

**Office of Shared Accountability  
Montgomery County Public Schools  
Rockville, Maryland**

**Reading Initiative Study  
Implementation Report**

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# Reading Initiative Study Implementation Report

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*In conversations about reform that reach the general public, it is the desired changes and new programs that get the headlines; for those of us who work in schools, however, it is increasingly the designs by which we implement change that make the most difference. (Marjorie Roemer, "What We Talk About When We Talk About School Reform, " 1992, p.1)*

### Overview

This is an interim report of the second year (1999-2000) of implementation of the Reading Initiative program in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). The major goal of the report is to inform MCPS staff of the current state of the program. At this stage of implementation, the strengths of the Reading Initiative program are promising, and little needs to be said about them, for they are not in need of change. However, it is appropriate to highlight the major strengths, for they do contribute to the recommendations that follow from this study.

First, the major challenge typically associated with the introduction of innovative instructional programs, namely resistance to change, has been successfully addressed. Enthusiasm among principals, reading specialists, and teachers for the Reading Initiative program is widespread; it is generally agreed that this is a powerful educational innovation, and that its growth should continue to be supported. Administrators and teaching staffs alike see the Reading Initiative as a logical extension of the best that was in place in their schools and a strong replacement for several of the varied programs that had been operating in school buildings. There is general agreement among school staff that the initial intensive, hands-on training that was provided was, as far as it went, effective and useful. Moreover, the assessment tool that has been provided to school staff for charting students' progress in the program is perceived as extremely valuable. And, finally, there is an increasing understanding in the MCPS Central Offices of the time that it takes to put a complex program into place so that its effects can become clear and strong. There is recognition that the time required to achieve full and consistent implementation of this program varies from classroom to classroom and school to school.

However, the real challenge now is to ensure that every staff member, every classroom, and every elementary school moves forward in this ongoing implementation process with the greatest efficiency and effectiveness possible. Therefore, the focus of this report is on those issues about which MCPS program planners, supervisory staff, and school building staff need to be fully informed in

order to structure an updated implementation plan for the Reading Initiative. An examination and understanding of the implementation weaknesses of the program are required to make appropriate and effective mid-course adjustments so that the powerful learning opportunities of this program are made available to all children.

The study design called for intensive case studies of 8 elementary schools where the Reading Initiative program has been put into operation. The findings summarized are those gleaned from the analysis of over 200 interviews with principals, teachers, and other school staff, 30 observations of pre-kindergarten through grade 2 classrooms, and notes from approximately 55 school-based meetings.

## Findings

Effective programs are not synonymous with effective implementation.

This study has confirmed an increasingly recognized issue in the move toward accountability for student academic success, namely that it is much easier to select and develop good programs than it is to have those programs implemented and functioning as intended. Curriculum and program developers have become very skilled in assessing evidence from the latest research, and in identifying potentially effective programs. The Reading Initiative, designed as a multi-faceted effort to improve the reading performance of elementary school students in MCPS, is clearly a reflection of this skill.

Implementation involves changing behaviors of the system.

However, putting a program such as this into operation is considerably more complex than anticipated because, as with most significant educational innovations, it involves changing the behaviors of professionals at every level of the school system, from the Central Offices, to the local school building, to the classroom. Traditional and familiar ways of operating, along with traditional administrative structures, often need to be adjusted and this is not an easily accomplished task. The consequence is that new programs are sometimes defined in individual buildings in ways that diverge from the intentions of program planners, are sometimes resisted by personnel because the new program has not been clearly distinguished from or integrated with pre-existing programs of worth, and are sometimes not monitored for consistency, which allows programs to drift.

Effective implementation requires consistent monitoring.

This poses a significant problem for both assessment and evaluation of the program because it becomes extremely difficult to determine why success has been achieved, and most importantly, why it has not been achieved. Without this knowledge, it is difficult, if not impossible, to know

where and how to support continued growth and development of the program. To address this problem, formative evaluation must take precedence over summative evaluation because, in most cases, it is not the program that is at fault, but the means by which it is put into practice that requires adjustment.

Inconsistent implementation is associated with variability in student outcomes.

The outstanding finding of this study is fully consistent with this understanding of program implementation issues. Variability in program utilization and practice across the school sample of the study is very high, as are student outcomes across a larger sample of schools. While the study does not address student outcomes, these outcomes are the focus of a separate report. However, it is clear that before such data can be appropriately interpreted, a careful examination of the Reading Initiative as it operates in the field is necessary.

**Managerial Factors** contribute to implementation consistency:

- Guidelines
- Resource allocations
- Instructional setting
- Planning/communication

Two major, and highly interrelated, categories of factors have been identified as contributing to the varied ways in which Reading Initiative operates within school buildings. **The first category** includes factors that impact the structural/managerial task of integrating new program resources and new guidelines about these resources into currently existing program structures in schools. The critical process here is

the methods and standards used by the Central Offices to interact with local school administrators and the ways in which school administrators, in turn, respond. Specific factors of relevance to this process were ambiguous program guidelines, program resource allocations based on student enrollments, as compared to the unique requirements of each building's instructional setting, and the lack of a mechanism for clarification and interactive planning between the Central Offices and local building administrators. These factors, in particular, left much room for both diversity of school-level decisions, as well as uncertainty about the most effective and efficient ways to structure program resources within the building. These are all factors that contribute to the responses of local schools to new initiatives with new guidelines, and that must be understood by the program designers in order that effective translation of program guidelines and directives takes place, and effective supports are provided.

**“School Readiness”** factors contribute to:

- The ease of program integration in local buildings
- The pace of program implementation

Also included in this first category of factors is what is referred to as **“school readiness.”** This is a concept that characterizes the ability of the building to take on another program. Schools vary in their “readiness” for different types of educational programs as a function of the degree of discrepancy or overlap of the new program with current programs, the accumulated expertise within

the building vis-à-vis the new program structures and curriculum, and the uniquely-defined academic focus that drives the internal organization of the school. These qualities of the instructional settings of local schools play an important role with respect to two implementation issues:

1. the ease with which schools can effectively integrate program resources into ongoing programs; and
2. the pace at which schools can build upon the strengths of the new program.

**Instructional Factors**

contribute to implementation consistency:

- System-wide, ongoing staff development
- Internal monitoring and assessments

**The second category** includes factors that impact the ways in which teachers and other instructional staffs translate the program into events within the classroom. These are processes that are deeply embedded within the structural/managerial task and are thus affected by similar factors. However, an additional factor impacted teaching staff in particular, and this

was the lack of provision of system-wide, on-going staff development beyond the initial, intensive 2-week summer institute. Without system-level support for professional growth in the balanced literacy approach, teaching staff, as well as administrators, had to rely upon supports available within their schools. Such supports, which varied greatly from school to school, included on-site expertise, on-site professional development opportunities, internal monitoring and assessment systems, and collaborative planning and learning time. Without system-level support for continued program and staff development, these kinds of implementation supports and their variability at the school level are major contributors to variability in the depth and breadth of implementation across classrooms.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended to pertain not only to supporting the continued growth and development of the Reading Initiative program, but also to supporting the implementation of future instructional program initiatives in MCPS. The recommendations are organized into three categories: 1) those that are directed to Central Office staff involved in planning, monitoring, and providing staff development for instructional initiatives; 2) those that are directed to supervisory staff; and 3) those that are directed to local, school building-level staff.

### A. Recommendations for Program Development Staff

- 1. Ensure that all new instructional initiatives include components specifically designed to provide: a) principal training alongside teaching staff; b) time for within-school collaborative planning; and c) assessment tools for within-school monitoring of program growth and success.**
2. Develop explicit guidelines about program components, their instructional objectives/procedures, and organizational structures that can be and are expected of all schools.
3. Develop explicit guidelines about program procedures and organizational structures that may be left for each building to define and operationalize.
4. Develop a body of knowledge about a wide variety of instructional delivery models that might be used in a program such as the Reading Initiative, and that includes information about required resources, summaries of experiences with, and research about, each option. Make clear that these are suggested models that may be tailored to local school needs, and work directly with schools on the appropriate adjustments of models to fit local school needs.

