terms of ability.

*On participation in the SCR process, she says,*

I now understand what good reading instruction is and how to make it happen. Also, the project changed the way staff thinks about instruction; it changed relationships in a good way; and it gave everyone confidence, pride, and satisfaction in their work. We make sure we are having professional conversations about instruction. Teachers are now more discriminating about what and how they teach reading. They are teaching differently because they are more confident about their instructional choices.

### ***Second-grade teacher***

Matthew Thompson is an exceptional second-grade teacher. He accompanied his students from first to second grade during the third year of the school’s SCR process. His students entered second grade reading seventy-four words correct per minute (wcpm) on average and ended the year reading 108 wcpm on average. On a standardized reading test, his students improved on average from the fifty-fourth percentile in vocabulary in the fall to the seventy-third percentile in the spring.

*On helping students achieve grade-level expectations, he says,*

All students need to be at their instructional level. Missing pieces identified by assessments need to be filled in, whether it is decoding strategies or reading with expression. Students need to learn how to think about a story and to answer questions on their own. Most need fluency building. They all need to write regularly and thoughtfully about what they have read.

*On cultivating students’ independence, he comments,*

I want my students to be motivated to learn on their own, to not need me telling them what to do every moment.

Throughout the year, he carefully scaffolds how to work with a partner and in a small group, how to ask for and give help, and how to engage in student-led discussions. In Chapters 2 and 3, you will learn more about Matthew’s approach to getting second graders, many of whom are ELLs, involved in student-led discussions related to high-quality literature.

*On how reform leads to openness to change, Matthew says,*

We learned a lot and once you know better ways of doing things, you want to keep doing them. Initial support from our external partner was very helpful, but now in the third year most of the staff development is internal. We work extraordinarily

well together. We are sharing with one another, discussing what we've read, and talking about what we're doing. I've never heard so much discussion about how we're teaching and what we're noticing about the children's learning as I have these past three years. I'm really proud of our staff.

### ***Special education teacher***

Kathy Little has high expectations for her at-risk first-grade readers.

*Reflecting on the components of her instruction, Kathy says,*

Collaborating with other teachers, creating lessons and using research and assessments to drive my instruction, and reflecting on what's working and what isn't are three critical pieces.

*On how her teaching has changed, Kathy reflects,*

My lessons are more intentional. I am especially focusing on vocabulary and comprehension. I'm using writing as a way for students to respond. I'm also being more purposeful in relating to students' lives. I'm seeing more excitement in my students than before, and this makes me more excited.

In Chapter 2, you'll learn more about Kathy's reading instruction for struggling readers.

*On the benefits of collegiality, Kathy says,*

I attribute success to study groups, good peer relations, and collaboration across grade levels. Having a focus during study groups is really improving my teaching; everyone shares experiences with the same strategies and reflects on changes that need to be made. Our monthly student progress meetings, where we share reading data on our students, help us focus on what we're teaching and what modifications are needed to get our students to the next level.

## **Westside Elementary**

### ***The context***

Westside Elementary is a K–6 urban school in which 95 percent of students receive subsidized lunch and 95 percent are students of color. The largest demographic is Spanish speaking, the second is Somali. During the SCR process, Westside became a school for newcomers to the United States, and the percent of ELLs at the school increased from 66 to 87 percent. On a standardized test, over the three years that data were collected, grade 3 students increased from a mean spring comprehension score in the first year at the eighteenth percentile to a mean score at the thirty-third percentile in the third year. They also went from a mean spring vocabulary score at the sixteenth percentile in the first year to a mean spring vocabulary score in the third year at the twenty-fourth percentile. The school still has a long way to go but is making steady progress.

### ***The principal***

With six years at Westside under her belt, Carla Herrera continues to rally her staff to get to know each individual child and his or her academic and social needs. The school's approach to differentiated instruction is impressive.

