Stopping Reading Failure: Reading Intervention for Intermediate-Grade Students

by J. David Cooper, Janet McWilliams, Irene Boschken, and Lynne Pistochini

The goal of every elementary classroom teacher is to ensure that all students become the best readers possible. Teachers in grades three and above often find themselves struggling to find ways to help students who are not making progress in becoming proficient readers. For many years, it was common practice to send the students reading below level to some form of remedial reading instruction (Harris & Sipay, 1985). However, evidence that has accumulated over the last several decades has shown that most remedial programs have not been effective in helping below-level readers achieve success (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). Students who appeared on the rosters of the remedial teacher the first year continued to reappear on those rosters year after year. Therefore, a different concept of instruction has been developing in more recent years; this concept is known as intervention.

What Is Intervention?

According to the dictionary, intervention is the act of coming into or between so as to hinder or alter an action. A reading intervention program is one that hinders or alters the action of reading failure by preventing it from occurring or stopping it if it has already started. Students who participate in intervention programs attain the goal of reading or the program is discontinued and other alternatives are considered (Hiebert & Taylor, 1994).

There are many very successful early intervention programs (Clay, 1985; Pinnell, Fried, & Estice, 1990; Taylor, Frye, Short, & Shearer, 1992; Hiebert, Colt, Catto, & Gury, 1992; Hall, Prevatte, & Cunningham, 1992). These programs have been very effective in preventing reading failure for children at the beginning of their educational experience (Hiebert & Taylor, 1994). Early intervention programs provide intensive, structured, systematic instruction that is delivered on a daily basis in addition to the child’s balanced classroom instruction.

Why Upper-Grade Intervention?

In spite of the successes of early intervention programs, reports of individual teachers and national studies of reading achievement (Mullis, Campbell, & Farstrup, 1993; NAEP, 1994) show that many students in grades three and above are reading considerably below their age-appropriate level.

Attempts to help students reading below level in grades three and above have focused heavily on the use of high-interest, easy-reading materials with controlled vocabulary (Harris & Sipay, 1985). Lessons accompanying these texts usually follow a pattern of introducing vocabulary, reading to answer questions, and teaching one or more skills. Research has demonstrated that this type of instructional approach has not been effective in helping upper-grade readers achieve success. The gap between the less able readers and the more capable readers continues to widen across the grade levels (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). Therefore, there is a serious need for a reading intervention program rather than a remedial reading program to help below-level readers in grades three and above bring their reading up to level. The chart below summarizes the differences between intervention and remedial programs.
**INTERVENTION**

- Time (30-40 min.) is in addition to regular classroom reading instruction.
- Literature consists of authentic trade books, sequenced from easy to grade-level reading.
- The goal is to move students out of the program as quickly as possible and into success with grade-level instruction.
- Instructional focus is on strategies that move students to reading independence.
- Instruction is fast-paced and delivered daily in a structured routine.

**REMEDICATION**

- Time has generally been pullout, often replacing classroom instruction.
- Literature is typically high-interest, low vocabulary; texts are often rewritten to conform to a readability formula.
- Students are often tracked for life! (The remedial students remain the remedial students.)
- Instruction typically focuses on book-specific vocabulary words, comprehension questions, and often isolated skills.
- Students are often pulled out two or three times per week for 20-30 minutes.

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**What Are the Major Needs of Struggling Readers in Upper Grades?**

Students reading below level in the upper grades have needs that are different from those of primary-grade students.

- Students in the upper grades have already experienced failure in reading. Therefore, there is a real need to accelerate their reading progress as quickly as possible in order to help them begin to achieve success. They need a reading intervention program that delivers reading support quickly, as opposed to a remedial program that continues to try the same methods over and over again.

- Below-level readers in the upper grades often can use decoding skills (phonics, structure) in isolation, but they do not apply them when they are reading text. If these students come to a word they do not know, they stop their reading, frustrated by not knowing how to use the skills they have. They often sit and wait or they skip the word, missing important information needed to comprehend the text they are attempting to read.

