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AVOIDING DANGERS IN THE SECONDARY READING PROGRAM: THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE

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With the increasing emphasis upon reading instruction on the secondary level, the total school faculty and principal must be wary of the many pitfalls that can doom the program to failure.

While the remedial program is probably the most frequent and likely program to be instituted, it must be designed and organized with care; otherwise, the program may become nothing more than a dumping ground for undisciplined or incorrigible students.

The principal must play a key role in establishing the program; his support and guidance are necessary. He, therefore, must have some knowledge on the Do's and Don'ts of operating a successful remedial reading program.

The following suggestions are made to serve as guidelines in establishing a secondary remedial reading program:

1. *Sell the faculty on the need for a secondary reading program.* In all probability the faculty may recognize the reading problems existing in the school. Depending upon the socioeconomic area, reading retardation can range from 25-60% of the school's student population. Many teachers believe that students should already know how to read before high school; however, in reality, many do not. They have great difficulty coping with the higher level of reading matter encountered. The secondary school, then, must recognize its responsibility to helping children through the establishment of such a program.
2. *Sell the students on the need for reading instruction.* Too often, both teachers and students view reading as an elementary subject. The students view the reading class with negativism. There is a stigma attached to taking reading in high school. This belief has been perpetuated for years by ending formal reading instruction at the sixth or eighth grade level. The concept that reading instruction is essential and necessary, particularly for students needing remediation, must be impressed upon students in a tactful and sensitive manner. A good reading specialist can be helpful here and the faculty needs to be sensitive.
3. *Hire a qualified secondary reading specialist.* Too often the error is made in assigning an existing teacher within the school to teach the remedial reading classes. Several common tactics are used which generally prove fruitless. The first approach is to slot the English teacher into the position. The erroneous assumption here is that

since English involves reading, perhaps more so than any other subject, the English teacher is best equipped to teach reading. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Reading is a skills area, involving diagnostic techniques, specialized methods, and a wide range of specialized materials. The English teacher is oriented toward literature, and as a result, teaches literature instead of dealing with the intricate areas of skill development.

Another mistake frequently made is to bring in an elementary teacher from another building and assign her, usually on a part time basis, several reading classes in the high school. While the elementary reading specialist may be qualified professionally and knowledgeable, she probably will not be successful in the program; her philosophy and orientation toward teaching will be elementary oriented. Her past experience with the attitude toward students will not be conducive toward the nature of the high school student, she will probably encounter great resistance on the part of students and experience personal frustration.

4. *Set the reading program in a physically favorable environment.* Impressions are important, and if a program is to succeed, it must get off to a good start. Too often, when the reading program is initiated, the classes may be held in a room in the basement or some other undesirable place in the school. This will give the program a third rate appearance, and will consequently contribute to any existing negativism or resistance. With an overcrowded or overburdened curriculum, classroom space may be limited; however, the remedial reading program is just as vital to the school as any other subject area and should be treated equally. Therefore, it is essential that the program be initiated and continued on a sound basis for the most optimum acceptance for all involved. The establishment of a favorable looking and material stocked classroom is imperative for the success of the program.
5. *Identify students for the program on the basis of need.* Allow the reading specialist wide latitude in identifying those students who will profit most from remedial instruction. The specialist can examine past reading scores, academic grades, and most importantly reading potential or reading expectancy level. Some students will benefit more from instruction than others. Teacher recommendations should be an integral aspect in identifying those students needing the most aid in reading improvement. If these proper means of identification are utilized, the program will not become a “dumping ground” for academic and behavioral problem students. Above all, keep class sizes small—no more than 15 students per class. It is far better to help 15 students thoroughly than it is to perform little or no help for 25 or 30 students. The reading specialist often has to work on an individual and small group basis; this cannot be achieved if the classes total above 15.

In conclusion, the above guidelines will provide a sound operating framework in establishing the remedial reading program. Good teaching,

faculty and student support and understanding, a favorable classroom environment, and proper identification procedures will enhance the success of the program by allowing it to begin properly. If the principal follows the guidelines and avoids the common pitfalls, he will become the instructional leader of a successful remedial reading program.