*On leadership style, Carla says,*

I oversee all of the professional development planning, observe teachers, and coach them in the classroom. I believe in connecting individually with each teacher around the data of their students. To improve instruction in their schools, principals need to get into classrooms and recognize what their teachers are doing and be a support to teachers. Principals need to know good instruction themselves and know how to coach teachers when needed. I am in classrooms every day and I join team meetings, so I know what is going on in the classrooms.

*On the school's reading program, she comments,*

We run a readers workshop model of instruction, with a minilesson followed by an independent work period that includes time for small-group instruction and/or partner work. The workshop closes with a sharing at the end. We have allotted 120 minutes of reading in grades K–3 and 90 minutes in grades 4–6 each day. Our students are grouped based on their needs. We assess them with a variety of measures. We provide interventions, such as Early Intervention in Reading for grades K–3, and in our 4–6 grades we have an intervention model that was created by our intermediate reading coach, a former Reading Recovery teacher. We have an adopted basal series, but we rely heavily on our extensive leveled books and also use the library collection to fill the book bags children take home for independent reading.

*On the biggest challenge, Carla shares,*

... is continuing to differentiate to meet the needs of all learners and to manage the behaviors and serious emotional needs of some of our children while running a workshop model of instruction.

*On the role of the literacy leadership team, Carla says,*

The literacy leadership team is made up of a teacher from each grade, K–6, and co-facilitated by the school's two literacy coaches, one working with K–3 and one 4–6. The leadership team members look at the data on students and on teaching practices to come up with overarching goals for literacy instruction at Westside. They are the venue for communicating with grade-level teams around building-wide expectations and implementation of our readers workshop model.

*On study groups, Carla shares,*

Teachers [for grades] K–6 met in study groups around the theme of reading comprehension this year, often sharing and discussing videos of their teaching. What felt awkward and cumbersome at the beginning is now becoming routine.

*On how a reflective stance leads to change, Carla says,*

Because of our involvement in schoolwide reading improvement, we're more reflective and intentional about our practice and more intentional about our research-based instruction. We have learned to open our doors and be more comfortable with peer observation and feedback.

### ***Literacy coordinator***

Estella Butler knows she has a crucial position in a school engaged in substantive efforts to improve its reading program.



Estella says,

Working directly with teachers, I set up study groups and whole-group meetings focused on literacy, and I make sure that we are studying research-based strategies. I organize materials and handouts, and I help teachers videotape their lessons to share in study groups. I engage in classroom observations that include pre- and post-conversations with teachers. I meet with a member of our external support team to plan ways to assist teachers as they are implementing what they are learning. I collect assessment data, meet with teachers to look at their data, and help them figure out what instructional modifications to try next.

*On professional learning and changes to reading instruction,* Estella shares,

Many teachers are willing to try what they are learning in study groups in their classrooms; if it doesn't seem to be working, most of them will adjust to meet the needs of their students, and that is a good thing. Also, teachers are beginning to drop some of their old habits and practices and turning to research-based techniques and data to drive their instruction. Before, our professional learning was all about reading and talking and now it's about action.

Teachers really understand that higher-level questioning is important and this is going really well. Teachers are seeing the importance of modeling and using accountable talk. Also, vocabulary learning is being stressed and that's new. A lot of the teaching was whole-group in the beginning and now I'm seeing so much small-group teaching, maybe almost too much at times. I think a lot of things have changed for the better with instruction due to the study groups and whole-group meetings.

*On coaching,* Estella reflects,

What I've learned about coaching from our external partners has really helped me. In the beginning I was in the classroom doing a lot of teaching and modeling myself, and I wasn't really sure how to get teachers to do more of the teaching when I was there. I've learned how to put the ownership on the teachers. I have a pre-conference, go in to observe, and then have a post-conference. I ask questions to get teachers to come up with their own ideas and changes. Now we are teaching teachers how to engage in peer coaching using the same coaching model.

### ***Teacher of ELLs***

Angelina Ipson says her reading instruction has improved and her students are doing well.

