

SCIENCE OF READING IMPLEMENTATION

BRIEF #5

CREATING a MASTER SCHEDULE that MAXIMIZES the LITERACY BLOCK

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INTRODUCTION

School master schedules, which determine the blocking of time during the school day, are tricky and complicated systems to coordinate. Researchers and educators are increasingly learning that these master schedules substantially impact learning because it determines the time spent on instruction and whether key components of instruction are experienced in the optimal order. *[“A well-thought-out master schedule can ensure time for intervention and enrichment to move all students forward in their learning. Thoughtful scheduling also ensures that teachers and teams have time to appropriately plan instruction and intervention.”](#)*

As noted in Brief 1, NC’s Excellent Public Schools Act, signed into law in April 2021, requires that all pre-K to fifth-grade teachers complete [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\) training](#). After completion, many aspects of implementation are left to the discretion of school districts and schools. Without additional guidance on how to implement what is learned, there are many decisions that schools can make that can undermine the benefits of strengthening teachers’ knowledge of the practices that can align their instruction with the Science of Reading (SoR). Whether beginning readers receive reading and writing instruction in connected blocks of time is one of those aspects that can be affected by a school’s master schedule, and when blocked correctly, can enhance the effectiveness of strong instructional practices.

During the 2023-24 academic year, when most kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers in the school were completing LETRS training, one of the school’s third-grade teachers began to see that the setup of the master schedule was reducing the effectiveness of the afternoon literacy block. The master schedule created a separation of two and a half hours between the morning one-hour block for teaching foundational reading skills and core reading content and the afternoon 45-minute block for teaching foundational writing skills, writing composition, and targeted small-group support for struggling readers. This separation occurred because reading instruction wasn’t a primary consideration among several other key factors that must be considered when setting the master schedule. Schools have to consider many priorities when developing the master schedule, such as maximizing the use of common spaces across grade levels as well as coordinating support personnel who need to work with student groups across grade levels. Unfortunately, this often results in less-than-optimal reading instruction schedules.



PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

How can the school schedule the literacy block(s) so that reading instruction time is closely connected with writing instruction time? Ensuring there is one extended literacy block that includes clearly identified time for explicit instruction of foundational writing skills, clearly identified time for explicit instruction of foundational reading skills, as well as small group reading and writing support?

This problem of practice was selected because LETRS training highlights and provides guidance on connecting the reading and writing strands of literacy instruction. However, no implementation guidance is provided regarding what to do when a school's master schedule does not enable literacy instruction to be conducted in this way.

During the 2023-24 academic year, the teacher at this school engaged in a series of twice-monthly meetings as part of NCECF's Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship. This Fellowship was guided by The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, four North Carolina university professors who are literacy experts, and NC-DPI's Assistant Director of Early Literacy. The Fellowship enabled her to tackle this problem of practice by providing time and space for collective professional development with colleagues who were also thinking about how to influence change beyond their individual classrooms in order to improve literacy instruction. Listening to the multiple voices and perspectives of Fellows (literacy coaches, kindergarten teacher, pre-k teacher, and structured literacy specialist) informed her understanding of the process of creating school-wide impact.

The primary change that resulted from consistent engagement with this problem of practice is that the leadership team that builds the school's master schedule will include maximizing the effectiveness of the literacy blocks in their school-wide planning. To

enable teachers to increase their instructional alignment with the SoR, priority will be given to the following:

- Creating an extended literacy block that designates time for explicit instruction of foundational reading skills
- Core reading lessons
- Explicit instruction of foundational writing skills
- Composition linked to core reading lessons
- Targeted reading and writing groups

During the first year of implementation, first through third-grade classrooms had a literacy block that included core reading, writing, and small group reading instruction, and teachers worked with small groups while other students worked on differentiated independent assignments. The foundational reading instruction block occurred at a different time in the day due to school-wide scheduling needs.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This problem of practice was taken up in a pre-K to fifth-grade school that has a student body that is 37% White, 19% Black, 23% Asian, 13% Latinx, 8% multiracial, 4.1% Academically or Intellectually Gifted, and 45% economically disadvantaged. The percentage of Multilingual Learners has increased in recent years, and currently, 21% of the student population has Multilingual Learner status. In addition, 95% of teachers are classified as experienced teachers.

As noted above, students received one hour of core reading instruction in the morning, then had specials, math, lunch, recess, and then their afternoon 45-minute writing and targeted small group support block. Challenges quickly become evident with the 45-minute afternoon writing block split apart from the reading block. Four components of literacy instruction need to happen in the same space and time: core writing lesson, independent writing time, targeted small group reading intervention support, and support staff pulling students for targeted ESL or reading services.

There were several challenges with this two-and-a-half hour gap between morning reading instruction and afternoon writing instruction. One challenge, was that when writing about what they read earlier in the

day, several students needed to reread the core text or complete a graphic organizer before beginning their writing response or draft. This created a repeat of the morning's activities and was a less productive use of the limited afternoon time for these students.

