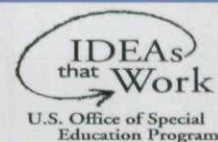# OSEP Research Institutes: Bridging Research and Practice

In this column, *Bridging Research and Practice,* three of the federally funded special education research institutes report to you, the practitioner, on their progress in areas that will be particularly helpful to you in working with your students. The U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has funded these three research institutes to study specific curricular and instructional interventions that will accelerate the learning of students with disabilities in curricular areas:

CASL (Center on Accelerating Student Learning) focuses on accelerating reading, math, and writing development in Grades K-3. The Directors of CASL are Lynn and Doug Fuchs of Vanderbilt University. CASL research sites are also located at Columbia University (Joanna Williams) and the University of Maryland (Steve Graham and Karen Harris).

REACH (Research Institute to Accelerate Content Learning Through High Support for Students With Disabilities in Grades 4-8) is examining interventions that reflect high expectations, content, and support for students. The Director of REACH is Catherine Cobb Morocco at Education Development Center in Newton, MA. Research partners include the University of Michigan (Annemarie Palincsar and Shirley Magnusson), the University of Delaware (Ralph Ferretti, Charles MacArthur, and Cynthia Okolo), and the University of Puget Sound (John Woodward).

The Institute for Academic Access (IAA) is conducting research to develop instructional methods and materials to provide students with authentic access to the high school general curriculum. The Institute Directors are Don Deshler and Jean Schumaker of the University of Kansas, Lawrence. Research partners include the University of Oregon and school districts in Kansas, California, Washington, and Oregon.

This issue features the CASL (Center on Accelerating Student Learning).

Profiling the Quality of Educational Programs for Adolescents With Disabilities

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Preparing secondary students with disabilities to succeed in rigorous general education classes and to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) standards as called for in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act is an exceedingly challenging assignment for all teachers and administrators. The magnitude of this challenge is even greater for adolescents with disabilities who are working toward graduation and the receipt of a standard high school diploma. Not only are the outcome standards that students are expected to meet demanding, but the stipulations of NCLB require that the education of all students be grounded in "scientifically based practices." The importance of educators using scientifically based practices is underscored by the fact that the term (i.e., scientifically based practices) is used 111 times in the Act.

Because of the relatively short amount of instructional time remaining for secondary students and the significant gap that many adolescents with disabilities exhibit between the skills/strategies they possess and the demands of the curriculum they are expected to meet, educational programs must be designed to ensure that what these students are taught and how their instruction is provided reflects best practice (Deshler et al., 2001). Some recent data on secondary school programming for adolescents with disabilities indicates, however, that these students are often taught with instructional programs that are not research based and that the commonly used instructional procedures are not necessarily grounded in research (e.g., Schumaker, Deshler, Bulgren, Davis, Lenz, & Grossen, 2002).

In light of these realities, instructional programs need to be designed and evaluated on an ongoing basis to ensure that they embody the very best of what is known about quality instruction for students with disabilities. Thus, the staff of the Institute for Academic Access designed a program assessment tool, called A Rubric for Educating Adolescents With Disabilities (READ) to assist those who are responsible for providing a quality education to students with disabilities. This tool can be used to build a profile of the educational program currently in place and to determine areas of strength and targeted areas for improvement. It can also be used as a framework around which new programs can be structured. In short, the purpose of the READ is to provide school districts, administrators, directors of special education, and individual special and general education teachers with a tool for enhancing the development, implementation, and sustainability of research-based programming for students with disabilities in secondary settings. This tool is designed to profile instructional programs for students with disabilities who are expected to earn standard high school diplomas in their districts.