She notes,

My English learners are able to apply more reading strategies than in previous years. Our scores are higher and that's good. In fact, most of our kids have shown improvement. My students are asking each other questions more, they are telling why more and proving why, not just saying, "I liked this book." Their written responses are much more meaty, too.

*On reading/writing connections,* Angelina says,

This year I am connecting written responses with students' reading more often, and this is making their reading more meaningful to them. The kids can really make some connections to their reading on their own now. I have also made a greater effort to help the kids see how reading and writing, speaking and listening are all connected.

*On communication and professional learning, Angelina comments,*

Communication across the school is strong because we meet in cross-grade-level study groups and talk about what works and what we are doing. The professional development is rigorous and much is expected. I like the fact that we read about best practices and apply them to our daily work. I think the application piece will make us better teachers and a better school.

*On leadership, Angelina shares,*

Our principal, Carla Herrera, is very supportive, reasonable, and tuned in to the reality of our day-to-day situations. Also, she sets a tone for collaboration. She works best by bouncing ideas off a group. She is willing to sit down and talk with people about problems they are having and how to resolve them.

*On the literacy coordinator, Angelina says,*

Estella observes in our classrooms and we talk about what we could do better. She pushes us to move forward. If we didn't have her leadership we would probably get lazy! She also helps us share our successes. After she has been in to watch me teach, I find that a lot of her comments simply affirm what I'm doing. She also makes suggestions and encourages us to go out to watch what others are doing in the school. Estella's coaching has been most helpful in that it has caused us to reflect more closely on what we are doing and to dig deeper. She has helped us think and make our conversations about our teaching more academic and metacognitive.

### ***Fourth-grade teacher***

Benice Daniels's students went from the thirtieth percentile on average in both comprehension and vocabulary to the thirty-ninth percentile in both areas by spring in the third year of the schoolwide reading improvement process.

*On her biggest challenge in teaching reading, Benice says,*

It is the varied levels of the students. Some kids are so behind the other kids and the biggest challenge is to instruct them in the right way so they can catch up. Keeping children motivated and not frustrated or afraid is another challenge.

*On improvements she's made, Benice adds,*

I have increased my ability to teach fluency and vocabulary effectively. Now I am focusing on comprehension-strategies instruction based on what I am learning in one of my study groups. I plan to keep expanding my repertoire in this area. I need a lot of practice and good examples when I am trying new things because it is so unfamiliar to me.

*On schoolwide change, Benice comments,*

Everything in our professional development model has a purpose and is useful, including feedback. Looking at the progress students have made from fall to spring has motivated teachers. There are individual students who made great gains. Also, the assessments drive our instruction because we see where our students' needs are and have a study group in that area, for example in comprehension, to provide more effective instruction.

## Edgewood Elementary

### ***The context***

Edgewood Elementary is a suburban school that has changed significantly in the past ten years. Historically, it was a school with little diversity, but now 35 percent of the students are from diverse backgrounds, 35 percent of the students receive a subsidized lunch, and there are very affluent students in the school as well. Edgewood made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the three years it was involved in the SCR process, as well as the year that followed. The mean spring comprehension score on a standardized test for grade 3 students increased from the fifty-fourth to fifty-sixth percentile from the first year to the third year and the mean spring vocabulary score increased from the fiftieth to sixtieth percentile over this three-year period.

### ***The principals***

Mike O'Connell, the principal for two years of the reform effort, attributes his success to an emphasis on collective leadership and a can-do attitude:

Through collaboration and a strong sense of collegiality we are really able to do some wonderful things for kids and look at change as a process over time.

During the third year of the grant, Tricia Calhoun took over as principal. To her credit, she did not try to move the school in a new direction based on her personal vision but worked hard to build on the successes of the prior two years. Her approach to leadership was similar to Mike's. She says,

I am an educational and instructional leader. It's my responsibility to keep us focused on our collective vision and school goals. I try to support teachers individually and collectively with their professional development and instructional practices. I'm a liaison with parents, the community, and the district. I support teachers with student management and discipline. She visits classrooms frequently.