### B. Recommendations for Supervisory Staff

1. Establish a mechanism to acquire information about each school building that is sufficient to provide differentiated implementation supports depending upon the physical facilities, current instructional programs, staff development needs, availability of on-site expert teaching staff and curriculum specialists, and student instructional needs. Recognize that an equitable support system does not necessarily mean that all buildings receive the same supports and resources or that all schools should be subject to the same formula for distribution of resources.
2. Establish clear guidelines for the use of program resources, the commingling of program resources with those of other programs, and the acquisition of additional resources, if needed.

3. Establish clear guidelines for monitoring implementation and giving schools feedback and direction.
4. Establish an ongoing system of communication and dialogue with each school to answer questions about local decision making with respect to implementation plans. This should be a permanent, formalized system capable of clarifying issues of local versus central office responsibilities as these arise in the course of program development and change.
5. Establish a mechanism for experience-sharing opportunities throughout the school year at which Central Office staff program staff, community superintendent office staff, principals, specialists, and relevant teaching staff are present and interacting. Continue the model of intensive summer training that includes observations of modeled teaching and hands-on experience, making it clear that this is necessary, but not sufficient for an effective training and support system.

### **C. Recommendations for School Building-level Staff**

1. Ensure that all staff understands that much experimentation, adjustment, and learning is expected. Time is the critical foundation for this learning and progressive refinement, and therefore, long-term goals are desirable and extensive planning time is essential. A long-term, integrated vision for the allocation of time and resources should be developed.
2. Establish guidelines for planning times such that a new initiative is carefully integrated with all other instructional activities and staff responsibilities.
3. Establish a self-monitoring system among teachers and specialists to assess the development of the program and carry out a continuous needs assessment for differentiated staff development and refinement of instructional strategies and organizational implementation models.
4. Train expert teachers to be mentors and support persons, to model lessons and strategies, and to provide expert advice and leadership in management and curriculum issues. Ensure the availability of this expertise to teachers.



**System-wide consistency of program implementation** demands:

- strong, effective channels of communication between central offices and school buildings
- Information-based, on-going monitoring

Inconsistent program implementation across schools reflects, more than any other factor, the lack of a strong model or mechanism for systematic communication between the Central Offices and local buildings, such that issues of program structures and instructional objectives have little

opportunity to be addressed. The thread that ties the above recommendations is the need to create an overarching model of communication and relationships between the program-specific offices, community superintendent office, and school buildings that can best support effective implementation of new initiatives. Obviously, a central clearinghouse for gathering and managing knowledge, making decisions and suggestions, validating local decision-making, and providing support as needed is a mechanism for which the time has come. Without this, school-to-school variability is likely to become increasingly greater, compromising the potential of soundly designed programs, such as the Reading Initiative.

## Reading Initiative Study Implementation Report

### Background

The Reading Initiative, a comprehensive and complex early literacy program composed of multiple components, has been the central focus of an intensive in-depth study during the 1999-2000 school year. Designed as a multi-faceted effort to improve the reading performance of elementary school students in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), the Reading Initiative has included three significant components: 1) reduction of reading class sizes in first and second grades; 2) increased time in these classrooms for uninterrupted reading instruction; and 3) staff development in a balanced literacy approach to reading instruction. The strength of this early literacy initiative lies not only in the research-based support for the effectiveness of each of these components taken alone, but most importantly in the commitment on the part of MCPS to undertake the challenging task of implementing an integration of all three components in first and second grade classrooms.

The goal is to determine the resources and supports necessary for effective implementation

Given the strong research support for the contribution of each of these components to improved student performance, the goal of this study is not to ask about the effectiveness of these components. Rather, the goal is to determine the resources and supports necessary for effective implementation of the integration of these components at the school and classroom level. Clearly, high quality implementation is essential to achieving maximum benefits in respect to student performance in every school.

The effective implementation of a program of this magnitude and complexity requires a comprehensive strategic plan that addresses planning, training, monitoring, organizational responsibilities, and communications. How such a far-reaching program can be introduced, incorporated, and encouraged to develop in the MCPS setting is first and foremost a question of how best to implement and support such a plan. This report addresses findings about implementation issues faced in 8 elementary schools where the Reading Initiative program has been put into operation. The study's intensive examination of the issues that have arisen, the solutions that have been put into place, the outstanding problems to be resolved, and the resources required yielded the findings summarized here.

### Study Design and Methods

The introduction of Reading Initiative to MCPS elementary schools has occurred in two phases. During the 1998-99 school year, the first phase included 54 "Phase I" elementary schools, selected on the basis of their relative ranking as schools with higher percentages of students experiencing challenges associated

with poverty and second language learning. During the 1999-2000 school year, the Reading Initiative was introduced in all of the remaining 64 MCPS elementary schools that serve kindergarten, first, and second grade children (“Phase II” schools).

The design of the study called for intensive case studies of 8 schools from among the 54 “high need” schools of Phase I. Each of these schools had completed the first year of implementing the Reading Initiative. The sample of 8 schools was selected to reflect the wide school-to-school diversity, within the 54 Phase I schools, of student demographics and the availability of other significant programs in the school, such as full-day and half-day kindergarten, pre-kindergarten classes, health and social service facilities, etc. This diversity was viewed as critical for better understanding the role of school context in the implementation of Reading Initiative. In addition, interviews were conducted with principals in 4 Phase II schools as another source of data for verification of findings.

Data Collection
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The study was conducted over a 7-month period from December, 1999 through June, 2000. During this time period, case study field staff, assigned to 1 or 2 of the 8 schools, visited assigned schools on a weekly basis, and gathered information through interviews, classroom observations, and attendance at team and other school committee meetings. The findings summarized below are those gleaned from the analysis of over 200 interviews with principals, teachers, and other staff, close to 30 observations of pre-kindergarten through grade 2 classrooms, and attendance at close to 55 meetings.

It should be noted that this implementation study was conducted at a time when schools were engaged in preparations for other program initiatives to be introduced in the next school year. As the study proceeded, multiple currents of program development were observed to be flowing through the buildings simultaneously. Thus, in addition to implementing the Reading Initiative, each of the participating schools was engaged in a wide variety of planning activities, many of which focused on developing organizational models to accommodate future class size initiatives in the school. Our observations of these planning activities served to enrich the findings of the present study.

Analysis involved systematic coding of interview and observational data, the use of software designed to aid in the manipulation and cross-checking of codes, as well as the identifications of patterns and processes. Standard techniques of qualitative data verification and validation of themes were used.

## Findings

### The Implementation Process

An overarching finding that emerged from the data analysis is that, within school buildings, the implementation process is first and foremost a decision-making process about how best to organize and distribute Reading Initiative program resources. The major task is to develop a plan for turning resources provided by MCPS into operational instructional delivery models. Guidelines for this task are the system-wide expectations about what this program should look like and what it should accomplish.

First, system-wide expectations about how Reading Initiative should operate include both structural and instructional program guidelines, as follows:

#### Structural Guidelines

- 1) All 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade reading/language arts classes will be organized to reflect teacher-student ratios that are not to exceed 15:1;<sup>1</sup>
- 2) All 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade reading/language arts classes will be scheduled for an uninterrupted block of time that is at least 90 minutes;

#### Instructional Guidelines

- 3) Proficient and consistent implementation of a balanced literacy approach<sup>2</sup> to reading instruction will occur in and across all 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade reading/language arts classes;

Second, expectations about what these structural and instructional components should accomplish focus on student achievement outcomes. The targeted goal is that all students will be “fluent” readers by the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade<sup>3</sup>.

