Approach to Literacy Instruction for Students with Disabilities

“White Paper”

Office of Special Education Instruction

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**Introduction of the Issue**

Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) students need strong literacy skills to succeed in school and life. Large numbers of students in this country are struggling to become proficient readers by fourth grade (Torgesen, 2005). Students with disabilities who do not acquire these skills find themselves at a serious disadvantage, both in their ability to pursue higher education and career goals, and as contributing citizens.

School-based administrators and teachers are charged with ensuring that all students are able to meet the rich and rewarding literacy challenges of the elementary, middle, and high school years. In FCPS, all schools build professional learning communities that employ best practices to raise the bar and close the achievement gap. It is the expectation that all students will obtain, understand, analyze, communicate, and apply knowledge and skills to achieve success in school and in life. This preparation begins in the classroom through core instruction. Students with disabilities may require specialized instruction to develop literacy skills in order to access the increasingly complex grade-level content, to facilitate the use of community resources, and to achieve success in the workplace.

Literacy can be defined as “a set of complex skills” that involve the reading and writing necessary to communicate and learn. National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities ([NJCLD], 2008) defines both reading and writing. Reading is a complex process which requires decoding with the intention of deriving and constructing meaning from text. Writing is the ability to compose text beginning with letter formation and progressing to include accurate and fluent spelling, sentence construction, and the ability to convey a complex message with different purposes.
Wakeman, Browder, Meier & McColl (2007), suggest that research has been conducted to show that students with moderate and severe developmental disabilities can learn academic content in the areas of reading, math and science. For students with severe cognitive, physical, and sensory impairments literacy instruction often requires an alternative conceptual framework. Downing (2005) indicates that reading instruction for students with the most severe disabilities requires expanding literacy activities to include any means of gaining information and expressing oneself. For these students, Downing suggests, using alternatives to written text is essential. Using materials such as pictures, objects, textures, and other concrete symbolic figures students with significant disabilities can master literacy skills targeted to their ability levels. For example, students who cannot read may access a piece of literature by having it read aloud. These students may also demonstrate their understanding of the text through their existing picture identification skills (Browder, Spooner, & Meier, 2011).

FCPS recognizes the need to address the issues related to literacy with the focus on effective reading and writing instruction for all students with disabilities. This white paper defines the approach to literacy instruction in FCPS for all students with disabilities to improve their learning and performance across the curriculum.

**Proof the Problem Exists**

Less than one third of adolescents have the literacy skills they need to succeed in school and beyond, creating a “literacy health” crisis for adolescents in our country (Deshler, 2010). According to the Nation’s Report Card (US Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, 2009), there also continues to be an achievement gap in reading ability between general education students and students with disabilities. When tested on comprehension with literary and informal texts, 62 percent of fourth grade students
and 57 percent of eighth grade students with disabilities earned grades below basic proficiency in reading. During the same year, only 22 percent of fourth grade students and 18 percent of eighth grade students without disabilities earned grades below basic proficiency. Although these numbers still cause concern, the percentage of students with disabilities performing below standards is far greater than their non-disabled peers. As students progress from middle school to high school, the demands of the curriculum change dramatically in volume, abstractness, and complexity of text materials (Deshler, 2010) causing the students with disabilities to either remain behind or fall further behind. When the statistics are compared to students without disabilities it is not a surprise that the future of students with disabilities continues to be clouded by the increased probabilities for dropping out of school, unemployment, or underemployment.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 requires states to set annual benchmarks for student achievement in reading and mathematics leading to 100 percent proficiency by 2014. Annual accountability ratings are based on achievement from the previous academic year or combined achievement from the three most recent years. FCPS data provides information regarding the achievement of students on the SOL test, including percentages of students who demonstrate pass proficiency. In Figure 1, the achievement gap between students with disabilities and students without disabilities is compared over three independent school years (2007-08, 2008-09, and 2009-10) on the reading SOL in FCPS. This data shows that between years 2007-08 and 2008-09, the gap decreased. However, from school years 2008-09 and 2009-10, the gap increased slightly. The achievement gap also increased in grades 7 and 8, highlighting the adolescent literacy crisis. Figure 2 shows the average of grades 3 through 11 over the three independent school years. Again, students with disabilities pass rates increased from school years 2007-08 and 2008-09, but were slightly lower between school years
2008-09 and 2009-10. Figure 1 and Figure 2 highlight the achievement gap between the two groups by presenting the specific percentage of students in each school year that passed.
### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Independent School Year</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
<th>Grade 7</th>
<th>Grade 8</th>
<th>Grade 11</th>
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<td>89</td>
<td>93</td>
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<td>94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Achievement Gap</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
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</table>
Overview of Best Practices in the Field

The research presented in the 2001 National Reading Panel’s report, *Put Reading First: the Research Building Blocks of Reading Instruction*, serves as the foundation for reading instruction at the elementary levels (K–grade 3). Five critical areas of effective reading instruction were identified by the panel including: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension. Based on an extensive review of literature, *Put Reading First* identified skills beginning readers need in order to become independent readers, including approaches, methods, and strategies that appear promising for classroom application.

