

CHANGING THE CLIMATE OF LITERACY IN PHILADELPHIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"Early Balanced Literacy is growing...changing the climate in the School District of Philadelphia's classrooms"

A REPORT ON THE IMPACT OF REDUCED CLASS SIZE/ EARLY BALANCED LITERACY INITIATIVES IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

*Commissioned by **The Philadelphia Education Fund**
Conducted by **Research For Action** October, 2001*

"Balanced Literacy is the hardest job I'll ever love..."

Core Components of Early Balanced Literacy

Reading Aloud: Teacher reads aloud from high quality literature [chosen for a teaching purpose]

Shared Reading: Teacher reads a text that all students can see and join in reading

Guided Reading: Students practice reading, and with teacher support apply strategies they have learned

Independent Reading: Students read on their independent level alone [or with a buddy]

Word Study: Teacher and students analyze word chunks to assist in development of decoding skills

Modeled Writing: Teacher demonstrates writing for a specific teaching purpose

Shared Writing: Teacher and students collaborate to write text with teacher acting as scribe

Interactive Writing: Teacher and students compose together with students doing some of the writing

Independent Writing and Writers Workshop: Students write independently and conference with teachers and peers

Balanced Literacy Across the Curriculum: Teachers use components of Balanced Literacy to integrate other aspects of instruction throughout the day

*"New recruits are working in District classrooms...
finding success as teachers...savoring students' progress"*

“Balanced Literacy has made [the children] better readers and writers than I could have hoped for. The writing-reading connection was amazing...”

INTRODUCING REDUCED CLASS SIZE/ EARLY BALANCED LITERACY IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

In the summer of 1999, federal and foundation grants helped the **School District of Philadelphia** and the **Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF)** make an extraordinary investment in improving literacy and student achievement in city schools.

New funds enabled the Philadelphia School District to hire 250 Literacy Intern Teachers (LITs) to work in District schools in partnership with veteran teachers, many of whom were teaching in crowded classrooms of 30 or more pupils. By September of 2001, there were 1000 LITs creating two-teacher classrooms in the District.

Without building new classrooms or tapping into a limited pool of ‘new hire’ certified teachers, the District was able to reduce teacher-student ratio to 1:15 in 1000 K-2 classrooms. In these classrooms, a rigorous model of intensive literacy instruction was introduced.

This RCS/BL initiative was implemented by the District and the Philadelphia Education Fund. PEF has long served as a partner with leaders, educators and parents to develop strategies that can bring about better schools and attract the resources needed to fuel change.

In 1999, PEF commissioned **Research for Action (RFA)**, a non-profit organization engaged in education research and reform, to evaluate the effectiveness of the RCS/BL initiative. PEF asked RFA to document implementation and recommend steps for on-going improvement.

“I have never, as a kindergarten teacher, reached the heights of success with a group of children as I have this year.”

WHAT DOES EARLY BALANCED LITERACY LOOK LIKE IN THE PHILADELPHIA DISTRICT?

Early Balanced Literacy Intern Teachers reduce the student-teacher ratio by half. This has permitted both the Partner Teachers and the Literacy Intern Teachers in RCS/BL classrooms to provide one-on-one attention to students as they need it.

Students spend large blocks of time daily on the core components of Early Balanced Literacy. By combining reading and writing instruction in both small and large group settings, offering students opportunities to work directly with teachers, other students and independently, and using quality fiction and non-fiction texts, K-2 students in RCS/BL classrooms have made impressive progress, including students whose first language is not English.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING LITERACY INTERN TEACHERS

The District’s RCS/BL initiative has attracted a pool of new teachers to the city’s elementary schools. Literacy Intern Teachers have helped alleviate a growing teacher shortage, while improving student reading and writing outcomes. Despite challenges, these new teachers are finding success and earning certification as they work with experienced Partner Teachers.

More importantly, 91 percent of Literacy Intern Teachers who responded to the Spring 2001 survey by Research For Action said they want to remain in elementary teaching, earn a masters degree, and teach in a public system such as Philadelphia.

