

Literacy for All: Making It a Reality

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On the 2009 *National Assessment of Educational Progress*, one-third of our nation's fourth-graders performed at or above the *Proficient* level in reading. That's the good news. But what about the two-thirds of students who did *not* read proficiently in fourth grade? These students will continue to struggle academically, and many of them eventually will drop out of school (Duncan, 2010).

In your school district, you may be facing the challenge of improving the *below Proficient* reading skills of a number of students, and it *is* a challenge! For children who enter school with below average language development, a one-year gain in reading achievement for each year in school is not enough to "catch up." To attain the *Proficient* level by fourth grade, we must *double or triple rates of reading growth* in kindergarten and first grade; by the end of third grade, we must expect *six years of growth in a four-year span*. How can we ensure this acceleration in reading achievement?

To accelerate literacy learning, schools must significantly increase both the amount of time and the quality of instruction offered to students. Schools can organize trained teams to provide small-group literacy instruction within their master schedules. Certainly the results are worth the effort. For example, Figure 1 (below) depicts the actual results achieved at one Virginia elementary school after four years of utilizing Early Learning Teams (ELTs) in kindergarten and first grade, with follow-up Intervention/Enrichment periods in grades 2-5. Of note, this school's free-reduced lunch status ranged between 40 and 45 percent during this time period. Additional programs

of Early Literacy Teams currently are being piloted in schools in Georgia, Ohio, Tennessee, and Virginia.

Figure 1: Four-Year History, PALS Identification Rates & SOL Scores, Grade 3						
Assessment Type		2008	2009	2010	2011	2011 State Average
% of 3rd Grade students identified for Intervention based on PALS*		24%	17%	5%	7%	
SOL** – 3rd Grade	Reading	79%	75%	80%	93%	83%
	Mathematics	87%	70%	86%	98%	91%
	Science	81%	77%	84%	95%	90%
	History/Social Studies	85%	82%	86%	82%	85%

*PALS = Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening, an assessment used across Virginia to identify K-3 students for literacy intervention.

**SOL = Standards of Learning, Virginia’s state assessment to determine whether or not standards were met.

Although gains would not be realized necessarily in the first year, continued commitment to flooding classrooms with ELTs and providing I/E periods in master schedules promises positive results over time.

In this article, first we explain how administrators and teachers can coordinate personnel resources to provide effective literacy instruction across all elementary classrooms. Second, we demonstrate how administrators can include literacy groups in the master schedule, thus increasing instructional time for reading acquisition and encouraging teaming among teachers. Finally, we show a framework for literacy instruction designed to double or triple student rates of literacy acquisition within scheduled literacy instructional blocks.

The Role of the Literacy Coach

Within any school, the identification and development of a Literacy Coach is essential to the success of establishing and supporting effective literacy instruction. The Literacy Coach develops and trains Early Literacy Team (ELT) members, organizes

assessment-based flexible Elementary Learning Groups (ELGs), and schedules Intervention/Enrichment (I/E) periods. The Literacy Coach also organizes materials for ELGs and provides easy access to those materials for ELT members.

Developing and Training Early Literacy Teams. Supporting and advancing teachers' development is the primary role of a Literacy Coach (Hartnett-Edwards, 2011), and developing and training ELT members is central to this effort. On an ongoing basis, the Literacy Coach reviews sample lesson plans, demonstrates how to implement them with students, co-teaches with ELT members, and then observes lessons taught by the ELTs to ensure that targeted instruction is being implemented for each small group.