Biancarosa and Snow (2004) delineate instructional and infrastructural elements of adolescent literacy programs aimed at improving middle and high school literacy achievement. According to Moats (1999), the components of reading instruction should
include the following research-based practices: direct, explicit teaching in phonemic awareness and decoding; vocabulary instruction that includes the study of word relationships; explicit instruction in comprehension strategies; exposing students to a wide range of reading genre in order to support independent reading skills; and having students respond frequently to their reading.

Reading and writing skills are integral parts of literacy; therefore, along with reading comprehension, writing skills are a predictor of academic success. Graham and Perin (2007) highlight specific teaching techniques that support writing instruction. Writing instruction should provide opportunities for students to learn to write well, and to use writing as a tool for learning. Students must be able to write clearly for a wide variety of reasons. Most contexts of life—school, work, and community—call for some level of writing proficiency.

The key elements of literacy include the five components of reading instruction, but also target metacognitive, self-regulation, and executive functioning skills. Students with disabilities require targeted instruction at differentiated levels of intensity that is explicit and systematic in both the general and special education settings (NJCLD, 2008).

Historically, students with severe developmental disabilities have had little focus in literacy instruction. Reading instruction for students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities has traditionally focused on mastering sight words. Put Reading First (2001) noted, however, that decoding skills, not just sight word recognition, are essential to gaining competence as a reader. Recent studies have demonstrated that these students can gain basic literacy skills with intensive instruction; although, few studies have focused on teaching phonics to students with these disabilities (Browder, Gibbs, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade, Mraz, and Flowers, 2008). Barudin and Hourcade (1990) and
Lane and Critchfield (1998) found that these students benefited from phonemic awareness training and phonics instruction. Others (Hoogeveen, Smeets, and Lancioni, 1989) have also demonstrated positive outcomes when introducing letter-sound correspondence to students with moderate intellectual disabilities. If this population of students is to have the opportunity to learn to read, they will need targeted, systematic instruction that teaches explicit decoding and comprehension.

**Office of Special Education Instruction’s (OSEI) Current Approach**

FCPS uses a balanced literacy approach. Balanced literacy is a curricular methodology that integrates various modalities of literacy instruction and has assessment-based planning at its core. The balanced literacy approach is characterized by explicit skill instruction and the use of authentic texts. Teachers plan and deliver instruction with a gradual release of control, whereby responsibility is gradually shifted from the teacher to the students. For many students with disabilities the balanced literacy framework in the general education classroom with support from special education staff members is sufficient to address their instructional needs. This core instruction differentiates and embeds reading instruction in the general education curriculum and students receive accommodations as indicated on their individualized education program (IEP). For students with disabilities who require more intensive support to improve literacy skills, FCPS provides a continuum of services that includes direct, explicit, highly structured, and systematic instruction.

A major tenet of both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and NCLB (2001) is the identification and use of evidence-based practices or instructional techniques shown by research to most likely improve student outcomes (Cook, Tankersley, Cook & Landrum, 2008). All specialized programs and materials are selected based on their use of “scientifically-based” researched best practices. Current
“peer-reviewed” research on sites such as the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences: What Works Clearing House, Doing What Works: Research-based Educational Practices (2010), and The Florida Center for Reading Research (2010) are two frequently used resources to support literacy instruction. It is important to note that being “evidenced-based” is not a guarantee that an instructional practice will work (Cook et al., 2008). Students with disabilities have highly varied needs; educators must remain flexible in their instructional approaches and develop a repertoire of strategies, implemented with fidelity, to meet students’ needs.

The following section defines the five elements garnered from Put Reading First (2001) and describes the programs and practices that are typically used to support students with disabilities around these core elements. In FCPS, programs are generally used to provide supplemental instruction in the critical areas of reading and are meant to support the balanced literacy curriculum delivered in general education.