With these broad expectations for Reading Initiative as a guide, schools embarked on a decision-making process about how best to transform program resources, in each of their local instructional settings, into an organizational and instructional delivery system. This task has been a challenging and complex one, as described by school staff. Although school staff acknowledged the value of flexibility in respect to their ability to be responsive to local building resources and

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<sup>1</sup> This targeted outcome for the Reading Initiative is addressed in the Year 2 Assessment Report.

<sup>2</sup> A balanced literacy approach is a teaching philosophy that encompasses a blend of strategies and methods, including phonics and basic skills instruction, and immersion in meaningful literature and writing.

<sup>3</sup> This targeted outcome is addressed in the Year 2 Assessment Report.

needs, they also felt frustration with the lack of clarity about what the Reading Initiative should look like structurally and organizationally. As one principal described this:

School administrators were frustrated with the lack of specific guidelines about what the Reading Initiative should look like in school buildings.

*We had an opportunity to create it, on the other hand, sometimes it became frustrating because there weren't enough directives. There weren't enough things like what does it look like? Tell me more basics. That didn't happen. We studied, and we did the research to figure out what it was supposed to look like, and I know that didn't happen in other schools, and that's not really fair.*

*I'd talk to my colleagues who didn't have that opportunity. That's unfortunate for the kids because I believe this school system could have provided more.*

This principal talked about the value of having taken the time to work closely with the Reading Specialist in the school, to explore the research, and to work through a plan for implementing the Reading Initiative the first year. In this case, having a principal intern in the school afforded the time required for this kind of research-based planning.

"The communication was just use what you have. You figure out how to do it."

Another principal, without the opportunity and time to do extensive research described how difficult it was to develop the expertise in this one program area, while balancing the demands of multiple programs in the school. This principal felt uncertain about allocation decisions that were made within

the school and wished for more support in helping to make the best decisions:

*We're doing so many different things in this building just in terms of the overall operation and the many aspects of the program and where the different curriculum is in terms of development. It's just that to develop that kind of expertise and attention to one program, it's hard to do that as a school, so I think that's where you need somebody else offering, you know, here's some offerings we can give you. Here are some next steps. ... I could maybe do some better mixing and matching to get more out of my Reading Initiative [allocations]... The communication was just use what you have. You figure out how to do it.*

This lack of support was discussed by another principal in terms of the consequences for uneven program implementation across schools with varying degrees of experience:

*When the Reading Initiative started...they wanted ... to really monitor the implementation of the Reading Initiative in the schools and offer support. ... but it didn't work out that way. It just didn't. And, if you did it, you did it and if you didn't do it, you didn't do it. Nor did you have, if you were a new principal in a school, the advantage of someone coming in saying, 'All right. Let me help you. This is what you need.'*

In addition to the guidelines outlined above, MCPS has provided schools with resources considered essential for conforming to these guidelines. These resources can be distinguished as “start-up” and “ongoing” resources and supports. Some of the start-up resources, such as supplemental funds for the purchase of materials and an initial intensive 2-week training for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers were uniform across schools. However, the allocation of another critical resource, additional staff, was differentiated according to projected first and second grade enrollments in the school.

There is disparity between the criteria used by MCPS to allocate program resources to schools and the criteria used by schools to allocate resources for program implementation within each building.

One of the important findings to emerge from the data analysis is the disparity between the criteria used by MCPS for the allocation of resources to support the Reading Initiative and the criteria used by local schools in turning these resources into viable instructional delivery systems. MCPS strives to achieve an equitable distribution of resources, with the goal of ensuring that schools can provide consistent and uniform learning opportunities for all

students. To achieve this equity, the primary criteria that enter into the distribution equation are the enrollments of students, with attention to the demographic characteristics of student populations.

Schools, on the other hand, think about resource allocation in the context of their local, and quite variable, instructional settings. Within school buildings, criteria for allocating resources include such factors as:

- the diversity of instructional needs of students in the school
- the relative strengths of staff in the building
- the beliefs held by school staff about effective instructional practices
- the physical and space constraints of the building
- the instructional services offered by other programs in the building, etc.

Throughout our interviews, principals and other school staff talked about the myriad local factors that contribute to their decisions about resource allocations and the varied ways in which they assess and weigh these factors. In light of the

diversity of these kinds of local school factors and the disparity between the system-level and local means of allocating resources, the diversity of Reading Initiative implementation models that has developed across schools is not at all surprising. Some of the ways in which these local school conditions have contributed to decisions about the distribution of program resources and have resulted in different organizational models for implementing Reading Initiative are described here.

Schools developed diverse organizational and structural models for implementing Reading Initiative. Decisions about these models were difficult because local instructional conditions did not match program resource allocations, and guidelines for these decisions were vague.

Throughout these examples the complexity of the task, at the school level, of integrating class size reductions and increased time blocks for reading instruction becomes apparent.

### *Space and Beliefs About Different Teaching Models*

For example, MCPS guidelines did not address how different teaching models could serve to accomplish the instructional objectives of reduced class size; schools used different local criteria for making decisions about these models.

Many schools were faced with constraints of space and/or local resources. Some schools considered a team-teaching model as one option to address these local constraints and to meet MCPS requirements about teacher-student ratios. However, the generic guidelines for Reading Initiative did not address how a team-teaching model might

accomplish the underlying instructional objectives of a reduced class size. Therefore, schools were left on their own to assess the appropriateness of this kind of instructional delivery option. Without guides for this assessment process, one frequent basis for this decision was different beliefs among school staff about the value and effectiveness of a team-teaching model in respect to professional growth and students' instructional needs. One principal, for example, felt that team-teaching was not consistent with maximum effectiveness of reduced class size :

*The biggest downside right now of the initiative, one that doesn't overwhelm me because I'd rather have the initiative than not have it, is the space issue. Where are we going to put all these classes? I said earlier we need to be creative. So that might mean in some cases putting two teachers in a classroom and putting 30 kids in that classroom. That defeats the purpose of having the smaller classes. The ratio might be nice, but the reality won't give you what you want.*

On the other hand, another principal, similarly faced with limited resources, believed that a team-teaching model would provide enhanced instruction and

made a different decision about the organization of staff for implementing Reading Initiative classes:

*While I was very pleased to see the Reading Initiative come into play, I still didn't believe that the resources were sufficient, and that's why we were going to the team teaching to make the best use of the resources that we were given. ... I believe that when you get two folks who really work well together, the kids will benefit even more, and that was really the factor. It's what can we do that will benefit the kids most.*

### Scheduling, Staffing, and the Instructional Needs of Students

The impact of discrepancy between system-defined criteria for resource allocation and local allocation criteria can be seen in the varied use of Instructional Assistants to support balanced literacy instruction in the classroom.