- Other students in the upper grades often call every word correctly but they cannot retell what they have read. Teachers often refer to these students as "word callers." These are the students who need major support in constructing meaning or comprehension.

Given what we know about struggling readers in the upper grades, effective instruction is needed to accelerate their reading growth, help them apply decoding skills as they read, and help them develop strategies to comprehend and construct meaning. Although instruction should initially start with easy reading materials, it must gradually, but systematically lead students to success with their grade-level materials.

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**Elements of Effective Intervention Instruction for Upper-Grade Students**

Two important elements must be included in an effective intervention.
program for upper-grade students:

1. Appropriate reading materials
2. Instructional strategies that promote acceleration

**Appropriate Reading Materials**
Books for upper-grade intervention need to be highly interesting, motivating texts that

- contain interesting subject matter that is applicable to a variety of curricular areas
- provide a balance of narrative and expository reading experiences
- go beyond texts used at the beginning levels of literacy development where the primary focus is on building decoding strategies and fluency in word identification
- are sequenced on a continuum from simple to complex, which gradually (but quickly) allows students to accelerate their reading ability with scaffolded support from a teacher.

Based on findings about texts for early intervention (Peterson, 1991) and research with upper-grade intervention (Cooper, Boschken, McWilliams, & Pistochini, 1997), we know that texts need to be sequenced from simple to complex in order to allow all students to start with a text they can read with teacher support. It is important that the books move students to grade-level reading difficulty.

The factors considered in these criteria differ from the usual readability formulas that have often been used to level texts. These criteria take into account the amount of print on the page, picture support, complexity of storylines, and/or complexity of facts presented.

The leveling or sequencing of texts is one aspect of an effective plan to scaffold instruction. By starting with easy texts and moving gradually to more difficult ones, students learn strategies and apply them in increasingly complex texts. The chart that follows illustrates the factors linked to text difficulty and show how books can be leveled for older students.

**Criteria for Selecting and Sequencing Books in Grades 3-6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category I</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Small amount of print per page. (The majority of pages have one to three sentences.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Pictures/illustrations are clear and uncluttered, and directly support the text.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Text for both fiction and nonfiction is narrative, with a clear, easy-to-follow storyline.</td>
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**Arturo’s Baton by Syd Hoff**

Level 3, Book 2*
### Category II

- Still a small amount of print per page, but text can increase to one or two paragraphs on the majority of pages. Short lines of dialogue may increase the amount of text per page.
- Pictures/illustrations still give direct text support; two or three spot vignettes on a page are appropriate.
- Expository nonfiction on highly focused topics with simply stated main ideas and few supporting details. (Often a picture or photograph illustrates each main idea.)
- Short captions (a word, a phrase, or one sentence) may accompany pictures. Simple diagrams with clear labels are appropriate.
- Narrative storylines remain simple.

#### Animals in Winter by Henrietta Bancroft and Richard G. Van Gelder

- Level 3, Book 5*

### Category III

- Increasing print with several paragraphs per page. Books themselves become longer.
- Pictures/illustrations are less supportive of text. Captions may increase in length.
- Clear storyline, but now multiple characters are appropriate (narrative texts).
- Topics may broaden; main ideas increase in complexity with more supporting details (expository texts).
- Text may contain a secondary element, such as sidebars or speech balloons.
- More inferencing is required by the nature of the text.

