



# TOUCHING BASE

APRIL 1, 2009

PUTTING PROVEN METHODS OF READING RESEARCH IN THE CLASSROOM  
TO INCREASE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT ACROSS COLORADO

## PREVENTING THE FOURTH-GRADE SLUMP

The following information was presented in *Reading First NOTEBOOK*, U.S. Department of Education's Reading First newsletter, Summer 2006.

**Some students, especially socioeconomically disadvantaged students, may read adequately from kindergarten through third grade but suddenly begin to struggle when they reach fourth grade. This phenomenon has been referred to as the "fourth-grade slump."**

Jeanne Chall (1983) identified two major stages of reading development. The first stage is characterized as a period where children are "learning to read" and the second stage as a period where children are "reading to learn." The first stage typically encompasses grades 1, 2, and 3, and the second stage encompasses grades 4 and beyond. "Learning to read" is a time when students are decoding words contained in simple texts that use familiar language. In fourth grade, texts become more complex and abstract and contain language and concepts that

are more challenging. Consequently, some students' reading scores dip. In subsequent grades, as text becomes more and more difficult and supply less and less contextual support, students face the "eighth-grade cliff." Difficulty in text comprehension seems to be compounded by the fact that many upper-elementary grade teachers do not have "substantial knowledge of how to teach reading," according to Stanford University professor Michael Kamil (Grosso de Leon, 2002, p.1).

Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) confirm that there are still a number of students in fourth grade who struggle with reading skills and that the achievement gap persists between minority and disadvantaged students and their counterparts.

Chall (1983) found that vocabulary scores were the first to drop among fourth graders, followed in

sixth grade by comprehension scores. She contends that this may indicate that contextual support within the fourth-grade level text was sufficient to compensate for word-meaning weaknesses in the beginning, but as the text concepts and language became more complex, contextual support was no longer sufficient to sustain comprehension.

So what can Reading First schools do to combat the dreaded fourth-grade slump? Chall and Jacobs (2003) suggest a focus on vocabulary to expand students' word knowledge along with fluency and automaticity instruction. By honing these skills, students can identify words and their meanings instantly so their cognitive capacity can be used solely for comprehension of connected text. Grosso de Leon (2002) proposes a focus on comprehension instruction that will provide students specific strategies to help them understand complex text. In addition,

(Continued on page 2)

### SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST

- *Preventing the Fourth-Grade Slump*
- *Promoting Incidental Word Learning*
- *Do Third-Graders Need Phonics Instruction*
- *CRF BEAR Data Webinar*

## FOURTH-GRADE SLUMP CONTINUED:



“WE USE WORDS  
TO THINK; THE  
MORE WORDS WE  
KNOW THE FINER  
OUR  
UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE WORLD”

~ STAHL, (1999)

efforts to build background knowledge help students understand texts that may contain less familiar and less cohesive material (Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick, & Kurita, 1989). All of these strategies are very familiar to teachers who have spent time in Reading First classrooms. Reading First teachers also know that this instruction can't wait. Chall and Jacobs (2003) emphasize that students in the early grades who seem proficient in narrative reading comprehension, despite having deficits in word meaning and word recognition, will likely suffer later. They state, “Because of the developmental nature of reading, the later one waits to strengthen weaknesses, the more difficult it is for the children to cope with the increasing literacy demands in the later grades.”

Reading First teachers have a critical responsibility to ensure that their students leave the third grade prepared for the reading demands of the upper-elementary grades. A steady application of explicit instruction in the five skill areas (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) outlined in the National Reading Panel report will help them achieve this goal. District and school leaders of Reading First schools may also consider how teachers in the upper-elementary grades can learn about quality reading instruction. Administrators might consider offering fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade teachers the following:

namely, professional development that

- is aligned with district and state professional development;
- includes training in core and supplemental programs;
- is ongoing and job-embedded; and
- includes follow-up and support.
- A strong curriculum and assessment system, linked directly to the early elementary system, to teach and assess appropriate skills
- A reading coach to support their efforts

The “fourth-grade slump” and the “eighth-grade cliff” can be avoided with a strong foundation of skills that support comprehension and vocabulary development in the primary grades and continued maintenance and development of these abilities throughout a child's school career. Reading First teachers are well prepared to meet this challenge.