Schools grappled with issues around the time allotment for the reading instruction block. Many came to believe strongly in the need to extend the "allocated" time block of 90 minutes to incorporate a stronger instructional focus on skill areas, such as oral language and writing, to meet the specific needs of students in their schools. However, these kinds of local school decisions did not figure

into the system-level criteria for allocating staff to schools. Thus, schools were left to balance the priorities of instructional needs with the staffing and scheduling structures that they perceived to be important to meeting these needs. Examples of the way in which these decision-making processes played out differently and led to different instructional models at schools can be seen in the varied use of Instructional Assistants (IA's) to support balanced literacy instruction. In one school where staff had determined that a 2 ½ -hour block was essential to meeting student needs, the staff allocation for Reading Initiative was inadequate and led to the conversion of IA time :

*Quite frankly, we were only given two reading initiative teachers for grades one and two, so it was going to be very difficult. We were fortunate because again of Title I and we converted a few hours of Instructional Assistants to get teachers. That was the only way that we were able to do the 2 ½ hour block, which I know that our kids really need.*

In another school, where the decision again was to extend the time block to include some writing instruction, the principal described the staffing and scheduling conflict as follows:

*I cannot service the kids in Reading Initiative in a 2-hour block with a 15:1 ratio with the allocation they give me. They [Central Office staff] know that. We've gone back and forth on it. So the biggest thing I do is use other positions buying Reading Initiative. I get 1.8 Reading Initiative.*



*They only allocate for a 90-minute block, and I have a 2-hour block, so that's one problem....It won't work because it's unrealistic to do 90-minute reading blocks in the morning. You can't do them back to back. Also, people don't come in, like .8 form. People want to work half-time, and every minute of that can't be teaching reading.*

In this same school, where other positions are used to buy Reading Initiative staff time, all of the IA time is distributed evenly across Reading Initiative classes:

*Well...we're a Title I school, so we have financial Title I, so it comes in the form of Instructional Assistants. That's how we convert that allocation into resources. We have 8 or 9 IA's. They're spread out, you'll see them in Reading Initiative, all first and second grade homerooms. All get an hour of IA's during the reading block.*

In still another school, some IA hours are being converted as in the above school, but the decision has been made to distribute the remaining hours differentially, based on differences in students' needs:

*The general trend will be to have less [IA] hours because I traded in 14 hours and we lost 6 [hours] so that is 20 hours right there. The general trend will be IA help in the lower grades, professional help in the other grades....Not that they will never get IA time. We're not going to take the pie and say, 'Hey, everybody get an hour.' ...It doesn't make any sense, it's not efficient, it's not effective....The lower grades need hands. They need hands, tie your shoes, go to the bathroom, settle down, and it's not that the upper grades don't need that, but I think they need more instruction.*

Not only does this in-school process of transforming resources into instructional models yield diversity of instructional delivery systems across schools, but, even within schools, it yields multiple instructional models being delivered to different groups of students:

*We met as a group in late spring....We talked about teaming, and how that would go, and putting on the table the fact [of the] realities of lack of space for pull-out....The realities were the constraint of space, as well as the fact that with 4 sections of each grade level not everyone would have a team partner. So we have different models going on simultaneously. The other factor was how we were going to operate this in terms of ESOL students....In terms of the two new hires, I did tell them they would be with a team person in the room. Plus, we had one new hire last year, and I wanted her to have a teammate. So that was another parameter.*

These examples demonstrate the complexity of this allocation task in the implementation process at the school level, as well as the ways in which the system-level resource allocation formulas are not always synchronous

with a school's ability to turn these resources into maximally effective instructional delivery systems.

Without a guiding frame of reference for schools to assess and monitor the appropriateness of selected models, the implementation process may be inefficient in respect to both effective distribution of program resources and the time it takes to achieve full implementation.

Schools must be able to “fit” or adapt the structures and resources of the Reading Initiative to those already in place at the school. Clearly, a “one size fits all” approach ignores the significant diversity of local school conditions, and it would not be reasonable for program planners to dictate specific instructional delivery models for schools to use in implementing the Reading Initiative. However, when asked to implement a program of the magnitude and

complexity of Reading Initiative, schools need a system-wide frame of reference for monitoring and assessing the appropriateness of selected implementation plans and models. Without this frame of reference, the implementation process in individual school buildings can become inefficient both in respect to the effective distribution and organization of program resources, and in respect to the time it takes for schools to fully implement the program.

Schools need implementation supports from the Central Office that help to provide this frame of reference. The first major support requested was for information. School staff at every level from administrator to teacher repeatedly wondered about models that other schools were using to implement Reading Initiative. They felt that “it” was being done differently across the County and thought that they might learn from other school's experience with different models. As one principal commented,

Schools continuously sought and requested more information about the effectiveness of different implementation models.

As one principal commented,

*Much as we all hate being out of the building...I think some more networking would be meaningful. I think [another school] is doing some things that we could get from them, and we are probably doing some things that could help others. All of this is very time sensitive, though. I mean nobody has any time. I think we're all back into doing this island work and not networking and I don't know how to do this in an efficient way.*

Clearly, a formalized, systematic mechanism for school staff to share and reflect upon the ways in which different organizational models work and do not work well in their schools is one important kind of support to schools. It is a support that should be built in as an integral, valued component of any new program initiative, such that the time to do this is no longer a concern, but rather a directive.

An important source of information is the experiences that other schools have had with different models.

### School “Readiness” For Structural and Instructional Change

Our analyses indicated that the Reading Initiative was introduced into buildings with pre-existing structural and instructional contexts that are quite diverse and that there are some qualities of these pre-existing contexts that contribute to the relative challenges that schools faced in developing effective implementation plans for the Reading Initiative. These qualities of the local school instructional settings were seen to play an important role in respect to two implementation issues:

- 1) the ease with which schools can effectively integrate program resources into ongoing programs; and
- 2) the pace at which schools can build upon the strengths of the Reading Initiative program components.

The two qualities that emerged as significant were the cohesiveness of instructional focus that was evident in the school, and the cumulative experience with components of the Reading Initiative program. These two qualities are discussed in this section.

#### *Unified and Cohesive Instructional Focus*

The extent to which a school had developed a unified instructional focus on reading, and had organized resources around this focus prior to the introduction of Reading Initiative, contributed to the efficiency of decisions about the use of program resources.

The extent to which a school had developed a school-wide instructional focus, and had organized resources around this focus prior to the introduction of Reading Initiative, contributed to the efficiency of decisions about the use of Reading Initiative resources. For the purposes of the discussion here, “cohesive” instructional focus is defined as the degree to which organizational structures, instructional programs, and staff development activities work in

synchrony to support a well-articulated, unified instructional focus for the school. Our analyses revealed that schools were quite variable in respect to the extent to which they had developed a unified and cohesive instructional focus at the time that Reading Initiative was introduced. In some schools, principals talked about the history of the school's instructional focus, and how this focus had served as a guide for decisions about what organizational structures and instructional systems needed to be in place. For example:

*Six years ago, we tested...We died at the results. It was just awful. It was just awful because it told us a whole lot of what we needed to do. It was awful in that sense, but it was wonderful because we had a common ground. We had a baseline. And, we said, "O.K. This is what we need to do."*

A new principal expressed the value of a unified instructional focus for making decisions about the distribution of resources and organization of instructional activities as follows:

*It is all very fragmented. ...To me there is no real vision for staff development. There is no overall umbrella where we are trying to go. That's a real goal for this particular school because of all the different things that are going on.*

<p>Schools with a pre-existing unified and cohesive instructional focus were able to use this focus as a frame of reference for decisions about the utilization of incoming Reading Initiative resources.</p>	<p>When the system-level guidelines for a program are only vaguely articulated with respect to instructional objectives, then the clarity and cohesiveness of the instructional focus within a school becomes particularly critical. Schools with a unified and cohesive instructional focus were able to use this focus as a frame of reference for decisions about the utilization of incoming Reading Initiative resources. Those schools with a clear picture of how the instructional programming pieces fit together were able to identify the gaps and holes within the big picture focus in order to target newly available resources. For example, principals in schools with a history of a strong instructional focus on reading, described the contribution of Reading Initiative program resources in the context of this frame of reference:</p>
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*It has helped. It hasn't added, it has in a way brought cohesion to the programs that we had. We were pursuing reading recovery, we were pursuing some of the new ideas out of Australia in writing and reading in balanced literacy, but with the Reading Initiative and balanced literacy approach that the county does, [the training]. ... What I think it has done, it has finally made a firm primary program for us. ...Now there is a flow from kindergarten to 1<sup>st</sup> grade to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade...I think the flow is clear. [School A]*

*While we had the reduced numbers, we were using our ESOL staff, which we still do, which made it down some, but now it's even more so because of the Reading Initiative positions. I think we're more focused. For instance, while we were doing key things of balanced literacy before, as far as the training went, the in-house....I think in the last year, especially in the second year, that we really have more focusing...specifically, in the area of writing. [School B]*

Many school staff talked about the strengths of the Reading Initiative program in regard to the value of having common materials and a common instructional language for communicating across classrooms and grades.

