



ALABAMA

HOW READING FIRST HELPS A STATE MAKE THE GRADE



In a second-grade classroom in Mobile, Alabama, a small boy is struggling to make his next benchmark in oral reading fluency. He needs to read 100 words per minute and hasn't ever, yet. As his classmates watch with the tension of basketball fans hoping for a last-minute three-pointer, the boy's face tightens with concentration. The seconds tick by. When he finishes, he has hit 104 words per minute, four words over benchmark, and his personal best. Around him, the class erupts in cheers, and the slaps of high fives echo through the room.

This is Reading First.



A MOMENTOUS CHALLENGE

A decade ago, the state of Alabama began a great test to see whether an historically poor state with high numbers of illiterate adults could reinvent reading instruction in public schools to achieve 100% literacy. Five years into its own reading initiative, Alabama was one of the first three states to receive federal Reading First funds. The resulting synergy between the “home grown” Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) and the federally funded Reading First program could reshape the state’s future at a time when Governor Bob Riley, the State Board of Education, the State Legislature, the State Department of Education, and others see a literate citizenry as a prerequisite for advancing Alabama’s economic and cultural goals. The Governor campaigned for office on fully funding an overhaul of K–3 reading instruction, staking considerable political capital on an expensive initiative. “Alabama is at the cusp of change,” Riley says. “The one limiting factor is a world-class educational system. This will redefine Alabama for a generation.”

The early signs show that the faith—and the investment—are paying off. Today, schools that once taught fewer than one in five children to read are turning out whole classes of readers. Katherine Mitchell, who oversees Alabama’s Reading First program as the Assistant State Superintendent of Education for Reading, cites case after case where Alabama schools have moved their percentages of students reading at benchmark from the low 30s to the mid 80s. These anecdotal data have begun to be substantiated in state-level Reading First scores (see page 7). Some of the lowest-performing schools in the state are making educational progress that would have been unimaginable ten years ago. But as professionals in any state will attest, making changes of this nature in school culture is not easy.

Some of the lowest-performing schools in the state are making educational progress that would have been unimaginable ten years ago.

THE WAKE-UP CALL

When Reading First appeared in 2002 as part of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) education act, Alabama was engaged in its own battle to improve reading achievement. It was no secret that many Alabama students were finishing school unable to read. But in 1996, when the state adopted the Stanford Achievement Test and other norm-referenced tests (tests that highlight achievement relative to other students), the results caught most people by surprise: more than 100,000 Alabama students in grades 3–8 could not read.

An informal steering committee, chaired by Katherine Mitchell, then an education administrator with the Alabama Department of Education, coalesced rapidly to examine what Alabama needed in order to change course. A more formal panel followed, representing an array of stakeholders with differing philosophies and beliefs on how children should be taught to read. The 25-member Alabama Reading Panel agreed that the time for guesswork and instruction by intuition had come to an end and spent a year studying the scientific research on teaching children to read. After extensive discussion and debate, much of which echoed the arguments of the so-called “reading wars,” the Panel concluded that struggling readers benefited most from explicit, systematic instruction in early reading skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics. These conclusions mirrored many of those reached by the National Reading Panel several years later (see “Readings and Resources,” page 18.)

Alabama’s report, published in February 1998, spelled out 21 key reading themes and added a strong caveat that “effective reading instruction must be delivered by highly expert teachers who are familiar with the research and who have the knowledge, skills, and conditions necessary.” The Alabama Department of Education set out to prepare those teachers and create those conditions.

Its first step was the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), a voluntary immersion in scientifically based reading instruction strengthened by ongoing, exemplary professional development. By the time of Alabama’s first Reading First grant award in 2002, the state had already reached some 17,000 teachers through ARI and had a structure in place for

*The Alabama panel
agreed that the time
for guesswork and
instruction by intuition
had come to an end.*

continued improvement: engage whole schools in scientifically based reading instruction, offer teachers and principals continued support and professional development, monitor each school's and each student's progress, make adjustments as necessary, and celebrate success.

