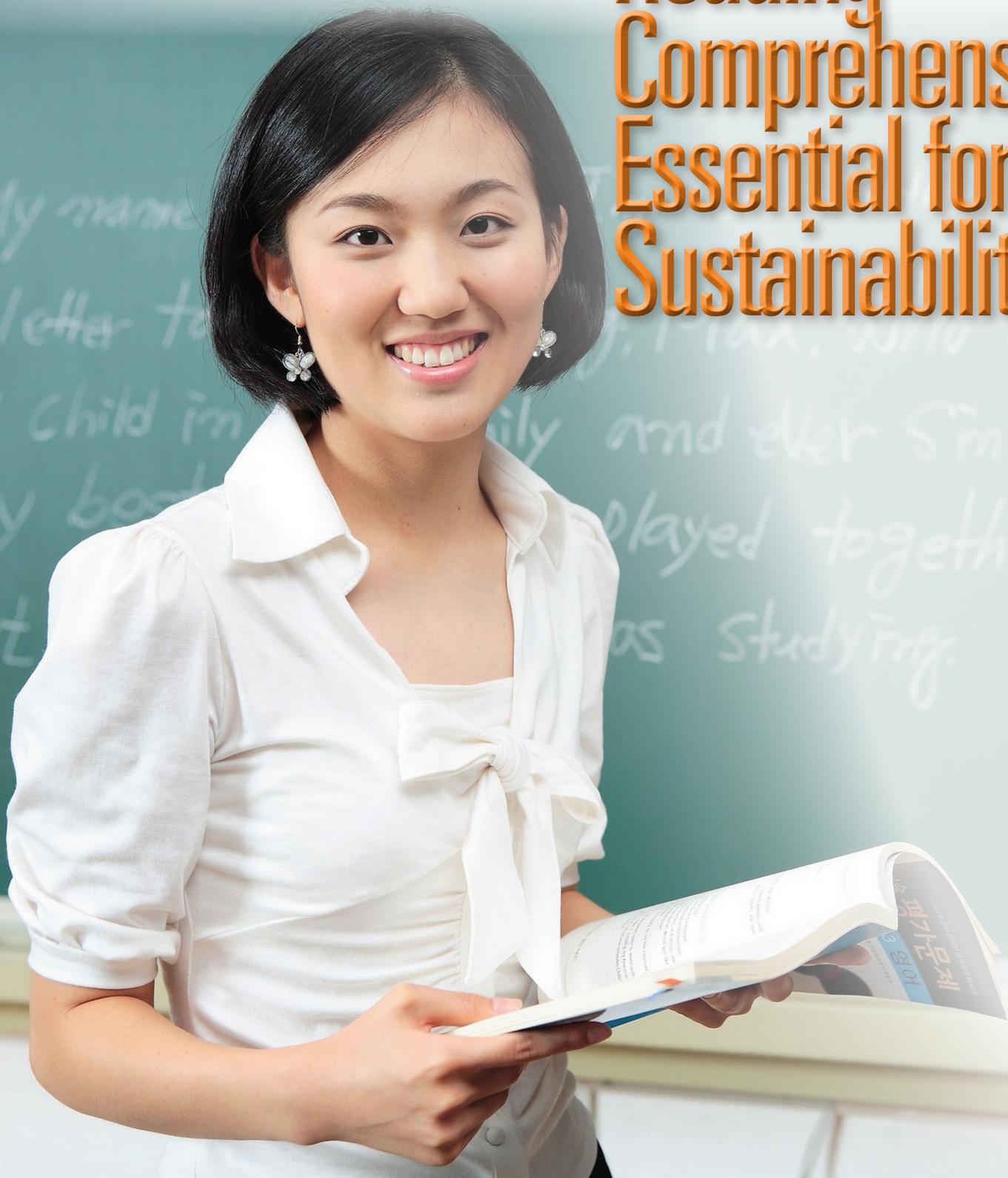




Sustainability Series

Number 8 • September 2009

# Reading Comprehension: Essential for Sustainability



# Welcome

Sustainability Series

Number 8

## Reading Comprehension: Essential for Sustainability

The purpose of this brief is to establish a link between strong reading comprehension and the successful implementation and sustainability of a reading model that spans grades K-3 and beyond. The document describes how teachers in grades K-3 can address comprehension development earlier and more explicitly in the “learning to read” stage than has typically been the case. It also discusses the need for intermediate and secondary level teachers to teach reading comprehension strategies related to the content in their academic disciplines.