*On the role of parents, Tricia says,*

I think that we have a group of very engaged parents and they are very satisfied with our school's community. Also, I think they are generally very happy with how we support them as educators of their children. However, the Edgewood staff feels it can do a better job with our parents—that some aren't as engaged as they could be. We have a task force to increase parent involvement and partnership in their child's education. As a school, we want to assist families in the education of their children.

*Tricia explains the leadership team's roles,*

Our leadership team consists of the literacy coordinator, four classroom teachers, a special education teacher, a basic skills teacher, and me. But leadership really is a collaborative effort among all the teachers. The leadership team is responsible for identifying areas of need and the types of professional development that will support change. Individual classroom teachers and teams make decisions about literacy instruction such as determining what learning targets to teach at what point in time, the formative assessments they give, and the daily instructional decisions that need to be made relating to their students' needs.

*On the school's reading program, Tricia comments,*

Our reading curriculum consists of our learning targets, our assessments, and our resources. Teachers use our core basal program, but they are driven by students' progress toward learning targets, not the basal. We know that students need varied instruction, and we're using our assessments as much to inform our instruction as to measure results.

We are training all teachers who hadn't previously been trained in the EIR small-group intervention program because we saw how effective that was for students who received it. A related initiative in our school is identifying and implementing an effective system of interventions for all of our at-risk readers as well as challenging supplemental instruction to support all students.

We are more aware of students' engagement. Teachers are always thinking about motivation now in their instruction and the role that it plays in how students learn to read. Teachers are releasing responsibility to the students over time. They are doing less teacher talk and allowing the children to be more actively engaged in questioning and in monitoring their reading.

*On what made the biggest difference in professional learning, Tricia says,*

I think the sustained study of topics makes a real difference. Teachers' opportunities to reflect on and share their practices with others seem to have a real impact on students' learning. I also think that teachers' ongoing use of current data from teacher observations has really helped them change their teaching, and classroom visits by external partners have helped us look at our practices through another lens.

### ***Literacy coordinator***

*About her job responsibilities, Anna Berglund explains,*

I visit classrooms to help move instructional practices forward for individual teachers by modeling and by coaching with guided reflective questioning and constructive feedback. Hopefully, this reflection and support leads to changes in instruction, which in turn leads to increased student learning.

*On important changes in the past few years, Anna reflects,*

One thing that's changed is that we have specific names to describe what we are doing. We are also much more aware of why we are doing what we are doing, and we are explicit about this with our students so they understand what they are doing and why. We are much more aware of what's happening at other grade levels and how instruction is building from one grade level to the next throughout the school. We are also paying more attention to individual student data and the need to differentiate instruction to help individual students.

*On professional learning, Anna comments,*

The School Change in Reading process has given us a structure to work within that leads to productive, reflective discussions about teaching and learning. Also, talking about the school reading program gives us a schoolwide perspective of what we are doing to help our students. It breaks down the feelings of isolation, and it gives staff ideas and strategies to make it more effective. Learning together builds common language and common vision and goals.

Things that were important this year for us were study groups that focused on comprehension strategy instruction, higher-level questioning, and getting kids to

talk to one another about books they were reading. Schoolwide, we have seen all students' fluency scores increase. But more important, we have seen students deepen their comprehension and their ability to engage in dialogue with other people. Overall we've seen our kids thinking at higher levels.

### ***First-grade teacher***

Becky Saunders does an amazing job teaching her first graders how to engage in student-led discussions. In the third year of the SCR process, her students went from the fifty-sixth percentile on average on a prereading test in the fall of grade 1 to the seventy-second percentile in decoding and comprehension by the end of the year.

*On recent changes in her instruction,* Becky adds,

I have been working hard at implementing student-led discussion groups in which students ask and respond to challenging questions. Students are writing their own high-level questions. They also learn how to coach each other for a high-level response.

