FOR STATE LEADERS

Here's How

State Sustainability Strategies

Focus on Success

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Building Support for Evidence-based Reading Programs

As the old saying goes, "Nothing succeeds like success." Evidence-based reading programs are more likely to be sustained and scaled up when a wide group of education stakeholders understands what the instructional approach consists of and what gains have been made. Successful Reading First programs need to communicate the fact that student reading outcomes have increased and explain how and why this was accomplished.

At the state level, key audiences include (1) state level decision-makers, such as the state legislature and state board of education staff, (2) staff across programs within the SEA, (3) staff in all local education agencies, and (4) the general public.

In the words of one Reading First director,

"We learned very quickly that we needed to move out of our office with the data if there was going to be any hope of making sure that this model really did go statewide….So we have tried to be quite public in the sharing of our data…"

Craft a Compelling Message of Success

Crafting and publicizing success is essentially a marketing endeavor. As a first step, you need to find an appropriate source of data; your state Reading First evaluation and/or technical reports are a good place to start. Second, consider fidelity of implementation and disaggregate your schools by level of implementation. This will enable you to make the case that student achievement was attained when Reading First was implemented with fidelity.

Once you have gathered your data, there are several considerations in crafting a compelling message of success.

Write for a fairly general audience, not "reading insiders." The idea here is to provide interesting, attention-getting information about what you have accomplished.

Clearly define the longer-term reading outcomes that reflect the values of you and your state stakeholders. This is likely to focus on reading comprehension and student success in making the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."

Clearly identify the assessments you are using to measure progress toward goals and why these are valid and reliable for the purpose in-

methods and present a limited number of tables or graphics, which focus only on the most important messages. Have the evaluation and research data to back up your claims, but don't forget that the greater goal is communicating well-supported conclusions to a broad audience in a way that resonates with their goals and values.

Sustainability is the ability of a program to operate on its core beliefs and values (its reading culture) and use them to guide essential and inevitable program adaptations over time while maintaining improved outcomes.

Adapted from Century and Levy, 2002

Putting Your Message Together: Suggested Techniques

- *Begin by citing achievements on widely held and valued goals: for example, increasing reading proficiency levels on the state test, closing achievement gaps, or reducing referrals to special education. Whenever possible, link achievement to goals and objectives in state strategic plans or state literacy plans. This helps stakeholders immediately grasp the value of the type of reading program represented by Reading First.*
- *Tell the story of the journey, working backward from a dramatic accomplishment to tell the story in deeper detail. Describe the challenges the Reading First schools faced, e.g., level of poverty, track record of poor performance, and achievement gaps. Then, describe how the school-wide reading model operates and describe the practices that made it effective. Finally, summarize data that indicates you were/ are on track to meet state test scores.*
- *Consider testimonials—include brief quotations that give teachers and students a voice in explaining why the school reading model worked for them.*
- *Package your story in multiple formats (press releases, presentations, etc.) to get the word on success out in a variety of ways.*

What can we achieve by communicating success?

As an SEA, you can communicate with many individuals and organizations. By communicating broadly within the SEA, you can encourage top–level state leadership to make the transition from Reading First as a federal program to an evidence-based approach for teaching reading as centerpiece of their efforts to help all students achieve. By communicating to non-Reading First districts and school staff, you can provide a specific and proven way to reach the achievement of decision-makers who can help you institutionalize the elements of evidence-based reading programs and, possibly, provide goals they are accountable for. By "communicating up" to the state legislature and/or state board, you can gain the support of decision-makers who can help you institutionalize the elements of evidence-based reading programs and possibly provide additional funding.

For example, the leaders in the Bureau of Indian Education's (BIE) Reading First program used their success to advocate to the head of the Bureau and leadership of the Department of the Interior for more funding. As a result, they received $4+ million for 2007-08, a portion of which can be used for the BIE Reads model (based on Reading First). It is easy to see that communicating success can bring many benefits. It may be the case that no one in the SEA is currently responsible for defining and implementing strategies to communicate success. However, even if you have to revise job descriptions to ensure this important function is covered—in the long run the benefits will far outweigh the time and effort invested.

Ways to Get Your Story Out

Successful Communication Mechanisms

Here are several communication mechanisms to consider. How many of these have you already used to effectively communicate your state's successes in evidence-based reading programs?

Communication Mechanisms	
Press Releases	Put out press releases from the SEA on results in Reading First Schools. This *Just Read, Florida!* Press Release focuses on announcing the achievements of the top 25% of *Just Read, Florida!*
Present to Board of Education	Make presentations to the State Board of Education explaining how the Reading First program is helping some schools reach state standards. For example, this presentation to the New Jersey State Board of Education effectively uses charts and graphs to convey Reading First results in the context of other state literacy initiatives.
Apply for Awards	Urge successful Reading First schools to apply for Blue Ribbon Schools or Title I Distinguished Schools awards, or to pursue awards in state recognition programs. Then, use recognized schools as success sites for other schools to visit.
Share Reading First Schools' Successes	Present data on the success of Reading First schools to non-Reading First districts and schools so they can see how their current approach to teaching reading stacks up.
Present at Conferences	Present the Reading First success story at conferences sponsored by state associations of school administrators, Title I, etc.
Seek Out Individuals and Organizations	Seek out prominent education organizations or individuals with whom to share your information; for example, state National Education Association (NEA) or American Federation of Teachers (AFT) representatives; state legislators, education assistants to the Governor, or chamber of commerce. Or, invite these individuals to Reading First schools to see how the school-wide reading model works, firsthand. Alabama found inviting legislators to schools was an effective means of illustrating the success of Reading First.
Use Your State Website	Make effective use of your state website to communicate success. For example, Oregon's Reading First webpage contains a section called "Spotlight" where state evaluations or other documents showing success are posted. It also highlights it's Beacon Schools with brief video presentations where you can learn about how particular schools used Reading First to increase student achievement.

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