This brief, eighth in addressing key aspects of sustainability, applies these concepts and strategies to the challenge of improving reading comprehension outcomes. Other aspects of sustaining evidence-based practices are addressed in other briefs in this series. Please check the Reading First Sustainability website at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/support/sustaining.html> for other titles in this series.

This brief was written by Scott Baker, Director of the Pacific Institutes for Research, and Stan Paine, of the University of Oregon. Dr. Baker has done extensive work over the past 20 years in the areas of beginning reading, reading comprehension, reading assessment and school-wide models for improved reading outcomes. He also is Associate Director for Research in the Center on Teaching and Learning at the University of Oregon. Dr. Paine directs professional development and outreach services to schools and districts to improve academic outcomes for students. Prior to joining the University, Dr. Paine was an elementary school principal for 22 years.

Sustainability is the ability of a staff to maintain the core beliefs and values (culture) of a program and use them to guide program adaptations over time while maintaining improved or enhanced outcomes.

*-adapted from Century and Levy, 2002*

**Teaching with the Goal in Mind from Start to Finish** 4  
Sustaining the focus on reading outcomes K-12.

**Content Instruction in Kindergarten through Third Grade** 6  
Comprehension is at the center of instruction from kindergarten throughout all of schooling.

**Extending Comprehension Instruction Across the Grade Levels** 8  
What is the school's responsibility for reading instruction in grades 4-12?

**Building the Link Between Comprehension and Sustainability** 10  
Learn about school and district leadership strategies.

**References** 12

When it comes to giving all students an opportunity for the success in life that is made possible by the ability to read, achieving and sustaining improved outcomes in reading comprehension is the measure of success.



# Teaching with the Goal in Mind from Start to Finish



Much work has been done over the past decade to improve reading outcomes in the primary grades. The fruit of these efforts is seen in state evaluations of the Reading First program and in some of the findings of the national Reading First evaluation study (Gamse, Bloom, Kemple, Jacob, 2008). However, the success story is not complete. For example, one national evaluation of Reading First found no significant differences in comprehension when looking at sites receiving Reading First funding and schools not receiving Reading First funding. We may debate these findings, but one thing is certain: they provide an opportunity for reflection as we move into the next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the next reading improvement initiative.

One way of reflecting is to look at the success of a reading improvement initiative from the eyes of its stakeholders. What does success mean to them? To parents and students, reading success is being able to derive meaning from books and other forms of print and to use information for the reader's purposes. From the point of view of school staff, success may additionally consist of meeting state reading proficiency targets, which are typically measured by assessment of comprehension on state assessments. What do these views of success have in common? They are squarely focused on strong reading comprehension skills.

In much of the recent work with reading improvement initiatives, such as the Reading First program, we have placed considerable emphasis on the skills of learning how to read, especially on decoding and reading fluency. The National Reading Panel's (2000) focus on the five components of effective reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) is appropriate and necessary to developing strong readers, but we have put only modest—and perhaps insufficient—focus on actively developing reading comprehension skills. If we are to improve reading outcomes in schools and sustain them, we must continue to develop decoding and fluency skills while simultaneously increasing our focus on improving reading comprehension outcomes (Snow, 2002). In fact, doing so might be the single best hope for garnering the support needed to sustain recent progress and to build upon it over time.

Because comprehension is the ultimate purpose of reading, any effort to improve reading outcomes—and to uphold

that improvement over time—must start early and stay consistent in focusing on improved outcomes in comprehension (National Research Council, 1998). We must teach to our goal from start to finish.

