

February 4, 2003

Success For All

What are the elements of Success for All?

- **Developmentally appropriate kindergarten**-The program calls for half-day pre-kindergarten and a full-day kindergarten.
- **Reading programs**-Students in grades 1-3 spend most of the day in heterogeneous grade level classes, but for the 90-minute reading class, they are regrouped into smaller classes of 15 in which all children are at the same reading level. The tutors serve as additional reading teachers during this block.
- **Eight-week reading assessments**- Every eight weeks, students' reading abilities are assessed by the program facilitator. Students are regrouped based on how well they did on the test. These assessments, also, identify students who need tutoring.
- **One-to-one reading tutors**-The tutors receive two days of training, and most are certified teachers. They tutor each student with a need for 20 minutes per day on content that the student is working on in class. First graders receive priority for tutors with the assumption that the tutors can help students be successful readers the first time, before they become remedial readers.
- **Family support team**-if students continue to experience problems after tutoring, they are referred to a Family Support Team, made up of the principal, facilitator, homeroom teacher, reading teacher, tutor, and a social worker. The team meets weekly to plan strategies for involving parents and for dealing with families with problems.
- **Program facilitator**-A full-time program facilitator works at each school to oversee the operation of SFA (with the principal). The facilitator visits classes and tutoring sessions to help teachers with problems. The facilitator may work with individual children to find successful strategies for teaching them. In addition, he/she coordinates the activities of the family support team.
- **A commitment to teamwork**-Success for All will only work with districts that have made a deep commitment to implement the program and with school staffs that have voted at least 80% in favor of participating in the program.
- **Special Education**-Every effort is made to deal with students' learning problems within the context of the regular classroom, with the aid of tutors. Resource services for special education are still provided for students previously assigned to special education, but no new assignments to resource services are made for reading problems. Self-contained services are maintained for seriously handicapped students whose needs cannot be met in regular classrooms.

Positive Aspects

The 90-minute reading block emphasizes:

- Development of basic language skills and sound- and letter-recognition skills
- Sound blending and phonics
- Shared reading
- Oral reading to partners and to teacher
- Integration of reading and writing
- Cooperative teaming activities built around story structure, prediction, summarization, vocabulary building, decoding practice, and writing

Negative Aspects

- Estimated cost of \$261,060 and \$646,500 per school,
- SFA developers reported how SFA schools performed in comparison to other schools. but said nothing about their actual achievement. After five years in the program, students would enter sixth grade reading about three years below grade level.
- Comparisons weren't fair 1) Only students who had been in SFA for five years were included in the final analysis. 2) The vast majority of special education students disappeared from the SFA schools during the course of the study, while far more remained in the comparison schools.

- There is no published evidence that SFA students make progress after the earliest grade levels or end up as able readers.
- Primary focus is on the early grades.
- Success for All developers claim that the program is most effective when all components are used, however due to the financial status of some schools, oftentimes certain elements of the program are eliminated.

My Thoughts

- Federal and state legislation continue to push for spending money on specific programs like Success for All based on the research based effectiveness; however, much of the research in favor of schoolwide models is conducted by the programs' own developers. Some of the research is misleading. It seems as though program developers are more interested in their pocketbooks than the truthful effectiveness of their programs.
- The words of Bobby Ann Starnes put my thoughts into words better than I can do myself:
“...there will never be a program, approach, or set of materials that can be successfully implemented "whenever and wherever we choose'.. . Effectiveness cannot be found in the mediocre sameness that grows out of programs that require lessons, teaching strategies, and materials to be precisely executed in order to maintain integrity. If only it were that easy!”
“Regardless of the comings and goings of trends, fads, or false prophets, good teachers -guided by a set of articulated beliefs and informed by skill and knowledge of their craft - will, in their individual ways, rise to meet all educational challenges" (Starnes, Phi Delta Kappan, 2000).

Success for All is a comprehensive restructuring program for elementary schools, based on the following principles:

- Emphasis on prevention, early and intensive intervention, and tutoring for students with academic difficulties.
- Incorporation of state-of-the-art curriculum and instructional methods.
- Emphasis on the integration of phonics and meaning-focused instruction, cooperative learning, and curriculum-based assessments.
- Writing/language arts instruction emphasizing writer's workshops.
- Pre-school/Kindergarten instruction with story telling and language development.
- Adaptations for Spanish and English as a second language.
- A family support program engaging parents, community members, and integrated services.
- Extensive professional development throughout the elementary grades.

(information taken from the Success for All Foundation Website: <http://www.successforall.net/curriculum/sfa.htm>)

Upon examination, "Success for All" appears to be the answer many weary educators are looking for – a comprehensive reading strategy that involves students, parents, takes in consideration at risk students and promises to have students reading at grade level. However, without careful analysis, a school system could be left to feel like Dorothy and her traveling companions when told to "ignore the person behind the curtain." As Toto soon uncovered, illusions very often distract people from the truth.

In reviewing the Success for All (SFA) program, best analogized as a one size fits all approach to reading, you are left at the conclusion that there are two camps both diametrically opposed to each other. One the one hand, you have the developers of SFA, Slavin and Madden, while on the other there is the group of "*independent*" researchers, teachers and practical users of the program who are its skeptics. The term independent is italicized due to the author of the research having developed his own program - therefore I have to question his motives.

As listed above, the developers of SPA believe they have devised a thorough and comprehensive reading program. According to certain researchers, they have included good ideas into their project; "class-size reduction, starting with a structured approach to reading, increasing reading time, some individualized tutoring, and some use of homogeneous grouping." (Pogrow) However, due to the method of determining the results of their research, many researchers have come to different conclusions about the success of the program.

According to Stanley Pogrow, in his article "*Success for All Does Not Produce Success for Students*" The authors of the program skewed the results, engaging what he calls "vendor spin." Specifically, Pogrow asserts the following:

- The data was manipulated to increase the likelihood of government mandating of SFA and similar programs.
- The program is over structured and regimented to such an extent, it takes the teacher out of the program, which also has the undesired effect of "pushing a mind-numbing form of learning onto large numbers" of potentially low income students.
- The research used in the majority of studies cited by the authors was done by a small group of people who have all been affiliated with the authors.
- The data from the trial schools was manipulated
 - Only students completing the entire five years of the program were counted in the data
 - A majority of special education students were removed from the data of the trial schools, while the control schools had a larger number
- SFA students were tested using an examination linked to their curriculum. Control students were not taught to the test.
- The costs of the program.

More disturbing than the independent research, are the results coming from the schools with practical experience using the SFA model. Pogrow mentions several school systems where the reading levels have remained the same, or have actually fallen after the implementation of the SFA program. He goes on to state; many SFA schools have chosen to drop the program when possible. For example, in 1996 the Baltimore County School District had the SFA program in 21 schools. Due to poor scores, the county developed their own reading program. SFA schools were given the choice to continue the program or "jump ship." The number of SFA schools dropped from 21 to 11, with those 11 modifying the program to meet needs.

Should a school system adopt the SFA program? In looking at the research of independent evaluators and the practical experiences of teachers in the field the answer would be a resounding, "no." The flawed and distorted data alone is enough to warn potential buyers away from the product. More importantly, the idea of a one-size fits all program is not very realistic. In today's classroom of multiple cultures, ethnicities, socio-economic status, cognitive abilities, etc the most important program to implement is the one that works in that specific classroom, not one from another city, state or region.