

## Maryland's Missed Opportunities to Help Struggling Readers

### *Early, Targeted Interventions and Monitoring Needed*

#### Executive Summary

Many Maryland schools wait too long to provide interventions for struggling young readers. Students in kindergarten, first and second grades should receive reading instruction tailored to their individual level of proficiency. Struggling students should receive interventions quickly and be monitored for further intervention needs. Maryland schools should follow the research-based Response to Intervention and tiered intervention approaches to close the achievement gap and ensure every student can read by third grade.

#### Background

Although student performance on state assessments has improved, Maryland students still perform poorly on more rigorous national assessments. Two of every three Maryland fourth graders failed the reading achievement portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Maryland fourth graders' overall achievement on the NAEP ranks 26<sup>th</sup> in the nation.<sup>1</sup>

Failure to identify and respond to reading problems in the early grades may play a major role in Maryland's poor test results. Quick, simple assessments in kindergarten and first grade can predict later reading problems with high accuracy and proven interventions can help students get back on track.<sup>2</sup> But the evidence suggests that too few schools are conducting these screenings and supporting students based on the results.

#### Findings

Students succeed when schools regularly assess all students and provide increasing levels of support for struggling learners – an approach known as Response to Intervention (RtI) or tiered intervention.

#### *Universal Intervention – Tier 1*

The first level of intervention is to provide all students with a developmentally appropriate core curriculum that is tailored to individual student needs (known as differentiated instruction). Ongoing, frequent assessments like daily classroom quizzes give teachers and students quick feedback on student learning. In addition, all students should be screened at least twice a year to identify risk for reading problems and other difficulties. This “benchmark” assessment should be closely linked to state or local learning standards.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Targeted Group Intervention – Tier 2*

If students fail to meet a screening benchmark, they should immediately receive targeted group interventions. Intervention for reading problems should be research-based and include daily, small group sessions of “intensive, systematic instruction on up to three foundational reading skills.”<sup>4</sup> Many practitioners recommend daily or weekly assessments of Tier 2 students' progress. At a minimum, students should be monitored at least once a month to determine whether more intensive intervention is needed.

#### *Intensive, Individual Intervention – Tier 3*

Students who fail to make progress with small group instruction should receive daily, intensive individual instruction “that promotes the development of various components of reading proficiency.”<sup>5</sup> School-based decision making teams can decide what interventions are appropriate and how long they should last.

<sup>1</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress. 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Buzzy Hettleman, The Abell Foundation, *The Invisible Dyslexics: How the Public School Systems in Baltimore and Elsewhere Discriminate Against Poor Children in the Diagnosis and Treatment of Early Reading Difficulties* (Feb. 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Gersten, R. et al, Institute of Education Sciences, *Assisting students struggling with reading: Response to Intervention and multi-tier intervention for reading in the primary grades. A practice guide* (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> Id.



### *Reading-Specific Interventions*

Response to Intervention and tiered intervention can be used for any subject but are especially useful for reading. Top-ranked beginning reading interventions include the following common elements:

- Begin in kindergarten or first grade;
- Daily, big blocks of time for reading;
- Mix of whole class and small group activities and instruction;
- Initial groups based on norm-referenced test;
- Regular quizzes – pre- and post-test;
- Frequent regroupings of students based on formative assessments;
- Teachers monitor progress regularly;
- System for extra intervention;
- Frequent student recognition; and
- Peer approaches.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Best Practices in Action**

##### **Washington County and Performance Matters**

On any given day, a teacher at Washington County's Salem Avenue Elementary can access student results from the Maryland School Assessments, daily mini quizzes, unit tests and bigger "benchmark" assessments, as well as the student's reading level. Armed with this data from the County's "Performance Matters" system, teachers and Student Achievement Specialists can quickly identify students who are falling behind. Students can be referred to group or individual interventions and teachers can find colleagues who were more successful in presenting a given objective. This countywide data management system allows teachers and administrators to know how each student, teacher and subgroup is performing, long before standardized test results arrive the next summer. Early reading problems can be identified in days instead of years and appropriately targeted, research-based interventions begin immediately.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Institute for Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse *Beginning Reading* (Aug. 2007). Programs reviewed had "potentially positive" or "positive" effects in general reading achievement or at least two domains.

<sup>7</sup> School visit and interviews with Superintendent Betty Morgan, school principal Tom Garner and Student Achievement Specialist Tiffany Tresler (Mar. 2009).

#### **Best Practices in Action** **Baltimore City and Project Early ID**

This Baltimore City pilot project uses a Response to Intervention approach to identify and intervene with low-performing students in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade in two Title I elementary schools. Project Early ID classes receive a core language / literacy development program, coupled with targeted, research-based intervention for students who need help to reach grade level. Despite high concentrations of at-risk students in need of intervention, every Cohort I student who received Early ID intervention starting in pre-K was able to achieve grade level literacy benchmarks at the end of first grade. Cohort I also had a reduction in special education placements and grade retention.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Maryland schools administer the Work Sampling System (WSS) school readiness assessment to all kindergarten students—an important first step in identifying reading difficulties. Unfortunately, many teachers do not use WSS results to guide their instruction and provide extra supports for students.<sup>9</sup>

State and local efforts are also underway to improve early literacy. The Maryland State Department of Education issued a framework for tiered instruction in 2008.<sup>10</sup> At the local level, the Baltimore City Public School System opened an Office of Literacy and created new unit assessments for schools using Open Court Reading materials. Students in these schools are now screened three to five times a year and referred for intervention as needed.<sup>11</sup>

Maryland's poor reading test results, however, suggest that too few schools are fully implementing research-based screenings and interventions. Advocates for Children and Youth recommends that all Maryland schools, especially those serving low-income, at-risk students, follow a tiered instructional approach that frequently monitors student progress and provides immediate interventions to struggling students.

<sup>8</sup> Project Early ID, *Something to Crow About! Cohort 1: Three-Year Summary*.

<sup>9</sup> Hettleman (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Maryland State Department of Education, *A Tiered Instructional Approach to Support Achievement for all Students: Maryland's Response to Intervention Framework* (June 2008)

<sup>11</sup> Baltimore City Public School System, *Master Plan 2006-2008*.