Frequently Asked Questions About K-3 Reading Instruction for Florida Reading First Schools
1. What is systematic instruction?
Systematic instruction refers to a carefully planned sequence for instruction, similar to a builder’s blueprint for a house. A blueprint is carefully thought out and designed before building materials are gathered and construction begins. The plan for systematic instruction is carefully thought out, strategic, and designed before activities and lessons are developed. Systematic instruction is clearly linked within, as well as across the five major areas of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). For systematic instruction, lessons build on previously taught information, from simple to complex, with clear, concise student objectives that are driven by ongoing assessment. Students are provided appropriate practice opportunities which directly reflect instruction.

2. What is direct instruction?
Direct instruction is an instructional approach that utilizes explicit and structured teaching routines. A teacher using direct instruction models, explains, and guides the students through extended practice of a skill or concept until mastery is achieved. The lessons are fast paced, students are academically engaged, and teachers are enthusiastically delivering instruction. Direct instruction is appropriate instruction for all learners, all five components of reading, and in all settings (whole group, small group, and one-on-one).

3. Aren’t scripted lessons for inexperienced or uncreative teachers?
The primary purpose of scripted lessons is to provide effective explanations of new concepts, to offer appropriate examples of the skill or concept that is being taught, to provide practice activities that directly reinforce instruction, to provide models for appropriate scaffolding and error correction, and to help with pacing. If they are well written, scripted lessons help focus instruction by providing consistent language and maintaining fidelity to the lesson’s objectives. While it is true that scripted lessons may be particularly beneficial to less experienced or less knowledgeable teachers, they may also be used effectively by experienced teachers to help them sharpen and focus their instructional language and procedures.

4. Why is it important to have a 90 minute reading block?
Implementation of a 90 minute reading block must be combined with good teaching methods with special attention to what a student already knows, timely and specific feedback, and the active participation of the teacher in order to have a significant impact on achievement (Quartarola, 1984). It is important to remember that students vary on the amount of time needed to learn a new skill, the intensity of instruction, and amount of practice opportunities provided within the reading block. All of these aspects of reading instruction are important to student achievement (Gettinger, 1984, 1985, 1989). Therefore “time spent in learning is a more useful index of learning time and a stronger predictor of achievement than simply allocated time” (Gettinger, 1985, p. 4).

Research suggests that before simply adding more time, schools should instead, make better use of (maximize) existing time (Quartarola, 1984; Hossler et al., 1988; (Moore et al., 1990 NECTL, 1994);(Taylor et al., 2000); (Taylor et al., 2003). Because increased engaged time (on task) produces, at best moderate increases in achievement, schools must at the very least find ways to (Aronson et al., 1999):

1- Increase the proportion of time students are involved in instructional activities.
2- Be sure that adequate allocated time is devoted to instruction in those core academic subjects in which we seek improved student performance.
3- Find ways to minimize interruptions during engaged learning times so teachers can create opportunities for academic learning time.

The appropriate amount of time allocated to reading instruction in grades K-3 will vary with the needs of the majority of students. Schools that serve a high proportion of students at risk for reading difficulties (students from poverty, students with restricted language experience, etc.) will likely require a longer block of time devoted to reading instruction than schools that have small numbers of students at risk (Foorman and Torgesen, 2001). If substantial numbers of students in the early elementary grades are not able to meet grade level expectations in basic reading skills and significant numbers cannot meet grade level expectations in reading comprehension by the end of third grade, both the amount and quality of instruction may need to be increased. The 90 minute reading block is widely
recommended as a “starting place” for schools that serve a high proportion of poor and minority students. This amount of time can be adjusted depending on students’ reading achievement and is a minimum requirement for all elementary schools in Florida.

5. May students go to another class for intervention during the 90 minute block?
In order to implement some programs correctly, students are grouped homogeneously and may need to move to another classroom for their core instruction. Students with an individual educational plan (IEP) that specifies special reading interventions may receive the most appropriate level of instruction either in the regular classroom or by the ESE teacher in the special education classroom.

6. How do we prioritize what to teach when the Core Reading Program offers so much?
During the 90 minute reading block, your priority should be on teaching the objectives of the lesson in the sequence provided with a focus on the five major components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Content and activities that directly teach and provide mastery oriented practice of critical skills should receive the first priority for inclusion in the lesson. Part of the purpose of the professional development provided within Reading First is to provide the knowledge required to help teachers select the most relevant, or critical instructional activities from within the material offered by the core program, depending on the needs of their students.

