



Audio

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Safety Nets for Struggling Readers in High School

Gateway High School, California • February 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Intensive Intervention

### Highlights

- Principal Sharon Olken and Reading Specialist Marlies McCallum discuss the ways that struggling readers are identified and supported at Gateway High School.
- After students are identified through diagnostic testing, reading intervention is provided through a learning skills class and an intervention class that focuses on teaching students the rules and structures of decoding, thereby demystifying reading for these students.
- After participating in the two-year intervention program, students typically make multi-year reading improvement gains.

### About the Site

Gateway High School

San Francisco, CA

## Demographics

27% White

25% Hispanic

24% Asian

17% Black

7% Other

1% Native American

67% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

9% English Language Learners

Gateway High School is a charter high school in San Francisco with a focus on “academic excellence through personalized, student-centered learning” (mission statement). Key components of their program include:

- Learning Center
- Reading Support Program
- Schoolwide reading strategy instruction

Gateway staff work collaboratively to help students develop strong reading skills by:

- Engaging staff in schoolwide literacy professional development,
- Using diagnostic testing to identify the specific needs of struggling readers,
- Providing intervention support to struggling readers through an intensive reading support program,
- Providing ongoing support to students through the Learning Center,
- Using strategies schoolwide for promoting reading development such as the use of literature circles and Reciprocal Teaching across grade levels, and
- Holding high expectations for all students to become successful readers

## Full Transcript

Sharon Olken: I’m Sharon Olken, the Principal at Gateway High School in San Francisco, California.

Marlies McCallum: I’m Marlies McCallum, and I’m the Reading Specialist at Gateway High School in San Francisco, California.

Olken: At Gateway, we strive to ensure that all of our students graduate ready for success in college and beyond, and definitely key among the skills that they need is the ability to be really strong readers.

McCallum: So, students who are unable to accurately decode would take our reading skills class, and we use the Wilson reading program, which is a pretty thorough study of word construction and has an emphasis on encoding and decoding, fluency, and comprehension. And then, if decoding is not the issue but actually understanding what they read is and they have an IEP to address their reading comprehension needs, then

we'll put them in a learning skills class where they'll get the explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies and the extra practice that they need.

The reading program is a two-year course, so students typically start in ninth grade, but oftentimes we don't catch that that's the root of their problem until later. So, sometimes they'll start in ninth grade and even the eleventh grade.

At Gateway we screen and diagnose for struggling readers, and we do this by taking a look at the incoming ninth graders' applications and go from there. So, we're mainly looking for perhaps some mention of remediation in reading is necessary or low scores, below basic scores in the reading section of the STAR testing, the language arts section, and we go from there. So, we would ask those students to come in before the school year starts and give them a comprehensive group of assessments to determine exactly what aspects of reading are giving them the most trouble.

We use the diagnostic assessment of reading to assess their skills in word recognition, in oral reading, in silent reading comprehension, in spelling, and in vocabulary, and we then administer two more assessments to get more information on their decoding skills. So, we would give the Woodcock-Johnson subtest of word attack and the Wilson reading program's assessment of decoding and encoding. So, it's great to find out exactly why, and then we know how to address their needs a little better. And we can pass that information on to their teachers so they too are aware of their strengths and their weaknesses so they can use their strengths.

Olken: I can think of an example of a student who was already a junior when she went through this process. And for her, while one might think that being told she was reading so far below-grade level would be a real demoralizer, getting all that specific information and then, through the reading program, the tools to address what her academic needs were turned into a huge academic gain for her in terms of confidence. So, those results are useful not just for the teachers but I think honestly for the students as well, so they can understand why they're struggling and feel like there's a way to move forward.

By the time a student gets to high school, I think pretty much everybody has stopped looking at the basics of reading as one of the reasons that a student might not be achieving. So, I think teachers, even students themselves, and definitely parents are surprised when they get the real understanding and analysis of where the process is breaking down. And for students, they've been faking it for so long that they've just made, even convinced themselves that they just don't like reading as opposed to they don't like reading because it's harder for them. And so, when they realize, "maybe it's not that I don't like reading, it's that I can't do it very well and that frustrates me," I think that's a real turning point for them.

McCallum: The focus of the reading skills program is mainly decoding, encoding or spelling, and reading comprehension, and we do that by using soundcards, word cards, syllable cards, suffix cards to teach the actual construction of words.

This program structures it in such a manner that there are rules to reading, and these rules are taught. And

you can just tell the students are so relieved. They realize that reading is not this big mystery, and they can do it, and they can apply these skills, and they can make progress. And it's just really exciting.

The program involves movement, and that's left out of a lot of phonics programs. So, students are manipulating soundcards. They are also encoding at the same time. So, this program incorporates spelling into the reading, and that just reinforces what they're learning. So, they're not only listening to sounds; they're speaking sounds. They're writing sounds. They're manipulating soundcards and syllable cards. So, the multisensory approach and interactive approach seems to work really well with them.

Olken: When a strong reader comes across a word, for example, that has a "c" in it, intuitively, the strong reader knows whether it's a /k/ sound or a /ss/ sound, and the struggling reader has no idea because they don't have that intuitive sense of what the rules are. And so, in Marlies's reading class, she explains exactly when the sound is /k/ and when it's /ss/ in a way that kids can then generalize. And so, it takes away the mystery from reading. And so, it looks to the outside observer so bizarre, but to the kids who are in the class, they're seeing real patterns and logic.

McCallum: Students who take the course for two years experience huge growth. Typically when students enter in our program, they range between mid-first-grade level and fourth-grade level with word attack skills, word recognition skills. By the time they graduate, it's typical for them to be at the eighth grade level. So, four years' growth is very common, if not expected.

Olken: I think that reading program at Gateway is effective because, first and foremost, we have a really well-trained instructor in the program who believes in the kids' capacity for growth. I think the fact the class is small matters. I think the fact that kids are still in their other college prep classes is important so that they are not being told that they're less intelligent or that their ultimate outcome should be any different than anybody else. They're just being given an extra support so that they can get more out of school and out of reading and life in general.