In effect, ARI tilled the soil for Reading First's more explicit and robust requirements and standards to take root, not only in schools receiving Reading First grants but in all K-3 schools. Mitchell recalls that the Alabama Department of Education used ARI to transfer Reading First precepts to all K-3 schools. Now, as the two programs work in tandem to share successful strategies, the state's legislators, parents, teachers, and students are beginning to believe that virtually all students can learn to read. In fact, as Alabama Education Department personnel hold discussions with legislators, debate policy with reluctant district superintendents, make their case to doubtful parents, train reading coaches, and observe changes in classroom instruction, it is clear that explicit, scientific reading instruction is not viewed as another educational fad that will come and go. This approach has become a way of life.

EARLY STRATEGIES

Katherine Mitchell set the bar high for schools showing interest in joining the first cohort of ARI schools in 1998. Schools had to agree to send no less than 85% of their faculty (including the principal) to a summer training, commit to change how they taught reading, and embrace the goal of 100% literacy. All 1,400 of Alabama's schools were invited to join. Seventy-six schools expressed interest, 26 formally applied, and 16 were chosen. The "Sweet Sixteen" are now seen by state and local educators as groundbreakers that led Alabama to a new frontier in reading instruction.

It was business, not governmental, support, however, that made the Sweet Sixteen experiment possible. When the

DR. KATHERINE MITCHELL, ASSISTANT STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION FOR READING

Calling No Child Left Behind "the best legislation we've ever had" because of Reading First, Dr. Mitchell brings an intense and personal sense of responsibility to her role as the state's pre-eminent reading emissary and the head of its Reading First program: "How many people do you know who have been able to realize their life's dream?"



“I’ve been a teacher for 32 years in this state. This is the best thing I’ve ever done.”

Alabama Legislature declined to fund the summer training, Caroline Novak—co-founder (in 1991) of the educational equity A+ Foundation—turned to the state’s business community and raised \$1.5 million to fund the Initiative. “It’s very important to have the business sector in there,” she said. “The major employers, for the most part, are part of our funding base. The business community has impacted this whole thing.”

It was clear to many educators, even that first summer, that the climate was right for a new approach. State Superintendent of Education Joseph B. Morton recalls an encounter during that first summer training: “A lady walked up to me. I could see her coming from afar, and I knew she had something on her mind. She got right up in my face, put her hands up on her hips, and she said, ‘I’m going to tell you one thing. I’ve been a teacher for 32 years in this state. This is the best thing I’ve ever done.’” At times, Morton says, the training had a flavor of an old-time revival meeting.

He stresses, however, that it took energy and leadership on several fronts to dissolve resistance to such a dramatic change in reading instruction. Some teachers were reluctant to buy into what they felt was a “lockstep” instructional program. Some district administrators remained skeptical about the state’s new strategies. Dr. Morton and his team found themselves continually countering reluctance as they promoted the principles embodied in ARI and Reading First.

Even schools that had volunteered to open their doors to change experienced “pretty significant growing pains,” Mitchell says. “The concept was so different from what we had done in the past, and it was overwhelming to completely change.” Some teachers left. Many who stayed complained, often vigorously. Beleaguered principals urged their faculties to have faith in the effort. And then the results started coming in. Children were decoding text more accurately. “He’s reading everything in sight,” one astonished parent reported about her son. Mitchell recalls other early signs of progress: Discipline referrals plummeted. Fifth graders who had failed to read began reading—and writing. Teachers who had reluctantly taught phonics and phonemic awareness changed their minds when they saw their students’ reading scores rising.

Jennifer Kendrick, today one of Alabama’s dynamic and motivational Reading First regional reading coaches, taught at one of the original Sweet Sixteen schools. The year before the ARI training, 46% of Kendrick’s students were performing at grade level. In the next year, nearly 70% had achieved grade level. Statewide, the following year,

ARI schools continued to outscore non-ARI schools. “It took about three years to really know the program worked,” says Sandra Ray, the Vice Chair of the State Board of Education. “In year one, we kept our fingers crossed; in year two, [as the state assumed the funding for ARI], we were breathing a bit easier; and in year three, we knew it worked.”

READING FIRST ARRIVES

Reading First makes grants to states and school districts to apply scientifically based reading instruction in kindergarten through grade three, targeting schools where student reading scores are low. Alabama has used Reading First to leverage many of the gains that the Alabama Reading Initiative had already put into motion: Reading First gave the state the opportunity to intensify its efforts and address problems at the lowest-performing schools. Today 36 districts—serving 93 schools—receive Reading First funding. While an ARI school typically receives some \$60,000 from the state, an Alabama Reading First school receives closer to \$200,000.