7. What is the best use of an extra adult in the room during the 90 minute block?
During the time an extra adult is in the room, organize the reading block for flexible, small groups. Rather than using this time to teach a whole group lesson, the classroom teacher works with a small group of students who are at high risk while the other adult works with a small group of students who need extra support. One suggestion is to train the extra adult (e.g., paraprofessional, volunteer) to use a detailed reading program that meets the needs of the particular group in which he/she will work.

8. During the 90 minute reading block, should I follow the sequence of student materials in the Core Reading Program or choose stories as they seem appropriate for our thematic units?
In an explicit and systematic reading program, the student materials are aligned with instruction and sequenced to provide application and practice of previously taught skills. Choosing stories based on thematic content is not appropriate as it may reduce the benefits of explicit, sequenced, and aligned student materials.

9. Is writing permitted and what type of writing activities can be included during the 90 minute block?
A writing activity that relates to one of the five components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension) may be included as part of the reading block. A lesson that teaches the writing process should be outside the 90 minute reading block. For example, writing activities that are explicitly designed to provide opportunities for students to use new vocabulary words in novel ways are an appropriate part of reading instruction. Many writing activities can also be used productively to help children strengthen their phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge.

10. What do you mean by flexible small group instruction?
Students are grouped according to shared instructional needs and abilities and regrouped as their instructional needs change. Group size, allocated instructional time, and instructional content varies among groups. Time can be adjusted so that additional instruction is provided for struggling students.

11. What is included in a small group reading lesson?
Small group teacher-led instruction should be a focused time spent on building skills that the students need to improve upon. This may include work in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, or comprehension. Instructional adaptations for individual children are made primarily in terms of varying amounts and intensity of instruction and practice on the five components. Teachers use the DIBELS® data and other assessments to group students and identify which skills
to emphasize for each group. To illustrate, spending half of the time or more on a picture walk during each small group teacher-led instruction is not an effective use of instructional time, because it would not be responsive to the varying needs of students in the different groups. It is important to work with each small group differently based on instructional need. When forming and modifying groups, teachers should also consider the students’ attitude, behavior, and work ethic.

12. How can I keep teaching my small group when the students in centers complete their activity early and start misbehaving?

It is essential to spend time at the beginning of the school year modeling, practicing, and reviewing appropriate classroom procedures in order to establish efficient routines and to encourage positive classroom behaviors during center time. It is also necessary to keep consistent materials, in addition to the assigned activity at the centers. These consistent activities contain materials that have been previously introduced to the students. These materials are aligned with the students’ instructional needs and remain available to students throughout the year. Examples of consistent materials that enable students to stay academically engaged until they move to the next center are: magnetic letters, alphabet tiles, alphabet puzzles, rubber stamp letters, dry-erase marker boards, blank mini-books, word games, word sorts, flannel boards, puppets for retelling, CD’s and tapes for listening centers. These consistent materials need to be well organized and easily accessible to students.

Kindergarten and First Grade Students Center Activities and a Teacher Resource Guide (how to plan, organize, and manage reading centers) can be found at http://www.fcrr.org/Curriculum/studentCenterActivities.htm.

13. What is a good way to build vocabulary skills?

Teachers help young students build vocabulary by choosing understandable, interesting, and potentially useful words to discuss during or after reading books to the children. Vocabulary knowledge will be expanded and deepened when teachers clearly explain the meaning of unfamiliar words and provide discussion and activities that require students to demonstrate their knowledge of the words’ meaning within multiple contexts. Teachers build vocabulary skills for older students before, during, and after reading by choosing words that are likely to be useful in understanding the text, exist in a variety of texts, and appear in normal conversations of the mature language user. In order for vocabulary learning to have an impact on reading comprehension, new words must be learned at a level of mastery that includes the ability to fluently access their meaning and to understand possible shades of meaning in different contexts. So, one key to “robust” vocabulary instruction is to engage students in activities with words that help them learn to access their meaning in many different ways. A helpful resource for building teachers’ knowledge about vocabulary instruction is Bringing Words to Life by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (Beck et al., 2002).

