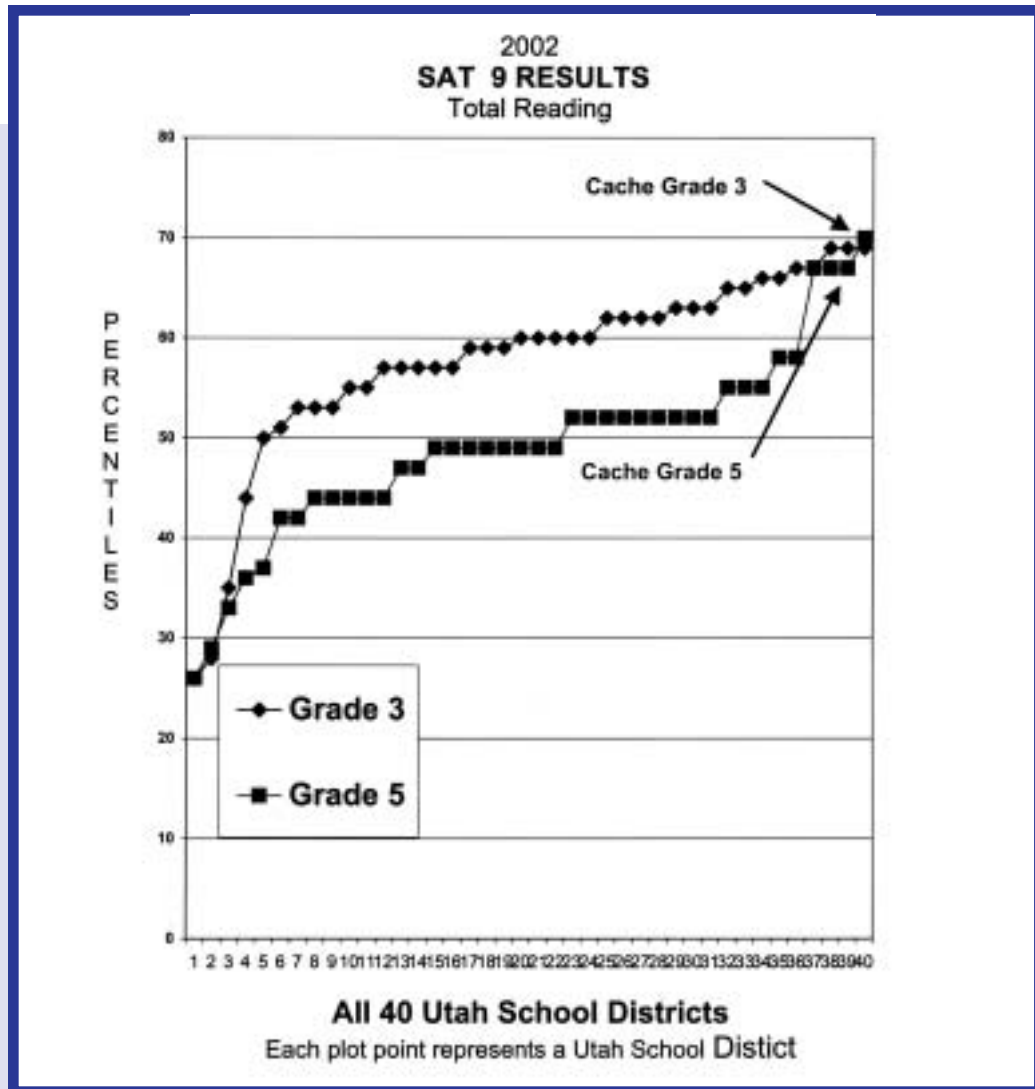


Improving Reading Skills:

A District Model for Success

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In 1996 Cache County School District set a goal that all children in the district read proficiently by the end of third grade. District reading scores (SAT 9) verified the need for a directed focus in literacy performance and instruction. Research verified that learning to read is a crucial step in children's education. Those who fare poorly in the early grades are unlikely to catch up with their more skilled classmates, even after years of further schooling. The intent of this article is to share Cache County School District's roadmap for achieving the reading proficiency goal.

