Broadening the Sphere of Influence: Reading Recovery as Part of One District's Comprehensive Intervention Approach

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The Long Beach Story

The story of the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) Intensive Intervention Model spans more than a decade. It illustrates how the interdependence between central office leaders and school leaders can be used to accelerate teacher skill development and confidence, build collective efficacy, and increase rates of student success.

Even after a 19-year commitment to maintaining a robust district Reading Recovery® program, the realization that Reading Recovery was having limited reach beyond the students it served created enough dissonance among LBUSD leaders to consider methods for broader impact. Did we want every classroom to be a place where a highly skilled teacher could deliver high-quality first teaching? Yes. Did we want every classroom to be a place where guided reading was implemented based upon Clay's literacy processing theory? Yes. Did we want every school to have a system of intervention that moved Reading Recovery from a stand-alone program to an integrated part of a response to intervention (RTI) system? Yes. And we believed that our Reading Recovery staff had the expertise, experience, and tenacity to support the implementation of an intervention system that broadened the impact of their work in schools.

When reading about efforts to improve outcomes for students in urban school systems, it will be no surprise to learn that many efforts do not reach their potential because there is a lack of alignment between central office systems and the efforts of leaders and teachers in schools (Chubb & Moe,1990; Malen, Ogwaa, & Kranz,1990; Ravitch & Viterrit,1997). While central office staff and school staff are simultaneously working as hard as they can, their efforts do not support one another. According to a Wallace Foundation study (2010) on central office transformation, "...teaching and learning improvements at single schools and multiple schools depend not only on what happens in schools but on how school district central offices create and implement supports for change," (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, p. 5). It is with this research in mind that LBUSD has sought to change the implementation outcomes for students through its Intensive Intervention Model.

Based on our experiences, we believe that every district committed to changing the dynamic between central office and schools in service to students has the power to do so. With a shared vision for student success,

As literacy coaches, Reading Recovery teachers work with all K–2 teachers at a school site on early literacy teaching and learning, with special emphasis on guided reading. These coaches work daily in classrooms with their assigned teachers, like this kindergarten group.

central office and school-based roles exist that complement one another and help create a culture of shared accountability and greater opportunity for student success.

The Intensive Intervention Model was developed after many years of individual LBUSD schools implementing Reading Recovery as an intervention for their students. In fact, 6,527 students were served over the course of 19 years prior to the implementation of the model. In support of schools, the LBUSD maintained its own Reading Recovery training center, staffed with a Reading Recovery teacher leader. During this same period of time, elementary school principals and support staff (i.e., counselors and psychologists) were trained in the development and use of RTI systems. Many other factors also had an influence on student achievement in the years leading up to the implementation of the Intensive Intervention Model and should be considered context for understanding the current chapter of the story. Most notably, LBUSD has long focused on high-quality first teaching, balanced literacy including guided reading, and high-quality job embedded professional development.

All of these aspects of district efforts were used to inform what became the Intensive Intervention Model.

LBUSD serves approximately 75,000 students across 54 elementary and K–8 schools, 15 middle schools, and 13 high schools. Currently the third largest district in California, the district's students speak more than 40 different languages and approximately 20% of the students are English learners. Like many urban districts, a high percentage of students (69%) in Long Beach face the challenges associated with living in poverty.

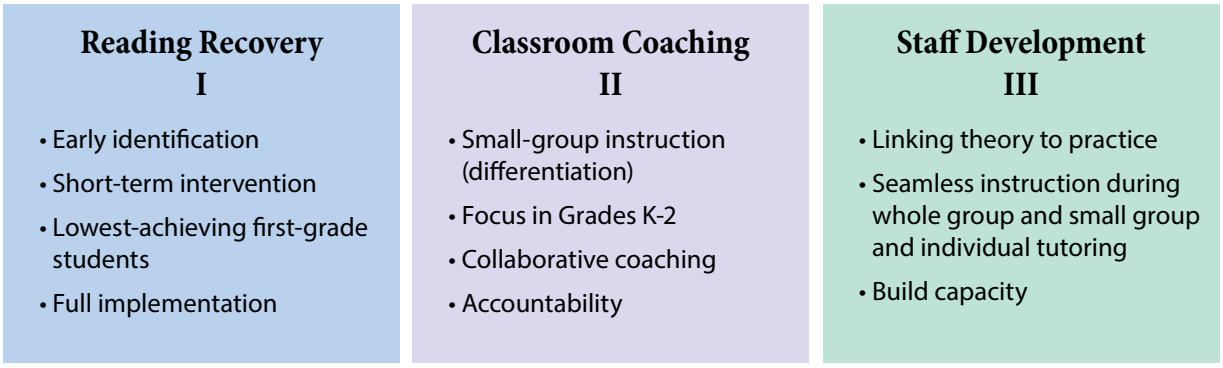
These demographic factors contributed to the district's decision to develop an Intensive Intervention Model as it strived to meet the needs of all students by maximizing the use of supplemental funds (e.g., Title I) during a budget crisis and building a model that it could replicate in different schools. In addition, since rates of student improvement varied across schools, the district desired to create a model that would specifically target and accelerate the rate of improvement in its highest need schools.