An Overview of the Rubric

The rubric is organized into five major domains. The **Program Design Domain** provides a profile of major attributes that define a special education program at the school level such as: the presence of a shared program vision; the method of decision making; alignment and compliance with federal, state, and district guidelines; continuous assessment of the program; and systemic capacity building through continuous staff development. The **Staff Skills Domain** provides a profile of the degree to which

special and general education staff who work with students with disabilities use effective planning methods and instructional practices. These instructional practices included those used in required general education subject-area courses as well as support classes. The **Basic Learning Skills Domain** provides a profile of which basic learning skills are taught to secondary students with disabilities, how they are taught, and how their instruction is coordinated. The skills profiled are: basic decoding skills, basic spelling skills, basic vocabulary skills, basic reading comprehension skills, basic writing skills, basic math concepts and facts, basic technology skills, and basic social skills. The **Advanced Learning Skills Domain** provides a profile of which advanced learning skills are taught, how they are taught, and how their instruction is coordinated. The skills profiled are: advanced reading fluency and vocabulary development, advanced reading comprehension, advanced writing skills, advanced math skills, studying for and taking tests, regulating one's own academic behavior, complex social skills, and taking notes and participating in class. The **Independent Adult Skills Domain** provides a profile of which independent adult skills are taught to ensure students' successful transition to postsecondary life and their success as adults. The independent adult skills profiled are: planning for life after high school, life-skills for adult independence, rights and responsibilities, and planning and preparing for career, and transitions to postsecondary education.

Within each domain area are several quality indicators. For example, there are five quality indicators within the Program Design Domain: shared program vision, decision-making methods, alignment and compliance with federal, state, and district guidelines, continuous assessment of the educational program, and systemic capacity building through continuous staff development.

For each quality indicator, the pages of the READ are arranged in pairs. On each right-hand page is the rubric for the quality indicator (See Figure 1). For example, in Figure 1, the quality indica-

tor for the Program Design Domain is "Shared Program Vision." That is, the quality indicator to be evaluated is the vision that is shared by people involved in the education of secondary students with disabilities. Within the boxes in the far left-hand column of the rubric page are factors related to the quality indicator (e.g., the long/short term nature of the program vision, the amount of input stakeholders had in creating the program vision, and the amount of integration between the vision, student outcomes, and staff roles). To the right of each factor name are four boxes that contain performance dimensions related to that factor. The least ideal performance indicator is listed in the box under the score of "1," and the most idea indicator is listed in the box under the score of "4" for each factor. Respondents are told that, in general, a "4" rating indicates that the program and staff are "proficient" with regard to the factor, a "3" represents the developing nature of the factor, a "2" represents the basic level on implementation, and a "1" represents emerging activities related to the factor.

On the left-hand page opposite the rubric page is the response page (See Figure 2). Here, respondents mark their responses with regard to the performance indicators. For example, for the factor "Short-term/Long-term," a respondent might decide that the program vision statement for the school's special education program considers

students' short-term needs only. Since this performance indicator falls in the "2" column on the rubric page, the respondent would circle the "2" rating under the column labeled "Level of Implementation" on the response page. However, the respondent might consider that factor to be very important to implement at the ideal level, so she might circle the "4" rating under the column labeled "Level of Importance."

Once all the items for a given quality indicator have been circled, the ratings for that quality indicator are then totaled for each column (Level of Implementation and Level of Importance). The example in Figure 2 shows that the ratings for Level of Implementation total 6 points out of 12 possible points. The ratings for Level of Importance total 10 out of 12 possible points. Thus, for this quality indicator, there is a discrepancy between the individual's perception of the program performance and the individual's rating of the importance of that quality indicator.

Once each respondent's ratings have been made and collected, all the respondents' ratings can be totaled and averaged to determine the group's perceptions of the program as well as the quality indicators that they value the most and the least. In addition, discrepancies between what they value and how the program is being implemented can be identified. Once areas for which discrepancies have been identified, participants can target particular areas for

Figure 1. Sample Quality Indicator: Shared Program Vision

What is your shared vision and how is it implemented?					
	N/E* N/A*	1	2	3	4
Short-term/ Long-term		Vision statement is nebulous and unmeasurable.	Vision statement considers students' short-term needs.	Program vision considers preparing students for their next learning environment.	Vision statement promotes future independence for children served in the program.
Input of stakeholders		An administrator writes the vision and goal statements.	An administrator and some staff members write the vision and goal statements.	All staff members participate with input and feedback in developing the vision and goals.	Stakeholders play a collaborative role in the creation of program vision.
Integration of vision, outcomes, and roles		Vision is a perfunctory document only	Outcomes are identified to realize the vision.	Vision and outcomes are correlated; roles have yet to be aligned with vision and goals.	Vision, outcomes, and roles reflect research-based practices for guiding work and proactive decision-making.

