

# Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement

## Early reading programs in high-poverty schools: A case study of beating the odds

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Learning to read is arguably the most important accomplishment of the first few years of schooling. Most children learn to read by the time they exit the primary grades in the U.S., but data from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999) reveal long-standing and unacceptably large differences in reading performance related to student poverty levels. More than twice as many fourth graders eligible for free and reduced-cost lunch scored below the "basic" achievement standard set by NAEP as did students who were not eligible (58% versus 27%), and 87% fell below the "proficient" level.

Although low and slow progress in reading has serious consequences for all children, it is especially critical for children who are already placed at risk by poverty. Furthermore, average early reading performance for a school tends to decrease as the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced-cost lunch increases. Hence, the statistical expectation for reading performance in high-poverty schools is relatively low. However, there are high-poverty schools that beat the odds, where typical student performance in reading greatly exceeds what would be expected from poverty data alone.

### Review of literature

For over a century, U.S. schools have recognized the importance of learning to read by making it the cornerstone of elementary school instruction. In the early grades, activities designed to help students learn to read typically account for more instructional time than any other subject area (Fisher & Hiebert, 1990). However, there is also compelling evidence that children who do not learn to read fluently and independently in the early grades have few opportunities to catch up to, and virtually no chance to surpass, their peers who are reading on grade level. For many poor, language-minority, and dialect-speaking children attending low-performing schools, the odds of learning to read by the end of third grade are far too low.

Much of the voluminous research on early reading in school settings focuses on individual classrooms (see Adams, 1990; Barr, Kamil, Mosenthal, & Pearson, 1991; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Chall, 1967; Pearson, Barr, Kamil, & Mosenthal, 1984; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; and Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999, among others). Effective, powerful, and balanced reading instruction from knowledgeable teachers is the key to successful early reading achievement. Instruction that provides opportunities to master concepts of print, the alphabetic principle,

word recognition skills, and phonemic awareness and that affords engagement and interest in reading through a wide range of materials in the context of developmentally appropriate instruction continues to be the major deterrent against reading failure (Adams, 1990; Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1998; Hiebert & Raphael, 1998; Snow et al., 1998).

Over the last two decades, a small but relatively consistent strand of work on reading performance has focused on whole schools. Our research fits into this latter strand. Beginning in the 1970s, research on effective schools identified characteristics of schools that were performing well beyond what would be predicted from one or more demographic variables. Early advocates of school reform (Comer, 1997; Edmonds, 1979; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989) incorporated characteristics of effective schools in their programs for at-risk students. Successive waves of educational reform in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly took the view that the school was a key level for intervention. Hoffman and Rutherford (1984) reviewed several school effects studies with particular attention given to reading programs per se. They identified particular program characteristics, roles for the principal, and psychological conditions that appeared to contribute to the success of reading programs.



Most recently, a variety of studies, using a range of methodologies and generally including school effects on reading outcomes, have produced results that are not incongruous with this earlier research. For example, positive effects on reading achievement have been associated with collaboration and community building (Briggs & Thomas, 1997), targeted professional development (Frazee, 1996), curriculum and assessment alignment (Rossi & Stringfield, 1997), clear and agreed-upon goals and objectives at the state and school levels (Rossi & Stringfield, 1997), high expectations of students (Foertsch, 1998), early interventions and strategies for struggling readers (Lein, Johnson, & Ragland, 1997; Legters & McDill, 1994), common planning time for teachers (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1997), and strong school leadership (George, Grissom, & Just, 1996; Shields, Knapp, & Wechsler, 1995). These general findings notwithstanding, the implications for early reading programs in high-poverty schools are still not clear. Often results are confounded with multiple subject areas, combined school types (elementary, secondary), and socioeconomic class data. Furthermore, findings have been presented at a level of abstraction that makes their implications for specific schools and school contexts less than obvious. These empirically derived characteristics are not yet sufficiently well understood to generate a compelling theory or framework for reliable interventions in new sites.

Additional descriptive studies of early reading programs and attempts to understand the relationships among the schoolwide and other factors that promote early reading achievement in high-poverty schools are still required. What do early reading programs look like in high-poverty, high-performing schools? How have these schools allocated resources to develop, implement, and sustain their early reading programs? Although it is unlikely that these broad questions have simple, straightforward answers, our goal has been to identify practices in specific high-performing, high-poverty schools through case study analysis of six schools. We describe here the early reading program in one such school.