One strategy is to increase comprehension instruction in kindergarten through grade 3. While there is no doubt that requisite reading skills must be developed, it is also clear that the reading skills measured on the third grade state reading test likely focus in large part on comprehension. Therefore, there must be a systematic and explicit effort to build comprehension skills beginning in kindergarten.

Another strategy is to ensure that our efforts to systematically improve reading outcomes reach beyond the skill building and fluency-building efforts of the primary years to include explicit comprehension instruction in the middle school and

high school years. If we limit our improvement focus too narrowly on beginning reading instruction, our efforts will eventually run into the established boundaries of the elementary school years or simply run out of steam as staff leave, priorities shift, or students move on to middle school.

If we seek support and build collaboration across school levels for the larger mission—teaching comprehension (and its component skills) and developing the reading fluency to support it—we might find more support among our constituents at all levels for a strong district level reading initiative and, as a result, realize the possibility of improved outcomes at each level.

Adopting a stronger comprehension focus for our reading initiative and extending it across all levels can help sustain reading improvement efforts and improved outcomes.

Similarly, adopting a district level systems focus for reading improvement can help us reach our comprehension goals at all levels.



# Content Instruction in Kindergarten through Third Grade

A critical question in grades K-3 is whether there is valuable content outside of explicitly teaching students *how* to read that may further prepare students for proficient reading. The answer suggested in this brief is *yes*. A broader conceptualization of reading instruction is described below that could be beneficial to students in measurable ways throughout their educational careers.

Comprehension is the common thread in instruction across all subject areas. In reading, it is what gives the words meaning. Moreover, words in different contexts or settings (e.g. genres of literature, informational text structures, etc.) must be understood differently. Hence, different types of comprehension are required. In what we typically call content areas (science, social studies, health,



**Table 1. Sample Washington State Grade Level Expectations for Reading Comprehension**

| <b>Component 3.1 Read to learn new information</b> |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Grade K</b>                                     | <p><b>3.1.1 Understand that resources contain information needed to answer questions and solve problems.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to and talk about information from a variety of types of informational/expository text.</li> <li>• Participate in whole-group discussions to generate questions and listen to informational/expository text for answers to those questions.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Grade 1</b>                                     | <p><b>3.1.1 Understand how to select and use appropriate resources.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify print and non-print resource materials available to complete a task (with teacher assistance), such as informational text and/or illustrations and graphics.</li> <li>• Identify one resource and use it to answer a question with teacher assistance.</li> </ul>                         |
| <b>Grades 2-3</b>                                  | <p><b>3.1.1 Understand how to select and use appropriate resources.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify two resources and use them to answer a question or solve a problem.</li> </ul>  |

[The table above is offered as an example of how one state developed GLEs and does not represent an endorsement from the US Department of Education.]

are less likely than other students to do well in school. There are important differences in language and vocabulary knowledge (Hart & Risley, 1995), on early numeracy skills (National Mathematics Advisory Panel, 2008), and on important cognitive processing

etc.), comprehension is what allows us to understand information about a topic. Thus, comprehension is critical throughout the curriculum. Because its variations are not intuitive, the forms of comprehension, as well as their application across types of reading material, must be taught explicitly. This puts comprehension (including its component parts, such as vocabulary, strategies, genres, and text structures) squarely at the center of instruction from kindergarten (where we can begin with word meaning and oral comprehension) throughout all of schooling.

How is this reading content structured? The best answer comes from looking at state standards and grade level expectations (GLEs). Table 1 illustrates one of the comprehension related GLEs from the state of Washington. Note how the expanding nature of the curriculum expectation calls for on-going instruction across grade levels on component skills. Taken together, these GLEs, along with their component skills and sub-skills, form a content for reading instruction across the grade levels and emphasize the importance of continuity of instruction over time.