I am also more focused on comprehension strategies. This, along with student discussions, leads to more student engagement. The research we've read on student engagement points out that students learn more as they are more engaged in their learning. Also, access to quality books is a key component.

*On what contributed to these changes,* Becky says,

It's come from what we've been learning in our study groups and also what we've learned through workshops conducted by our external partners. I'm a member of the higher-level questioning study group. I find that's a daily application in my room. I'm also in an EIR intervention study group, which is something we are using daily. I really value study groups because of the opportunity to learn from readings and from one another. As we talk, we are able to reflect together on what we are doing and if it's best for students.

*On receiving support from the literacy coordinator,* Becky adds,

I've appreciated the opportunity to sit down with the literacy coordinator to talk about things I'm doing or thinking of doing. I like to bounce ideas off her one-on-one. Also, the feedback on what she sees students [are] able to do when she comes to my room or what else I might think about doing is helpful. It has caused me to think about my instruction in different ways and make modifications.

*On students' reading achievement,* Becky says,

I see students meeting higher standards and targets. So I am able to raise the bar and know that students will still be able to succeed. We all take great joy in seeing the children accelerate in a way we haven't seen before.

## **Madina Elementary**

### ***The context***

Madina Elementary is a small school in a rural farming community in which most of the students are white and a small percentage are Native American. Fifty-eight percent of the students receive a subsidized lunch, and 15 percent have been identified

as having special learning needs. The responses from the principal, literacy coordinator, and teachers at Madina to interview questions were very similar to those from administrators and teachers at Lincoln, Westside, and Edgewood. Madina made AYP in reading during the five years it received support in the SCR process from an external partner and for the two years after this support ended. Over the three years data were collected, the mean spring comprehension score for grade 3 students on a standardized test went from the fifty-fourth to sixty-third percentile.

### ***The principal***

*At the end of the SCR process, principal Judy Hunter said,*

It has been a rewarding experience. Our literacy coordinator has provided outstanding support and leadership for the staff. The leadership team, made up of one representative from each grade level, has been the direct connection to the staff. They are also the ones who have been most active in creating our sustainability plan. Study groups have been invaluable as our forum for reflecting and processing, helping us go from the research and student data to implementation in the classroom. Feedback data from teacher observations during the reading block have been another way for us to look at our progress and for teachers to individually reflect on their teaching.

### ***The literacy coordinator***

Jane Larson, the literacy coordinator, reflected,

The School Change in Reading process is based on research on effective schools and what works. Through this change process, we have collaborated on reading instruction. Talking with others has led to professional growth for all teachers in our school. It is important to talk with colleagues about instruction and assessments to reflect on your own teaching and make changes.

### ***Kindergarten teacher***

Melissa Norris, an exemplary kindergarten teacher, reflected *on changes in her instruction since the SCR process began,*

I have more of a focus, like the reciprocal teaching piece I have added that includes predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing. I have really noticed a difference in student engagement since I started the reciprocal teaching work. Also, my students are excited about reading books and discussing them with their peers.

### ***Third-grade teacher***

Maggie Voss, an excellent third-grade teacher, reported,

People who have visited my classroom mention over and over again how excited the students are about reading. The children are really into informational text. Part of this is because the students know how to use strategies and they have better comprehension. Also, I get so much positive feedback about reading from the students at the school. They love to discuss their books and monitor their own comprehension. They have more ownership of their own learning.

## The Take Away: Similarities Among Schools

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These four schools have similar stories. The principals, literacy coaches, and teachers believe that the reform effort had a significant impact on their school's sense of collective efficacy, on the quality of classroom instruction and teachers' sense of self-efficacy, and on students' reading achievement and motivation to learn.

