

Florida High intensifies reading intervention to put a period after reading deficiencies

RST stops the bleeding for struggling readers within months

Every school in every town has struggling readers, even an A school like Florida State University Lab School (FSUS), whose reading scores are consistently among the highest in Florida. But ignoring the almost 20% of students who need more intensive interventions than are commonly offered is not an option for Dr. Lynn Wicker, school director.

“I am always concerned about our struggling readers and want to do whatever it takes to ensure that they have the greatest opportunity for success,” Wicker said. To that end, she brought Reading Strength Training (RST) to FSUS in 2012 because of its proven record of success with struggling readers in grades 3-12.

Reading specialist Kay Kincl developed and refined RST over 20 years of working with students one-on-one, “trying different strategies, discarding ones that did not work, and learning what *does* work from the students themselves,” she said.

“I firmly believe that utilizing a one-on-one intervention is the most powerful way to help these students succeed,” said Wicker. “She’s right,” said Kincl. “Research shows that one hour of one-on-one is better than six hours in the classroom.” (Ekwall and Shanker, 1988).

However, it’s not just the one-on-one that makes RST so effective. The RST approach is distinctive and does not replicate other reading interventions commonly provided in small group pullouts or intensive reading classes. Students come to their RST sessions once a week for 30-45 minutes and work in a nonthreatening environment: no tests, no grades, no computer programs, no assignments, and no audience.

It is not true that bringing students’ reading skills to grade level is a long and drawn out process, according to Kincl. Provided in private one-on-one sessions, in which the student is totally engaged and the teacher is totally attending, RST is the only reading intervention that claims to strengthen a student’s reading skills to grade level in one school year or less and measures success in months, not years.

Wicker’s response to ongoing RST results the past two years has been, “Wow!” One week after her first RST session, an “at risk” third grader reported that “All of my teachers have started calling me Miss Smartie because I’m making 100’s on all my work!” Two months later, that student scored 4 on the 2014 FCAT Reading.

“It is a wise decision to divert at least some of a school’s financial resources toward the implementation of RST to get the kind of fast and lasting results that RST can provide.”

Dr. Lynn Wicker, FSUS Director

RST rewires students’ brains

Kincl learned of the science behind the success of RST when she read the report of a 2008 Carnegie Mellon University brain imaging study that found that the brains of dyslexic students

and other poor readers were permanently rewired to overcome reading deficits after hours of intensive remedial instruction. (Carnegie, 2008).

“It is so great when my students tell me that words no longer appear scrambled,” said Kincl. “Their fluency and spelling quickly improve when they are not hindered by this learning disability.”

Reading deficiencies are often the results of heredity, health, and happenstance—life events (i.e., moving often, allergies, divorce, or death, etc.), according to Kincl. “Anything that disturbs or distracts can hinder students’ concentration in early school years and cause them to fall behind. It’s not the parents’ fault, the teachers’ fault, or the school’s fault.”

“While we can do nothing to *prevent* reading deficiencies, we *can change the reality* for the thousands of struggling readers in our schools,” Kincl said. “We can put a period after their reading deficiencies; we can end the daily deluge of Ds on their papers; stop the stress of tearful homework sessions, stomach pains, and headaches; crush the self-criticism; and fan the last little flame of hope.”

An important part of remediation is enhancing students’ self-esteem and getting them to realize they are not saddled with some awful disease from which they will never recover (Ekwall & Shanker, 1988).

***“I feel great now
because before RST
I thought I would be like this forever.”
Dana, Gr. 5, FSUS***

Game changer, life changer

Data collected for the past two years at FSUS is compelling. Of the 200 students who have received RST, 100% reported improved grades across content areas in the first week or two of RST, said Kincl.

She praised teachers who advocate for bright students who are underachieving and understand that reading deficiencies limit their students’ ability to be fully engaged in learning. In the past two years, 26 FSUS teachers —of math, science, foreign language, and reading—have referred 240 students for RST.

“RST has made an immediate impact on the students who have worked with Kay one-on-one, and the results have generalized to their other content areas,” said Wicker. “The positive impact of identifying and targeting a student’s specific reading difficulties has wide spread and lasting positive impact.”

Mindy’s RST story is one of the most dramatic. Since kindergarten, she had received the best teaching, every possible support service, and extraordinary care and nurture by FSUS teachers and staff. However, Mindy was retained twice and was only reading on second grade level in the Spring of her fourth grade year, when her teacher referred her to RST in 2013.

“She barely made it through the 10-minute RST assessment,” Kincl recalls. “Her face was flushed, her head hung low, and she was breathing heavily—very antisocial and stressed!”