When selecting ELTs, school administrators and teachers draw on available staff members to serve. Suggestions for staffing ELTs and I/E Periods are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Suggestions for Staffing ELTs and I/E Periods	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literacy coaches/aides • Classroom teachers • Title I teachers/aides • English language learners teachers/aides • Talented and gifted teachers in enrichment • Encore teachers (P.E., art, music, dance, drama, etc., possibly in enrichment) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Math coaches/aides • Special education teachers/assistants • Teacher assistants • Media specialists • Computer lab personnel • Highly trained retired teachers on a contractual basis

Early Literacy Team (ELT) members rotate among the small groups when regrouping occurs, so that all students receive access to highly qualified instructors and exposure to a variety of instructional styles. Rotation allows ELT members to specialize in certain teaching strategies, thus becoming skilled in delivering particular types of instruction. Furthermore, teacher assistants, under the supervision of the classroom teacher and the Literacy Coach, can be trained to implement and repeat particular types of selected instruction.

Coordinating Instructional Resources. The Literacy Coach coordinates the organization of a literacy center to provide materials for the ELGs and literacy interventions. These materials include adaptable lesson plans, with multiple copies of books and materials for implementing each lesson plan. A computerized spreadsheet allows teachers to sort literacy center resources by a variety of fields such as *title, reading level, theme, or instructional strategy sequence.*

Assessing and Flexibly Grouping Students. Working with classroom teachers and ELT members, the Literacy Coach ensures that assessment-based instruction occurs in the ELGs. Assessment-based instruction denotes grouping and regrouping students based on formal and/or informal assessments and providing instruction reflective of such assessments. Initially, students may be grouped based on the results of a formal reading assessment; as they progress, they can be regrouped based on how they perform on quick, frequent, and informal mastery checks. An informal reading inventory or a running record can be used, for example, to form small groups focusing primarily on the development of fluency and primary-level comprehension skills. As another example, a brief group-administered spelling assessment can be used to regroup students when word study is the main focus.

The Literacy Coach helps classroom teachers use these assessment results to plan groups responsive to individual learning needs. Groups are “flexed,” that is, students can be moved from one group to another in response to formative assessment results. This kind of placement allows students to progress to the next level on any particular sequence of instruction. Students not making adequate progress must be

monitored closely so that appropriate changes can be made in materials, practice sessions, and individual tutoring to facilitate their success.

Scheduling Literacy Instruction

If students are to achieve literacy at accelerated rates, administrators and teachers must adjust their daily and weekly schedules to significantly increase the amount of time for small-group literacy instruction. In this section we will overview key concepts associated with scheduling literacy instruction, then share a sample master schedule designed to make “literacy for all” a reality.

Early Literacy Groups and Teams. Early Literacy Groups (ELGs) are homogeneous, skills-based groups of students taught by trained Early Literacy Teams (ELTs), as well as by their classroom teachers. Within any one school, all students receive reading instruction in ELGs in kindergarten and first grade and, on a limited basis, in second grade. ELTs “flood” classrooms, meaning the entire team conducts small group instruction at least twice daily in each classroom (see Figures 3 and 4). Throughout the school year, small group composition can be flexed, based on continuous assessments within the classroom. ELG groups can occur across homerooms and grade levels based on student instructional levels and needs.

ELTs offer a number of benefits; for example, members of the ELTs can be trained and monitored more easily than ensuring that all teachers school-wide are providing quality instruction. Also, the ELT allows specialization to occur, since ELT members develop and repeat several types of specific lessons with different groups of students throughout the school year. Furthermore, the ELT provides an embedded staff development program, since ELT members model diagnostic teaching daily in all

classrooms. Finally, the ELT ensures that all students receive quality reading instruction, rather than relying on a student's probability of being assigned a teacher qualified and willing to teach reading.

Intervention/Enrichment (I/E) Periods. Once a school's ELT sessions are scheduled for grades K-2, Intervention/Enrichment (I/E) periods can be scheduled for grades 3-5. During the I/E periods, students who still require *Intervention* in basic reading and math skills will continue to receive those lessons, while those who have attained proficiency in those subjects will receive *Enrichment*. The Enrichment goal is to move students from *proficiency* to *advanced proficiency* in literacy and in math by offering targeted enrichment units taught by a variety of personnel.