Some aspects of new program initiatives can serve to facilitate the development of a unified and cohesive instructional focus in a school. Many school staff talked about the strengths of the Reading Initiative program in this regard. Across schools, staff talked about the value of

having common materials and a common instructional language for communicating across classrooms and grades. In particular, the development of the Early Literacy Guide, intensive staff development with this document as a guide, and a common assessment tool were significant contributors to helping schools establish a common instructional framework. As one principal described these strengths,

*I know that the staff will tell you that we had our reading program in place, and we did. And, a lot of the practices we had were Reading Initiative kinds of practices, but what this did for us was it put everybody on the same page. It gave everybody the same framing. It outlined what the goals were. It provided a common language, common strategies.*

The power of a cohesive instructional focus for bringing about change within a school can be diminished if spread too broadly across multiple goals.

Our analyses also indicated that the power and value of a cohesive instructional focus for bringing about change within a school can be diminished if spread too broadly across multiple goals. Another principal talked about the history of the school's instructional focus, and was clear about the difficulty of focusing on multiple targets:

*The model that was here...was a beautiful model. Problem was the kids couldn't read and write....The program was very rich but the kids couldn't read and write and they couldn't compute. It took me a year or so before I said 'O.K. This is a lovely program, but we have to make it fit to what needs to be done first. And, that's when we began the focus on reading, actually we started with math and we extended it to reading. Math shot up, and then we started the [reading] program. Then math began to slip. It's very hard to focus on more than one thing at a time.*

Schools that serve students and families with multiple needs, such as the 8 schools in this study, are confronted with the realities of having multiple target areas that are in need of strengthening. This reality makes the task of developing a unified and cohesive instructional focus particularly difficult. As one principal described this:

*It's very difficult to find the time for any principal, but particularly a school that's so highly impacted not just in terms of instructional needs, but I'm talking about things that happen to kids and kids' families including behavior issues and the number of EMTs.*

Staff in “high needs” schools engage on every level—from the student, to the classroom, to the programs within the school—in a continuous struggle with the push and pull of multiple priorities. This struggle can impact the pace at which a school progresses toward their goals.

The school's status as “highly impacted” also means that they are the recipients of extra resources, inclusive of staff and programs. This creates a particularly challenging management task, both in terms of developing an instructional focus and in terms of organizing and distributing resources coherently—to maximize the strengths and interconnections of

resources in the school. It was clear in our interviews with school staff across these 8 schools that, on every level-- from the student, to the classroom, to the programs within the school, to the school as a whole—they engage in a continuous struggle with the push and pull of multiple priorities. This struggle can impact the pace at which a school progresses toward their goals. This relation was emphasized by one principal as follows:

*That's my job—to monitor that we're moving in the direction that we need to. [This school] is a school that's very difficult to maintain a steady heading with your programs. Every day is a day fraught with interruptions, the magnitude of which, in other principalships and administrative positions I've had in other schools, I've never had this many. The interruptions that occur, I liken to priority hooks. There are all these different hooks put into you. One pulls you this way, another pulls you that way. And they don't always pull you in the same direction and you're still trying to stay a steady course toward the ultimate goal that we've outlined in our LSSES plan. ... So it's a constant source of concern for me that we're maybe not moving as fast as I want.*

## Cumulative Experience with Program Components

As described above, the first step in the development of a unified instructional focus in a school is the articulation of a problem area. The specificity of information that a school has about this problem certainly helps to define the school's focus. However, the task of the next step in this change process is one of deciding the "what" and "how" of the changes to be made. It is at this step that having access to cumulative experience in the school building is critical. The need for guidance in determining the "what's" and "how's" of implementing Reading Initiative is evident in one principal's questions:

*We see some kids progressing. That's wonderful. Some aren't. Where do we go from there? What would be some creative ways to deal with it?*

Prior experience with organizational structures and instructional strategies that are consistent with the Reading Initiative is a critical form of institutional expertise. This expertise was highly variable from school to school.

Expertise within a school building can derive from multiple sources. Typically, one thinks of expertise in terms of the knowledge and skills that specific school personnel bring with them to the school setting. However, this study also informed us that the experience that school personnel has had with organizational structures and

instructional strategies that are consistent with the Reading Initiative is a critical form of institutional expertise. And, this expertise is highly variable from school to school.

For example, schools varied in how they had been grouping students for reading/language arts instruction, in the size of reading groups, in the time allotted to reading instruction, in their inventories of instructional materials, in the use of different balanced literacy instructional strategies, and in the use of different literacy assessments. Thus, some schools had been, over several years, gradually introducing many Reading Initiative-like changes to their primary reading program; others had experimented with one or two such changes; and

Diversity of prior experience with Reading Initiative components poses a diversity of challenges to implementation.

others were operating reading programs that had few elements in common with the Reading Initiative. This diversity of prior experience poses a diversity of challenges to implementation. For example, one principal talked about the philosophical foundations for the balanced literacy approach that was in place in the school and how this has made the implementation

process easier:

*We were into the guided reading and the philosophy. ...And also we've had adaptations of Reading Recovery here. Plus our Reading Specialist is trained in Reading Recovery and has done some of that here. So it [implementation of Reading Initiative] was not a leap philosophically or in terms of the foundations.*

Having a solid philosophical grounding in the instructional program that is introduced into a school clearly impacts the receptiveness of school staff and the pace at which implementation can proceed. As a Reading Specialist at another school commented, this receptiveness gave schools a head start on the implementation process:

*Well, I think the Reading Initiative was wonderful and it just reinforced what we had been working on because we had been doing research. So we had kind of started [on] our own. We had decided this is what we want in our primary program. So, we in a sense had a head start on the Reading Initiative. What the Reading Initiative did was to give us money for materials and we had already started, so we were a little bit better off than many schools...we had already started buying the sets of little books. And, so we got more money, which we were then able to add to our collection.*

On the other hand, even in schools where some elements of Reading Initiative had previously been in place, when structural changes to the program were required, it was difficult, as noted by another Reading Specialist:

*Last year it was hard to get organized because there was no vision of what it would look like. Now, our teachers had been doing guided reading before that, but not within the constraints of the block or the specific 90 minutes, or with two teachers. That piece of it looked different, and people weren't really sure what it was supposed to look like.*

It is also the case that a school's readiness with respect to cumulative experience can be disrupted by the insertion of a new aspect of an on-going program. For example, in talking about the impact of inserting a new class size initiative into the school, a Reading Specialist in a school that had worked for two years on refining a team-teaching model for Reading Initiative, summarized the disruption this way:

*The model that we have worked on has ended...Teachers are going to go through a whole new learning curve of how to make this work within their day with 17 kids. Whereas, before they were making it work with 25 kids and 2 adults.*



Clearly, much needs to be known about the recent past and current status of each building in order to introduce new programs in a rational manner. As this Reading Specialist commented:

*The [Central] Office is supposed to be responsive to school needs. So if you were responsive to a need of a school and they had an existing program and you wanted to reduce class size, you might say, 'We've got something going. We will add the staffing, [and] use it in a way that makes most sense.'*

A consequence of hands-on experience with Reading Initiative-like program components is the accumulation of a body of knowledge about what works and what does not work.

