



TEACHABLE MOMENTUM



A GUIDE TO
CLOSING AMERICA'S
EARLY READING GAP





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FOREWORD

By Carole Geary, Former Superintendent, Pleasant Valley School District, Pennsylvania

Elementary schools all across the country are struggling to find the path that will ensure that all students are getting what they need to learn to read -- to subsequently read to learn. The crisis has been created by the lack of early reading skills, that true to this book's title, has an exponential negative cascade effect on every American's future success. My district in Pleasant Valley was a great example. Nearly half of our students were beginning their school career with a deficit that in many cases was only going to get wider. Something had to be done.

After a tremendous amount of research on early literacy and many sleepless nights, Mike Grabarits from Step By Step Learning® (SBSL) brought us a new teaching culture that included intensive training in assessment, data analysis, instructional planning, and a Multi-Tier System of Support (MTSS) which would change the way instruction occurred in our elementary classrooms. The regimen helped guide us through an accountable, holistic change process that provided the skills we needed to close the early reading gap that Mike Grabarits documents in "Teachable Momentum". Additionally, we put this training in place for pre-K parents to help them prepare their children at home for the academic rigors of kindergarten. Change in the educational arena often seems like moving a mountain. But it works when leadership makes the commitment to embrace an early reading system that works and the results are so dramatic.

The pages that follow outline the research on early literacy development and a fully proven solution that supports a seismic but manageable change in the way we teach our children to read. This consolidation of information is urgent for parents, teachers and administrators in understanding the components needed for a highly effective early literacy program. The success stories shared in this book are inspiring not only because of the great gains that each school or district experienced, but because each organization is different in size, demographics, and locale illustrating that smart, evidenced-based, outcome driven teaching is achievable regardless of your circumstance. The changes I've experienced in our youngest school children in early literacy development demonstrated that over 90% are now achieving academic success in a half-day kindergarten were spawned by the methodology highlighted throughout this book. The insights in "Teachable Momentum" and the results it documents need to be read and embraced by every stakeholder in our children's education ecosystem.

A CALL TO ARMS....

Closing the Early Reading Gap: Why America's Elementary Schools Are Failing

WARNING...WARNING!!! There is a grave danger pecculating under the surface for many Americans...the fact that they cannot read well enough to compete for today's jobs. For more than three decades, K-3 administrators and teachers in our schools have applied balanced strategies and tactics in an effort to reverse the widening and deeply ominous gap in early reading and comprehension with many of our youngest students. Despite teachers and administrators concentrating and working hard to get every student to read to their respective grade level...our efforts are not producing the results that can keep us even to the world achievements in reading, writing and spelling. The disturbing lack of successful results has caused a severe impact on each child's success in later grades and their future career earning power. We should ALL be concerned with this.

Bluntly stated, today, in an information age in which early reading ability and literacy are more important than they have ever been before, there is a disconnect between current practice, the way reading is routinely taught in our schools, versus what the objective science of teaching and learning to read has said for over a decade.

With teachers having good intent to solve this problem, the implementation of these failed policies in thousands of local district school systems, both urban and rural, have robbed our friends and family of lifelong career opportunities year after year. I know teachers. Some are in my own family. It's not from a lack of effort because I have witnessed on almost a daily basis, teachers working tirelessly to try to solve this problem. Even with all of this extra effort, the average reading scores nationally have flat-lined since the beginning of the new millennium. In fact, in some statistical analyses (NAEP), reading scores among student populations are actually continuing to decline. This should alarm every single American concerned about the ability of future generations to compete with young people from other nations whose reading and comprehension levels are surpassing the U.S.

Over the past fifteen years of designing and implementing reading intervention programs in elementary schools, our analysis shows well-meaning and dedicated educators in the classroom, as well as many administrators, who simply do not know the most effective means to analyze data and create adaptive plans for each student. Think about how you might have been trained and prepared to be a teacher. In your college preparation programs to be a teacher, did you in fact study deeply what reading, writing and spelling instruction and their respective most effective techniques were? Or were you taught about the various forms of assessment and how to read them to improve reading outcomes? This has contributed to the problem...

most teachers were not exposed to the rigor of what are the most effective techniques in treating struggling readers, writers and spellers. The Achilles Heel in this conundrum is if you don't identify the root cause of the problem properly, you have little hope of finding the correct solution. And I believe that better certification programs preparing us to be teachers would have led us sooner to the answer.

Yet, harsh though the question may sound, in the face of the available reading skill data starting in Grade 4, how can we succeed in doing the work that must be done to close this pervasive reading gap among our nation's school children?

As a first step to dramatically improve reading outcomes, we need to ask the following:

- After applying the current methodology year after year, why is there virtually no improvement in student reading scores for more than 40 years?¹
- Given the widespread data that shows we are making no progress toward closing the reading gap, could it possibly be the teaching methodologies and tools that presently are in use are flawed—perhaps even outdated with respect to the current science?


And finally, the most crucial question of all:

- Are there better, more effective program strategies or methods that will enable us to do a much more successful job of closing the reading gap once and for all?

The answer to the last, most pivotal question is a resounding “YES” and will be described in this book. Virtually all of the scientific research conducted over the last 20 years has reached the same conclusions in identifying the most effective techniques for teaching reading and comprehension skills to early school children from kindergarten through third grade.