The state’s education officials had a clear idea of how they could use this infusion of Reading First money to strengthen and amplify their efforts, recalls Judy Stone, director of Alabama’s Reading First program: “All of those experiences with the reading initiative kind of told us what we needed to do.” They would build on what they had learned from ARI, learn more from Reading First, and interweave the lessons from both. They would intensify service to schools most in need and generate a consistent statewide approach to teaching reading in all schools.

At the outset, state Superintendent Morton dramatically focused the direction of Reading First by establishing the position of Assistant State Superintendent of Education for Reading (appointing Katherine Mitchell to the job), signaling the state’s strong commitment to reading improvement. (Few states have an assistant state superintendent of education position committed exclusively to reading.) Widely regarded as a motivating force behind both the ARI and the Alabama Reading First program, Mitchell has a reputation for setting high standards and for bridging philosophical and political divides. As far back as 1979, she was lobbying to change how Alabama taught reading.

As Assistant State Superintendent, Mitchell can be found on any given day meeting with a state senator, welcoming

Alabama has used Reading First to leverage many of the gains the Alabama Reading Initiative had already put into motion.

the newly assigned principal of a high-poverty school, or talking to the superintendent from a distant rural community. Today she oversees the implementation of—and interaction between—ARI and Reading First efforts, with Sherrill Parris continuing the day-to-day direction of ARI and Judy Stone, a former teacher, reading coach, and coach trainer, managing Alabama’s Reading First program.

FROM THE STATE TO THE STUDENT

Judy Stone is responsible for overseeing the development of training materials and programs for administrators, coaches, and teachers, and for structuring the system of professional development and coaching that allows Reading First to thrive. “I think what makes Reading First so powerful in our state,” she says, “is that in the past, we could provide these huge trainings to people but we never had the opportunity to continue with the professional development. And that’s what makes this process work, that ongoing assistance.”

The Reading First requirement of school-based reading coaches accelerated awareness that intensive, continuous support was essential. Coaches were not part of Alabama’s original vision for its reading initiative. But Alabama’s Department of Education realized in ARI’s first year that single-event, large-scale training sessions were not enough; teachers still struggled to translate what they had learned about effective teaching into their moment-to-moment interactions with students. Notes ARI Director Parris, “Research shows that the odds of having teachers change what they are doing in the classroom subsequent to professional development is increased by 90% if you add coaching to all the other levels of professional help.” Today more than a thousand reading coaches aid Alabama schools.

The Department of Education also recognized that coaches themselves needed to learn how to be effective, and a statewide coaching system has evolved—a hierarchy that provides continuous support to teachers, principals, and building coaches. This cascade of trainers forms a seamless connection from the state to the classroom. Two state department trainers convey the State’s messages and materials to a set of regional Reading First trainers. Those trainers, in turn, work in their regions with the reading coaches who then return to their schools to assist teachers. The main concepts that move through this system include information on scientifically based reading research, help in analyzing core programs, advice on interpreting and using data to drive instruction, and guidance in using intervention programs.

ALABAMA'S EARLY DATA ON READING FIRST

Understanding how Alabama implements and supports Reading First has value only if the program is making a measurable difference in the reading skills of Alabama's young students. Savvy state reading officials know that conclusive evidence of effectiveness will come only after a new program has been in practice, and systematically evaluated, for a number of years. Yet the public and even teachers want to see evidence of change almost immediately.

Because Alabama's Reading First program was first implemented in 2003–2004, assessment evidence from Alabama's first years of Reading First is only suggestive of its possible future success as a mature program, but the early signs are positive. Students in Reading First schools improved during the 2004–2005 school year and improved relative to their grade-level cohorts in the 2003–2004 school year.

Measuring the effect of Reading First in Alabama is complicated by the pre-existence of the Alabama Reading Initiative, which uses many of the scientifically based reading principles present in Reading First instruction. Alabama is so confident in its approach that the state has systematically introduced scientifically based principles statewide and "borrowed" concepts from Reading First to use in all K–3 programs. In fact, July 2006 marked a major milestone: After years of intensive training of cohorts of schools, every K–3 school in the state has been trained in scientifically based reading principles.