**Reading Programs used in FCPS**

**Phonemic Awareness and Phonics**

Phonemic Awareness and Phonics are the building blocks of reading. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken words. Phonics refers to the relationship between the letters of written language and the individual sounds of spoken language. For students with phonologically-based reading disabilities that manifest themselves in problems learning to identify words with fluency and accuracy (Torgeson, 2006), a highly explicit and systematic approach is taken.

Programs such as Wilson: Fundations® (K-3), Wilson Just Words® (4-12), and Wilson Reading Systems® (3-12) by Barbara A. Wilson (1985), involve direct instruction and
are based on the Orton-Gillingham approach which consists of structured, sequential, and multisensory techniques. Students with dyslexia particularly benefit from these types of programs. According to the International Dyslexia Association (2008), instruction for students with language-based learning disabilities should include a multisensory structured language approach which incorporates the use of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic strategies and techniques to teach written language. In addition, "explicit, direct, cumulative, intensive instruction, a focus on the structure of language" is recommended.

Phonics for Reading (Archer, Flood, Lapp, & Lungren, 2009) instructs students on reading one-syllable and multisyllable words, using letter-sound relationships and structural units, and comprehension at a sentence and passage level. REWARDS, (Reading Excellence: Word Attack and Rate Development Strategies) (Archer, Gleason, Vachon, 2000) for intermediate and secondary students, focuses on blending prefixes and suffixes to decode multisyllabic words in sentences within passages, and provides opportunities for students to practice comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, and spelling. REWARDS Plus applies the previously learned decoding skills to build comprehension in the science and social studies content areas. Word Journeys (Ganske, 2000) assesses students’ spelling and word knowledge abilities which includes detailed guidelines for engaging students in word study that is matched to their strengths and weaknesses. Words Their Way (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 1999) explores word recognition and spelling skills for students grades K-12.

Lexia Reading ® (Lemire, 1984) is a supplementary software program designed to help improve basic reading skills. It is intended to support teacher instruction by providing systematic and explicit independent practice in the five critical components (phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) of reading. Stronger
emphasis is placed on phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency than on vocabulary and comprehension. Both Lexia Early Reading® and Lexia Primary Reading® (PreK-3rd grade) and Lexia Strategies for Older Students® (4th grade to adult) provide opportunities for immediate feedback following student responses. Lexia Reading® is specifically designed to remediate basic reading skills while offering age-appropriate content and, with levels that focus on phonological awareness, word attack, contextual strategies, automatic word recognition, comprehension, and structural analysis.

Early Literacy Skills Builder (ELSB) ™ (Browder, Gibbs, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade, and Lee, 2007) is a highly effective program for teaching foundational literacy skills. ELSB™ is a scientifically-based language-rich literacy curriculum for children aged 5 to 10 with moderate to severe developmental disabilities. It incorporates systematic instruction to teach both print and phonemic awareness. ELSB™ is a multi-year program with seven distinct levels and ongoing assessments so students progress at his or her own pace.

**Reading Fluency**

Fluency is the ability to read accurately, with prosody, at a conversational pace. It involves the ability to recognize words automatically, rapidly apply phonics, and use context clues to understand unknown words. Current research references a number of strategies to support fluency development. These strategies include listening to repeated readings (hearing a passage read by a fluent model), contingent reinforcement, and goal setting combined with feedback. To address reading fluency, Read Naturally© (Ihnot & Ihnot, 1991) is a program that combines three research-based strategies: teacher modeling, repeated reading, and progress monitoring.
Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the words we must know to communicate effectively. Vocabulary is described as oral vocabulary or reading vocabulary. Oral vocabulary refers to words that are used in speaking or recognized in listening. Reading vocabulary refers to words recognized or used in print (Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read, 1999). Effective vocabulary instruction should provide students with explicit instruction with specific content-related words and concepts, as well as teach strategies that help facilitate the development of this skill and its application. Techniques such as pre-teaching vocabulary, modeling the use of context clues to determine the meanings of new words or concepts, the use of mnemonics, and the use of graphic organizers are all strategies supported by research.

The Edmark® Reading Program by Pro-Ed Inc. is designed for students with low mild to moderate cognitive disabilities, uses a whole word approach which teaches recognition and comprehension of words. The process teaches sight recognition of a word, introduces its meaning, provides comprehension practice, and uses the word in context. Edmark Level 1® teaches 150 words chosen from the Dolch® Word List (Dolch, 1948) and first grade texts, as well as regular tense, plural tense, gerund endings, capitalization, and punctuation. Edmark Level 2® introduces 200 new words, including compound words.