The model emerged in a district where the organizational culture can be described as one of continuous improvement that includes the regular collection and analysis of data, learning from one another across schools, collaboration between central office and schools, and a system of accountability that incorporates all stakeholders in monitoring the success of its work.

The Intensive Intervention Model includes three pillars summarized in Figure 1. Each pillar is considered critical to the model's success. While individually the components will likely be familiar to many literacy educators, what may be different than other intervention approaches is the implementation of the three pillars in concert with one another. In its full use, the model is designed to positively impact student success across K–2 classrooms, while building the capacity of K–2 teachers to meet their students' needs.

Coordination of services within and across the three pillars is essential to the success of the Intensive Intervention Model. Without it, all stakeholders are working in isolation and not coordinating their efforts to build a comprehensive literacy system. In the LBUSD model, it is the coordination of services, the commitment to communication, and the acknowledge-

Figure 1. Three Pillars of LBUSD's Intensive Intervention Model



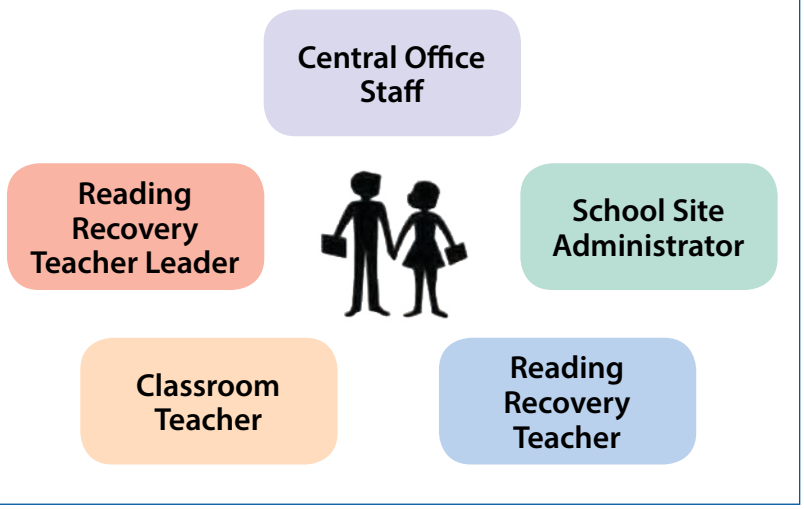
ment that "we all have a job to do" that have led to the model's success. Each role (central office and school site) involved in implementing this model is summarized in Figure 2 and will be explained further.

Central Office Leadership

In order for all three pillars of the Intensive Intervention Model to be successful, central office leaders must play a crucial role. The support of the LBUSD superintendent, through allocation of funds and support of the vision, was paramount to this effort. The deputy superintendent of schools, who oversees early childhood efforts in the district, supports the alignment between preschool and the early elementary grades, as well as advocates for early intervention. She is actively involved in all aspects of the model, including serving as the district Reading Recovery site coordinator. Active involvement includes regular visits to Intensive Intervention sites, collaboration with the teacher leader, and analysis of program data in order to make informed decisions.

The office tasked with supervising elementary schools provides strategic support and input about the implementation of the Intensive Intervention Model. The assistant superintendent of elementary schools regularly participates in site walkthroughs and Reading Recovery principals' meetings and facilitates communication across the division. All of these efforts are coordinated through ongoing communication and regular opportunities to meet and share ideas.