This fast implementation schedule precluded an experimental-design evaluation since there were no control or comparison schools without some exposure to scientifically based reading practices. So to evaluate the extent to which Alabama students are making reading progress, the state contracted for two separate evaluations. And their analyses agreed. Fall to Spring changes within grade levels and year-to-year growth across grade-level cohorts show that Reading First students are making good progress. Some highlights:

- Fall to Spring 2004–2005 DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) data indicate that at the end of first grade, 96% of students were at benchmark for phoneme segmentation fluency and 73% were at benchmark for oral reading fluency, compared with 67% and 56% in the Fall, respectively.
- Second and third graders made similar gains in oral reading fluency, improving from 43% at benchmark in the Fall to 67% at benchmark in the Spring (second grade) and from 38% at benchmark in the Fall to 63% at benchmark in the Spring (third grade).

Implementing scientifically based reading instruction for multiple years also seems to have positively affected cohorts of students. Focusing attention on eliminating non-proficiency, the state uses a weighted measure of the percent of students at high risk and at some risk as measured by DIBELS scores.

- Using this weighted measure of non-proficiency to assess grade-by-grade improvements shows that student non-proficiency was lower in the 2004–2005

school year than it had been the previous year. Kindergarten students finished the 2004–2005 year with lower non-proficiency than kindergarten students a year earlier—12% instead of 21%.

- Similarly, students in the first-, second-, and third-grade cohorts of 2004–2005 finished the year with lower nonproficiency than students in those grades a year earlier—17% instead of 21%, 23% instead of 28%, and 25% instead of 28%, respectively.

Total Reading scores from the Stanford Achievement Test also show positive cohort results across the two years for students in Reading First schools. The average Stanford Total Reading percentile rank for successive cohorts of grade 1 Reading First students increased from 40 to 46; the average percentile rank for cohorts of grade 2 students increased from 39.5 to 43; and average grade 3 percentile rank increased from 29 to 39.

Even with this solid improvement, however, state officials are not satisfied ... yet. They want every K–3 student to read on grade level and to translate that reading success into solid and sustained reading abilities in the upper grades.



“We put a lot of emphasis on the steps of planning,” says regional trainer Pam Lackey. “What is the first step? What is the outcome? Not just what are we going to do, but what do we want to accomplish?”

In a typical month, Reading First regional trainers offer seven or eight small-group training sessions, as well as follow-up visits, to about ten coaches in each region. Training takes place in small groups, Judy Stone says, because “we have learned that professional development in small groups is the only kind that really has much payoff.”

By the time this interconnected coaching process reaches the school, the coaches’ depth of content knowledge and interpersonal skills is considerable. Although being observed and supported by a coach takes some getting used to, most teachers come to appreciate it. “Before Reading First, I thought that when those doors closed, everybody was confident in what they were doing,” says Allison Kelley, coach trainer at Selma’s Southside Primary school. She soon discovered this was not the case. Today, she works side by side with teachers to model instruction, work through individual lessons, and help them find the best whole-group and small-group activities: “We don’t leave the teachers ‘out there,’” Kelley says.

Completing the coaching picture, 23 principal coaches help principals understand how to build a context of support for scientifically based reading instruction at the building level. As usual, skill development is carefully tailored for the audience: Principals learn how to protect the 90-minute reading block when making a master schedule, how to support the interaction between building coaches and teachers, how to budget for and select professional development activities to focus on important reading-instruction issues, and how to foster the relationship between building coaches and teachers.

SUPPORT FOR THE CORE PROGRAM

When Judy Stone and her colleagues looked at statewide K–3 DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) scores midway through the first year of Reading First, they noticed that five of Alabama’s top ten schools—high-poverty schools that had performed poorly in the past—were using a scientifically based core program, as required in

*Coaches work
alongside teachers
and principals offering
support, modeling,
encouragement, and a
sense of what’s possible.*

a Reading First grant. On reflection, Stone and her colleagues realized that “It wasn’t a particular scientifically based program that was important, it was that the teachers followed a sequence—it really is the sequence in a program, the system of a program more than anything else,” says Stone. “It’s the systematic instruction and professional development that was specific to that program.” In addition to training in how to sequence instruction, Stone adds, professional development focuses on how to deliver explicit skills instruction.