### **Emerald Elementary School**

Emerald Elementary School is bordered by one of the service roads that runs parallel to a major interstate highway alongside an industrial area. Across the interstate to the north of the school are a county sewage plant and an industrial airport. To the south of the school is a wooded area. In fact, the back of the school opens up to a spacious playground with a sloping grassy field that leads to a river. The school's proximity to major arteries and industry belies its relative inaccessibility to its own community. Public transit service was discontinued a few years back, leaving the nearest bus stop too far for parents and others to visit the school easily. Thus, aside from children who are able to walk from low-income housing and small single-family homes in the neighborhood, students are bused.

At the time of the study, the school's total licensed staff of 26 included 16 classroom teachers (K–5), 2.5 Title I staff, and 1.5 Special Education teachers, as well as 6 Title I paraprofessionals. Four hundred sixty-four students were enrolled in Grades K–5, with an average class size of 29. Seventy-one percent of Emerald's students were white and 26% African American, with one language-minority student reported for the 1997–98 school year. In spite of the fact that the 50% of Emerald students eligible for free and reduced-cost lunch are above the state average of 31% and the school's high mobility rate of 40%, Emerald has consistently outperformed other schools in its state and district on reading achievement and, in particular, for the 3 consecutive years prior to the study. How have they been able to achieve this success? Planning, management, and development of the early reading program identified at Emerald include key elements of school

### **Key features of Emerald's reading program**

Strong focus on student learning outcomes	Emerald staff work continually to find ways for students to learn, rather than assign blame or accept failure. This focus is supported by a general school climate that is learning oriented, which, in the early reading program, translates to an expectation that students will learn to read.
Multiple reading programs in every classroom	Teachers pull from a variety of reading programs to meet student needs (e.g., direct instruction of phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, guided reading and writing) as they move students into the district-adopted reading series. They do not allow themselves to become locked into a "one size fits all" solution.
Shared responsibility for student success	At Emerald, the literacy rotation program and its biweekly meetings, where teachers meet to discuss individual student progress, provide an example of a shared commitment to student learning outcomes and the acceptance of varied instructional styles.
Strong leadership at school and classroom levels	The picture of leadership in the reading program at Emerald is complex. Although there is no doubt that the principal provides much of the leadership for the school, the teachers share in this through their knowledge, expertise, and participation in educational decisions.
Veteran, knowledgeable, coherent, and committed staff	This is a staff that is very dynamic and constantly seeking solutions to problems. In addition to having worked with one another for approximately 10 years, senior staff in the early reading program are very active in professional development and involved with mentoring teachers new to the school.



operation, the early reading program, and implications for resource allocation.

**School operation.** A variety of elements make up school operations: strong leadership at school and classroom levels, shared responsibility for student success, ongoing professional development, collaboration and team approach, and a schoolwide focus on early reading achievement. At Emerald, all students are seen as learners; when learning does not occur or is slower than expected, staff do not place blame, but rather seek solutions.

**Early reading program.** Flexible and dynamic student grouping, ongoing student assessment for instruction, multiple reading programs, safety nets for struggling readers, and data- and research-driven reading instruction make up the key components of Emerald's early reading program. Although the kindergarten program provides a foundation in the emergent literacy and oral language development, the core of Emerald's early reading program begins with Grade 1. The cornerstone of the early reading program is referred to as a literacy rotation in which all Grade 1 students have access to four small-group instructional approaches for 2 hours per week. Beyond the literacy rotation, there are a variety of safety nets for dealing with struggling readers. The school has several mechanisms in place for facilitating communication among the staff (about reading performance and broader issues), professional development, collaboration, and addressing state and federal schooling initiatives. Analysis of Emerald's early reading program identified five key elements of school operation. Each is described in the Table.

**Resource allocation implications.** With regard to resources, the level of funding at Emerald does not appear to be significantly different from other schools within its own district or different from other schools with comparable demographics. What does seem significant is the time that Emerald has had to grow as a school and the ways in which time is allocated throughout the school day and year for program planning, implementation, and management. Programmatic decisions are made at the school level, and Emerald is proactive in its allocation of resources

available to it from local, state, and U.S. federal agencies.

(For a more detailed description of the key elements of Emerald's school operation, early reading program, and resource allocations, see Fisher & Adler, 1999.)

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