For over a decade, my team and I have conducted our own extensive research with the guidance of my dear friend and colleague, the late Dr. Ed Shapiro, a well known literacy researcher at the Center for Promoting Research to Practice at Lehigh University. We collectively worked to implement a science and evidence-based, comprehensive system and process in dozens of school districts with the goal of improving each and every elementary school student to achieve reading skills at or above their grade level by the end of second grade. With the help of enlightened principals,

¹ The nonprofit Learning First Alliance cites government figures indicating that overall reading performance among America's school children has remained more or less unchanged since 1972, and further notes that 40% of all nine-year-olds score below the basic level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).




superintendents and teachers, this practical (boots-on-the-ground!) work has provided a rich opportunity to apply the most current scientific findings within the real-world, nuts-and-bolts parameters of the actual classroom experience—for students *and* teachers.

Further, this experience that has now yielded over a decade of data to validate our methodology has emboldened our resolve to provide an antidote in the fight to close the reading gap in America. Let's be clear: This is a battle in which failure is not an option. Moreover, the results of the research, development and process implementation that we have created with participating educators have yielded universal success. As we will see later in the case studies chapter, one of the most often repeated acclamations expressed by administrators and teachers working in the districts in which our MTSS Academic Improvement system has been implemented is simply this: "WOW, It works!"

To briefly summarize here, we discovered that over 50 percent of the children arrived at their first day of kindergarten lacking the basic, foundational skills of knowing letter names and letter sounds that are crucial for learning how to read proficiently. However, after implementation of our carefully crafted and controlled MTSS Academic Improvement process, within six months we were able to successfully bring the average reading-preparedness percentage to over 90% at the end of year...repeatedly...and it was sustained year after year. These figures suggest that all children can learn to read to grade level.

Moreover, almost every one of these school districts encompasses a varying and often high percentage of disadvantaged and below poverty level families, as well as significant numbers of students at serious risk for reading failure and perhaps life failure. For example, one school district in Pennsylvania saw a 57 percent decrease in the number of children referred for Special Needs over a 5-year span after implementation. And while of course, the goal is to close the reading gap for the benefit and future well-being of our youngest children, the cost savings to districts burdened with paying for Special Needs Services cannot be overlooked.

This book is intended as a call to arms to educators—both teachers and administrators—but also to parents, literacy and education advocacy groups. I urge you to forget everything you've ever heard, even from some of the so-called "experts" in the fields of learning theory, to the effect that, "Some children are just naturally poor readers," or "Some children, perhaps said about the children most distressed and immersed in poverty for generations, just cannot be expected to be that bright." Most of all, I recommend that you raise your objection when an uninformed and hopelessly misguided individual declares that, for most children who struggle with reading, "Remedial programs are the only answer." Not true. We just need an improved system... read on to find out the details of how other school districts---just



like your school, perhaps laden with high levels of poverty, now are achieving results well above 90% achievement...even 96% for a ½ day kindergarten!

The preponderance of the evidence clearly shows that, while acknowledging some exceptions for cognitive learning or behaviorally disabled individuals, all children are capable of learning to read to grade level.

The fundamental reason that our MTSS Academic Improvement process has been so successful is that it is firmly grounded in a systems approach derived directly from other industry sectors that focus on quality and results. Briefly stated, this proactive problem-solving approach essentially entails establishing a solidly defined set of quality and performance standards that are desired—or better—are to be achieved. The next step is to collect and assemble the hard-fact data, in the case of student reading competence, through the documentation of a timed and comprehensive assessment process. We then create an objective, evidence-based metric that enables us to analyze and measure that data in each student to identify the root cause of individual early reading skill deficiencies. In this way, once the specific difficulties that individual students are experiencing have been determined, the precise nature and type of instructional help may be given to each child as needed. And finally, the instructional help that is administered must be documented and firmly grounded in what the findings from the reading research science have been telling us for over 20 years.

We will explore the most effective academic processes and how the schools actually are closing the gap in more detail later in this book, but to sum up...the crux of our process involves: intensive and comprehensive data-gathering assessment; the application of an individualized, performance-based gap analysis; and the design and implementation of an equally individualized Multi-Tiered and Multi-Sensory System of Supports (MTSS, sometime referred to as Response to Instruction or RtI) that is singularly focused on sustainability that does not end at the completion of third grade, but promotes continued progress and growth into the fourth grade and beyond.




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What Are Other Educators SAYING ABOUT US?

A) Louisa Moats, Ph.D.

 *"The Step By Step Learning® team has solid relationships with the most renowned researchers and contributors to reading and reading instruction in the industry. The mutual respect that these experts and Step By Step Learning® have toward each other is impressive."*


- Louisa C. Moats, Ph.D. researcher and author of LETRS®

B) Joseph Torgesen, Ph.D.


 *"My interactions with the people at Step By Step Learning® is that they are serious about taking the most reliable data from research and translating it into effective practices for the classroom."*

- Joseph K. Torgesen, Ph.D. former Founding Director of the Florida Center for Reading Research and Distinguished Research Professor of Psychology and Education at Florida State University.


C) Joseph Gorham- Crestwood- Superintendent

 *"SBSL possesses the art of a surgeon as they diagnose the root causes to your district literacy struggles and produces a systematic plan to overcome the obstacles and improve your literacy success and outcomes."*

D) Edward Shapiro (1951-2016), Center for Promoting Research to Practice at Lehigh University

 *"The results show that growth rates for every child increased significantly and this was accomplished within a half day kindergarten setting."*

E) Carole Geary-Pleasant Valley- Former Superintendent

 *"The enthusiasm we have generated within our staff is both exciting and, as the data reveals, highly sustainable."*

