

Florida Center for Reading Research

Literacy First Comprehensive Reading Reform Process

What is Literacy First?

Literacy First is a comprehensive reading reform process implemented in PreK-12 schools to strengthen the school's reading program by reorganizing the school's infrastructure and culture. This 3-year plan is accomplished by proceeding through a series of steps designed to: 1) analyze a school's current reading program and culture; 2) incorporate the school's current curriculum into the literacy plan; 3) create a 3-year strategic plan unique to that school; 4) train the leadership and faculty of the school; and 5) provide the school with coaching and consulting to actualize the reform plan. Implementing these steps requires numerous meetings between members of the school district, administration, and faculty.

How is Literacy First aligned with Reading First?

The implementation of sustained, high quality professional development for K-3 teachers is a major focus of Reading First. *Literacy First* stresses that it is a process, not a program. It also emphasizes that without the full, active support of the principal, faculty, and district representatives, it is unlikely to be successful. *Literacy First* works in conjunction with both the leadership and the faculty to change the culture and develop a "can do" spirit among the staff. *Literacy First* consultants hold either a master's or doctorate degree and are former or present teachers, principals, and district level administrators. Each *Literacy First* consultant participates in an extensive training process, which includes an initial training, co-presenting with an experienced consultant, and receiving evaluations on every presentation (consultants must consistently receive an average score of 6.5 on a 7 point scale on all evaluations). During the 3-year process in which *Literacy First* works with a school, each teacher at the school receives 8 days of professional development. To strive for fidelity of delivery in these training sessions, *Literacy First* consultants utilize Instructor's Notes, which include background material and directions for each lesson, 400 color transparencies, 14 videotapes, and learning activities.



To facilitate the cultural changes, a *Literacy First* consultant spends 22 days in the school observing, demonstrating, problem-solving, and encouraging teachers. During each consultation day, the principal, the school-based reading coach, and the *Literacy First* consultant observe a minimum of five teachers. After each observation, the consultant leads a mini-conference with the teacher to reinforce strengths demonstrated by the teacher in relation to implementing *Literacy First*. Additionally, the consultant offers suggestions for more in-depth implementation of all components of the *Literacy First Process*. *Literacy First* consultants also work with principals and school-based literacy coaches to strengthen their leadership skills. Although alternative delivery modes such as CD-ROM or on-line training are not offered, phone and electronic mail consultation are available.

During the training, each teacher receives a manual and resource books that cover a wide variety of topics including: phonological awareness, phonics, spelling, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, reading and metacognitive strategies, flexible skill groups, and literacy centers. The objectives for each activity in which participants engage are clearly stated in the manuals. Presentations include discussions and

demonstrations. Emphasis is placed on the effective instructional technique of using assessment to inform instruction. A specific assessment protocol is prescribed for phonological awareness, phonics, spelling and fluency. This assessment protocol is used to measure student progress. *Literacy First* works with schools to allocate two hours and 20 minutes each day for reading instruction: one hour of large group instruction, one hour with small, flexible skills groups, and about 20 minutes of sustained silent reading. Students not engaged with the teacher during small group time participate in literacy centers.

Through its training sessions, *Literacy First* addresses phonological awareness in terms of what it is and why it is important as well as assessment and teaching strategies. Phonics, advanced decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension skills from a variety of reliable sources are included in the instructional workshops. Although the effectiveness of sustained silent reading as a technique to improve fluency was not substantiated in the research findings of the National Reading Panel (2000), *Literacy First* does address fluency specifically for grades two through six through a resource book that incorporates research-based fluency strategies. During *Literacy First* professional development, teachers learn how to choose books at individual student's independent reading level to read during sustained silent reading.

Currently, *Literacy First* is developing a correlation between the K-12 Florida Reading Endorsement Competencies and *Literacy First*.

Research Support for Literacy First



Literacy First was developed in 1998. The instructional content and commitment to on-going professional development of the *Literacy First Pre-K to 12 Comprehensive Reading Reform Process* includes the important instructional elements of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension. On their website, *Literacy First* reports that over a three-year period, schools that implemented this process made greater gains on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test than did elementary schools in general. For more information, see: http://www.literacyfirst.com/assets.jpg/pdf_csrd.pdf. These are positive results, but they are difficult to interpret because little is known about the pre-existing characteristics of the schools that chose *Literacy First* versus those that did not use the program. *Literacy First* cites preliminary data (including surveys, interviews, and observations) that indicated changes in teachers' knowledge and classroom implementation of explicit teaching directed at the students' instructional level. Presently, *Literacy First* is designing a study to collect more evidence about its impact on cultural change and school reform.

We conclude that the *Literacy First Pre-K to 12 Comprehensive Reading Reform Process* does provide professional development and strategies in the areas important for reading growth. Many of the instructional strategies supported by *Literacy First* are consistent with findings from current research in reading. There is no research currently available that can unambiguously substantiate its effectiveness as a means to improve reading outcomes, although *Literacy First* has at least one project underway which it feels will provide this evidence.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Literacy First*:

- Multi-level involvement includes the district superintendent, the school principal, and the faculty, of which at least 80% must be supportive of the program before it is implemented.
- The *Literacy First* process involves an intensive initial professional development experience followed by three years of on-going training and in-class coaching for teachers. Additionally, principals are provided training that involves strengthening leadership skills and emphasizes the importance of becoming the instructional leader in the school.
- The consulting services based on a site analysis are tailored to the unique needs of each school.
- *Literacy First* offers significant, on-going support to coaches so that they are equipped to fulfill their roles with maximal knowledge and skill.
- The revised phonics and phonological awareness assessments from *Literacy First* are reliable and valid, which make scores from these assessments suitable for making instructional decisions about individual children.
- The professional development process recognizes the need to address the "school culture" pertaining to reading instruction and to establish a problem solving approach to instructional issues for individual children and teachers.

Weaknesses of *Literacy First*:

- Literacy First's interaction with the school's chosen reading curriculum and instructional materials is unclear and a potential weak link. In other words, how teachers can incorporate the provided research-based recommendations into their existing reading program in a sound, systematic, and explicit manner is not clear.
- Initial impressions of the materials were negative. However, it is important to note that *Literacy First* has revised the materials and they now include full references and are edited and organized.


Which Florida districts have schools that implement Literacy First?

Brevard County	321-631-1911
Highlands County	863-471-5564
Martin County	561-219-1200
Lake County	352-343-3531
Sumter County	352-793-2315
Okeechobee County	863-462-5000
Orange County	407-317-3202

For More Information

www.literacyfirst.com

References

 National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Washington, D.C.

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