

# The Tale of the Struggling Reader

All too often, the life story of the struggling reader, especially the child from disadvantaged circumstances, is a heartbreaking one.

Often not identified as at-risk until third-grade high-stakes testing, stigmatized by classroom pull-out programs, given one-size-fits-all remediation, and faced with the possibility of retention, the struggling reader must then continually play catch-up in all subject areas as reading becomes increasingly central to learning.

According to The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *2013 Early Warning Confirmed: A Research Update on Third-Grade Reading*, that struggling reader not proficient by the end of third grade is four times more likely to drop out of high school than the strong reader, as the achievement gap broadens through school. For poor and minority students, risks are higher: 26 percent of those who face the "double jeopardy" of poverty and low reading proficiency fail to earn high school diplomas, and Hispanic and African American children who lack proficiency by third grade are twice as likely to drop out of school as their white counterparts.

The ripple effects of low literacy continue beyond the school years. The American Literacy Council tells us two-thirds of students still struggling by the end of fourth grade will end up in jail or on welfare. The drop-out student who is employed will earn 48 percent less than the graduate and experience low-income related health issues, straining government and community social service budgets.

The hopeful news is that this troubling narrative of the struggling reader need not play out for today's learners. With the right support and leadership, schools can reverse this trajectory, and, as key instructional leader, the principal plays a primary role in that.

The challenge, say organizations such as the Literacy Collaborative at The Ohio State University, lies in equipping school leaders with the skills and knowledge they need to provide informed support and instructional feedback to teachers. Literacy Collaborative executive director Jason Hillman, a former NAESP National Distinguished Principal who turned a failing Wyoming school into a top state performer, says principals must both create the conditions for schoolwide literacy success as well as develop their own literacy knowledge base.

The first priority, he says, is for principals to create a school culture where all adults are ongoing learners. To



do so requires ensuring that time is built in for teachers to meet regularly in professional learning communities, and participating in these collaborations as much as possible. On the personal knowledge development level, Hillman says principal training in interactive read-alouds,

writing practices, guided reading, and similar skills, which are offered by the Literacy Collaborative and other organizations, are key to helping school leaders make informed assessments of literacy instruction in their schools.

The Harvard Graduate School of Education's PreK-3 Initiative also provides very specific guidance to principals on children's literacy development through its 2012 Lead for Literacy series. Among the key actions principals must take, it says, are designing programs to achieve measurable, rather than just scalable, impact; providing students the right dosage, or amount of time on task, to improve literacy skills; and ensuring programs are implemented with efficacy. It also strongly recommends very early assessment, identification, and intervention—preferably within the earliest years of life—as prevention remains much more effective and affordable than remediation. Like the Literacy Collaborative, it emphasizes the need for school leaders to "deeply understand" what good literacy instruction looks like.

Breaking down traditional silos between reading class and content area instruction to make all educators responsible for student literacy is another important shift in school

culture being spearheaded by principals, say experts like Marcie Craig Post, executive director of the International Literacy Foundation, formerly the International Reading Association. Post says the organization's recent name change reflects the transitioning roles of its membership who, more and more, say strapped budgets mean they no longer have the luxury of teaching

only reading and are now being asked to teach in content areas. Teachers of science, math, and other subjects are now taking on the challenge of integrating literacy into their curricula, she says, citing new practices from organizations such as the National Science Teachers Association, which is increasingly focusing conference offerings and resources on literacy instruction for members.

When it comes to the struggling reader, I like to envision a new and different life story than the sad one traced above. A child enters preschool doors—perhaps with odds stacked against him—and he is welcomed and supported academically and emotionally; he achieves; he graduates high school with his peers; he goes on to college or a career; and he enjoys the good health and active citizenship that is his right and due. As school leaders, we have the power to write this new story for him—and his peers. ■

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