THINKING READING

5 Principles to ensure that literacy improves for all students

1. Prioritise reading across the school

Ensuring that children can read is the most fundamental duty of schools. This does not just apply to primary schools. Secondary students attend school for five years. That time ought to be more than enough to ensure that struggling readers are guided towards success and independence.

Many secondary teachers oppose reading interventions that encroach on their subject time. They may also fall into the trap of stereotyping, assuming that children cannot read because they lack intelligence. Almost invariably, students cannot read because they have not been taught as they needed to be.

All teachers need to understand that good reading brings a host of benefits, such as improved general knowledge, access to subject knowledge, confidence, improved behaviour, longer concentration and improved self-esteem. Improving reading markedly reduces disruption, frustration and avoidance behaviour. In short, it is in everyone's interests to prioritise reading.

Do you:
- Have a clear, unambiguous policy that reading underlies all academic success?
- Have a clear plan by school leaders to ensure that the policy is implemented?
- Have a member of the senior leadership team with direct responsibility for literacy strategy, interventions and progress?

2. Assess all students

There must be an effective system for screening all students – not just on arrival but throughout their time at school. There should also be a system for ensuring that new arrivals take part in screening as part of their school induction. These practices ensure that no student is overlooked, which can happen surprisingly easily. Some students are very good at masking reading problems. Teacher referrals are not consistent or accurate enough to ensure that all students are identified and helped. Accurate screening systems ensure that those who need help most get it first.

Do you:
- Screen all students using a standardised test with a broad statistical base?
- Follow up low scorers with individual testing to check whether low scores are the result of decoding difficulties, comprehension difficulties, or low motivation?
- Train your staff to ensure that one-to-one testing produces reliable data?

3. Use validated teaching practices

Teaching reading *is* rocket science. Teachers must have a very good knowledge of the content – the code system of written English language – and of empirically based methods that have been proven to have a significant impact. Features of such practices are: carefully analysed content; high rates of student response; immediate, explicit error correction; guided practice to fluency; links to spelling and written language; opportunities to generalise skills; and follow-up monitoring to ensure that gains are maintained. Students in the Last Chance Saloon of their education must not have their time wasted.

Do you:
- Ensure that reading tutors understand the English orthographic system, and how it links to spoken language?
- Ensure that reading intervention staff are trained in research-validated practices that accelerate progress?
- Ensure that student progress is closely monitored and that programmes are adjusted accordingly?

4. Be meticulously organised

Meticulous organisation of reading interventions is essential to ensure that the school's resources are deployed to maximum effect, and that students get the maximum possible benefit from their literacy lessons. This organisation extends to communication, reporting, planning, record-keeping, resource management and the teaching environment.

Do you:
- Ensure that all teachers involved with the student, as well as parents, are informed about reading support being given and that they are updated on progress regularly?
- Keep detailed records of each lesson so that problems are quickly identified and resolved?
- Keep resources, teaching plans and materials in meticulous order so that no time is wasted during lessons?

5. Monitor and evaluate in-depth

Student progress should be monitored systematically, not only in interventions but in whole-school practices – for example: reading logs, book presentations, reading passports, and comprehension activities. Students receiving intervention should be monitored on a lesson-by-lesson basis. Intervention programmes should be regularly evaluated based on student progress data, and adjustments or targeted training put in place where necessary.

Do you:
- Have a straightforward system for teachers to monitor reading activity and progress in mainstream lessons?
- Keep lesson-by-lesson data on students receiving reading interventions, including graphic representations for high-impact feedback?
- Review and evaluate the impact of literacy intervention programmes, including updating training as a regular element of the evaluation cycle?

To learn more about the principles outlined here, visit our website:
http://thinkingreading.net