*Not evident, not applicable

Figure 2. Response Document for Rubric

Program Design (1)		
Shared Vision (1.1) **What is your shared vision and how is it implemented? (1.1.1)**	**Level of Implementation**	**Level of Importance**
Our short- and long-term vision is clear and promotes students' independence. (1.1.1.1)	1....2....3....4	1....2....3....4
All stakeholders in our school community had input in this vision. (1.1.1.2)	1....2....3....4	1....2....3....4
Our articulated vision, group goals, and individual roles leads our staff to proactive decision-making and research-based practices. (1.1.1.3)	1....2....3....4	1....2....3....4
Section point totals and percentages	/12 = %	/12 = %

improvement, set priorities, set goals within priority areas, and make and implement plans. An Action Plan form can be used to help facilitate these activities.

Considerations in Implementing the Rubric

The READ is a tool that can be used in a broad array of ways. This section will address three key questions that need to be considered when using the READ: Who should complete the READ? How frequently should READ profiles be completed? What strategies can be used to complete the READ?

Who should complete the READ? Ideally, educators will want to get a "complete" picture of the quality of services being provided within a given school. To help gain this profile, having several individuals complete the READ can be helpful. For example, each member of the high school special education department can complete the READ to report perceptions of the nature and quality of services being provided. At the same time, key administrators with responsibility for the quality of services for students with disabilities (e.g., the director of special education, the school principal, the assistant principal in charge of curriculum and instruction) can complete the READ. When multiple stakeholders complete the READ, the resulting information indicates the degree of convergence of individuals with varying perspectives on the nature of programming for students with disabilities. Points of divergence can be productive points for discussion.

Similarly, general educators from an academic department in a school can complete portions of READ to profile courses that have large numbers of students with disabilities enrolled. For example, by completing Domain 4 (the Advanced Learning Skills Domain), they can determine the degree to which their instruction is addressing issues related to such skill areas as reading fluency, reading comprehension, vocabulary, test taking, and student regulation of their own behavior. Likewise, the input of general educators on the items included in the Program Design Domain and the Staff Skills Domain would be very important in order to create a complete profile of the quality of programming on behalf of students with disabilities. In short, the READ can be a beneficial tool for any members of secondary school staffs who have responsibility for teaching students with disabilities.

While the READ was designed primarily as a tool to be used to profile the quality of educational services within a given building, it can also effectively be used by the staffs of several schools within a district that have a feeder-receiver school relationships. For example, it can be used to determine the degree of alignment and coordination of educational services offered by a high school and the three middle schools that feed into that high school. If the instructional emphasis is markedly different across the three middle schools, the instructional challenges awaiting the teachers in the receiving high school will be great (students will arrive with different prerequisite skills and behaviors, and significant time will need to be spent catching certain students up with their peers). On the other hand, if the kinds of instruction offered by the receiving high school fails to reinforce and systematically build up the instructional program offered in the middle schools, much of the momentum and instructional growth students experienced during their middle-school years can be lost. Thus, the READ can be an exceedingly valuable tool when used by multiple stakeholders within and across secondary school settings to ensure that instruction is optimally aligned and coordinated.

The READ can also be a very valuable tool in the hands of an external consultant, peer coach, or evaluator who is working with a school staff for the purpose of profiling the quality of instruction and readiness of a school staff to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. It can also be helpful for the READ to be completed by both a person external to a school as well as the members of a school staff. Being able to compare and contrast the ratings of a variety of people with regard to various program elements can be a productive way of improving the quality of programming for students with disabilities.