14. What can I do to help my students read more fluently?

Teachers can help their students become more fluent readers by providing a model of fluent reading and then monitoring them during repeated oral reading. Model how to read a passage at the student’s independent level then have him/her reread the passage at least three times to improve fluency. Of course, this will need to be done across many different passages during the year in order to produce a generalized effect on reading fluency, and it is important for reading to be as accurate as possible during this type of reading practice. Effective repeated oral reading strategies include partner reading, choral reading, tape-assisted reading, and timed repeated readings. When the teacher is able to provide immediate feedback during a timed repeated reading, it may be appropriate to have the students read material at their instructional level. As much practice as possible of this type should be scheduled during reading instruction, particularly for students who are struggling with reading fluency. For students who are very poor readers with extremely limited sight vocabularies, it may also be helpful to provide focused practice from lists of high frequency words. Apart from these focused instructional techniques that have been shown to produce gains in reading fluency, it is also important to create as many opportunities throughout the day for students to read meaningful text at the appropriate level of difficulty. A useful reference for further guidance in the area of fluency instruction is A Focus on Fluency that can be downloaded from: http://www.pre.org/products/re_/fluency-1.htm.
15. Is it okay to use nonsense words as a timed fluency activity in a center?
No. To build fluency in phonemic decoding skills, it would be much better to use regular real words that the student is not already able to recognize “by sight” or at a single glance. This type of practice will increase decoding skills while at the same time increasing the students’ familiarity with words that are likely to be encountered in text. On the DIBELS® Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) measure, students are asked to read nonwords in order to provide a direct assessment of their ability to fluently execute phonemic decoding skills. Nonwords are used in order to reduce the influence of children’s “sight word” knowledge on the test. However, the best way to practice these skills once students have acquired them through explicit instruction is to provide opportunities to use them by reading decodable text, and to encourage their use when unfamiliar words are encountered during any reading activity. If students receive enough of this kind of instruction and practice, they will not have problems with their performance on the Nonword Fluency test.

16. Why should I use the DIBELS® Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) measure if the students are not able to use the strategies we teach them such as picture cues?
Picture cues are meant to provide a temporary support for students when they encounter unfamiliar words in text during the early stages of learning to read. They are an aid for students who cannot yet read the words in the passage accurately and fluently on the basis of the word’s printed representation. Our goal is to help students acquire all the skills and knowledge they need to accurately and fluently identify words in text while simultaneously developing an understanding of the meaning of the passage. The Oral Reading Fluency test from the DIBELS® is a direct assessment of how well students can read grade level text without the “outside supports” that will not always be available as students move to text at higher levels of difficulty. Students who remain dependent upon “picture cues” as an aid to reading grade level text are not developing the kinds of word reading skills that are increasingly required in late elementary, middle, and high school.

17. Which assessments measure comprehension?
The following assessments include a measure for comprehension that has sufficient evidence of reliability and validity:
DAR (Diagnostic Assessment of Reading)
ERDA (Early Reading Diagnostic Assessment)
GMRT (Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test™, 3rd ed.)
GRADE (Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation)
WRMT (Woodcock Reading Mastery Test)

This is not a comprehensive list of tests to measure reading comprehension. Additional information is available on the FCRR website: http://www.fcrr.org/assessment.

18. What do you recommend for students who continually score in the red (high risk) on the DIBELS® measures?
The most likely explanations for lack of progress of students who perform in the high risk range on the DIBELS® are: 1) instruction is not targeted on the right skills or is not being delivered effectively; 2) not enough time for instruction is being provided; and 3) instruction is not being provided in a small enough group. Small group instruction provides a more powerful opportunity for the teacher to monitor and correct recurring errors, and to make an assessment of the areas where the student is most in need of additional instruction and practice. The smaller the group, the more effectively can these two critical things be accomplished. For many students, the only way their reading skills will be accelerated toward grade level performance is through a sufficient amount of focused small group instruction. If the teacher has access to an instructional program that supports explicit, systematic instruction and effective, coordinated practice, then the first areas to focus adjustments on are amount of time for instruction and instructional group size. Of course, a fundamental assumption here is that the instruction available to the student will be responsive to reading performance data, and will be directly focused on areas of greatest instructional need.
19. What is the difference between Core, Supplemental, and Intervention instruction?