The Alabama Department of Education committed to providing intensive, program-specific professional development to all schools and brought representatives from every district together with representatives of core program publishers. District and Education Department representatives peppered the publishers with questions about the level and kind of support they could provide for their reading programs. “Reps who couldn’t answer our questions were sent home,” recalls Stone. She regards that exercise as one of the best things the Department has ever done. Intensive training in the core program (whether provided by the publisher, a university training center, or a professional technical assistance organization) is the most substantial investment the Department has made in professional development. Before, Stone says, the publishers had people “who could tell you what was in the program ... [like] what’s on the tapes, how many puppets you get.” But some companies couldn’t deliver more complete professional support on how to deliver the scope and sequence of their programs.

Although the program is still in its formative years, Reading First gains have already eclipsed ARI results and Reading First schools continue to make the greatest gains in the state (see page 7 for details). Officials at the Alabama Department of Education theorize that a major reason for this is that Reading First requires the use of scientifically based core programs, but the state cannot impose or limit the programs non-Reading First schools use to teach reading. As a result of several factors—strong encouragement from the state, visits to demonstration schools,

DR. JOSEPH B. MORTON, STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION

Born, raised, and educated in Alabama, Dr. Joe Morton sees himself as a cheerleader. “If you ask me how we generate enthusiasm for how to teach children to read, and build support in the Legislature, I can answer that.”





“I realized,”
concedes one teacher,
“that I had to teach
not what I liked to
teach but what my
students needed.”

and the test results themselves—the benefits of using scientifically based programs have rippled throughout the state education system. More schools and districts are choosing to use rigorous, scientifically based reading programs, and more schools have one or more reading coaches. More teachers are learning how to teach reading concepts explicitly. This year, every K–3 school will have its own reading coach, and every Reading First school will have two coaches.

Further, Reading First’s requirements for the use of data to guide instruction have prompted more Alabama teachers and principals to collect data on their students’ progress and to use those data to modify instruction. Each year, new cadres of teachers, principals, and coaches receive ongoing, intense professional development in data use. In short, while Alabama was ahead of the game nationally in bringing scientifically based reading instruction to its schools, Reading First has helped the state set its sights higher.

This year, every K–3 school will have its own reading coach, and every Reading First school will have two coaches.

MEASURING MASTERY

Following the model set by Reading First, Alabama uses different assessments for different purposes, such as screening, progress monitoring, and measuring achievement. Alabama moved to use the DIBELS assessment statewide, testing student achievement three times a year. Schools use a range of assessments—the norm-referenced Stanford Achievement Tests (9 and 10), Alabama’s own criterion-referenced Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test (ARMT), program-specific assessments, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, and the Woodcock-Johnson measures, says Mike Lenhart, Assistant Superintendent of Montgomery County Schools. “We’re not just giving independent tests. They’re all linked. They all have a purpose, and the correlation of all those tests is what’s important,” he says, because “that will help you get very prescriptive about what you do for each student.”

These assessment techniques have opened the eyes of educators who have worked in Alabama schools for decades. They see that teachers must identify and address each student’s individual needs. Explains Butler County reading coach Doris Peagler, “We progress monitor at-risk students weekly, some bi-weekly, but we progress monitor

every child once a month.” Patricia Redd, a principal coach, says that in a data meeting, “We want the principal to cover the DIBELS data with the team of teachers, and then we want the reading coaches to piggyback and have the teachers develop some instructional strategies to use with those children that are not making the progress they need to make.” Reading Coach Allison Kelley carries her “bible” of student data with her throughout the school day so she knows at any given moment which students—they change constantly—need help.

Coach and teacher meetings are now regular features in Butler County and are known as GLAD meetings—Grade Level Assessment Discussions. Elsewhere such meetings are called “glow and grow”—affirmations of work well done and suggestions for teacher improvements, says principal coach Jill Eaton. Interactions like these allow teachers, coaches, and principals to “pinpoint which kids are making progress, which ones are not, and more importantly, what to do for the ones who were not,” says Stone.

CONSTANT RE-EVALUATION—AND PATIENCE

Judy Stone conceives her role as both minder and critic of the state Reading First plan: “I have to keep in mind what our state plan looks like. I have to look at what’s going on in each of the schools and the local education agencies to some degree, but my major focus needs to be on how that is playing out with what we said was going to happen.” Just as important, she says, is deciding whether what is happening is “what *needs* to happen, because we have different knowledge now.”

