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VIABLE STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING GROWTH AMONG READING PERSONNEL

Nicholas P. Criscuolo

NEW HAVEN (CONN.) PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"I've learned so much about the teaching of reading from our school's reading consultant. He's fantastic."

"Our reading consultant is so knowledgeable that it's an inspiration just talking to her. She's always available when you need her."

These comments are typical of those made daily concerning the valuable services performed by reading personnel. Effective reading consultants are constantly interacting with a variety of people both in the community and in the schools. They offer strong leadership for the reading program.

Reading personnel dispense knowledge and facilitate learning willingly. Yet, it's not a one-way street. Reading personnel have their own unique needs. They need to replenish their reservoirs of knowledge and constantly be aware of the latest trends and developments in the field. By so doing, they will be in a better position to help others.

Many school systems have hired specially trained and certified reading consultants. Such a group can accomplish much to upgrade their own skills and expertise so that they can operate with maximum effectiveness. Presently, there are 47 reading members which comprise the Reading Department of the New Haven, Connecticut public school system. Eleven members staff the secondary schools; the remainder staff the elementary schools. Of the 47, sixteen are line item positions on the city budget while 31 work in Title I and Title VII programs supported through Federal funds.

Staff meetings are held monthly. The size of the staff and diversity of the programs do not always permit meeting as an entire staff, although periodically meetings with the total staff occur in order to emphasize the importance of a well-articulated, balanced K-12 reading program. In addition to sharing and pooling ideas and experiences, staff meetings allow reading personnel to keep abreast of current materials and programs. Sales representatives and consultants are often invited to display and discuss their programs and products. Resource people from within the school system and surrounding colleges are also invited to meet with the staff.

Current books and articles in educational journals contain a wealth of useful information. It has been a practice by the writer to assign an individual reading consultant a recent, thought-provoking article for review at a staff meeting. This activity generates lively and interesting discussions. Most often these staff meetings take place at the Reading Center, although some are held at a host reading consultant's school who, as part of the

agenda, describes an effective technique or program he or she has been using.

One valuable service reading personnel perform is to orient and train the many volunteer tutors who work in the schools. Presently, there are approximately 110 reading tutors drawn from the community and area colleges, particularly Yale University and Southern Connecticut State College. Working with tutors requires time and effort on the part of the reading consultant.

In recognition of the time expended by reading personnel and in order to upgrade their own skills, an arrangement has been made between the school system and Southern Connecticut State College's Special Education Department to provide workshops on working with children with learning disabilities for the reading personnel involved in training these tutors. This promotes growth among reading personnel while they are helping others learn how to tutor reading effectively.

Providing options and alternatives for children with diverse learning styles is an important task for the reading consultant. Whether it is working with children or teachers, the reading consultant must be able to match the appropriate modality with the child. Therefore, it is crucial that the knowledgeable consultant is aware of different reading methods and strategies.

The New Haven public school system uses a flexibly structured basal reading program as its major vehicle for reading instruction. Area school systems use a variety of methods: I.G.E. (Individually Guided Education), Words in Color, programmed reading, etc. Recently, contact was made with reading personnel working in these area school systems for the purpose of sponsoring a Reading Methods Seminar at which personnel from each school system would demonstrate the method used.

Reading personnel in New Haven were assigned a particular method, contacted the reading consultant in the school system using that method and made an on-site visitation to become familiar with it and then drafted a short introduction for use at the Seminar. Later, at a staff meeting the different methods were discussed in depth. Not only did such a Seminar foster regional cooperation but it helped New Haven reading personnel become familiar with different reading methods.

As with other school personnel, reading consultants must clarify in their own minds goals and objectives for the reading program. This year, members of the Reading Department were asked to complete a Self Evaluation Record. The information requested on this form dealt with having the consultant list his or her major objectives for the year, a listing of strengths and weaknesses as perceived by them and an item relating to accomplishments. This form was extremely helpful for two reasons: (1) it brought into focus salient aspects of the reading consultant's work and (2) it served as a basis for discussion and review when, as the supervisor, I had to complete an evaluation required of all city personnel.

Another viable strategy for promoting in-service growth is sub-committee work to develop bulletins, pamphlets and booklets aimed at

helping teachers to use a variety of effective reading techniques. Reading personnel participate (sometimes on a release-time basis but often after school hours) on committees which produce important materials which are then distributed to city teachers. Such booklets as: *Independent Reading Activities*, *Enrichment Activities in Reading*, and *Guidebook to Tutorial Reading Programs* have been written by various members of the reading staff in committee. Such an activity helps the reading consultant sharpen research and writing skills and helps others as well.

Preparation of these booklets is timely too. Recently, New Haven's Superintendent of Schools George A. Barbarito stressed the importance of homework in his column in the bi-weekly Superintendent's Bulletin. A Reading Homework Committee was formed by six reading consultants. The result was a *Homework Resource Activities Booklet* which lists primary and intermediate grade homework activities which reinforce reading skills and lend themselves to reinforcement at home. This booklet has also been distributed to New Haven's 600 elementary teachers.

Connecticut's Right to Read program has provided funds, in the form of \$1,500 "mini-grants" for creative reading programs. Since the program's inception five years ago, New Haven has received a total of 54 grants, the largest number in the State. A majority of the recipients have been reading personnel, working on an interdisciplinary basis with teachers, librarians and other personnel. Awarded on a competitive basis, the reading consultant has taken the leadership in writing the necessary proposal for submission to the State Department of Education. Such an activity induces professional growth because it taps the reading consultant's creativity, sharpens his or her writing skills and fosters teamwork.

Teamwork must be the byword of an effective reading consultant not only among school personnel but also among members of the community as well. Reading staff members are encouraged to work with business and industry in order to expand resources to children. For example, several staff members worked recently with employees of the Southern New England Telephone Company on Operation Bookworm, a drive among employees at S.N.E.T. which resulted in the collection of 7,000 usable, appealing books. These materials were sorted by a committee of reading consultants for distribution to the schools to stock interest corners and classroom libraries.

For the last two years, New Haven has served as a Right to Read site and its participation in this program has allowed many opportunities for growth. One reading consultant is the liaison person for the program, one member edits a Right to Read Newsletter, while several others have prepared spot announcements for the program aired free-of-charge by the local television station WTNH. Several other members of the Reading Department have written articles, aimed at parents of pre-school children, for the local newspaper, *The New Haven Register*. These activities have allowed the reading consultants to tap local resources while at the same time informing the general public of the importance of reading.

Reading consultants are asked constantly to share and impart information. They are the givers, but they must also be the receivers if their

knowledge is to remain fresh and up-to-date. Effective reading consultants must seize every opportunity to grow professionally. Attendance at conferences, seminars and institutes help, but there are many other activities—such as described in this article—which will achieve this goal. A high quality staff of reading consultants can shape a high quality reading program which will ultimately benefit children to an immeasurable degree.