Core Instruction is instruction provided to all students in the class, and it is usually guided by a comprehensive core reading program. Part of the core instruction is usually provided to the class as a whole, and part is provided during the small group, differentiated instruction period. Although instruction is differentiated by student need during the small group period, materials and lesson procedures from the core program can frequently be used to provide reteaching, or additional teaching to students according to their needs.

Supplemental Instruction is instruction that goes beyond that provided by the comprehensive core program because the core program does not provide enough instruction or practice in a key area to meet the needs of the students in a particular classroom or school. For example, teachers in a school may observe that their comprehensive core program does not provide enough instruction in vocabulary, or in phonics, to adequately meet the needs of the majority of their students. They could then select a supplemental program in these areas to strengthen the initial instruction and practice provided to all students.

Intervention Instruction is provided only to students who are lagging behind their classmates in the development of critical reading skills. This instruction will usually be guided by a specific intervention program that focuses on one or more of the key areas of reading development. This type of instruction is needed by only a relatively small minority of students in a class. In some cases, students in 2nd and 3rd grade may have lagged so far behind grade level development of reading skills that very little content from the grade level comprehensive core program is suitable for them. In these cases, students may need to receive instruction guided by a comprehensive intervention program that is specifically designed to meet their specific needs while at the same time accelerating their growth toward grade level reading ability.

20. What materials should I use for targeted instruction for my struggling students?

Targeted Supplemental Reading Programs (TSRP) and Targeted Intervention Reading Programs (TIRP) provide instruction in one or more areas of reading skill. They are intended for flexible use to support extra instruction for all students, or in more intensive interventions to meet the needs of specific areas such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension. If students in second or third grade are so far below grade level in their reading skills that very little of the instruction and practice supported by the comprehensive core program is appropriate for them, they may be more effectively served in a group or classroom that receives instruction guided by a targeted intervention program. Many programs that can be used effectively to support supplemental instruction or interventions have been reviewed by FCRR, and reports are available at: http://www.fcrr.org/FCRRReporst/reportlist.htm

21. What exactly is meant by immediate intensive intervention (iii), or ‘triple i’?

Immediate intensive intervention is specifically designed and customized instruction for homogeneous small group or one-on-one reading instruction. It is considered “immediate” because it should begin as soon as the teacher becomes aware that a student is lagging seriously behind in the development of one or more critical reading skills. It involves systematic and explicit instruction that specifically address the student’s deficiency in a component skill, and it also involves more frequent progress monitoring on target skills to ensure adequate progress. Immediate, intensive interventions can be provided by the classroom teacher, a reading resource or special education teacher, or a well-trained and supervised paraprofessional. They can be provided both within and outside of the 90 minute reading block. For example, during the small group instructional period within the 90 minute block, a resource teacher could provide an intensive intervention to one small group of students, while the teacher was providing differentiated instruction to another group of students, and the rest of the students were working at independent reading centers. One key to success for intensive interventions is that they must increase the instructional intensity available to the child. To do this, interventions should be offered every day in as small a group as possible, and they should be delivered by a skilled instructor. For more information about organizing and delivering immediate intensive interventions within a school, please see A Principal’s Guide to Intensive Reading Interventions for Struggling Readers in Reading First Schools by Joseph Torgesen: http://www.fcrr.org/staffpresentations/Publication1a.pdf.
22. What can we use for intervention when third grade students are not successful with the Comprehensive Core Reading Program?

Comprehensive Intervention Reading Programs (CIRP) are intended to replace the core reading programs for students who are reading one or more years below grade level, and who are struggling with a broad range of reading skills. Comprehensive Intervention Programs include instructional content based on the five essential components of reading instruction integrated into a coherent instructional design. A coherent design includes explicit instructional strategies, coordinated instructional sequences, ample practice opportunities, and aligned student materials. Comprehensive Intervention Reading Programs provide instruction that is more intensive, explicit, systematic, and more motivating than instruction students have previously received. These programs also provide more frequent assessments of student progress and more systematic review in order to insure proper pacing of instruction and mastery of all instructional components. If the CIRP is used as a replacement for the Core Reading Program, the CIRP must be taught by a highly knowledgeable teacher with a relatively small group of students.

References


DAR (Diagnostic Assessment of Reading)

ERDA (Early Reading Diagnostic Assessment)
GMRT (Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, 3rd ed.)

GRADE (Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation)

WRMT (Woodcock Reading Mastery Test)