The Alabama State Department of Education is “almost totally non-defensive about bad news,” says Ed Moscovitch, who has evaluated ARI several times. Open to constant reinvention, the Department continues to examine and rectify its failures and strengthen its successes. The most recent development has been a new way to leverage learning by bringing teachers, principals, and coaches to demonstration training sessions where they can observe other teachers working with students. The great value, says Tonya Chesnut, a principal coach, is that educators can “actually see what

*Assessment techniques
have opened the eyes
of educators who have
worked in Alabama
schools for decades.*

they've been taught. I have not encountered a setting where teachers have not implemented what they observed."

As Alabama moves forward with confidence and a commitment to make changes to the Reading First program along the way, Governor Bob Riley sees the state at a "tipping point" in reading. "We have convinced the Legislature to spend money on every K-3 school. Now we have to move the numbers in the right direction. We can't be resigned to the bottom tenth of the nation." Alabama has put its energy, focus, and dollars into a K-3 prevention model; educators and policymakers next expect to see improvements in reading achievement beyond third grade. All eyes seem to be looking ahead to state test results in the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years. Says the Governor, that's when legislators and taxpayers will be expecting to see substantial increases in students' reading abilities.

All involved acknowledge that both ARI and Reading First are expensive to implement and maintain. Many of the core programs have annual licensing fees. Program-specific professional development, though vital, is expensive. But the consensus among Alabama's educators is that wherever schools get their support—from the state through ARI or from the federal government through Reading First (and in some schools, from both)—there is strength in addressing reading instruction with a successful teaching and professional development plan. Many teachers have adopted radically new stances. "I realized," concedes one teacher, "that I had to teach not what I liked to teach but what my students needed."

Open to constant reinvention, the Alabama Department of Education continues to examine and rectify its failures, and strengthen its successes.

JUDY STONE, ALABAMA READING FIRST DIRECTOR

Once a reading teacher and a reading coach in rural Alabama, Stone directs Reading First in Alabama and drives its most critical support system: professional development. "Principals don't hesitate to pick up the phone and say 'I need help with this.' We have the kind of relationship with our districts and schools that typically a state department doesn't have."





The students know
what is happening.

Benchmarks,
assessments, and goals
are not mysteries.

Students are keenly
aware of their
classroom's current
status and how far the
students need to come
to reach those goals.

CELEBRATING

Celebration without achievement can be an excuse for not trying harder. On the other hand, achievement without celebration is a lost opportunity for taking on higher challenges. Alabama's educators know how to take time to honor success: If progress toward benchmarks is the goal, then reaching the goal is a reason to celebrate.

Celebration has a cultural component, too, and Reading First seems to have become infused into the educational culture of the state. At State Board of Education meetings, Reading First teachers, coaches, and administrators receive public commendations for their progress. At training sessions, coaches are reminded to take stock of forward momentum. In classrooms, teachers take time to acknowledge student success. Students know what is happening—benchmarks, assessments, and goals are not mysteries. Students are keenly aware of their classroom's current status and how far the students need to come to reach those goals, explain Wanda Norris and Doris Peagler, Reading First coaches at the W.O. Parmer School.

When a classroom hits its benchmark at Parmer, an announcement goes out over the intercom and the reading coaches visit classrooms with a treasure chest of low-cost, high-fun toys and trinkets. Cartoon characters Spider-Man and Mr. Fantastic have visited the school to encourage students to work hard and reach their end-of-the-year benchmarks. Last year, says Norris, W.O. Parmer held a carnival when the school met its annual goal of 85% reading at grade level. Children, teachers, parents, neighbors, and others were seen defying gravity in the Moon Walk, and savoring snow cones and cotton candy. Business owners, clubs, and civic organizations joined the celebration by helping to fund the carnival.

Whether it's a single child surpassing a benchmark, an entire school throwing a party because the year's goals have been met, or the highest levels of state educational leadership saying thank you to successful reading educators, Alabama celebrates its progress toward historic expectations of literacy and reading achievement. The stakes—and the hopes—are high.