#### Aunt Flossie’s Hats (and Crab Cakes Later) by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard

- Level 3, Book 14*
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category IV</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Text increases to fill the page.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Storylines become more complex: there may be subplots, mysteries, or multiple problems (narrative texts) that require critical thinking.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Topics expand to include subtopics, which may be organized by chapter; main ideas increase in complexity and contain more details, requiring readers to organize and analyze information.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Picture support is less direct; pages may be designed more for visual effect than to help readers with the text. Chapter books may contain spot art, or none at all.</em></td>
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**Clouds of Terror by Catherine A. Welch**

**Level 3, Book 17***

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<table>
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<th>Category V</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Number of chapters increases.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Size of print decreases as amount of text per page increases.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Picture support is minimal or nonexistent. Book length may increase to 80-100+ pages.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Greater inferencing skills are required to follow complex story lines containing multiple characters. Problems, which are multiple, are more sophisticated (narrative texts).</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Increasing amount of new information is presented with more complex text organization. Readers may be required to sift through information and make decisions about how relevant each detail is to the topic at hand.</em></td>
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**Centerfield Balhawk by Matt Christopher**

**Level 4, Book 18***

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* Examples taken from *Soar to Success* collection published by Houghton Mifflin Company.

**Instructional Strategies that Promote Acceleration**

Students reading below grade level lack the skills that enable them to
organize text, to understand what they are reading, and to stay on task. In order to acquire these skills, students need careful, systematic instruction that will help them overcome these problems.

**Graphic Organizers.** Graphic organizers are effective in helping students construct meaning (Heimlich & Pittelman, 1986; Pehrsson & Robinson, 1985). By visually representing the meaning they construct from reading, students improve their ability to comprehend. Below are examples of three graphic organizers.

Although more than one graphic organizer per book can help students visually construct meaning, research on upper-grade intervention has shown that it is most effective to use one graphic organizer for each text (Cooper et al., 1997). The single graphic organizer then becomes a prompt to help students retell and summarize what they have read.

**Reciprocal Teaching.** Another instructional strategy that is effective in helping below-level readers accelerate their reading is reciprocal teaching (Palincsar, 1984; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; 1985; 1986; Snow, Burns, & Griffen, 1998). Reciprocal teaching uses four strategies for constructing meaning: **Summarize, Clarify, Question,** and **Predict.** The teacher and the students take turns being teacher, modeling the use of the strategies after reading each meaningful chunk of a text.

**Summarizing** helps students identify and integrate the most important information in the text. **Questioning** involves students in formulating a question that can be answered. In the beginning, questioning focuses on specific text information; later, it progresses to using the text plus one's own knowledge to form inferential and evaluative questions. Through the **Clarifying strategy,** students learn to monitor their comprehension and "fix up" problems that occur as they construct meaning. They may focus on an **idea, word meaning,** or **word pronunciation.** Clarifying helps students learn to apply their decoding skills and figure out unknown words. **Predicting** helps students hypothesize what will occur in the text. In order to do this successfully, students must activate relevant background knowledge that they already possess regarding the topic. The students then have a purpose for reading: to confirm or disprove their prediction for the text. Each of these strategies aids students in constructing meaning from text, and provides a means of monitoring their reading to ensure that they are, in fact, understanding what they read.

**Scaffolding.** Scaffolding is the process of providing strong teacher support and gradually removing it until students are working independently (Pearson, 1985; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1986). This instructional strategy is effective in helping students accelerate their learning. Scaffolding can be applied by sequencing texts (see
earlier comments), and through teacher modeling that gradually leads to student independence.

**Daily, Fast-Paced, Structured Lessons.** Early intervention research shows that daily, fast-paced, structured lessons are important in helping students accelerate their reading (Pikulski, 1994). The same has been found to be true for upper-grade intervention (Cooper et al., 1997). Fast-paced, structured lessons help to move students along and keep them focused on the task at hand.

**Modeling Good Work Habits.** Students reading below grade level usually lack structure in their school work. An effective intervention program should model the structures that successful students use every day: arriving on time, getting right to work, staying on schedule or task, and keeping to the topic.

**Project SUCCESS: An Intermediate Intervention Model**

The instructional strategies described above are each effective in their own right. However, for them to be most effective, they must be worked into a meaningful, systematic instructional plan. Project SUCCESS is an upper-grade intervention model that accomplishes this goal (Cooper et al., 1997).