### References:

Chall, J. S. (1983). *Stages of reading development*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Chall, J. S., & Jacobs, V. A. (2003). The classic study on poor children's fourth-grade slump. *American Educator*, 27(1), 14-15.

Gorsso de Leone, A. (2002). *Moving beyond storybooks: Teaching our children to read to learn*. *Carnegie Reporter*, 2(1). Retrieved June 19, 2006, from <http://www.carnegie.org/reporter/05/learning/index.html>.

Pressley, M., Johnson, C., Symons, S., McGoldrick, J., & Kurita, J. (1989). Strategies that improve children's memory and comprehension of text. *The Elementary School Journal*, 90(1), 3-32.

Snow, C.E. (2002). *Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

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- Professional development modeled after Reading First—

### April 2009 Events

April 8: CRF Spring Leadership Conference  
Colorado Springs: Antlers Hilton, 719.955.5600

April 09: CRF Spring Conference  
Colorado Springs: Antlers Hilton, 719.955.5600

April 17: CRF BEAR Data Webinar  
Beginning at 10:00 a.m.

### May 2009 Events

No CRF Professional Development scheduled for May 2009

## PROMOTING INCIDENTAL WORD LEARNING

The following information was presented in *Reading First NOTEBOOK*, U.S. Department of Education's Reading First newsletter, Summer 2006.

We know from the report of the National Reading Panel (2000) that vocabulary is learned through both incidental word learning and intentional word teaching. Direct instruction in vocabulary skills is familiar to Reading First teachers and is clearly outlined in the scientifically based reading curriculum adopted by every Reading First school. Vocabulary skills for third-grade students may include using a dictionary and reference sources, using context clues, and using synonyms, antonyms, homophones, homographs, figurative language, and morphemic analysis.

Equally important, however, is word learning that is not so intentional. Teachers may be the most important factor in influencing a child's incidental word learning. Because teachers can and should play such an important role in advancing incidental word learning, it is important that they are familiar with ways in which they can promote it.

What are some strategies for promoting incidental word learning? In his book, *The Vocabulary Book: Learning & Instruction*, Michael Graves offers four means by which vocabulary can be learned incidentally: (1) listening, (2) reading, (3) discussing, and (4) writing.

### Listening

A teacher can greatly influence his or her students' vocabulary simply by paying attention to the vocabulary he or she uses in the classroom. Try speaking to a group of third graders about illegible, rather than sloppy, handwriting, or ask them to work collaboratively, rather than together. The point is not teaching these words and their meanings but simply exposing

students repeatedly to words that might be outside of their established vocabulary. Additionally, read-alouds with discussion, audio books, and story telling are effective practices.

### Quick Quiz

1. Students learn most vocabulary from intentional explicit vocabulary instruction.

True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

2. Wide reading of independent-level texts is a good way for students to expand their vocabulary.

True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

3. Oral language experiences alone are not sufficient to ensure adequate vocabulary growth necessary for proficient reading comprehension.

True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

(Answers on page 4)

WHILE DIRECT INSTRUCTION OF VOCABULARY IS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF THIRD-GRADE READING FIRST INSTRUCTION, INCIDENTAL LEARNING OF VOCABULARY SHOULD NOT BE NEGLECTED.

### Reading

Promoting wide reading is another powerful method of incidental word learning. Hayes and Ahrens (1988) found that children's books contain about one third more rare words than even adult prime-time television shows. A well-stocked classroom library is critical to supporting students' independent reading both in school and at home. Additionally, children should be enticed to read outside of class time. Teacher guidance during reading and student discussion of texts will also promote vocabulary growth.