Mindy's Reading Performance Timeline

Grade 1	Retained
Grade 2	Retained
Grade 3	<p>Evaluated: General Intelligence: Average Low frustration tolerance "Significant difficulty in long-term retrieval and short-term memory"</p> <p>STAR Reading Score in January 2012 2.7</p> <p>IEP: "...making progress...very gradual...behind her peers in reading, math, and writing."</p> <p>Annual IEP Goal: Increase STAR Reading score to 3.7</p>
Grade 4	<p>RST assessment in January 2013 documented deficiencies in decoding, fluency, and phonological awareness</p> <p>Session I Jan. 17, 2013 Decoding on RL2 Stressed/heavy breathing/nonsocial</p> <p>Session III Jan. 31, 2013 Decoding on RL3 <i>"I'm reading more words per minute and made 90 on a spelling test!"</i></p> <p>Session V Feb. 14, 2013 Decoding on RL4 <i>"Words aren't scrambled as much."</i></p> <p>Session VI Feb. 21, 2013 <i>"I made 83 on a reading test (usually 60) and 90 on a spelling test (usually 70) and I only missed 2 of 12 in math."</i></p> <p>Session IX Mar. 14, 2013 <i>"I went from 2nd grade to 5th grade level on the STAR Reading test and the principal and my class gave me a standing ovation!"</i></p> <p>Session XI Apr. 4, 2013 Decoding on RL5 <i>"On my report card, all of my grades went up---every one of them!"</i></p> <p>Raised FCAT Reading score 35 pts.-----missed L3 by 1 point (after only 9 hours of RST)</p> <p>LAST SESSION May 15, 2013 Decoding on RL5, good fluency, good grades, happy, relaxed</p>

Mindy conquered her reading deficiencies in 11.25 hours of RST.

UPDATE: This 2013-2014 school year Mindy's fifth grade teacher described her academic performance as "fabulous," and Mindy passed the FCAT.

Today she is a friendly, relaxed, and confident middle schooler.

DOE calls for change

The Florida Department of Education *Grades 3-10 Assessment/Curriculum Decision Tree* calls for replacing reading interventions that prove to be ineffective:

“For students who have not responded to a specific reading intervention delivered with fidelity and with the initial intensity (time and group size) provided, reading intervention instruction and/or materials will be changed based on student data.”

Typically, struggling readers spend hours each week on technology-based instruction and assessments that focus on reading comprehension, vocabulary, and reading speed. However, recent research funded by the U. S. Department of Education Institute of Education Services (IES) shows that computer-assisted reading programs most commonly used in the past 30 years have minimal impacts on the attainment of struggling readers.

“Children who have failed to respond to normal lessons or to proven small group tutorials should receive one-on-one tutoring before special education services are considered,” according to the IES report, *The Educator’s Guide Identifying What Works for Struggling Readers*. This research of 96 reading programs found that often small group teaching simply offers more of the same instruction that has already failed to work

“If a reading intervention did not take care of students’ reading deficiencies in one school year, why would schools continue to place students in that same program the next year...and the next?” Kincl asks.

“Struggling readers are test-weary,” she said. “Multiple times a day, they have to work on computer-based reading programs that test their comprehension of passages that are too difficult for them to read. When their reading scores do not improve, many stop trying and simply go through the motions....guessing, shutting down internally..... skewing schools’ progress monitoring scores.”

With RST, said Kincl, students experience early success that is highly motivational. It’s an awakening for older students, who have literally given up on academic success years ago and quit trying, she said.

“Although it may appear more expensive to fund a one-on-one intervention, the long term gains and growth in student learning in reading is well worth the investment,” said Wicker.

The cost-effectiveness argument is that the expense is justified if it can make a substantial difference to children and reduce later needs for special education, retentions, or remediation, according to the IES report. Kincl emphasizes that RST requires no technology or curricula and needs minimal space.

The primary expense of RST is the initial training and the salary of RST experts, preferably paraprofessionals. Cost of materials is minimal, according to Kincl.

Gains are not good enough

Kincl emphasized that struggling readers have no time to waste.

“Do the math,” she said.

If a 9th grader reads on 5th grade level,
how many grade levels is he behind? (Answer: 4)

If he raises his reading level by one grade (to 6th grade level)
this year, how many levels will he be behind
next year in 10th grade? (Answer: 4)

A senior at FSUS this year talked about his three years in an intensive reading class with a highly qualified teacher and the latest technology-based reading programs that primarily focused on comprehension strategies.

But it wasn't until he had RST that he began experiencing increased success in all his classes. After only one RST session of addressing his weak fluency and phonological awareness deficiency, he reported making much higher grades than usual. Raising his scores from a usual 69 to 80 in his reading course and from 75 to 102 on vocabulary tests was highly motivational.

"I'm making good grades in all my classes and have a 3.5 GPA now—my highest ever," he reported a few weeks later. "I used to have all C's and D's, but now I have all A's and one C."