**An Instructional Plan Based on Research**

The instructional plan for Project SUCCESS was developed for small groups of 5-7 students in grades three through six. The teaching model requires a 40-minute daily lesson that is fast-paced and uses authentic literature including fiction and nonfiction selections sequenced from simple to complex.

The following are the major components of each lesson:

- **Revisiting:** Students reread previously read Project SUCCESS books or participate in a group conference on independently read books. This process builds fluency and develops comprehension (Samuels, 1979; 1997). Discussing independently read books builds a connection between learning to read and independent reading (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1986; Center for the Study of Reading, 1990).

- **Reviewing:** Students summarize the previous day's reading using the graphic organizer as a prompt. They often discuss reciprocal teaching strategies used in Project SUCCESS lessons and in other classroom reading. Focusing on the same four strategies helps students improve in comprehension (Kelly, Moore, & Tuck, 1994).

- **Rehearsing:** Teacher and students in the Project SUCCESS group do a guided, cooperative, or independent preview of text to be read. Students may predict, question, or begin their graphic organizers. The rehearsing stage builds background specifically for the text and sets a purpose for reading (Clay, 1985).

- **Reading/Reciprocal Teaching:** Students silently read a meaningful chunk of text to verify predictions or answer their questions. Following the reading, reciprocal teaching is employed with the students and teacher taking turns assuming the role of teacher as they model summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. This process enables students to apply strategies and develop comprehension (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; 1985; 1986; Palincsar, 1984; Pearson, 1984).

- **Responding/Reflecting:** Students do one or more of the following as they conclude each day's lesson:
  - Make a written response
  - Complete a portion of a graphic organizer
Reflect on strategies
Discuss and share

This step in the plan requires students to respond to selections and to evaluate their own reading performance; these activities further develop comprehension and effective use of strategies (Sweet, 1993).

**Home Connection:** Making connections between what students are learning and their homes is important to students’ successes. Upon completion of a book, it is sent home with a letter requesting that someone at home have the child read or retell the book just completed. The letter is then signed and returned to the teacher. Having a student take known material home to read to a family member further increases fluency and builds self-esteem.

**Research with Project SUCCESS**

**Development Study.** During the 1995-96 school year, the instructional plan for Project SUCCESS was developed and field tested using two teachers and 11 fourth-grade students who were reading considerably below grade level. After approximately 90 days of instruction, these students gained an average of three levels in retelling and two and one-half levels in oral reading as measured by the Basic Reading Inventory (Johns, 1994). It was concluded that with this amount of growth, the model should be tested more carefully to see if similar gains would be obtained in a larger and more controlled situation.

**National Research Study.** An extensive national research study was carried out by the Project SUCCESS developers in 14 locations throughout the United States during the 1996-97 school year. The population for the study was fourth-grade students identified as considerably below-level readers in 24 different schools. A total of 38 teachers taught Project SUCCESS to 409 students. The samples for the research groups (Project SUCCESS) and the control groups were randomly selected from a pool of students who met the same criteria.

Among the research sites, the Project SUCCESS model was used in the following ways:

- **Pullout Model:** Students went to another teacher for intervention instruction. They remained in the classroom for their regular reading/language arts instruction.

- **In-class Model:** The classroom teacher instructed the Project SUCCESS group as part of his/her daily program, or another professional came into the classroom to teach a SUCCESS group while the classroom teacher worked with other groups.

- **Extended Day Model:** Project SUCCESS instruction was given before or after school.