The first step was bringing on board people who possessed a deep knowledge in reading research and

reading instruction, were open-minded to new practices and approaches, and maintained a focus on student performance in the face of conflicting theories and approaches. Their primary responsibility is to support teachers in their efforts to reach struggling readers.

Initially we wanted to determine what students were learning, what instruction occurred during reading, and assessments that were being used. A district team consisting of the two literacy coordinators, the ESL coordinator, the Title I coordinator and the two directors of schools visited every elementary classroom to become knowledgeable about current practices. Observation guidelines

based on research available at that time were utilized. This assessment provided a perspective of our strengths and needs, and established a foundation for professional development efforts.

The focus of our professional development efforts is building instructional leadership in every educator in the district. Grade-level meetings provide teachers with solid research-based information and provide time to examine practices collectively. Our intent is to build a common mindset on what research shows about how children learn to read, and to cultivate effective reading teachers who provide instruction that results in positive student outcomes.

Parallel to teacher professional development is professional development for principals. Monthly principal meetings begin with a literacy focus. Principals are assisted in gaining a comprehensive understanding of literacy instruction to accelerate student achievement. In order to become knowledgeable about what students are learning in classrooms, principals are asked to make daily classroom visits. Principals are to provide time for staff discussions on the instructional work of the school and to monitor with teachers the student performance of struggling readers. All administrators in the district are asked to increase time spent directly involved in instruction.

When classroom teachers begin to focus on the needs of struggling readers, it necessitates collaboration between Special Education, Title I, and ESL staff. Collaboration is encouraged and celebrated, as are opportunities to extend instructional time. Schools are reorganizing paraprofessional time and training to expand instruction in small groups. After school programs also offer intensive instruction. The summer migrant program emphasizes literacy and continues student progress monitoring.

Ongoing assessment and monitoring of student performance drives instructional decisions. Research shows that students not reading by the end of the third grade often continue to struggle throughout their school career. Research also shows that the last half of kindergarten and the first half of first grade are the optimal times for identifying reading problems. One school's request for an assessment aimed at early identification and ongoing monitoring resulted in the implementation of *Dynamic Indicators of Beginning Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS). Subsequently, every school requested and is using this resource. To support the schools' efforts, the district helps organize and implement testing at each site. Testing teams include special educators, speech and language pathologists along with general educators and other educational support staff. Assessment is completed in each school in one day, and at the end of the day the results are delivered to each classroom teacher. This immediacy has served instructional decision-making in a dramatic way. Good data allows teachers to make instructional adjustments early.

Additionally, teachers have been encouraged to use curriculum embedded assessments. The district facilitates this through hands-on support. The district responds to individual teacher and school requests with personnel to administer and manage assessments.

To support early reading instruction, teachers are provided with decodable text in the form of *Reading For All Learners* (RFAL). The embedded assessment is critical to achieving accelerated student performance. Additionally, the following resources have been used in varying degrees across the district: *Reading Mastery*, *R.E.W.A.R.D.S.*, *Fluency Builders*, *Road To The Code*, *Optimize (Early Reading Intervention)*, *Read Well*, and *Corrective Reading*. No single program is seen as the answer. Instructional success is measured by student gains.

Recently, a district-wide committee began looking for resources to address systematic phonics instruction. A *Consumer's Guide to Evaluating a Core Reading Program Grades K-3: A Critical Elements Analysis*, by Dr. Ed Kame'enui and Dr. Deborah Simmons served as the evaluation instrument. This tool specifies criteria for reviewing critical skills and strategies that children must acquire in order to become successful readers by grade three. This led to the purchase of an instructional resource that all teachers are trained with and encouraged to use as a resource along with other resources based on student performance.

This process and collective focus is ongoing. Improvement has occurred as the district's and schools' purpose has united. In 2002, SAT 9 scores reflected accelerated student achievement. Our roadmap for accelerating student success centers on creating and sustaining continuous learning where everyone's primary role is to be a learner.