Figure 2. Key Players for a Shared Vision in LBUSD



The Role of School Principal

In the LBUSD Intensive Intervention Model, the site principal acts as an accelerant to the success of the model. Building on the expectation that principals are instructional leaders, the school principal provides formal and informal feedback to both classroom teachers and coaches, closely monitors implementation efforts, and seeks observational data to use in planning professional development with the team. The principal connects the learning that is taking place within the intervention model to the professional learning of the staff at large and readily integrates the model as a component of their school action plans and improvement efforts. Principals who have experienced the model at their schools report tremendous growth in their own working knowledge around early literacy, enabling them to label effective early learning and intervention practices and to advocate for early intervention actions on their campuses. It is the school principal who ensures that this model becomes an integral part of the fabric of the school.

The Role of the Reading Recovery Teacher Leader

The role of the Reading Recovery teacher leader is multifaceted and goes beyond the coordination and implementation of the three pillars. The teacher leader's expertise and experience with early literacy teaching and learning are valued and utilized in the district at large. The teacher leader attends and participates in ongoing professional development as an affiliated site with the Saint Mary's College of California University Training Center. Apart from providing support, coaching, and training of Reading Recovery teachers, the teacher leader develops those Reading Recovery-trained professionals as literacy coaches and early literacy staff developers. This endeavor takes time and on-going training and coaching.

During training sessions, the literacy coaches have opportunities to collaborate, work through challenging issues at their school sites, study and use common coaching and staff development resources, and provide feedback on how to grow and improve the coaching and staff development components of the Intensive Intervention Model. As Askew, Pinnell, and Scharer (2014) state, "An effective comprehensive literacy system requires a high level of expertise among educators within the school. When children struggle with some aspect of learning, the teachers most expert in those areas should provide the intervention service" (p. 24). Training sessions with literacy coaches help to develop this expertise.

Two to three times a year, the teacher leader also provides early literacy training for central office staff and school site administrators, aligned with teacher learning. In addition to the content learning, these meetings provide opportunities for central office staff, principals, and assistant principals to learn from each other, share ideas and resources, and collectively move forward in building a comprehensive literacy system at school sites and within the district.

Bringing school site administrators and central office staff into the implementation of the model was another critical decision that helped build, grow, and strengthen the Intensive Intervention Model, as illustrated by coaching walk-throughs. Three times a year, central office staff, school site administrators, and the teacher leader observe the coaching component of the model in action. The coaching walk-throughs begin with a briefing conducted by the coaches who share the work they implement with assigned classroom teachers. Classroom observations follow this briefing, and the walk-through concludes with a debriefing by all participants. The classroom observations are focused on the coaching in action in a small group instructional setting. The debriefing portion of coaching walk-throughs allows all participants to share insights, ask questions, and suggest possible next steps to move their work forward. The coaching walk-throughs have also added a level of accountability for all participants.

Central office staff, school site administrators, and the teacher leader observe the coaching component of the model in action three times a year. After a briefing of work being done with the classroom teacher and a walk-through, participants gather for a coaching conversation. Here, the literacy coach, classroom teacher, site principal, and assistant superintendent for elementary schools discuss their observations after a guided reading lesson.

Developing strong relationships and building trust among all stakeholders provide authentic opportunities to be vulnerable and transparent — and to take risks. Continuous improvement could not happen at an accelerated rate without the variables mentioned previously.

The use of data is an integral part of measuring our individual and collective work on improving early literacy teaching and learning at school sites and within our district. The teacher leader takes on the task of analyzing site, district, and state data for literacy growth for all students. For example, after careful analysis of Observation Survey tasks at the highest needs schools, Concepts About Print scores were noted as lagging. It was discovered that shared reading and interactive writing were not being used consistently, if at all. Training and coaching were provided to improve and remedy the situation. Across the Intensive Intervention Model, data is reviewed regularly to inform, improve, and refine the collective work of building a comprehensive literacy system at school sites and within our district.