*"Reading and writing are increasingly embedded
in all classroom work... It's all integrated
and the kids are seeing reading as a tool."*

*"Children are comfortable and secure...do not mind
taking risks...there are only benefits for my children."*

"The joy I feel when I look at my students' writing is beyond my wildest imaginings...They write pages and pages and the entries have wonderful detail ... I pinch myself because this is a kindergarten class."

SURVEY RESULTS

In spring of 2001, RFA administered a survey. Responses came from 225 Interns and 150 Partner Teachers.

Students and teachers are enthusiastic. Teachers are optimistic. They report that Balanced Literacy works well; students love reading and writing. Progress in Kindergarten and First Grade is unprecedented.

Early Balanced Literacy is particularly well suited to English Language Learners and others who receive special services.

"The children – every one – love to read. They all feel successful. I have more fluent readers than ever and the class as a whole reads more...better...and with more understanding...."

"It gives the ESOL kid a second chance, more attention, more of a chance to practice English...They can be more actively involved in what the other kids are doing."

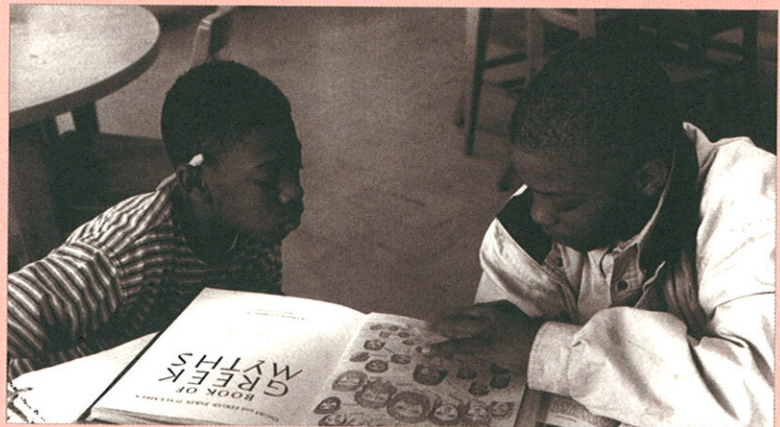
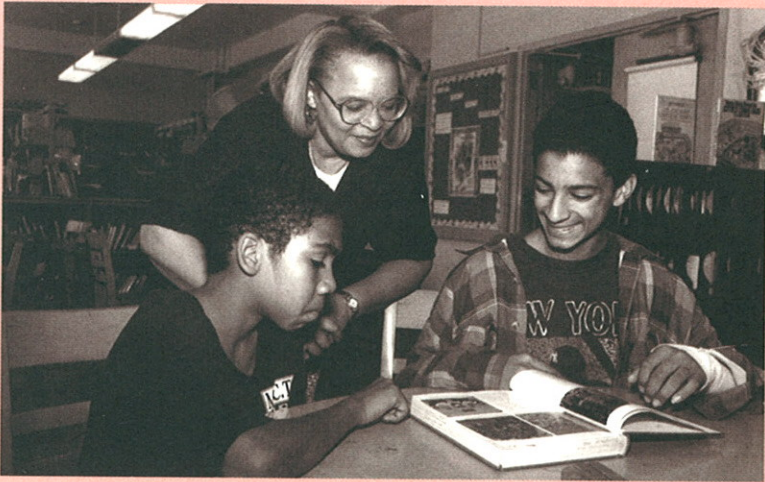
SUPPORT FOR EARLY BALANCED LITERACY

Philadelphia Education Fund has sponsored and supported highly effective Professional Development to Literacy Interns and Partner Teachers. Support for LITs also comes from their Partner Teachers, other Literacy Interns and teachers, and from the students themselves.

Unified commitment to Early Balanced Literacy is crucial. Teachers set the tone, but in many schools the principal is at the center. The principal provides time blocks and materials and leads the culture of the school toward deeper understanding of the importance of literacy. Open inquiry and further study will encourage greater depth of practice.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

An evaluation by Research For Action of implementation of the Reduced Class Size/Early Balanced Literacy initiative in the School District of Philadelphia has revealed both successes and challenges. (These appear in the report section titled Overview of Research on Reduced Class Size/Early Balanced Literacy.)



"...Many more opportunities are available for addressing individual needs. I can finally 'catch' those children who are at-risk for early literacy failure or delay."



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