We know that on just about every measure of school readiness, students who enter kindergarten at risk for academic difficulties

skills such as working memory (Baker, Kame'enui, Simmons, & Simonsen, 2006). Factors that strongly predict who these children will be have nothing to do with intrinsic talent or ability. They are factors like childhood poverty, race, and ethnicity that should have nothing to do with whether or not students get a quality education. Therefore, teachers need to be intentional and explicit in addressing the needs of each student in mastering the reading comprehension skills identified in state GLEs.

Table 2 suggests some strategies that might be used to develop comprehension skills.

**Table 2: Key Instructional Strategies for Comprehension Development in Grades K-3**

|  |
|--|
| • Provide structured read alouds                 |
| • Develop knowledge of various text structures   |
| • Use procedural facilitators such as story maps |
| • Review text organization prior to reading      |
| • Teach the key structural features of books     |

# Extending Comprehension Instruction Across the Grade Levels

It has been somewhat of a tradition in education to assume that reading is taught primarily in the early grades and that by the end of elementary school students would be able to apply their developed reading skills independently to important content in middle school and high school. Content teachers in middle and high school have not traditionally thought of themselves as “reading teachers.” This is changing for at least two reasons. First, we are developing a better understanding of how reading skills develop from kindergarten through grade 12. Second, as our world becomes increasingly complicated, increasingly competitive, and increasingly information dependent, we are setting higher standards for defining proficient reading.

Let’s go back to the sample comprehension GLE we looked at in Table 1 and see how it evolves after grade 3 (See Table 3).

**Table 3: Washington State GLEs Component 3.1. Read to Learn New Information.**

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
|                    | <b>3.1.1 Understand that resources contain information needed to answer questions and solve problems.</b>  |
| <b>Grade 5</b>     | <b>3.1.1 Analyze appropriateness of a variety of resources and use them to perform a specific task or investigate a topic.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Locate, select, and use a variety of library and internet materials appropriate to a task or best suited to investigate a topic.</li> <li>✦ Follow multi-step written directions (e.g., explain the process for becoming a U.S. citizen, follow a recipe, build a model, complete a project).</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Grade 8</b>     | <b>3.1.1 Analyze web-based and other resource materials (including primary sources and secondary sources) for relevance in answering research questions.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Examine resource materials to determine appropriate primary sources and secondary sources to use for investigating a question, topic, or issue (e.g., encyclopedia and other reference materials, pamphlets, book excerpts, newspaper and magazine articles, letters to an editor).</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Grades 9-10</b> | <b>3.1.1 Analyze web-based and other resource materials (including primary sources and secondary sources) for relevance in answering research questions.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Examine materials to determine appropriate primary sources and secondary sources to use for investigating a question, topic, or issue (e.g., encyclopedia and other reference materials, pamphlets, book excerpts, newspaper and magazine articles, letters to an editor, oral records, research summaries, scientific and trade journals).</li> </ul> |



Note how far the expected skill has been extended from the elementary school grades to middle school and high school levels. We can't simply assume that kids will "get it" by grade 3, then be able to extend the skill to a far higher level without further instruction, practice and feedback over time (numerous occasions and multiple examples). These curriculum details are not merely what we are **hoping** for at each grade level. They are **expectations** that the state and its stakeholders—students, parents, and the general public—hold for our students. We must continually work to develop these skills across grade levels so that each student can master the skills and meet the Grade Level Expectations by the time s/he exits the public school system.

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) has issued a Practice Guide on Reading Instruction in grades 4-12 (Kamil, et. al. 2008). By addressing these specific grades, the intention is to build on the efforts of many early reading reforms that are focused on getting students off to a good start in reading.

The connection to many recent reading improvement initiatives is also clear in the content of the Practice Guide, where the thread of explicit instruction runs throughout.