A consequence of hands-on experience with Reading Initiative-like program components is the accumulation of a body of knowledge about what works and what doesn't. This is a dynamic process whereby schools may continually refine their organizational structure. In this study, we saw repeated evidence of this learning process with respect to Reading

Initiative. For example, talking about the changes that were made from the first to second year of implementation, a teacher described this learning process as follows:

*The first year, last year, we ran the second grades on the 90 minutes formula, but the first grades on this 2.5 hours....What we found was that it was going great in reading. And then when they went back for the writing...what we found was that writing is so tough, we weren't seeing the gain that we thought we could get if they stayed for 2.5 hours. ... We decided this year we would try everybody on the 2.5 hours to see if we couldn't get more mileage out of our program.*

There is little doubt that all schools would benefit significantly from an opportunity to spend time experimenting with different implementation designs and sharing the knowledge accumulated thereby.

Schools not only learn from their own experiences with different programming options, but from the experiences of other schools. As a principal from one of the Phase II Reading Initiative schools said when asked how decisions were made to organize staff for the program:

*We had information from Phase I people, and we were going to try to learn from their mistakes.*

There is little doubt that all schools would benefit significantly from an opportunity to spend time experimenting with different implementation designs and sharing the knowledge accumulated thereby. This would, in part, allow each school to

come up to the starting line at approximately the same level of preparation and commitment.

## Long-Term Supports for Implementation

With the lack of system-wide, on-going support beyond “start-up” training, teachers have had to rely on supports available within their schools.

A second major set of findings centers on the continuity of supports for which school staff expressed a need. School staff discussions focused very heavily on long-term, on-going support that went well beyond the initial start-up training, which staff felt largely left them on their own. In fact, in respect to the distinction made

earlier in this report between “start-up” resources and “ongoing” support, little investment has been made in “ongoing” system-wide support for meeting the instructional expectations of consistency and proficiency . One teacher noted that, with the lack of system-wide on-going support, teachers have had to rely on supports available within their schools:

“When this first started, they said,...’you need to implement this program into your school,’ and no one told you how to do it. “

*You know we had the training before the program started—the two week training and pretty much after that I think the training, you know, was just few and far between. I think you just had to go as a school and work together to figure out the program. When this first started, they said,*

*...’you need to implement this program into your school,’ and no one told you how to do it.*

It was difficult for teachers, on their own, to put together in the classroom all the “pieces” that they had picked up in training.

Once again, we heard in our interviews with teachers, many questions and uncertainties about whether they were doing it “right” in their classrooms. It was difficult for teachers, on their own, to put together in the classroom all the “pieces” that they had picked up in training and to determine what this should look like. There

appeared to be no models or guides for them to follow. As several teachers shared:

*My first year of teaching was very difficult because I was teaching reading, but I was so unsure if I was doing the right things. And I didn’t know if I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. I wasn’t sure if I*

*[was] doing the right things with these reading groups with all these kids you have on different levels. [Teacher A]*

*I could have walked away with a little bit more exact, like “in this situation, you do this.” ...I guess I wanted more specific formulas. [Teacher B]*

*I would like some follow-up training all around. When we were trained before, we had never done it. Now we’ve adapted it to how we teach. I’d like to see it again to make sure I’m really doing what I was trained to do. [Teacher C]*

When on-going supports are not available to guide teachers in their own learning process, they may fall back on using instructional strategies that are comfortable and familiar.

In their efforts to “figure out the program,” many teachers described a strikingly similar process of trial-and-error that took place over the first two years of implementation. Although this kind of learning process over time is a natural one, when on-going supports for guiding this learning are not available, then there is always the danger that teachers will fall back on instructional strategies that are comfortable and familiar to them. The way

in which different teachers described their experiences with implementing literacy centers provide good examples of the different paths that this learning process can take—either toward more proficient implementation of a balanced literacy approach, or a turn-around back to more comfortable teaching strategies:

*It was a whole new thing to get used to the kids getting up and moving around and talking, and trying to run the reading groups....They used to sit at their seats and do packet work or follow-up from a book. Now they’re involved in literacy centers. It’s better for them. It just took a lot of getting used to, how to manage and run the centers. So that was hard. [Teacher A]*

*I think we could use some in-service programs on management of centers, independent centers, that you can see the learning that is going on there....When they’re supposed to be building sentences or words, you’ll see them building towers—you know, that type of thing. I guess I could use more management ideas. [Teacher B]*

*Last year I focused a lot on centers, and I don’t know if I didn’t implement them well or what, but it didn’t seem to work out well for me. So, I’ve kind of reduced it. [Teacher C]*

As we talked with reading and classroom teachers throughout the study, we learned about the time and training required to become fully skilled in the

implementation of the balanced literacy approach in the classroom. As one principal described this,

Time and continuous training is required to become fully skilled in implementing a balanced literacy approach.

*I talked about this at the beginning—how hard this is to do—Reading Initiative. [It] takes a truly gifted teacher that can do [it]. Not that we don't have a lot of them, but you still have questions. As you start to try it out, you still have questions.... I have probably said this before, the more you know about teaching reading, the more you realize you don't know.*

And, as one teacher commented, there are no easy “how-to” guides:

*I guess the scary thing about the literacy program in the beginning was that everybody wanted a clear-cut outline of this is what you do. But there really isn't an answer to that. I'm surprised that I'm saying that now, because I remember that first month. “Well, how am I supposed to fit this and this in?” I thought there was supposed to be a specific kind of outline [about] what you're supposed to do everyday, but it really is a matter of taking your kids along where they're ready to go—just constantly assessing and seeing what they're doing and guiding them along the way to that independent level.*

The diversity of implementation supports within schools was found to be a more important contributor to the pace at which schools were able to progress toward proficient and consistent balanced literacy instruction than was the diversity of structural models chosen to get there.

With minimal system-wide support for on-going training, the task of learning how to skillfully implement a balanced literacy approach in the classroom is a challenging one for many teachers. Thus, the importance of within-school supports for teachers to develop these skills is clear. Our interviews and observations revealed a great deal of variability in the depth and breadth of implementation

supports for teachers that were in place at schools. This diversity of implementation support systems within schools was found to be a more important contributor to the pace at which schools were able to progress toward proficient and consistent implementation than was the diversity of structural models chosen to get there. Findings about the critical elements of support are summarized here.

### *On-site Expertise*

The single most important support in moving beyond the initial confusion about what to do after the 2-week training was the presence of a staff member in the building—essentially a mentor—with a strong background in reading, a philosophical commitment to a balanced literacy approach, and well-honed skills

in the relevant instructional strategies. An important source of expertise is the school staff, inclusive of the principal, Reading Specialist, and the teachers themselves. However, principals are not often the most effective mentor in this regard, and Reading Specialists also can have some limitations as mentors. Principals varied in respect to expertise in reading, and Reading Specialists varied in respect to their strengths in early literacy and in a staff development leadership role. In some cases, the principal had a strong reading background and the Reading Specialist had leadership strengths. In other cases, the principal's background was not reading, but there was a strong Reading Specialist on board in the school. And, in still other cases, principals determined that the Reading Specialist's strengths were not well-matched to the task of providing leadership to the primary Reading Initiative teams.

This diversity in on-site reading expertise and leadership was seen to impact the rate and depth of implementation of a balanced literacy approach in the classrooms. A principal described the importance of this leadership role for the school's rate of progress in implementing the Reading Initiative:

“When you have someone advocating for the program in a reading leadership role, well, you just can't replace that. Or if this is not there, progress just doesn't happen at the same rate.”

