



15 Tests for Secondary School Reading Interventions

Wasting money is undesirable. Wasted time is irreplaceable.

1 Which students is the intervention intended to support?

The needs of students who are up to two years behind their chronological age will be different to those who are further behind. Some secondary students have become careless readers who have developed a practice of guessing and need to learn more accurate decoding 'through the word'. Other students are able to decode accurately but need specific practice to develop their fluency.

Students who are reading more than two years behind often have more complex needs. They will be inaccurate when decoding, may have poor phonological processing skills and often have low levels of comprehension. They also arrive at secondary school with a history of low motivation and ingrained use of ineffective strategies that have to be unlearned. It takes a skilled practitioner to effectively identify and unravel such problems on an individual basis.

2 What is the evidence base for the programme?

It is important to distinguish between the claims that the marketers make and the scientific evidence base. What do formal studies or systematically gathered data show about the programme's efficacy? What independent measures are used to evaluate impact?

3 Is the intervention based on phonics, whole language, or does it use 'mixed methods'?

While many children learn to read regardless of the method by which they are taught, a significant proportion need explicit systematic instruction, primarily in mastering phonics. Many programmes which were whole language-based have now been repackaged as 'scientifically-based' or 'including phonics'. However, such approaches teach students poor strategies which prevent them from becoming independent readers. Caveat emptor!

4 Does the programme provide an assessment that enables individualised instruction?

In order to minimise time out-of-class, it is important that students have an intervention that focuses on what each particular student needs to learn. Time spent learning material that they already know is time wasted.

5 Does the intervention track progress in every lesson?

Leaving data collection until the end of the intervention means that many opportunities have been lost for adjustment of the programme in response to student performance. There should be a facility for more rapid advancement or for 'slicing back' to work on component skills as necessary.

6 What is the mean rate of progress for each lesson?

If the programme is devised around daily monitoring, each student's rate of progress should be clearly visible. Students need to make at least three months' progress every month if they are to have any hope of catching up on their peers.

7 Is continual, specific feedback an integral element of the programme?

It is important that the student is given specific, immediate feedback on what they are doing right, and

that they are carefully corrected when they are wrong. A lack of immediate correction can lead to students practising errors. It is much simpler to learn correctly from the start than to have to unlearn an error.

8 If the programme is computer-based, how do you know that the work is the student's best effort?

While a computer-based intervention seems easy for a school to implement, students working alone at a computer may not be making sufficient progress. Where teaching assistants are used in support of the programme, it is important to check that students are being challenged to work at their best and not merely being given 'hints' and 'encouragement'.

9 Are the teaching materials carefully graded to ensure that the student is neither bored nor frustrated?

It is important that the work is not so difficult that the student becomes frustrated, or so simple that they become bored. Accuracy criteria for moving up a level should be clear and precise, and the level of difficulty between steps should be carefully calibrated.

10 Are there enough practice opportunities for the student to become fluent?

For the learning to endure, the student must not only be accurate, but also fluent. Fluency practice is vital with clear-cut 'criteria for acceptable proficiency' (CAP).

11 Does the intervention have a spelling and writing component?

Reading should not be taught in isolation from related skills. Spelling is the reverse of the decoding process, i.e. encoding sounds into letter combinations. Some studies have suggested that writing by hand enables students to retain and generalize skills better than using a keyboard.

12 Does the intervention address comprehension needs as an integral aspect of the programme?

Students need to be actively taught to think about what they are reading, particularly at secondary school where they are expected to 'read in order to learn'. There should be opportunities for students to make links between different parts of the text, their own knowledge and experience, and the author's purposes.

13 Are teachers trained in how to differentiate between genuine inability and low motivation?

All too often students have been selected for interventions when the problem is not low ability, but poor motivation resulting in low performance. Differentiating between the two is important both at the assessment level, when selecting students for intervention, and while students are participating in a programme. Failure to identify low motivation as a factor results in students receiving time and resources unnecessarily. At the same time, students who have genuine difficulties will often have low motivation as often a consequence of long-term failure. Teachers need the skills to analyse behavior and motivate students to work at their best.

14 Are there clear exit criteria?

The aim of any reading intervention should be to have the student reading at their chronological age and comprehending what they read. Clear targets should be explicit for each student and when these are reached, they should enjoy graduation with celebration. No one should be in a programme longer than necessary.

15 Is there a systematic approach to checking that gains been maintained over time?

Often students make progress while taking part in an intervention but these gains are not maintained. It is important to follow up students on a yearly basis to ensure that they are able to employ the skills that they have been taught across a wide range of settings.