A Sample Master Schedule with Literacy Instruction as Priority

Providing sufficient instructional time is critical to the success of early literacy instruction. Following a master schedule, such as shown in Figure 3, kindergarten teachers begin the day with their assigned homeroom groups, devoting 75-90 minutes to morning activities, including whole-group work in literacy and mathematics. Beginning with Period III, the ELT joins Kindergarten Teacher A (Figure 4) to "flood" the classroom with sufficient personnel, typically 2 or 3 ELT members, to teach small groups (ELGs) of three to seven students based on identified student needs. After the first ELG period, the ELT moves to Kindergarten Teacher B's classroom and subsequently to Kindergarten Teacher C's classroom. After lunch, the ELT again rotates through the three classrooms and provides afternoon instruction for the same ELGs.

Initially, ELGs are formed within a single classroom, but as students progress from emergent to beginning readers and beyond, groupings can cross grade-level

classrooms. ELGs at higher levels of reading can include a larger number of students (seven to ten), since ELTs may have a limited number of quality staff.

The same process continues in first grade and, on a limited basis, in second grade. By second grade ELTs meet primarily to benefit transfer students who have gaps in their skills that must be identified and mastered. By scheduling double ELGs in grades K-1, reading difficulties are reduced, and fewer students require intervention in grades 2-5. However, to maintain grade-level skills as students progress through school, additional small group literacy instruction during I/E periods (see Figure 3), provides a safeguard for continued achievement and also assists transfer students who have not reached proficiency.

Figure 3: Hill Elementary School Schedule Illustrating Early Literacy Groups (ELGs) Meeting in Reduced Groups Twice Daily for Kindergarten and Grade 1 Teachers, Including I/E Periods and Completed Schedules for Grades 2-5

		I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX
Kindergarten	HR	Math/Literacy		Early Literacy Groups (ELGs)		Lunch/Recess (45 Minutes)	Repeat a.m. ELGs/Literacy		Encore/Plan (45 Minutes)	Sc/SS (45 Minutes)
Grade 1	HR	Early Literacy Groups (ELGs)		Math/Literacy		Recess/Lunch (45 Minutes)	Sc/SS (45 Minutes)	Encore/Plan (45 Minutes)	Repeat a.m. ELGs/Literacy	
Grade 2	HR	Reading/Language Arts/Social Studies (180 Minutes)				ELGs, if Needed/ I/E	Lunch/Recess (45 Minutes)	Math/Science		Encore/Plan (45 Minutes)
Grade 3	HR	Reading/Language Arts/Social Studies (180 Minutes)				Encore/Plan (45 Minutes)	Recess/Lunch (45 Minutes)	Math/Science		I/E
Grade 4	HR	90 Minutes		I/E	Encore/Plan (45 Minutes)	90 Minutes		Lunch/Recess (45 Minutes)	90 Minutes	
Grade 5	HR	90 Minutes		Encore/Plan (45 Minutes)	I/E	90 Minutes		Recess/Lunch (45 Minutes)	90 Minutes	
Encore/Plan		Plan		Grade 5	Grade 4	Grade 3	Lunch	Grade 1	Grade K	Grade 2
I/E		Plan		Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 2	Lunch			Grade 3
Lunch/Recess						K-1	2-3	4-5		

ELGs = Early Literacy Groups HR = Homeroom Activities Sc/SS = Science/Social Studies I/E = Intervention/Enrichment Period

Note 1: Periods II through IX are 45 minutes. Period I time may vary, depending on number of minutes in school day.

Note 2: For additional information on implementing an Intervention/Enrichment (I/E) period in an elementary school, see Canady, R. L. & Rettig, M. D. (2008), Chapter 4, *Elementary school scheduling: Enhancing Instruction for student achievement*, (pp. 93-125), Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education and www.schoolschedulingassociates.com/canady.html

A Detail of Early Literacy Team Rotations at One Grade Level

To maximize available resources, the principal will need to prepare schedules for the ELTs. In Figure 4, a detailed schedule for one grade level is presented.