*When you have someone advocating for the program in a reading leadership role, well, you just can't replace that. Or if this is not there, progress just doesn't happen at the same rate.*

This principal also described the relation between a loss of momentum in the implementation process and the loss of this expertise in the building:

*Well, I think we've lost a little momentum having lost [the Reading Specialist]. I think ...her replacement is kind of at the neophyte stages that some of my staff is. ...In terms of understanding the concept of early childhood literacy, I think she's not an expert. ... As a result of all that, I don't think we've grown professionally.*

When the reading leadership role is not being exercised in the building, there is a tendency for individual differences in teachers' styles and beliefs to become the central driving force in classroom practices, with diminished consistency across classrooms.

When the reading leadership role is not being exercised in the building, there is a tendency for individual differences in teachers' styles and beliefs about teaching reading to become the central driving force in classroom practices, with diminished consistency of reading instruction across classrooms. As the principal quoted above described it, those teachers who were really “sold on the

program” were “in-servicing themselves and continuing to grow.” However, those who were more resistant to or uncertain about these instructional changes tended to fall back on more familiar strategies that they felt had worked well for

them in the past. In this situation, schools were more likely to have scattered pockets of implementation across classrooms, as compared to widespread use of balanced literacy practices.

Even when expertise was present in the building, accessibility of expertise was critical. Factors that impacted the accessibility of expertise were the multiple demands placed on staff with expertise and their mobility.

How reading leadership functioned and was maintained, to the extent that it existed at all, was found to be critical to its effectiveness. Factors that appeared to impact the accessibility of expertise in the building were the multiple demands placed on staff with expertise and their mobility. Clearly, when teachers are targeted as the primary source of expertise in a building, their availability to support their peers is compromised by their own classroom

responsibilities. This is true, as well, for Reading Specialists, when they are expected to assume multiple roles within the building. As one principal described this problem:

*The part that really is frustrating to me is that when we have teachers...who really have more intense individualized needs ...we start off o.k., but the people who are helping them get distracted, not really distracted, but the other demands of their jobs start to take precedence. And you can't keep up the level of support that they really need.*

The absence or movement of expertise out of a building is equally damaging:

*Last year... there was a lot of help, but this year there is not a lot of guidance. I'm sure the new teachers will tell you they haven't had a lot of guidance. They don't seem to get this in their colleges. There is no teacher's manual to tell you how to do it. ...That's the big hindrance. And, you need someone who knows the curriculum to be there for you—someone to answer your questions.*

Schools invest in the professional growth of their teachers and these teachers themselves become a valuable source of expertise in the building. When they leave and take this expertise with them, this slows implementation progress.

Similarly, schools invest in the professional growth of their teachers and these teachers themselves become a valuable source of expertise in the building. When they leave and take this expertise with them, this slows the progress of schools in implementing instructional programs that require extensive training and time to

implement well:

*We had teachers who had one year under their belts...and they could go with it now. I was concerned though because we had two new teachers added to first grade this year and three to second grade. Having a more stable staff allows you to go faster. In a school where we have a high mobility rate not only with kids, but also with staff, every year it's almost like starting over. ...Any time you're trying to create teams it's hard.*

Having staff development leaders in the building with Reading Recovery training was an extremely valuable implementation support.

One notable finding in regard to on-site expertise was the power of having staff development leaders in the building with Reading Recovery training. The depth of understanding of the balanced literacy approach that is acquired in the Reading Recovery training cannot be matched by the 2-week Reading Initiative training only. A Reading Specialist with

Reading Recovery training described the value of this training for her contribution to the Reading Initiative, as follows:

*When I reflect, [what] I give to the Reading Initiative is so much greater because I have had this training. For instance, tomorrow [a colleague] and I are going to do a staff development. The piece that I am getting ready for tomorrow, I really could not have done without the Reading Recovery training.*

And, another staff member with Reading Recovery training spoke about the impact of that training on the depth of her understanding of the reading process:

*I kept watching what [a reading recovery-trained teacher] was doing and she kept saying to me, and I didn't realize it until I got into the class, that she thought she knew a lot about reading, but once you get into that training...Many of the people who take it are Reading Specialists and that is the universal statement: "We thought we knew a lot about reading, but didn't realize how much there was [that] we didn't know."*

Preparation and training of principals is another significant source of support. As one principal, who does have the background in early literacy commented:

"I think that there has to be...a knowledge [on the part] of administration of what early literacy really is and how it should look."

*I think that there has to be...a knowledge [on the part] of the administration of what early literacy really is and how it should look. You cannot observe a program if you don't have a basic understanding of what it should be, if you don't have some understanding, or are in the process of learning.*

Another principal, who acknowledged that her background was not reading, spoke of the value of the Reading Initiative summer training that principals received in respect to her ability to monitor consistency of implementation across classrooms:

*We had done so much, but people were still doing their own little things. And now I can also walk into a classroom and know what's going on because it looks familiar to me because I've had the training also. And I can ask informed questions.*

### *On-site Professional Development Opportunities*

Proficient implementation of a balanced literacy approach to reading instruction is not easy, as a number of school staff noted in our conversations with them. And, it was agreed that the 2-week training that MCPS provided was not sufficient. As one teacher summarized this:

*I think we need to be reinforced. You know teachers are learners too....I feel that I am improving too and that I'm learning new strategies....a week or two of Reading Initiative training is fine. But you need something else. ...I think that teachers that are in this program need continued support.*

Many teachers emphasized the importance of on-site provision of this continued professional development support. In this regard, one teacher commented:

*I learned a lot more here at [my school] from the administration and the Reading Specialist than I did from the training.*

The value of on-site training was that it could be tailored to the individual needs of teachers, which varied both within and across schools.

In part, the value of on-site training was that it could be tailored to the individual needs of teachers, which varied both within and across schools. Beyond the lack of follow-up training, when teachers talked about shortcomings of the system-wide training, they mentioned the lack of differentiated training. For example:

*I guess some people are going to have more questions, but, as you do it more there's other things you can focus on....There are other things like other aspects of it, like how to make Read Alouds more dynamic. Maybe give [teachers] a choice. Have 4 places you could go at a training...so it's more individualized. We're trying to individualize for them [children], so we need it to be individualized for us.*



Another teacher suggested:

*Have trainers come to the school for in-service training. Because every school sends their teachers for different amounts of training. So I think it should be done by school with a lot more research [about school needs] done before.*

Schools varied greatly in the provision of on-site professional development opportunities.

In addition to the variation across teachers in their training needs, there was variation across schools in the provision of on-site professional development opportunities. Some brought outside consultants or trainers to the school, some used primary team meetings as the occasion for the Reading Specialist or other experts in the building to lead a training session, and some had no training programs. Beyond the importance of

**Three qualities of good in-school training** included:

- administrative support for school-wide training;
- hands-on training, such as peer observation and expert modeling in the classroom; and,
- administrative support for taking risks.

offering some form of on-going training, as compared to none, there were three qualities of the in-school training opportunities that appeared to be most important. These three qualities of good in-school training included: administrative support for school-wide training, hands-on training, such as peer observation and expert modeling in the classroom (peer coaching), and administrative support for taking risks.