**Results.** The Project SUCCESS intervention model proved to be effective in accelerating the reading levels of students reading below grade level in a brief amount of instructional time (Cooper et al., 1997). Students in the research group performed significantly better than the control group students on retelling and answering questions on the Qualitative Reading Inventory II (Leslie & Caldwell, 1995), and comprehension on the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests (Gates & MacGinitie, 1989) after an average of 76 days of instruction (see Chart 1). Students in the Project SUCCESS group also performed significantly better in oral reading after the same amount of instructional time. Higher percentages of students in the Project SUCCESS groups were reading on fourth-grade level or higher after this instructional period (see Chart 2).
How Soar to Success Builds on Project SUCCESS

Soar to Success (Houghton Mifflin’s Intermediate Intervention Program) was developed based on the Project SUCCESS research. The lessons follow the same instructional plan as Project SUCCESS lessons. Authentic literature, both narrative and expository, with accompanying graphic organizers, is the core of each lesson. All texts for both programs are used in their entirety: none are rewritten to provide an easier reading level. In each level of the program (Levels 3-6) all texts are sequenced using the criteria discussed earlier: each level begins with Category I and progresses to on-grade-level books by the end of that level of the program.

Like Project SUCCESS, Soar to Success lessons are scaffolded and begin with strong teacher modeling and support. The teacher support and the text support gradually decrease while the students move to independence in grade-level appropriate materials.

Importance of Training and Coaching

Classroom practices and research have shown that effective staff development and coaching are key elements as teachers continue to grow professionally and improve their instruction (Showers & Bennett, 1987; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). Research with Project SUCCESS supports the importance of both of these elements in helping teachers learn to accelerate the reading of upper-grade students (Cooper et al., 1997).

Project SUCCESS teachers were given two days of intensive training. During the training, teachers learned to use the Project SUCCESS instructional model with reciprocal teaching, graphic organizers, and the scaffolded lessons provided for each book.

During the implementation of the model, teachers received ongoing training in monthly meetings. Coaching was also provided to help each teacher internalize a set of instructional strategies through observation and feedback. The process of coaching involves three basic steps:

1. **Observation**: The teacher being coached is observed teaching.
2. **Feedback**: The observer/coach and the teacher share key ideas from the lesson.
3. **Follow-up**: Another observation is scheduled after the teacher has had time to try the agreed-upon suggestions.

Coaching helps teachers apply a newly acquired skill (Showers & Bennett, 1987).

Soar to Success includes provisions for training, coaching, and monthly follow-up meetings to help teachers become effective intervention teachers. A training video is provided as a part of the Soar to Success materials. The Intermediate Intervention Institutes sponsored by Houghton Mifflin provide two days of intensive training for teachers, coaches, and site coordinators.

Who Should Teach Intervention?

As teachers in Project SUCCESS were observed, it was evident that some teachers are more able and willing to work within the structure and fast pace of intervention lessons. Persons most likely to be effective with intervention instruction should possess the following:

- A belief that below-level students can and will learn to read on level.
- A willingness to accept structure and consistency within their lessons.
- An ability to adhere to given time frames for instruction.

McGuiness (1997) discusses the "teacher effect":

“If the teacher doesn't understand or believe in what you are asking..."
her to do, she will sabotage your most carefully planned experiment day after day. This can happen even when teachers sincerely think they are doing what they are trained to do. The "teacher effect" tells us that teachers need to be given a clear rationale for being asked to change their teaching methods. This new method has to make sense and be designed so that it works in the classroom, with curriculum materials and lesson plans. The teacher must be thoroughly trained so that she feels confident and comfortable with the new approach.” (pp. 171-172)

Site administrators should keep these points in mind. Just as we must follow specific guidelines and procedures when determining which students will most benefit from intervention, so must we carefully select those teachers who will provide the greatest success for the students with whom they intervene.

Conclusions
Reading intervention for upper-grade students can serve a major function in helping struggling readers achieve success in reading. It must be delivered on a daily basis in addition to a balanced literacy program that all students receive.

The research with Project SUCCESS shows that it is possible to help struggling upper-grade readers read on level or higher in a short amount of time. The model of instruction used in Project SUCCESS was developed by studying existing research and planning a systematic program to fit the specialized needs of upper-grade students. The effectiveness of this model is highly dependent upon in-depth training for teachers and on going support and coaching throughout the model's initial use.

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