How a Boston School Boosted Home Reading

In this classic article from the September 2000 issue of *Principal*, Boston principal Bill Henderson describes the steps that he and his colleagues took after receiving abysmal standardized-test scores at the end of the 1989-90 year, placing their student achievement near the bottom of the city's 78 elementary schools. As they planned an improvement strategy, they agreed on spending more time on reading, improving the quality of instruction, getting more books, and providing more help to students who were reading below grade level. But there was also strong sentiment that these strategies wouldn't result in higher achievement unless students spent a lot more time reading – and the best place to do that was at home.

But how could they get students in this high-poverty school to read at home? Here is the ten-year story of how Henderson's school figured this out:

• *A contest* – During the 1990-91 school year, the school promised to give prizes to students who read the most books. Some students read a lot of books, but as the year progressed, it became evident that less-proficient readers were giving up because they realized they had no chance of winning a prize. Other students tried to game the system by reading lots of short, easy-to-read books. The school distributed prizes to the winners at the end of the year, but teachers had no illusions that they had changed many students' reading habits. If anything, they had reinforced existing inequalities.

• *Flooding students with reading material* – During 1991-92, the school used every possible approach to get more books into students' hands:

- Expanding the school library's collection;
- Stocking classroom libraries;
- Taking students to neighborhood libraries and signing them up for their own library cards;
- Giving students free books through Reading Is Fundamental;
- Giving each student a book on his or her birthday;
- Setting up a swap cart where students could exchange used books and magazines;
- Bringing in vendors to sell book to families at rock-bottom prices;
- Requesting book donations from the community.

All these measures exposed children to a lot more reading material, and that was good. But many students still weren't reading regularly at home.

• *Reading contracts* – During 1992-93, the school developed a contract that required students to read or be read to at least four days a week at home. Kindergarten through second-grade students had to read for at least 15 minutes a day, grade 3-5 students for at least 20 minutes. In deference to concerns raised by the school council, the policy allowed families to skip days when they were busy or had a crisis, and allowed children to read independently or be read to by any relative or family friend. The school

pushed the reading contracts at parent meetings, teacher conferences, and in school bulletins and newsletters. However, the results that year were disappointing. Fifty percent of students participated at least 75 percent of the time, and those students showed steady growth in reading proficiency. But the other 50 percent were not reading regularly at home. What was most disturbing was that the students who were not reading at home were generally the least-proficient readers, students whose families qualified for free or reduced-price meals, and students with special needs.

• *Parent workshops* – At the beginning of the 1993-94 school year, a committee of parent leaders asked Henderson to send a strong letter to all parents emphasizing the benefits of reading at home. They also held a series of parent workshops on the importance of home reading. But those who showed up for the workshops were parents whose children were already honoring the reading contract. It was obvious that a more aggressive approach was needed.

• *A literacy show* – At the beginning of 1994-95, the school council decided to hold a literacy show in which students dressed up as children's book characters performed skits. Parents packed the auditorium and loved watching their children perform, and Henderson took advantage of the turnout to deliver a strong message about how children's future academic progress depended largely on how much they read at home. But there were still a good number of homes in which very little reading was taking place.

• *Home visits and calls* – The next year, some parents decided to address this issue by visiting the homes of all newly-enrolled students. Twelve parents received training and technical assistance from the Boston-based Institute for Responsive Education and proceeded to visit homes, giving a book to each family, talking up the importance of home reading, and discussing ways that each family could fulfill the reading contract. The visiting parents also called and/or visited the homes of parents who were not participating regularly in home reading; as fellow parents, they were usually well received. The school council upped the ante, making performance on the reading contract part of each student's report card. Teachers checked off each student's level of participation and sent warning notices to non-participating students midway through each marking period.

• *Reaching the hard core* – All these measures brought participation in the home reading program to 84 percent – a significant accomplishment. But an analysis of the 16 percent of non-participating students revealed the same pattern as before: almost all of these students came from low-income homes, had special needs or reading problems, and were reading below grade level. In other words, they were the students who needed the program the most. "The hard reality," says Henderson, "was that unless we could change

the reading patterns of these children, their chances of academic success were limited." And the older they got, the more difficult it would be to change their habits.

In the fall of 1996, parent and staff leaders held a pizza party to which only the families of the students who were not participating in the home reading program were invited. Invitations were sent, follow-up phone calls were made, transportation was arranged, and parents were encouraged to bring along younger siblings so child care would not be an issue.

Two-thirds of the targeted families showed up, and after a pizza feast, parents went to the auditorium while children stayed in the cafeteria with adult volunteers to do arts and crafts projects and watch a movie. The parents had a frank discussion about why it was so difficult to honor the reading contracts. Some parents vented about the stress of being single parents trying to find time after work to make dinner, clean up, and get their children ready for bed. Others said that they had to work in the evening and leave their children with an older sibling or relative. Many spoke of their children's addiction to television and video games.

Parent leaders listened sympathetically to these concerns, acknowledging their own parenting difficulties. Then they led the group in brainstorming strategies for getting children reading *despite* the barriers: setting a specific time and/or place for reading; restricting TV time; reading to all children in the household together; asking a relative or family friend to read with children; contacting teachers for suggestions on the best reading materials; and calling each other for ideas and support. Coming from fellow parents in much the same circumstances, the suggestions hit home.

After this meeting, the school paired a number of students who were not reading at home with parent and community volunteers, who read with them at the neighborhood library. The school also began to check on some students whose participation in the reading contracts seemed dubious, quizzing them on their books to make sure they were really fulfilling their contracts. And in the fall of 1997, the school reached out to its expanding population of Vietnamese-American families, telling them with the help of translators about the importance of home reading, giving them easy-to-read English books, and assuring them that home reading in Vietnamese was perfectly acceptable.

By the middle of the 1999-2000 school year, 95 percent of students were participating regularly in the home reading program, and reading at home was firmly established as part of the school's culture. As participation increased, the school's standardized-test scores also rose, reaching the national average and putting the school near the top of Boston's elementary schools.

Henderson is quick to acknowledge that many factors went into this dramatic improvement – additional instructional time, extensive staff development, adopting best teaching practices, and tutoring for high-need students. But he believes that regular

reading practice is critically important to reading proficiency – and that the home reading program has been the most effective venue for extensive practice. “Hopefully,” he concludes, “we have implanted a reading habit that will stay with them throughout their lives.”

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