Figure 4: Detail Version of Hill Elementary School Master Schedule for One Grade Level, including ELGs

Periods	I	II	III	IV		V	VI	VII		VIII	IX
Kindergarten Teacher A	Homeroom Activities, Mathematics and Literacy (75-90 minutes)		ELGs (30 minutes)	Literacy and Math (60 minutes)		Lunch/Recess	Literacy and Math (30 minutes)	Repeat a.m. ELGs (30 minutes)	Literacy and Math (30 minutes)	Encore/Plan	Sc/SS
Kindergarten Teacher B			Literacy and Math (30 minutes)	ELGs (30 minutes)	Literacy and Math (30 minutes)	Lunch/Recess	Repeat a.m. ELGs (30 minutes)	Literacy and Math (60 minutes)		Encore/Plan	Sc/SS
Kindergarten Teacher C			Literacy and Math (60 minutes)		ELGs (30 minutes)	Lunch/Recess	Literacy and Math (60 minutes)		Repeat a.m. ELGs (30 minutes)	Encore/Plan	Sc/SS

Note: Periods II through IX are 45-50 minutes each. Period I and lunch/recess periods can vary in length depending on the number of minutes in the school day.

As shown above, one ELT is assigned to instruct ELGs in each kindergarten classroom, both in the morning and in the afternoon.

Implementing Literacy Instruction

Our purpose here is to present details about successful implementation strategies for providing literacy instruction within morning and afternoon ELGs. In addition, specific examples of activities included in literacy lessons are provided.

An Adaptable Framework for Literacy Groups

In *Response to Intervention: A Framework for Educators*, Taylor asserts that highly effective teachers balance the use of a teacher-directed mode with the use of a more active, student-participation stance. During the teacher-directed mode, teachers provide high levels of support and direction, demonstrating important concepts and engaging students in shared activities. During the student-participation stance, teachers gradually release support and direction, offer opportunities for guided practice, and

move students toward independence as learners. Highly effective teachers naturally flow between these levels of support and direction as needed; but to be sure that both levels of participation occur, they can be built into ELG activities and included on the daily schedule. Typically, the morning ELG sessions emphasize teacher-directed instruction, while afternoon sessions emphasize active student participation. Sample 30-minute morning and afternoon ELG lesson plans are depicted in Figure 5. These lesson plans, intended for kindergarten in the spring and/or first grade in the fall, contain essentials of effective reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel (2000), with research-based word study (Bear et al., 2008), new book reading and follow-up writing instructional frameworks (Heinemann, 2012).

Figure 5: Sample Early Literacy Group (ELG) Lessons, Kindergarten and/or First Grade		
Essentials of Lesson Plan	Morning (AM) ELG: Primarily Teacher-Directed	Afternoon (PM) ELG: Active Student Participation
Fluency (5 minutes in AM) (10 minutes in PM)	<input type="checkbox"/> Modeled/Shared Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Partner Reading	<input type="checkbox"/> Repeated or Wide Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Audio-taped Reading/Self-Evaluation/Performance Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Fluency Assessment
Word Study (10 minutes)	<input type="checkbox"/> Word Bank Introduction <input type="checkbox"/> Shared Picture/Word/Writing Sort <input type="checkbox"/> Other Shared Word Study Activities	<input type="checkbox"/> Word Bank Review <input type="checkbox"/> Word Study Review <input type="checkbox"/> Dictated Sentence Writing (K-1) <input type="checkbox"/> Word Study Assessment
Comprehension (15 minutes in AM) Comprehension/ Writing (10 minutes in PM)	<input type="checkbox"/> Before Reading: New Book Introduction <input type="checkbox"/> During Reading: Guided Reading, Prompting, Documentation <input type="checkbox"/> After Reading: Teaching Points, Oral Retelling, Discussion	<input type="checkbox"/> Oral Retelling Practice <input type="checkbox"/> Shared Writing <input type="checkbox"/> Written Response/Comprehension Assessment

In both types of sessions, the lesson is adaptable, depending on student needs as identified by regular checks for mastery, where the teacher notes student responses to teaching strategies for use in future planning. Ideally, students in ELGs are engaged in grade-level classroom content while reading books at their instructional level.