The college-bound senior is candid about his improved reading skills. "Everything is easier now. I wish I had had this last year; it would have helped me out a lot." (*See Appendix A, 2012-2013 RST Students' Feedback Results.*)

Casting the vision

Students from 16 of the *best* schools in Leon County have come to Kincl's off-campus office after school for RST at their parents' expense.

"It is a hardship for students to come after a full day of school for reading help; parents have to leave work to drive them across town, and a third-grader is very tired when he comes for a 6 p.m. session," Kincl said. "Schools should provide RST to struggling readers for free," Kincl said.

"I envision RST experts on every school campus, working stealthily behind the scenes, fixing students' reading problems. This would not only benefit students and their families, but would be a great support to teachers."

Teachers benefit from an intervention that empowers struggling readers to access their texts, teaching, and tests. Teachers at FSUS get that; they are advocating for students who need more than they can offer in a classroom setting and under curriculum constraints. And the secondary reading teachers understand that before students can grasp the comprehension strategies they teach, the gaps in their fundamental reading skills must be addressed.

Research reports that low reading comprehension scores at older ages might often be attributed to difficulties with word-level processing rather than to true deficits in understanding. (Leach, Scarborough & Rescorla, 2003).

"I highly recommend RST to all public schools who have used a variety of other reading interventions but have not seen the kind of results we have seen utilizing RST," said Wicker.

Kincl suggests that *all* students would benefit from reading courses that focus on increasing students' comprehension skills and ability to grapple with complex text. Ironically,

only struggling readers are enrolled in these reading classes—but they lack the reading skills that are requisite to comprehension, she said.

Struggling readers defy demographic profiles; many have great home environments, academically successful siblings, and highly educated parents who spend hours each evening helping them do school work. Some middle and high school students are so smart, they have managed to compensate for their poor reading skills and—with the extra help at home— make average grades. Thus, they avoid detection as a struggling reader.

But good students’ weak reading skills will eventually limit their abilities to pass statewide assessments and their opportunities to attend college and/or reach their career goals.

If a student displays any of the characteristics below, he/she is likely struggling with reading, in spite of making decent grades:

- Hates to read
- Refuses to read aloud
- Insists that parents read for them...
- Requires help with homework—always
- Requires help studying for tests...then performs poorly on tests
- Stumble on easy words when reading orally
- Tries to read too fast and often skips words
- Works hard on school work but makes average/poor grades
- Does not read for leisure

**After RST
parents report that their student:**

- Is less stressed about school
- Is able to do homework independently
- No longer makes himself sick every morning
- Is more confident
- Completes homework more quickly
- Makes better grades
- Shows more interest in reading
- Is a happier child
- Has fewer behavior problems

“The most common reading deficiency is poor fluency. It is a hindrance to many more students than just the struggling readers in the lowest 30th percentile,” Kincl said. “Even the high performing students in AP classes cannot reach their potential if their fluency skills are lacking.”

But poor fluency is the quickest skill to fix with one-on-one guidance, according to Kincl. “Strengthening this one skill can be a game changer.”

One school-teacher mom referred her daughter to RST, even though she made excellent grades. She later reported, “RST has made my daughter a more confident reader and student. She was able to break some bad reading habits and establish positive practices through her independent reading.”

“I knew it was working when she read a book cover to cover without my help or pleading!”

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APPENDIX A

2012-2013 RST STUDENT FEEDBACK RESULTS

60 of 94 surveys returned

Question	Y	N
Did you know that you needed help with your reading skills before RST?	52%	48%
Do you feel your reading problems kept you from making better grades?	63%	37%
Have you been in other reading programs or tutoring?	63%	37%
Were you surprised at how quickly RST began to improve your reading?	85%	15%
Did you know how to address an auditory learning style before RST?	30%	70%
Does whisper-reading help you better understand what you read?	83%	17%
Does RST help you get your assignments finished more quickly?	75%	25%
Are you doing more homework without help now?	82%	18%
Did any of your teachers say anything about your improvement?	49%	51%
Did you read very much before RST?	24%	76%
Do you read more now?	55%	45%

Sample quotes:

"I feel happy because my grades have gotten better every second."

"Life is kinda bad for me but I'm smart---I just need help in reading."

"It is amazing. I feel smart when I read."

"I like life better because I can read a lot faster now."

(When you have weak reading skills) "It is sort of aggravating and you kinda want that feeling to stop."

"My life is very hard for me. (Now) I feel much better about myself."

"It's real hard to get reading assignments done on time. You have to re-read, like, a hundred times each sentence."

"Now I am not embarrassed to read in front of people."

"I feel smarter now."

"I have more confidence about myself."

***"I feel great now because, before I was in RST,
I thought I would be like this forever."***