The Practice Guide makes two fundamental points. The first is that content-area teachers in grades 4-12 should be responsible for explicitly teaching students how to read proficiently in their discipline. History teachers should provide explicit instruction in how to read history textbooks and historical documents, as well as how to reason and think as a historian. It's not enough to teach students about events in history, or even how events are connected to central historical themes, such as the struggle for independence. Even students with "strong basic reading skills" should be taught explicitly how to read texts in history with deep understanding. And we should not assume that because students are able to read history texts with deep understanding they will automatically be able to read science or other content texts with the same level of depth.

Second, instruction in grades 4-12 must address the needs of students who need assistance with foundational skills. For these students who are not reading at grade level, instruction in grades 4-12 should include reading interventions that occur outside of content-area instruction. These reading interventions should focus on explicitly teaching essential elements of reading. The direct connection to essential reading content is reminiscent of recent reading improvement initiatives, and with struggling readers throughout 4-12, the primary objective is to provide students with the instruction they need to proficiently read the texts used in their science, mathematics, history, and literature classes.

Content area teachers in grade 4-12 should be responsible for explicitly teaching students how to read proficiently in their discipline.

# Building the Link Between Comprehension and Sustainability

Providing sufficient emphasis on comprehension skills in the early grades and then continuing to teach comprehension in grades 4-12 will help ensure that all students become proficient readers. This success is in and of itself a foundation for sustainability. Why would we continue practices that do not produce the results that are intended?

Further, this success will help create a unified culture across the district with regard to achieving reading comprehension goals. Leadership will begin to play different roles, and the building blocks for sustaining the districtwide approach to teaching

reading will be in place. See the list on the next page for some specific strategies to build the link between comprehension and sustainability.

Comprehension is the key to long-term reading success. When it comes to giving all students an opportunity for the success in life that is made possible by the ability to read, achieving and sustaining improved outcomes in reading comprehension is the essential component. When we have strong comprehension outcomes, we are much more likely to sustain the evidence-based approach to teaching reading.



## School and District Leadership Strategies to Extend the Focus on Reading Comprehension Across the Grades

**View reading as a K-12 responsibility** and have this notion communicated clearly and consistently by district leaders.

**Structure reading-related training, planning, collaborating, and communication** across grade levels and across school levels (primary to intermediate grades; elementary school to middle school; middle school to high school).

**Develop and promote a “culture of comprehension”** in a district by:

- using the same comprehension strategies and the same instructional vocabulary (adapted to the age of the students) across grade levels and school levels.
- engaging teachers and administrators in cross-level walk-throughs, with customized “look fors,” structured debriefing and subsequent planning to enhance understanding of the structure, goals, and importance of reading instruction at each level.

**Develop district level leadership for reading instruction** to provide support, assure adequate planning, structure alignment of instructional practices, and use common supervision procedures across grade levels.

**Use reading assessments to guide instruction in comprehension and fluency** at each grade level and each school level.

**Engage stakeholders (parents and others) at each school level in promoting the focus on comprehension** and supporting efforts to improve comprehension outcomes.

# References

- Baker, S., Kame'enui, E., Simmons, D., & Simonsen, B. (2006). Characteristics of students with learning and curricular needs. In M. Coyne, E. Kame'enui & D. Carnine (Eds.), *Effective teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learners* (3rd ed., pp. 23-43). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Gamse, B. C., Bloom, H. S., Kemple, J. J., & Jacob, R. T. (2008). *Reading First impact study: Interim report* (NCEE 2008-4016). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.
- Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Maryland: Brookes Publishing Company, Inc.
- Kamil, M. L., Borman, G., Dole, J., Kral, C. C., Salinger, T., & Torgesen, J. K. (2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Effective classroom and intervention practices: A Practice Guide* (Report No. NCEE #2008-4027). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation & Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, US Dept. of Education.
- National Mathematics Advisory Panel. (2008). *Final report of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.
- National Research Council. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Snow, C. E. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.



RMC Research Corporation  
1501 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 1250  
Arlington, VA 22209

This publication was created by RMC Research Corporation under contract ED04C00041 with the U.S. Department of Education. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, or enterprise in this publication is intended or should be inferred.