

Reading Strategies Critical in Talent Development Schools

NOT TOO LONG AGO, reading as a separate subject dropped out of school days and curricula after fourth or fifth grade. By that time, students were expected to read—and comprehend.

Although teachers, parents, and even employers assumed that someone who could decode words could understand them, too, it has become apparent throughout school and beyond that literacy cannot be taken for granted. In recent years, scores on many state and national tests showed middle-school students underachieving in reading. Now, educators are looking seriously at the difference between reading as decoding and reading as comprehending. They realize that students need instruction in both—from preschool through high school. Research has shown that students at risk of school failure are often several years behind their grade level in reading skills and lack the vocabulary and life experiences that help readers understand unfamiliar material.

So when these students come to an assignment, some are unable even to read it and many fail to comprehend, understand, and use what they read. Nor is it only at-risk students who have trouble comprehending what they read. The U.S. Department of Education has, in fact, identified comprehension as a problem for many readers and a subject ripe for research. It has committed millions of dollars over the next few years to find out which curriculum and instruction practices promote comprehension skills and what is the best way to assess those skills.

CRESPAR's Talent Development (TD) model already includes intensive instruction aimed at reading and comprehension deficiencies. The TD interventions use age-appropriate materials—not easy to find for poor readers in their teens—and research-based strategies to improve older students' reading skills, while not diluting the rigorous academic program offered to all students in TD schools.

Reading strategies are embedded in the middle-school curricula so that students get reading help in every subject, and every teacher can function as a reading teacher. In social studies, for instance, the focus is on American history, based on a 10-book series, *History of US* by Joy Hakim. Curriculum writers at Johns Hopkins University, who are developing teacher and student materials for the series, have added strategies to their lessons. “We needed to discover ways to support reading,” said Susan Dangel, one of the creators of curriculum materials. Among those supports are activities to help students understand what they are reading. Some are teacher-led activities, such as introducing vocabulary and setting goals for a reading assignment. Others are student strategies, such as reading in pairs.

Hopkins' curriculum writers have been asked by Oxford Press, which publishes the history series, to write a handbook on reading to accompany the curriculum materials.

Student Team Literature. This basic middle school reading program focuses on literature rather than “basal” stories. The teacher prepares students by introducing the book, its author, and new vocabulary and by giving background information. Students read silently and aloud and then do activities—often in cooperative teams—based on their reading. Students learn strategies they can use any time they read—strategies such as asking themselves questions about what they are reading, putting the selection into their own words, and taking notes and outlining difficult materials.

The emphasis on literacy continues in high school, where many at-risk students are reading two years below grade level. TD schools use block scheduling, which gives students four 90-minute classes per day—more time to focus on a subject and complete several activities during each class.

Strategic Reading. For readers who are well below their grade level, the Talent Development model offers a ninth-grade research-based course in Strategic Reading. Designed by CRESPAR researchers, it is a balanced literacy program that provides students with multiple opportunities to construct, examine, and extend meaning from print. Also, it offers help in writing clearly and listening effectively—skills that support good reading and foster all learning.

Literacy Lab. This is computer-based instruction under development that gives an extra dose of language arts to students who lack reading and writing skills. The lab is used in conjunction with Strategic Reading to give needy students more help and a broader choice of reading materials. The Literacy Lab consists of three stations: a computer station where students read, often from the Internet; a writing area; and a listening area, where students can hear tapes of the core texts read by good readers. This helps them read and gives them the opportunity to hear fluent readers.

Reading & Writing In Your Career. This 10th-grade course is also under development for students who need additional help with reading and writing. The focus is on content and skills that students will need throughout their high school careers and when they are job hunting. A similar course is being planned for 11th grade, as well.

Talent Development Middle Schools in Philadelphia

URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS that serve high-poverty populations are often attended by large numbers of students who are multiple years behind grade level, staffed by inexperienced and under-supported teachers, and operate in a chaotic teaching and learning climate. As a result, few students obtain a rigorous and standards-based middle grades education and high levels of teacher turnover are the norm.

The Talent Development Middle School (TDMS) has been specifically designed to enable middle schools to engage students with rigorous curriculum and instruction, provide teachers with the support they need to develop deep content knowledge, and develop safe, nurturing, and challenging learning environments.

Since 1995, through a partnership with the Philadelphia Education Fund and the School District of Philadelphia, the Talent Development Middle School model has accomplished this in 12 challenging middle schools within the district: 1995—Central East; 1997—Cooke, Beeber; 1998—Shoemaker, Clemente; 1999—Strawberry Mansion, Roosevelt; 2001—Lewis, Edwin Vare, W. Pierce, Tilden, Penn Treaty.

There is significant achievement advantage to attending a TDMS school. Evaluations of the model have been conducted in seven Talent Development Middle Schools and their comparison schools. These evaluations provide strong evidence that full implementation of the model leads to substantial gains in student performance and improved morale for both students and staff. TDMS students on average have had achievement gains which are two to three times higher than the district average on the Pennsylvania State Student Assessment (PSSA) in 8th grade. These schools have also out-performed a matched set of demographically similar control schools.

The first two schools in Philadelphia to fully implement the Talent Development model were Central East and Cooke Middle Schools. Each school has significant achievement gains in mathematics, reading, and science. These gains have put both schools on trajectories to reach ambitious performance goals.

On multiple indexes and measures, Central East Middle School has exhibited strong and sustained achievement gains since the implementation of the TDMS model.

After two years in a Talent Development Middle School, students at Cooke Middle School had twice as much achievement growth in reading and mathematics as students in the control school.

TDMS students report high use of recommended reading strategies. On the most recent PSSA reading test, eighth graders were asked about the reading strategies they use. The results indicate that students in Talent Development Middle Schools are already employing many of the core strategies recommended in the School District of Philadelphia's ELA Scope and Sequence and Balanced Literacy documents.

Teachers give high marks to Talent Development Middle Schools' training and curriculum. Focus groups and interviews with 60 teachers in seven Talent Development Middle Schools conducted in February and March 2000 by independent researchers indicate that teachers are quite favorable when asked to evaluate Talent Development's professional development sessions, curriculum materials, and instructional approaches.

New teachers in particular found the support they receive is crucial to their professional growth as teachers.

The researchers have also found evidence of a notable positive impact of the TDMS model on pedagogy, content, and learning environment. They compared Central East to five other schools not using the model

and concluded that the model has produced “greater consistency in pedagogy, content, and environment...[and] a greater emphasis on mastering challenging content.”