The Role of the Reading Recovery Teacher/Literacy Coach

The role of the Reading Recovery teacher has expanded greatly in the Intensive Intervention Model. The

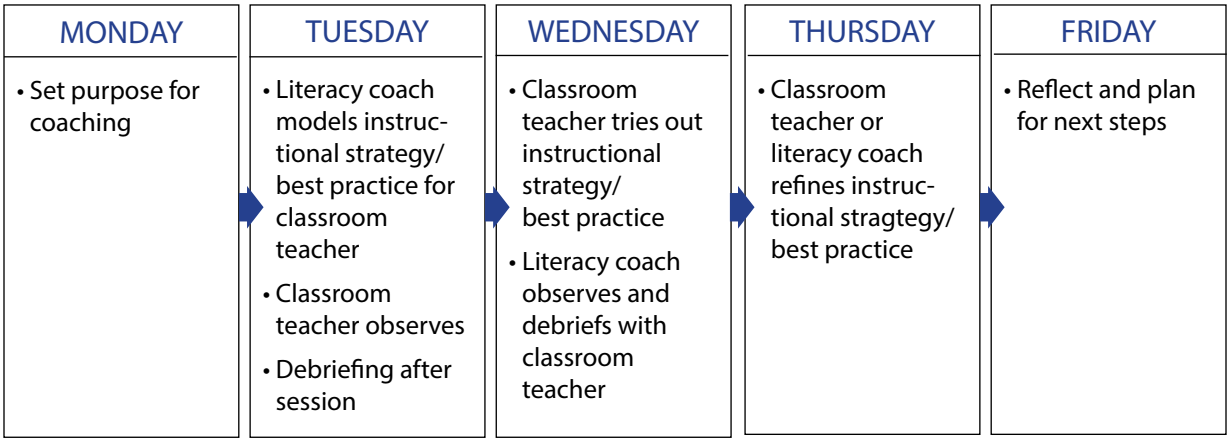
teacher supports and works with the highest need first-grade students by providing one-to-one literacy instruction using individually designed lessons. The second role is as a literacy coach, working with all K–2 teachers at a school site on early literacy teaching and learning, with special emphasis on guided reading. On a daily basis, these literacy coaches work in classrooms with their assigned teachers. In contrast to previous intervention models, a deliberate decision was made to focus Reading Recovery teachers on teacher development—leading to increased student achievement—rather than assigning the teacher to direct student intervention (e.g., pullout student support). Although the literacy coaches work with all students in the classroom setting, the highest-need students are given priority. The classroom teacher and the literacy coach work together to set goals for student achievement in literacy development and for the refinement of teaching practices.

Each week, the classroom teacher and literacy coach participate in a coaching cycle as illustrated in Figure 3. Since the role of the coach is not evaluative, the coaching cycle builds mutual accountability between the literacy coach and classroom teacher for refining teaching practices and moving the work forward. It is imperative that the literacy coach works on building a strong relationship with the classroom teacher in order to gain trust and earn respect; if trust and respect are missing, the work will be challenging, move at a slower pace, or even become stalled at times.

The third role of the Reading Recovery teacher is early literacy staff developer. This component of the model helps bring the theory and practice together for classroom teachers and school site administrators. K–2 teachers annually participate in 12 hours of early literacy professional development during release time from their assigned duties. The content of the professional development is linked directly to daily literacy teaching and coaching back in the classroom. This professional development allows classroom teachers to be better equipped to help all students in the classroom because they are learning the why and how behind early literacy best practices.

The Reading Recovery teachers/literacy coaches are important members of the RTI team at their school sites. Due to their daily and intense work with all K–2 students, they are equipped with data, daily teaching experiences, and observations to share. This information helps guide decisions and next steps for the most-in-need students at a school site. Brandon is an example of a student who was followed closely and provided support in Grades K–2. In kindergarten he was identified as being at risk for a myriad of reasons. In particular, classroom and district assessments revealed he was struggling with literacy development. In first grade, he qualified for Reading Recovery and his lessons were successfully discontinued. With regular support and monitoring, he entered second grade as a capable reader and writer and continues to do well in school both academically and socially. This success story was made possible due to the coordination of services, regular communication by all members of the RTI team, and the expanded sphere of influence of the Reading Recovery teachers.