*Principals* saw themselves as instructional leaders:

- ▶ They understood what good reading instruction entailed and looked like in the classroom.
- ▶ They visited classrooms in order to build rapport, provide support, coach, and communicate to teachers that they were serious about ensuring there was excellent reading instruction at their school.
- ▶ They had a collaborative style. They listened to their teachers, who in turn felt they could come to their principals for help.
- ▶ They were engaged in the reform process and were members of their literacy leadership teams. But they did not try to take charge; rather they fostered collaborative leadership.

*Leadership team members* took an active role in leadership. They, not the principal or literacy coordinator, were seen by teachers as the group in charge of the literacy improvement efforts at their schools.

The *literacy coordinator* was regarded as an instructional leader and excellent teacher:

- ▶ She was seen as the manager of the reform process who, as a member of the leadership team, worked with the other members to keep all aspects of the improvement effort moving forward.
- ▶ She helped teachers collect student data when needed and, more important, set up and participated in meetings in which teachers looked at this data together to make instructional modifications to better meet students' needs.
- ▶ She was valued as an exemplary reading teacher who modeled effective practices in classrooms.
- ▶ She was respected by her colleagues and was accepted, even appreciated, as a peer coach who had learned how to ask questions and provide suggestions to get teachers to reflect on their reading instruction and generate their own next steps to make their instruction even more effective (Peterson et al. 2009).

*Teachers* felt they had made significant improvements in their reading instruction and demonstrated enthusiasm for the changes they had made:

- ▶ They expressed greater satisfaction with and confidence in their ability to provide balanced instruction that was differentiated to meet varied student needs.
- ▶ They said they were now teaching comprehension strategies, engaging students in high-level talk and writing about text, and teaching students how to take part in student-led discussions.
- ▶ They expressed their great satisfaction in seeing students' reading scores increase, especially in the area of comprehension; in seeing greater engagement in and enthusiasm for learning in their students; and in seeing students develop greater independence as learners.

All the educators showcased in this chapter felt that participation in the SCR improvement process had been successful because it increased collaboration and cohesiveness throughout the school. It led to more reflection on and professional conversations about reading instruction through study groups, whole-group meetings, student data retreats, reflections on observation data, and coaching conversations.

## What's Ahead in This Resource

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In the chapters that follow, you will learn about the processes these schools put in place and the different types of learning opportunities that teachers and administrators engaged in. Ultimately, it gives you a blueprint to help you plan your own schoolwide professional development plan.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the content and practices of effective reading instruction and showcases successful teachers such as Matthew Thompson, Kathy Little, Angelina Van Ipson, Benice Daniels, and Becky Saunders. Use these chapters as a springboard to develop teachers' knowledge of literacy; use them to galvanize professional inquiry and conversations about effective reading instruction, effective classroom discussions, and so on.

Chapter 4 presents the research on school-based reading improvement and an overview of the theory and research behind the SCR model. Increasingly, school leaders are asking, *can you show me the data that shows that this framework works?* They don't want to waste precious time or resources—and most of all, they want to serve their students. The SCR model has strong research support on its efficacy (Peterson et al., 2009, Taylor and Pearson, 2004, Taylor et al., 2000, Taylor et al. 2003, Taylor et al. 2005, Taylor and Peterson, 2007, Taylor and Peterson, 2008, Taylor et al., 2007). These studies and others are summarized at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 5 describes the meetings and processes you need to foster organizational change in your school. Chapter 6 provides suggestions for how to use data on students, classrooms, and the school to help foster change. Chapter 7 focuses on the specifics of teachers' professional development so you have a vision for the teacher-centeredness of this reform. Chapter 8 details the coaching techniques that a literacy coach or teacher peers can use to support one another as they try out new instructional techniques. Chapter 9 offers a kind of case study of teachers and administrators in Westside Elementary, so you can spot the factors of their success and anticipate common roadblocks and take actions that keep a can-do spirit in your school community. For external support on how to engage in processes covered in this book, go to [www.earlyinterventioninreading.com](http://www.earlyinterventioninreading.com).