A TIMELINE FOR CHANGING READING INSTRUCTION IN ALABAMA

1997

- Alabama State Department of Education convenes an informal ten-member committee to talk about poor test results and consider next steps.
- Department forms the Alabama Reading Panel of 25 to study reading research.

1998

- Panel identifies instructional principles and writes two documents to guide reading improvement.
- Alabama Legislature turns down request for \$1.5 million to establish first set of ARI schools. A+ Foundation steps in and raises the necessary funds from the business community.
- Competition held to identify the first 16 ARI schools—the “Sweet Sixteen.”
- State Department of Education develops materials for 15-day training.
- Training held for first ARI schools.
- First ARI schools begin their work using the new instructional guidelines.

1999

- Second set of ARI schools (65) identified.
- Ten-day training held for second set of ARI schools.
- Legislature funds ARI at \$6 million.
- Third set of ARI schools—186—identified.

2000

- Ten-day training held for third set of ARI schools.
- Legislature funds ARI at \$10 million.
- Fourth set of ARI schools—156—identified (now 423 ARI schools total).

2001

- Ten-day training held for fourth set of ARI schools.
- Legislature funds ARI at \$11.3 million. However, funding does not keep up with the number of ARI schools. State Department of Education freezes number of ARI schools at 423.



THE ALABAMA STATE PERSPECTIVE: EIGHT THEMES

The philosophies, policy decisions, and actions of Alabama’s State Department of Education suggest eight themes that have led to the successful implementation of Reading First and, more broadly, scientifically based reading principles to every K–3 classroom in the state.

Getting an early start. Alabama began examining weaknesses in reading instruction well before the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and was poised to use Reading First to good effect and to broaden its earlier efforts.

Leading with courage and conviction. A reading coach strives to convince a teacher to change her methods. The Assistant State Superintendent of Education for Reading makes the case to a District Superintendent that a radical change in reading instruction must take place if all students are to become readers. Many in Alabama—reaching into their deepest reserves of skill, courage, and powers of motivation, and buoyed by scientific research—are leading others to believe that a new way of teaching reading is worth the time, the energy, and the money.

Committing the necessary resources and energy. The state Legislature has dedicated progressively larger amounts of money, and by Fall 2006 the State Department of Education will have trained every K–3 school in scientifically based reading, with Reading First providing guidance, examples, and motivation. Political leaders, state and district administrators, coaches, teachers, and children approach their reading mission with candor, mutual support, tireless energy, and optimism.



Providing intense professional development. Without question, the most extraordinary aspect of Alabama’s Reading First and Reading Initiative efforts has been a comprehensive, coherent professional development system—and the realization that professional development is not a one-shot event. It is a critical element within the organization: a program-sustaining obligation.

Using data to guide the way. NCLB and Reading First require the disaggregation of achievement data as well as ongoing progress monitoring, and Alabama has complied with enthusiasm. Teachers talk excitedly about weekly meetings with coaches where each child’s growth is checked, discussed, and addressed. Principals meet with teachers and coaches to monitor changes in test scores over time. And state leaders—legislators, the Governor’s staff, and the State Board of Education—keep a keen eye on annual testing results, looking for steady, upward trends.

Thinking scientifically: Changing the culture of teaching. A visitor to the Alabama State Department of Education, or to an Alabama Reading First school, feels a strong sense of dedication to the belief that every boy and girl can be a grade-level reader. Most educators who were once doubtful about the potential of Reading First and scientifically based reading research now think of the approach as instructional doctrine.

Adapting the plan: Does it still make sense? As Alabama’s educators have embraced the tenets of scientifically based reading instruction, they continue to seek ways to improve or rethink how the Reading First program is delivered and evaluated.

Celebrating. When students make progress, students, teachers, and administrators celebrate—in part to acknowledge the hard work of the past, and in part to energize themselves for the hard work that still lies ahead.

2002

- The No Child Left Behind act signed into law.
- Legislature funds ARI at \$12.5 million.
- Alabama receives first Reading First grant of \$15.5 million. Department of Education funds 74 Alabama Reading First schools.
- State Superintendent of Schools Joe Morton creates the position of Assistant State Superintendent of Education for Reading.
- Despite ARI’s freeze, 27 new schools ask the state to use local money for training and reading coaches.