Figure 3. LBUSD Reading Recovery Teacher's Weekly Coaching Cycle



The Role of the Classroom Teacher

All K–2 classroom teachers at an Intensive Intervention Model school participate in the coaching model and early literacy staff development. A central focus has been on the development of guided reading practices in all classrooms. Teachers work actively with their assigned literacy coach to refine early literacy teaching and learning in their classrooms. Since teaching is isolating by nature, most classroom teachers welcome the help, support, and guidance of a literacy coach. Initially, the classroom teacher and literacy coach work collaboratively to coordinate schedules, arrange the classroom setting for small-group instruction, set teaching and learning goals, examine data to form initial guided reading groups, and gather appropriate books to ensure daily implementation of guided reading. Furthermore, the classroom teacher participates in the weekly coaching cycle and professional development sessions described in Figure 3.

As the collective work has evolved, the skill set, successful experiences, and confidence of classroom teachers have grown immensely. The most important and exciting change for classroom teachers was seeing student literacy achievement improve. DeFord, Lyons, and Pinnell (1993) state:

> Providing high-quality instructional time for children at risk can be thought of as a safety net that captures children, offering more support at a critical time, so that they can fully profit from good, ongoing teaching in their school or district. That, in itself, will have impact on a system. With good coverage, almost all children can enter the world of literacy and begin early to use literacy in their learning of content. (p. 203)

Building capacity at a school site is one of the original tenets of the Intensive Intervention Model. Over time—with daily teaching of guided reading, effective coaching, and early literacy professional development—the majority of classroom teachers participating in the model have become instructional leaders at their sites, welcoming visitors and colleagues to observe their teaching. Many teachers have allowed their coaches or principals to video record them in order to be used as examples for other colleagues at their site. Another positive outcome resulted in the inclusion of classroom teachers and principals in the planning and delivery of early literacy staff development. These changes and outcomes could not happen without building strong relationships, consistent and effective early literacy teaching practices, professional development, accountability, and regular communication in all components of the Intensive Intervention Model.

Getting Started

For a school or district that is committed to building a comprehensive literacy system, there are a number of ideas for getting started that may be helpful. Excellent resources that have been utilized over time in LBUSD include *Promising Literacy for Every Child: Reading Recovery and a Comprehensive Literacy System* (Askew, Pinnell, & Scharer, 2014), *Systems for Change In Literacy Education* (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001), and *The Art of Coaching* (Aguilar, 2013).

Beyond these foundational resources, districts should consider defining and recording their aspirations for what an early literacy system could

Figure 4. Lessons Learned in LBUSD

- **Always keep the children in mind and at the center of all decisions.**
- **Celebrate small and big changes.**
- **Communication at all levels is important.**
- **Examine many different types of data.**
- **Leadership at all levels is necessary.**
- **Building strong relationships is essential.**
- **Don't be afraid to innovate and take risks.**
- **Change takes time.**
- **Be willing to change course if what you are doing is not working.**

look like in their district. Make time to take stock of current resources and personnel in order to see what is possible. Pilot ideas or model at a few schools first before expanding systemwide. Make a 3- to 5-year commitment to measure the model's effectiveness — allowing the time and space to experiment, course correct, and grow from learning together. Select school sites eager to build a comprehensive literacy system in order to build momentum with early adopters. Choose and develop signature literacy instructional practices that can be shared across the system. Schedule regular time with all stakeholders to reflect, redefine, redirect and review the model or system for continuous growth. Finally, celebrate and acknowledge the group's strengths and together work on areas for improvement.

Conclusion

As we reflect on our work over the past 8 years, we have learned a great deal about the ingredients of an intensive intervention system that positively influence individual students and support the capacity-building of an entire school and other schools within the system. A few of those lessons learned are summarized in Figure 4.

In a district that places such high value on continuous improvement, we find ourselves celebrating how far we have come in building a comprehensive literacy system and asking ourselves how to have an even greater impact on our students' and teachers' lives. We recognize that continuing to link the three tiers of intervention with the three pillars of the model is imperative. We must also continue to cultivate leadership at all levels, provide high-quality professional development for teachers and leaders while pushing ourselves to cultivate shared accountability that will ensure that our students benefit from our efforts. Clay (2014) concludes:

> The matter of accommodating diversity and individual differences in learning paths is complex. We must keep our criteria relative and give assistance to the lowest achievers in any program. It is time for us to institutionalize early preventive intervention accessible to all children who need it, as part of the overall system of delivering education, and as the first step in a process of improvement of literacy learning at all levels of schooling. (p. 232)

In LBUSD, we will continue to strive to embody Dr. Clay's vision.

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