The Morning Early Literacy Group. During the morning ELG, based on identified instructional needs, the small group instructor provides a higher level of **Fluency** support. For example, the instructor models fluent oral reading of a brief section from a previously read text or works with students to arrange and rearrange sentence strips; students then practice reading the section or the sentence strips, then read the entire book with their partners.

During **Word Study**, again as determined by student learning checks, the teacher provides a higher level of support for learning new words. As one option, the teacher introduces sight words, difficult-to-sound-out words, or important vocabulary words from the new book or from a previous assessment. The teacher shares strategies for learning the words and then hands out cards with the words printed on them. These cards are added to each student's **Word Bank** or store of words. As another option, the teacher engages students in a **Picture and Word Sort**. Together, the teacher and students sort pictures and then words identified as features of study. Students engage in a **Writing Sort**, writing the words under appropriate column headers.

To apply Word Study to reading, the teacher then focuses on **Comprehension** by providing support before, during, and after new book reading. Before reading, the teacher conducts a **New Book Introduction**, displaying the cover and discussing the title of the new book, then showing the pictures sequentially, while using language

patterns similar to those used in the book. Next, the students make predictions about the story. During reading, students often engage in **Guided Reading**, reading at their own pace as the teacher offers prompts as needed and documents teaching points. After reading, the teacher reviews **Teaching Points** to encourage strategic actions. The teacher may also engage students in **Oral Retelling**, modeling how to use picture support to retell the book in sequential order. Another option is to engage students in **Discussion** by asking key higher-level comprehension questions that require students to revisit their earlier predictions, analyze text structure, infer the author's message, or make personal connections to the text.

The Afternoon Early Literacy Group. In the afternoon ELG, the teacher provides a lower level of support, encouraging students to actively respond to and apply learning from the morning ELG. During afternoon **Fluency** time, students practice **Repeated Reading** of familiar instructional-level books or **Wide Reading** of new independent-level books to build speed, accuracy, and expression. As another option, based on identified need, they engage in **Audio-taped Reading** and then **Self-Evaluation**, noting strengths and setting improvement goals. Eventually, individually or in groups, students practice **Performance Reading** for a future audience. On a regular basis, the teacher conducts a **Fluency Assessment**, taking a running record to learn how each student is applying strategies.

During afternoon **Word Study** time, students actively engage in **Word Bank Review** or **Word Study Review** activities. For example, students play a game using cards from their word banks or engage in Make-A-Word, writing teacher-called words on dry erase boards. Students studying mixed short vowel sounds change the word *chick*

to *check* by erasing and replacing only one letter. As another option, the teacher asks students to write **Dictated Sentences**, using key word-study sentences from a previously read book. Dictated sentences along with other informal checks of words studied serve as **Word Study Assessment**.

During afternoon **Comprehension and Writing** time, students can practice using pictures and other support to retell the book, the teacher and students can engage in **Shared Writing**, where the teacher writes shared ideas, or they can work in pairs to write responses to a higher-level comprehension question discussed in the morning session, which will serve as a **Comprehension Assessment**.

This sample Lesson Framework can be adapted easily for those students reading above first grade who require additional literacy instruction beyond regular classroom instruction. A 40-50 minute Intervention/Enrichment period allows teachers in Grades 2-5 to focus more on in-depth comprehension strategies.

Literacy for All: Worth the Effort

Yes, “literacy for all” is possible. All students *can* receive adequate time and explicit instruction in K-1. Early literacy learning *can* be accelerated by implementing early literacy groups (ELGs) in all K-1 classrooms at least twice daily. Highly supervised and trained early literacy teams (ELTs) *can* inundate K-1 classrooms with data-driven, explicit lessons and follow-up during I/E periods. When “literacy for all” happens, dramatic increases in student reading proficiency, lower dropout rates, and improved lives are predictable outcomes.

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