2003

- Legislature funds ARI at \$12.5 million.
- Reading First funding increases to \$17 million.
- With ARI freeze still on, 35 additional schools offer to use local money for training and coaching.

2004

- Twenty-six more schools ask the state if they may use local funds for training and coaching support.
- First Alabama Reading Academy held for both ARI and Reading First schools.
- Legislature funds ARI at \$40 million; Reading First funding stays steady at \$17 million.
- Ten new local education agencies become eligible for Reading First funding; 18 new Reading First schools funded in those districts.

2005

- Second Alabama Reading Academy held for all ARI and Reading First schools.
- Legislature funds ARI at \$56 million. There are 753 ARI schools and 93 Reading First schools. Eighty-three of those 93 are also ARI-funded.

2006

- The final 146 schools with K–3 grades will be trained as ARI schools. By this point, all 899 K–3 schools will be ARI-trained. Of these, 93 will also be Reading First schools.

READINGS AND RESOURCES

Alabama State Department of Education

www.alsde.edu/html/home.asp

U.S. Department of Education Reading First homepage

www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst

Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read

www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/k-3.html

A Child Becomes a Reader: Proven Ideas for Parents From Research—Kindergarten through Grade 3

www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/k-3.html

Using Research and Reason in Education

www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/k-3.html

What is Scientifically Based Research?

www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/k-3.html

National Reading Panel Report

<http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org>

U.S. Department of Education No Child Left Behind Act

www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml

Reading First Support

www.readingfirstsupport.us

Leading for Reading Success: An Introductory Guide for Reading First Coaches

www.readingfirstsupport.us/default.asp?article_id=10

Tips for Designing a High Quality Professional Development Program

www.readingfirstsupport.us/default.asp?article_id=10

A Principal's Guide to Intensive Reading Interventions for Struggling Readers in Reading First Schools

www.readingfirstsupport.us/default.asp?article_id=10

THANK YOU

The RMC publication team appreciates the guidance, insights, and candor of the people who helped us write this booklet:

The students, teachers, reading coaches, principals, and district administrators at the W.O. Parmer, Chisholm, Southside Primary, and Johnson elementary schools

Governor Bob Riley, Governor of Alabama
Sandra Ray, Vice Chair, Alabama State Board of Education
Dr. Joseph Morton, Alabama State Superintendent of Education
Dr. Katherine Mitchell, Alabama Assistant State Superintendent of Education for Reading
Judith Stone, Alabama Reading First Director
Sherrill Parris, Alabama Reading Initiative Director
Carol Belcher, Alabama Reading First Manager
Pam Lackey, Alabama Reading First Coach Trainer
Gina Looney, Alabama Reading First Coach Trainer

Pam Higgins, Allison Kelley, Wanda Norris, Kim Pair, Doris Peagler, Luella Smith, and Fran Spivey: Reading Coaches

Jennifer Boykin, Vicki Dill, Jennifer Kendrick, Holly Morgan, and Kelly Pettit: Reading Coach Trainers
Martha Barber, Tonya Chestnut, Patricia Corbett, Jill Eaton, Becky Kundberg, Candy Mahaffey, Patricia Redd, and Susan Thornton: Principal Coach Trainers

Mike Lenhart and Connie Mizelle, District Staff, Montgomery County
Mike Looney, Superintendent of Schools, Butler County
Gerry Adair, District Staff, Butler County
Laura Adams, Carole Teague, Melanie Wright: School Principals
Caroline Novak, President and Co-Founder of the A+ Foundation
Ed Moscovitch, Cape Ann Economics, Program Evaluator

Research, Editorial, and Design Team
C. Ralph Adler, Project Co-Director, Writer, Site Visitor
Elizabeth Goldman, Writer, Site Visitor
Wendy J. Graham, Site Visitor
Mustapha Khan, Photographer
Robert Kozman, Production
Dr. John Mullens, Project Co-Director, Writer, Site Visitor
Lisa T. Noonis, Graphic Designer

This publication was created by RMC Research Corporation under contract ED04CO041 with the U.S. Department of Education. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, or enterprise in this publication is intended or should be inferred.

Download PDF or HTML files of this booklet at www.readingfirstsupport.us.



RMC Research Corporation
1000 Market Street, Building 2
Portsmouth, NH 03801