### Discussing

Talking with others can improve vocabulary. Not just any conversation will do, however. Hayes and Ahrens (1988) found that even college gradu-

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## INCIDENTAL WORD LEARNING (CONTINUED)



ates do not use many sophisticated words. To be more effective, conversations should center on academic topics that students know something about and should contain the specialized vocabulary typical of those topics. Third graders should be provided opportunities to discuss the forces of motion during a science lesson using such words as “reciprocal” or to discuss how they will display the numerical data of an experiment they have conducted using words like “matrix.”

### Writing

As students’ writing skills develop, they begin to focus on the purpose of their writing as well as their audience. As a result, a more focused view of word choice emerges. Students should be encouraged to choose just the right word to convey the meaning they hope to communicate. The process of choosing and using words judiciously will help expand students’ vocabulary.

While direct instruction of vocabulary is an important element of third-grade Reading First instruction, incidental learning of vocabulary should not be neglected. Teachers should arrange to provide incidental word learning oppor-

tunities in the areas of listening, reading, discussing, and writing as often as possible.

### References:

- Graves, M. F. (2006). *The vocabulary book: Learning & instruction*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hayes, D.P., & Ahrens, M. (1988). Vocabulary simplification for children: A special case of “motherese”? *Journal of Child Language*, 15, 395-410.
- Lehr, F., Osborn, J., and Hiebert, E. (2004). *A focus on vocabulary*. Honolulu, HI: Pacific Resources for Education and Learning.
- 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*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

### Answers to the quiz:

1. **False.** Most word learning occurs incidentally through oral language experiences and wide reading (National Reading Panel, 2000).
2. **False.** Most researchers agree that students should read a variety of texts from a variety of difficulty levels (Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2004).
3. **True.** Everyday oral language does not contain the varied word use found in written language. Exposure to seldom used or rare words is required to build the vocabulary necessary for proficient reading comprehension (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988).

“... KNOWING A WORD IS NOT AN ALL-OR-NOTHING PROPOSITION; IT IS NOT THE CASE THAT ONE EITHER KNOWS OR DOES NOT KNOW A WORD. RATHER, KNOWLEDGE OF A WORD SHOULD BE VIEWED IN TERMS OF THE EXTENT OR DEGREE OF KNOWLEDGE THAT PEOPLE CAN POSSESS”

~ BECK &  
MCKEOWN,  
(1991)

## DO THIRD GRADERS STILL NEED PHONICS INSTRUCTION?

The following information was presented in *Reading First NOTEBOOK*, U.S. Department of Education’s Reading First newsletter, Summer 2006.

Most students who have consistently participated in Reading First instruction should be working on advanced phonics and word study by the third grade. But what should be done for students transferring in to a Reading First school who haven’t consistently received explicit and systematic phonics instruction or for students who have received good instruction but still don’t “get it”?

The National Reading Panel (2000) identified phonics as one of five critical areas of early reading instruction. Phonics instruction includes helping students understand the “code” relationship between letters and sounds and strengthening their ability to use the knowledge to “decode” and read words. Phonics instruction is crucial in helping students recognize familiar words automatically as well as decode words they have never seen before.

(Continued on page 5)



## DO THIRD GRADERS STILL NEED PHONICS INSTRUCTION? (CONTINUED)

According to Torgesen (2000), "To comprehend written material, children need to be able to identify the words used to convey meaning and they must be able to construct meaning once they have identified the individual words in print" (p. 56). Although there may be a variety of causes, if third-grade students have not yet mastered basic phonics, their teachers must take immediate action to ensure that those students have the skills to become proficient comprehenders so they will be prepared to meet the increased reading demands of fourth grade. In order to do this, teachers should take three steps.

First, the teacher should establish what type of decoding problem the student has. Sometimes a student reads poorly and the teacher assumes it is an accuracy problem when, in fact, it may be a fluency issue.

