



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Designing Tiered Interventions

Donald Deshler, Ph.D. • January 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Intensive Intervention

Highlights

- Dr. Deshler discusses the factors involved in being a proficient reader at the high school level and the challenges schools face in meeting the needs of adolescent readers.
- Reliable screening is an essential assessment component for identifying struggling readers, diagnosing their instructional needs, and providing targeted, focused, and intense interventions at an early point in their high school career.
- Teachers have different levels of expertise which need to be leveraged and organized in a tiered model of instructional delivery to best meet student needs, including supplemental reading classes taught by specialists with the expertise to provide intensive and explicit instruction and more opportunities for practice and feedback.
- Dr. Deshler explains how struggling students benefit when subject matter teachers and reading specialists collaborate in discussions about student needs and classroom experiences, share reading strategies, and cooperate in designing classroom and supplemental instruction.

About the Interviewee

Donald Deshler is Director of the Center for Research on Learning (CRL) and the Gene A. Budig Teaching Professor of Special Education in the School of Education at the University of Kansas. The work of the CRL focuses on the validation of academic strategies to enable adolescents to meet state assessment standards and successfully graduate from college prepared to compete in the global economy. The CRL's work addresses ways to close the large "achievement gap" and reduce the escalating dropout rate within a world in which students must be prepared to meet increased academic and employment standards. Deshler and his colleagues have completed in excess of \$172 million of contracted R & D work related to the Content Literacy Continuum—a tiered intervention framework for raising literacy achievement for all adolescents.

Deshler serves as an advisor on adolescent achievement to several organizations including the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the National Governor's Association, the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Council on Families and Literacy, and the U. S. State Department. He recently received a presidential appointment to serve as a member of the National Institute for Literacy Advisory Board. He has presented on matters of educational policy regarding adolescent literacy to the nation's governors at the James B. Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy and has testified in Congress and several state legislatures on secondary school reform. Through the Aspen Institute, he has worked with members of Congress to shape policies addressing the challenges of high school reform. Deshler is the recipient of numerous awards including the J.E. Wallace Wallin Award for leadership in educational research, the Maxwell J. Schleifer Distinguished Service Award, and the Higuchi Research Achievement Award. Deshler's most recent textbook (with Annemarie Palincsar, Gina Biancarosa, and Marnie Nair) is *Informed Choices: Principles and Programs for Adolescent Literacy*.

Full Transcript

I'm Don Deshler. I'm at the University of Kansas. I'm Director of the Center for Research on Learning; I'm a professor in the Department of Special Education. Our center has just finished its thirtieth year of operation and the entire focus of our work since inception has been on struggling adolescent learners.

Adolescents who struggle in reading do so for a variety of reasons. At the top of the list is the fact that for many years they've failed, and they're aware of this fact. And when they encounter increasingly difficult academic demands in high school, that just plays down on them, and everyday they're reminded of the fact that they're not being successful.

When we try to understand what is at the root of poor reading performance, we need to consider the broad array of factors that are embodied within the act of reading. That is, what's involved in being a proficient reader at the high school level? And those skills vary from being able to decode words and read fluently to being able to detect various organizational structures of text and nuanced meanings that authors give.

One of the most significant challenges we face as we try to address the needs of struggling adolescent readers at the secondary level is a shortage of time. Given that fact, as we're making decisions about those students with whom we will work and those students with whom we won't—because there is always a shortage of resources—we need to have in place some screening practices, screening instruments that will give us some good data, that will give us an indication of those students who are struggling and in what areas they are struggling. And if we're not getting an accurate read on the screening that we do, we can end up misplacing some students. And once placed in a class, for example in your first semester of your ninth-grade year, changes aren't made until the end of that semester. That's a significant chunk of time.

Because we are so short of instructional time for adolescent learners, we need to have our instruction being very targeted, focused, and intense. One of the ways that secondary staffs have dealt with this is to recognize that everyone on a secondary faculty doesn't play the same role. Teachers bring different levels of expertise to the table, and we should leverage those varying levels of expertise to meet the needs of students. And we can organize the work the teachers do within a tiered model of instructional delivery.

The work that we have done in our center, we've called this framework the content literacy continuum as an example, but there are others out there, and in a nutshell it is this: We specify some instructional practices for content teachers to use within their classrooms. They are facing certain instructional dynamics, sometimes as many as 30 or more students. And so, in light of that, they are taught some specific things that they can do to make the language demands and the reading demands more understandable and more approachable for students. And for many students who are struggling, that will be sufficient. But for some students, the things that a content teacher can do won't be enough. They will need more opportunities to practice and more explicit instruction. And hence, if students receive some more intensive instruction, perhaps in a supplemental reading class, the preparation of that teacher is different because the expertise that they are going to bring to the table will be different, and so they may be spending more time giving more explicit instruction on the targeted strategies, more opportunities to practice and to provide feedback.

One of the things that characterizes a learning experience for secondary students is fragmentation. Think of it. They have five or six different teachers throughout the school day. The likelihood of what happens in period two being coordinated with what is happening in period one at the school day is quite remote. And that's something that—by teachers really deciding to find ways to cooperate one with another and for the classroom subject matter teacher who is focusing on a certain type of instruction and wanting students to acquire certain things in his or her class, if they make those demands of his or her class, make the supplemental reading teacher or specialist aware of them, the supplemental reading teacher can then design their intensive instruction on skills and strategies in light of what is transpiring in the general education classroom.

After intensive, explicit, direct instruction is provided within the supplemental class by that specialist, it's important to close the loop by going back to the subject matter teachers and sharing with them, "Here are

the strategies that I have been working on with the students in your class. If it would be possible for you to prompt the students to use them, that would make a world of difference.” So basically, it is a dynamic going back and forth among teachers, and to the degree that we’re not successful in overcoming that barrier—and, frankly, it is a barrier. It’s a challenge because secondary schools often aren’t set up for this to happen, but when teachers make that happen and administrators support that happening, remarkable things happen on behalf of students who are struggling.