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

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1. Which comments made by these teachers, principals, or literacy coordinators stuck with you? Why?
2. In what ways is your school similar to the four schools featured in this chapter? In what ways is it different?
3. In what ways is leadership in your school similar to the leadership described in this chapter? In what ways is it different?



4. In what ways is professional learning at your school similar to the professional learning described in this chapter? In what ways is it different?
5. Based on what you learned thus far from the schools described in this chapter, what questions do you have and what changes might you like to work toward in your school?

## Supporting Your Practice: Research Studies to Share

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As a teacher, you may be looking for research to support best classroom practices. With your needs in mind, we offer the following studies to provide the very evidence you need, ready to share with others: principals, professional developers, parents, and school boards.

The School Change in Reading (SCR) reform model has been used in many states across the country, particularly in Minnesota (see Chapter 4). This model has been extensively researched, and relevant studies are briefly summarized here.

### Characteristics of Effective Teachers and Schools

Taylor, B. M. 2002. Highly Accomplished Primary Grade Teachers in Effective Schools. In *Teaching Reading: Effective Schools/Accomplished Teachers*, edited by B. M. Taylor and P. D. Pearson, 279–88. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Four exemplary primary-grade teachers in schools that were beating the odds had high expectations for student learning and behaviors; taught and coached in instructional level groups; enhanced literacy through authentic, engaging learning activities; and fostered independent learners.

Taylor, B., P. D. Pearson, K. Clark, and S. Walpole. 2000. "Effective Schools and Accomplished Teachers: Lessons About Primary Grade Reading Instruction in Low-Income Schools." *The Elementary School Journal* 101: 121–65.

Effective schools had strong links to parents, systematic assessment of pupil progress, strong communication and collaboration, and a collaborative model for the delivery of reading instruction, including early reading interventions. Effective teachers, compared to others, spent increased amounts of time in small-group reading instruction, gave students more time to engage in independent reading, had high levels of pupil on-task behavior, and strong home-school communications. Effective teachers, as compared to others, and teachers in more effective schools, as compared to other schools, supplemented explicit phonics instruction with coaching in word-recognition strategies and employed a greater number of higher-level questions in discussion of texts. Effective teachers also asked students to do more writing in response to reading than other teachers.

Taylor, B. M., M. Pressley, and P. D. Pearson. 2002. Research-Supported Characteristics of Teachers and Schools That Promote Reading Achievement. In *Teaching Reading: Effective Schools, Accomplished Teachers*, edited by B. M. Taylor and P. D. Pearson, 361–74. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

This review found that effective teachers had excellent classroom management, provided balanced reading instruction, used small-group instruction more than other teachers, and stressed higher-order thinking. High-poverty schools with high achievement focused on improved student learning, had strong school leadership, had strong teacher collaboration, engaged in consistent use of data on student performance, focused on professional development and innovation, and had strong links to parents.

## **Schools Using the SCR Framework to Become Highly Effective**

Taylor, B. M., P. D. Pearson, D. S. Peterson, and M. C. Rodriguez. 2003. "Reading Growth in High-Poverty Classrooms: The Influence of Teacher Practices That Encourage Cognitive Engagement in Literacy Learning." *The Elementary School Journal* 104: 3–28.

In schools involved in schoolwide reading improvement, the teachers in grades 2 through 5 who saw the most growth in their students' reading during the school year asked more high-level questions about text, taught less phonics, did more coaching and involving students in active reading practice, and had more students on task, as compared to other teachers.

Taylor, B. M., D. P. Pearson, D. S. Peterson, and M. C. Rodriguez. 2005. "The CIERA School Change Framework: An Evidenced-Based Approach to Professional Development and School Reading Improvement." *Reading Research Quarterly* 40(1): 40–69.