How frequently should the READ be completed? The READ has been designed to be a dynamic tool that provides helpful information to educators to refine and build high quality instructional programs. Building such programs is extraordinarily challenging and does not occur quickly. Rather, multiple attempts are required to refine and strengthen various program components over a sustained period of time. The READ should be used to check regular progress toward targeted goals,

and, as such, it should be completed at least annually to determine the degree of progress and change in targeted goal areas specified in the Action Plan that emerged during earlier administrations of the READ.

What strategies can be used to complete the rubric? The rubric can be competed in a variety of ways. For example, each member of the special education department in a school can independently complete the READ, and then a summary report can be prepared that details the varying perspectives across domains and items within domains for each of the staff members. Means can be calculated as a way of determining targeted areas for action. Alternatively, all members of a school's special education department can meet together for the purpose of discussing each of the items in a given domain. Through a process of consensus building they can determine specific strength areas and areas for improvement. Given the amount of material and complexity of issues involved in each of the domains, several meetings should be scheduled to allow sufficient time to carefully discuss each of the quality indicators in the various domain areas. Regardless of the specific strategy used to develop a profile of the services being provided in a school, arrangements need to be made in a such a way that all staff members feel a vested interest in the process and sense of ownership and commitment in addressing the goals included in the Action Plan.

A Case Study Applying the READ

Personnel in an urban school district in a Midwestern state volunteered to use the READ. This school district serves about 1500 high school students, 825 middle school students (seventh and eighth graders), and 870 intermediate-school students (fifth and sixth graders) each year. One hundred and twenty-five students in the high school, 90 students in the middle school, and 100 students in the intermediate school were receiving special education services. There were 18 special educators providing instruction for these students. The Director of Special Education indicated

that the special education department had had a great deal of staff turnover during the past 2 years and that she was concerned about the quality of instruction occurring in special education classes. She opted to employ the READ through the guidance of a facilitator with a combination of team and individual responses. Teams were set up based on personnel assignments to schools: intermediate, middle, and high school. Administrators from each school and the special education director completed the READ individually.

Prior to the first visit of the facilitator, administrators and the Director of Special Education were sent the READ to complete individually. During the facilitator's first visit, 1 hour at the beginning of the day's activities was devoted to instructing the staff teams on how to discuss and respond on the READ. Members of each team sat together, and each person had a copy of the READ. The middle- and high-school teams were instructed to rate quality indicators in all five domain areas; the intermediate team was instructed to rate quality indicators in the first four domains.

Each team then read the READ quality indicators and their related factors together and discussed what they were doing related to each factor. Then they decided which performance rating that they would give the program as well as how much they valued each factor. As the teams discussed each of the domains in turn, a rich conversation transpired. They discussed their viewpoints regarding the philosophy associated with their special education services, the research-based instructional programs available in the district, ideas about class management, and personnel issues. Differing points of view created a venue for in-depth discussions until agreements were made as to what rating a certain quality indicator item would receive from the team. The READ ratings were collected from each team at the end of the session. In subsequent meetings results were shared, discussed, and action plans were formed.

Next, quality indicators for which implementation ratings were low and value ratings were high were identified

and prioritized. Action planning was then initiated for these identified areas. The staff identified the need to create a shared vision statement and the need for additional professional development tied to advanced learning skills and transition skills as high priorities. They made plans for each of these targeted areas and identified people who would be responsible for carrying out the plans.

Summary

The READ can be a very useful tool in helping secondary school staffs assess the degree to which quality services are being provided to the adolescents with disabilities whom they serve. This tool can enable teachers and administrators to assess the overall quality of what they are teaching, how the instruction is being provided, critical areas that are being neglected. It also provides the means to prioritize a plan of action and to monitor progress in steadily refining and improving a program over time. The demanding expectations associated with NCLB necessitate the use of multiple strategies by educators to ensure optimal student growth. The READ is a tool specifically designed for use in secondary schools to enhance the quality of instruction and services provided to adolescents with disabilities who are expected to earn standard high school diplomas.

References

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