With respect to administrative support for school-wide training, this was expressed both in terms of ensuring that all instructional staff who worked with children in the primary grades (in some cases inclusive of pre-kindergarten) received training, and in terms of communicating clear expectations that all staff would be on board in implementing this approach in their classrooms. As one teacher expressed this:

*We all know [the principal's] vision. And [principal] makes that clear when we have the first—before we come back to school, we have a meeting. ...”This is what I’m going to do for you. I’m going to stand by you. I’m going to get this for you, but you will utilize it.”*

And, as a principal expressed this:

*It was very clear it doesn’t help to ...have just two teachers trained in this way. What helped was to have everybody on the same wavelength and the reading teacher too.*

Teachers repeatedly talked about the need for hands-on training in the balanced literacy approach. Teachers viewed the opportunity to observe demonstration teachers in the Book Clubs during the 2-week summer training as the most valuable aspect of the system-wide training:

*To actually see that the teachers were doing this. And yes, it does work. And you can manage children at centers and children in guided reading groups. And just how those teachers were able to plan many of the components of the balanced literacy into such a, you know, a relatively short amount of time. So, definitely getting to observe the people, I think was the most important to me. If we didn't get to observe, it would have been far less meaningful.*

And, when teachers went back to their schools, they wanted to continue observing examples of what this should look like in the classroom; they wanted “models,” presented both in the context of their own classrooms and in their peers’ classrooms:

*You need to actually see it....Somebody came to our school and modeled with our children, and that's what you really want to see. And I would love to see that continued. We said throughout this program that we would have loved to have gone to other schools that were doing Reading Initiative and watching.*

Variations in on-site training were related to the depth and breadth of implementation across classrooms.

Again, schools varied in the extent to which these kinds of professional development opportunities were made available to teachers, and these variations were related to the depth and breadth of implementation across classrooms within the building. The 2-week summer training was clearly not sufficient to get all teachers on board back in the classroom with finely tuned skills. When MCPS left schools on their own to provide follow-up training to this 2-week session, the extent to which teachers were able to continue to refine and develop their skills was largely a function of the on-site training and expertise that was available in the individual school buildings.

A third quality of the professional development climate within schools that seemed especially important to encouraging growth among teachers was the extent to which teachers felt that the school was a “safe” environment in which to take risks. As one teacher noted:

*If you make teachers feel safe, just like you make kids feel safe, you get a lot more progress.*

Another teacher talked about the way that this kind of climate can reduce the stress around learning new strategies:

*We've all given ourselves permission not to be perfect and not to have a perfect lesson every day.*

Teachers needed to feel that they were not expected to be doing it all right away and doing it all perfectly. Within this climate, teachers talked more about trying out new strategies, and they viewed these efforts almost as experimental investigations of a strategy, that might or might not succeed, but from which they could learn.

### *In-school Monitoring and Assessment Systems*

The availability of an internal database to track the performance of children served as a critical support to schools.

The availability of an internal database that tracks the performance of children serves as a critical support to schools in the implementation of instructional programs. It does this in several ways. First, as noted earlier in this report, the critical first step in a school's ability to develop a unified and cohesive instructional focus is the recognition and articulation of a specific problem with respect both to student performance and the school's organizational capacity to address this problem. The availability of data that provide a clear picture of such a problem is crucial. Second, ongoing assessment and tracking of student performance is essential to providing feedback about the effective functioning of instructional programs, both school-wide and at the classroom level. And, third, such feedback, in and of itself, can be an important source of motivation to teachers as they are able to document and see their students' progress.

One of the more significant strengths of the Reading Initiative in regard to this kind of implementation support is the grade 2 performance assessments that were a part of the ECAP. Several principals described the value of ECAP in this way:

"The truth is that the ECAP gave us good data on the kids and it gave us direction."

*The truth is that the ECAP gave us good data on the kids and it gave us direction. We did that first round of testing...and we saw [that] kids were not scoring very well in terms of the writing part. We were getting the kids to be fluent readers, but they were really not fluent in terms of writing. So we shifted...The second round of ECAP scores I saw, we definitely had kids that were scoring "3's" which*

*was really exciting to us....We could get our second graders there, we just needed to know the target and then we needed to shift the instruction to hit the target. [School A]*

*I'm really glad about the ECAP because it gives us even more information. We can see it. We can see the kids' writing. We see the running records, but ECAP is really giving us the kinds of information we need in terms of really seeing the progress. [School B]*

Assessments that were able to inform instruction at the individual student and classroom level were seen as valuable.

Schools were quite diverse in the kinds of internal assessment systems they had been using prior to Reading Initiative, and in the kinds of assessments they put together for grouping children into reading classes at the beginning of the year. They varied as well in respect to the frequency of gathering assessment data and in the use of these data by different staff members. However, all schools recognized the value of tracking assessment information. And, all talked about some kinds of assessments as being more valuable than others. Specifically, assessments that were able to inform instruction at the individual student and classroom level were seen as the most valuable within the building, both for teaching as well as administrative staff. **These kinds of assessments were talked about as serving multiple purposes: 1) identifying students who might otherwise fall through the cracks; 2) targeting the specific needs of individual students; 3) identifying classrooms in which students were not performing well in specific areas; and, 4) learning about where and how to make changes in instruction.** Principals, as well as teachers also talked about how important it was to be able to see student progress:

*The other purpose is to find some data that is positive from the test scores. Because people work hard and then they get discouraged about the test scores not increasing and then they don't work towards that because they figure they can't do it.*

In addition, in-school assessment systems were seen as useful to the extent that they provided immediate feedback to teaching and administrative staff.

### *Time*

*Time is an essential ingredient of change....How time spent with students can be improved is dependent on the amount, nature, and quality of the time that teachers spend together. (Olsen and Jaramillo, "When Time is on Our Side," 2000, p.242)*

A ubiquitous theme was that of time. This theme emerged repeatedly as a critical support to the implementation of Reading Initiative.

A ubiquitous theme that ran through all of our conversations with teachers and administrative staff in the case study schools was that of time. As this theme emerged again and again, its status as a critical support to the implementation of new instructional programs, and Reading Initiative in particular, became clear. The extent to which time

was seen as an impediment to school staff's ability to engage in activities that research has demonstrated are critical to institutionalizing school change was striking. Thus, teachers talked about planning time, time to collaborate, time to learn from others, and time to adjust and modify the program until it "works,"

"What really is needed...is time for planning with the team."

*What really is needed, though, is time for planning within the team. Everybody had great ideas, if we could just all get together. [Teacher A]*

*The biggest problem that I see is that lack of planning time. That is the real deficiency in the program. The lack of built-in planning time. Now you can certainly, I do some planning at home, I do some planning with my first grade teacher. I do some planning with the second grade teacher, but it's all kind of, excuse the vernacular, "on the fly." It just isn't sufficient time for teachers to sit together and to really strategize in a more professional manner. [Teacher B]*

*I think we learn so much from each other when we have time to sit and talk. [Teacher C]*

*I would like more time to visit other teachers, not necessarily in this school, to get new ideas. [Teacher D]*

Teachers need time to learn about new strategies, and schools need time to learn about organizational models for implementation.

Time also was seen as essential to the implementation process itself. Teachers need time to learn new strategies, and schools need time to try out new organizational models for implementation. This was "learning time" for teachers and schools to grow:

*There are just so...many different components to the balanced literacy program that, what I have to tell the new teachers is, "Don't expect to implement it all because then you're doing quantity and it's not the quality."*

And, over time, teachers learned to give children more time as learners:

*They needed more time, so we got rid of the timer and set it up that once they finished a center they could move on to the next center, rather than timing them. That way, we weren't interrupting their thought process and making them change.*

The cumulative time that children spend in the Reading Initiative program is important to accelerating the learning process.

Not only is the time that teachers spend in implementing the program important to their learning process, but also the time that children spend in the Reading Initiative program is important to accelerating the learning process:

*This year is really nice because the kids we have this year had the same program last year. So, there isn't the management issue that we had last year. They came to the centers knowing how to do them.*

Some children "just need a little more time on task" both inside and outside the school day and walls.

On the other hand, principals in the most highly impacted schools in respect to student needs, cautioned us about the time that must be given to children, both inside and outside the school day and walls:

*A lot of these kids are struggling in school, in my opinion, and I increasingly believe this after 27 years in education, is that they just need more time because it just isn't there at home, for a variety of reasons.*

*The real needs here are a stronger after-school program and a strong summer school program not just for our second language learners, but for our kids who, for whatever reason, just need a little more time on task.*

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