In a study of thirteen schools across the United States using the SCR framework over a two-year period, schools more successful in implementing the essential components of the reform (including staff participation in frequent study-group meetings to learn about and reflect on research-based practices, as well as sustained staff efforts to provide effective, research-based instruction in classrooms) saw substantially greater growth in their students' reading than schools less successful in implementing the reform.

Taylor, B. M., and D. S. Peterson. 2007. *Year 2 Report of the Minnesota Reading First (Cohort 2) School Change Project*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, Minnesota Center for Reading Research.

In a study of twenty-four Minnesota Reading First schools, second and third graders saw greater growth in reading comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and decoding (grade 2) if they were in classrooms where teachers engaged in more high-level questioning relative to other teachers. They also saw greater growth in reading comprehension and vocabulary if they were in classrooms where teachers engaged in higher levels of comprehension strategies instruction as compared to other teachers. Second graders saw less growth in vocabulary, fluency, and decoding if they were in classrooms where teachers engaged in more phonics instruction than other teachers. First graders saw greater growth in reading comprehension and decoding if they were in classrooms where teachers engaged in more high-level and low-level questioning.

Taylor, B. M., and D. S. Peterson. 2008. *Year 3 Report of the Minnesota Reading First (Cohort 2) School Change Project*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, Minnesota Center for Reading Research.

In a study of twenty-three Minnesota Reading First schools, students in grade 3 had significant growth in comprehension (+3.1 normal curve equivalent points, NCEs) and vocabulary (+5.6 NCEs) on a standardized reading test from fall to spring. Students in grade 2 had significant growth in decoding (+4.4 NCEs) and comprehension (+1.3 NCEs). First graders had significant growth in decoding (+4.6 NCEs) and comprehension (+2.5 NCEs). Second and third graders saw greater growth in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and decoding (grade 2) if they were in classrooms where teachers engaged in more high-level questioning than other teachers. Students saw greater growth in reading comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and decoding (grade 2) if they were in classrooms where teachers engaged in more comprehension strategies instruction.

Taylor, B. T., D. S. Peterson, M. Marx, and M. Chein. 2007. Scaling up a Reading Reform Effort in 23 High-Poverty Schools. In *Effective Instruction for Struggling Readers, K–6*, edited by B. M. Taylor and J. Ysseldyke, 216–34. New York: Teachers College Press.

In a study of 23 Reading Excellence Act schools in Minnesota, students in grades 2 and 3 had greater growth in reading comprehension and vocabulary in classrooms in which teachers engaged them in more high-level questioning and less phonics instruction relative to other teachers. Schools that did a better job of implementing the SCR framework saw greater growth in their students' reading comprehension scores than other schools.

## Specific Elements of the SCR Framework

Peterson, D. S., B. M. Taylor, R. Burnham, and R. Schock. 2009. "Reflective Coaching Conversations: A Missing Piece." *The Reading Teacher* 62(6): 500–09.

Teachers in Minnesota Reading First schools made important research-based changes to their reading instruction and students made accelerated progress in their reading comprehension scores. Teachers' instructional changes were stimulated through collaborative conversations about practice that included video sharing, data sharing, and coaching conversations with the building literacy coach. Through coaching conversations, teachers focused on elements of effective instruction and set goals for future reading lessons.

Taylor, B. M., and P. D. Pearson. 2005. Using Study Groups and Reading Assessment Data to Improve Reading Instruction Within a School. In *Current Issues in Reading Comprehension and Assessment*, edited by S. Paris and S. Stahl, 237–55. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

This chapter describes the efforts of teachers at one high-poverty, diverse school that used the SCR framework with great success. The teachers, teacher leaders, and principal at Howard Elementary worked very well together as a collaborative, learning community, and they saw excellent growth in their students' reading scores.

For related studies, see Chapter 4, as well as B. M. Taylor, T. E. Raphael, and K. H. Au (2010). Reading and School Reform. In *Handbook of Reading Research, Volume 4*, edited by M. Kamil, P. D. Pearson, P. Afflerbach, and E. Moje. New York: Routledge.



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