Comprehension

The ultimate purpose for reading is to acquire knowledge from the context and then to communicate this acquisition of content effectively and efficiently. Comprehension consists of several specific skills and strategies that need to be taught explicitly, practiced, and applied. Read 180 Enterprise Edition (Hasselbring, Kinsella, and Feldman, 1999) uses theme-based workshops that employ a variety of genres and
content area nonfiction selections, and uses whole group instruction and small group
differentiation for secondary students. Thinking Reader® (Tom Snyder Productions,
2006), a computer-based program, teaches students to apply seven scientifically proven
comprehension strategies through young adult novels. The Corrective Reading
Comprehension© program by SRA/McGraw-Hill (Engelmann, Hanner, and Johnson,
2008) moves the students from applying basic reasoning skills that form the framework
for learning information to higher order thinking skills. Read to Achieve© by
SRA/McGraw Hill program, (Marchand-Martella and Martella, 2010) provides explicit and
systematic instruction in comprehension strategies to prepare students to be successful
in content area classes.

Comprehensive Programs (Address the Five Critical Areas)

For students who have more comprehensive needs there are several programs available
for use. Direct Instruction programs by SRA/McGraw-Hill including Reading Mastery©
and Corrective Reading Comprehension© implement explicit teacher directed
instruction, the use of decodable texts, and corrective feedback. Cognitive Reading
Strategies© Level I and II are comprehensive programs that use direct instruction and a
multisensory instructional approach to teach phonics, comprehension, and writing. Read
Well®, published by Cambium Learning Group, designed for Kindergarten through third
grade students, provides the foundational skills critical to reading and understanding
what is read (Florida Center for Reading Research 2007). The upper elementary and
secondary program, LANGUAGE!™, integrates reading, spelling, writing, and other
critical language arts strands in a highly individualized, systematic, intensive, and
structured curriculum (Florida Center for Reading Research 2002).
Technology Tools for Accessing Curriculum Materials

“Technology is both a facilitator of literacy and a medium of literacy. Effective adolescent literacy programs therefore should use technology as both an instructional tool and an instructional topic” (Biancacosara & Snow, 2004). Students who struggle with reading and writing need to have access to curriculum materials while they are working on improving their literacy skills. Technology can often provide the means for students to access these materials. Screen readers such as Read:OutLoud®, Read Please®, Word Talk, and Natural Reader allow text to be read to students. Textbooks and other instructional materials are available in accessible formats for students who qualify through the Accessible Instructional Materials Center of Virginia (AIM-VA). High interest, controlled vocabulary books such as Start to Finish® provide students with access to grade level literature at their reading level. Programs such as Draft:Builder®, Inspiration®, and Kidspiration® provide students with a means to plan and organize their writing. Word prediction programs such as Co:Writer® and Word Q® allow students who struggle with the mechanics of writing to produce written work reflective of their thoughts and ideas. Speech recognition programs such as Dragon Naturally Speaking® and Speak Q™ allow students to write by dictation. Portable word processors such as the Neo2™ allow students who struggle with handwriting the ability to compose written work through keyboarding. All of these technology tools can help students overcome the barriers that often create literacy deficits.

Conclusion

FCPS recognizes the need to address the issues related to literacy with the focus on effective reading and writing instruction for students with disabilities. OSEI takes a consistent and coordinated district wide approach to literacy instruction. We collaborate
with all stakeholders to address the literacy needs of students with disabilities. Our goal is to develop literacy leaders in each school who have the knowledge of core literacy content, the knowledge of best practices in literacy instruction, and the ability to differentiate instruction for students with disabilities. Teachers participate in a tiered professional development model that helps support the literacy needs of any student with a disability. OSEI’s coordinated approach to specialized reading program training and coaching ensures the fidelity of the specialized reading programs and the implementation of those programs. The overall outcome will provide students with the strong literacy skills necessary to succeed in FCPS and beyond.
References


Dolch, E.W. (1948) Problems in Reading, Dolch word list.


Florida Center for Reading Research: http://www.fcrr.org


Pro Ed. Edmark Reading Program (2011). Called customer service and they do not have the names of the authors. This 2nd edition was published in 2011, but the original program was in the 70’s and they did not have the year.


U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences: What Works Clearing House

http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/


http://www.wilsonlanguage.com/FS_ABOUT