Simmons and Kame'enui (1998) suggest the following formula to determine whether to focus on accuracy or fluency:

More than one error every 10 words:  
Work on accuracy

Fewer errors (one in 15-20 words) but  
a low speed: Work on fluency

Once a teacher or reading coach has determined that a student has difficulty with phonics, he or she should use a diagnostic assessment to determine which phonics skills the student lacks. The assessment may take many forms; it can be a commercially available assessment or the assessment included in the school's core or supplemental reading program. Teachers will get a good understanding of where to begin instruction once this diagnosis has been completed. This instruction will occur during supplemental or intervention instructional time.

The teacher can then select a strategy (many strategies are typically included within core or supplemental instruction programs) to address the identified need. For example, a student who is still struggling to blend the sounds in words can be encouraged to run his or her finger under the word, saying the sounds, and

then circle his or her finger back around the word, blending the sounds together. The student also can practice building words with tiles and blending sounds to read the word as he or she runs a finger underneath the tiles. A student who is struggling with multisyllabic words can be introduced to and consistently encouraged to use a method of chunking large words into smaller parts. This student might also benefit from breaking off word beginnings and endings (prefixes and suffixes), reading the remaining word, and then adding the prefixes and suffixes back to read the entire word.

Customized instruction, usually provided in a very small group, provides the specialized instruction, focused attention, and immediate teacher feedback that these struggling students need. Instruction should be explicit and systematic and ensure that instruction can begin where assessment indicates it is necessary and no gaps will result. Isolated phonics instruction should be practiced, reinforced, and immediately applied to the reading of a connected text. This can be accomplished through the use of decodable texts that contain the specific types of words the student needs to practice. Learning should be monitored frequently to determine if this concentrated instruction is benefiting the student. That said, it is equally important for teachers to know that because a third-grade student is struggling with fundamental phonic skills, he or she can still benefit tremendously from exposure to core third-grade instruction that all students receive. It is here that the student will be exposed to the vocabulary and comprehension skills that will be crucial once phonic skills are finally established.

### References:

Kame'enui, E. J., & Simmons, D. C. (1998). Beyond effective practice to schools as host environments: Building and sustaining a school-wide intervention model in beginning reading. *Oregon School Study Council*, 41(3), 3-16.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read*. Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Torgesen, J. K. (2000). Individual differences in response to early interventions in reading: The lingering problem of treatment resisters. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 15(1) 55-64.



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COLORADOLITERACY/CRF/INDEX.HTM](http://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradoliteracy/crf/index.htm)

**PUT READING 1ST!**

## CRF BEAR Data Webinar

Colorado Reading First is hosting a webinar for the BEAR assessment and procedure on April 17, 2009, at 10:00 a.m.

We want to answer any questions that you have in an attempt to make the BEAR assessment process as efficient as possible.

If you have any questions regarding the BEAR assessment, please submit them by April 10, 2009, to Jacob Heiney:

[Heiney\\_J@cde.state.co.us](mailto:Heiney_J@cde.state.co.us).

An e-mail will be sent out prior to the webinar with log-on instructions.

Please contact Jacob Heiney if you need any assistance or have any questions.

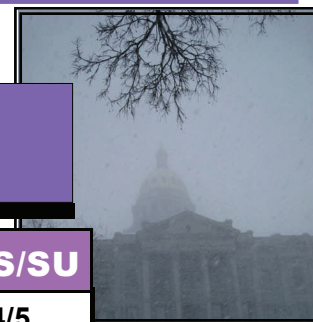


Johnson Elementary

## CRF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CALENDAR

# April 2009

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	S/SU
30	31	1	2	3	4/5
6	7	8 CRF Spring Leadership Conference, CO Springs, CO	9 CRF Spring Conference, Colorado Springs, CO	10	11/12
13	14	15	16	17 CRF BEAR Data Webinar, 10:00 a.m.	18/19
20	21	22	23	24	25/26
27	28	29	30	1	2/3
4	5	6	7	8	9/10



Colorado Capital Building,  
Denver CO

March 26, 2009

Spring?

Maybe Puxatony Phil was right.