The second challenge with this schedule was the requirement that during the 45-minute afternoon segment: (1) the teacher was not available when students needed more guided practice support with writing because of the need to fit in targeted small group reading lessons; (2) students who were part of the targeted small group reading lessons had little time to engage in independent writing skills practice, and (3) students who were pulled out of the class for individual ESL or reading services missed out on critical opportunities to develop their writing skills.

RESEARCH-INFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Research informs us that school and [classroom schedules](#) can be blocked in ways that [maximize reading instruction](#). Most educators are now familiar with the [Reading Rope](#), a metaphor for the types of knowledge and skills that develop together for successful reading acquisition. Growth on one strand or skill affects the growth of other skills or strands. However, there is less familiarity with the [Writing Rope](#), which details the knowledge and skills that are necessary for the development of skilled writing. The writing strands include critical thinking, syntax, text structure, writing craft, and transcription. Instruction in these writing skills also supports and integrates reading comprehension.

The SoR informs us that there is strong integration between reading and writing instruction—students writing about what they read—is important for developing grade-level reading proficiency. From LETRS training, educators learned the importance of establishing writing foundations through direct, explicit, and cumulative teaching with frequent practice in the early grades. Additionally, [the Simple View of Writing](#) highlights that skilled writing results from foundational writing skills and composition skills that then support reading comprehension and content knowledge.



At present, district leaders, campus leaders, support staff, and classroom teachers have easy access to professional development in the language acquisition and word recognition strands of the Reading Rope. This has built awareness at all levels of leadership of the importance of ensuring instructional time for targeting foundational reading skills in kindergarten through third grade. The Writing Rope affords the same importance of establishing instructional time and intention for foundational writing skills in order to support grade-level reading comprehension for all student groups. This would align with the explicit, systematic, and cumulative instructional practices, which have been fortified for foundational reading skills due to LETRS training.

CAPACITY BUILDING & CONVERSATIONS THAT CREATED CHANGE

Regarding this problem of practice, immediate actions could be taken to minimize the impact of the challenge of not having clearly allocated time for instruction in both foundational reading and writing skills. One of these is at the instructional level by embedding explicit foundational writing instruction within composition lessons. For example, this third-grade teacher embedded explicit instruction of encoding by syllable type and sentence-level grammar and syntax, which went deeper than the existing practice of teacher-modeled writing and class discussions centered around mentor text used in the core reading instruction.

Further change has to happen at the administrative level. Individual teachers can't change the organization of their class's daily schedule because it impacts the schedules of other professionals providing individualized student support. Therefore, change was only possible by getting school-wide awareness of the need for a master schedule that connects the reading and writing blocks and includes time for instruction of foundational writing skills. The conversation was initiated with the teacher expressing the struggle to fit explicit instruction of foundational writing skills and writing composition in a way that connects to text read earlier in the day during core reading. During weekly instructional planning professional learning community meetings, the teacher shared the concern with third-grade team members. As a response, the team looked closely at instructional plans to find alignment to LETRS practices, explicit instruction of foundational reading and writing, along with text reading and writing composition. From this closer look, the team agreed that the division of the literacy block into foundational reading with core reading and foundational writing with writing composition, as well as targeted reading groups, was challenging.

Oftentimes, people who hold leadership positions sit at many leadership tables across the school. This creates the potential for the same voices to be at each decision-making table, enabling the tracking of similar decision-making patterns across topics. One benefit is that decision makers are familiar with one another and relationships are well established, which can strengthen the efficiency and speed of decision-making. However, it is essential to couple this efficiency with opportunities to hear from classroom teachers during topics that directly impact instruction. There is value in hearing from staff members who are directly responsible for implementing changes and from those who can provide evidence-based information and solutions to a shared problem.

FOSTERING CHANGE IN THE COMING ACADEMIC YEARS

Continued conversations about the interconnectedness of the Reading Rope and Writing Rope frameworks need to be included when looking at the design, time allotment, and instructional materials for the literacy

block. Understanding how the foundational skills of reading and writing are essential for reading and writing fluency, which in turn is essential for comprehension, is an important grounding point for future decisions about improving literacy instruction at this school.

In addition to developing the most effective master schedule, school leaders, in consultation with classroom teachers, need to discuss the following core planning questions:

1. What processes exist in the district and school to use data to design Tier 1 reading instruction?
2. How can we use DPI's [district-level](#) and [school-level](#) data protocols to improve our use of DIBELS8 screening data to design Tier 1 instruction?
3. What does Language Comprehension Instruction look like in ALL grades, pre-K through to fifth grade?
4. What would it take to get a process in place to ensure the Language Comprehension side of the SVR is being addressed appropriately across all grade levels in your schools?
5. What guidance can the district and state educational office provide concerning the curriculum, instructional materials, and schedule?

SEVEN RESOURCES FOR MAXIMIZING THE LITERACY BLOCK

- [The Power of Innovative Scheduling](#)
- [Considerations for Scheduling Early Literacy Interventions](#)
- [Louisiana Literacy Block Schedule](#)
- [What Does a Structured Literacy Block Schedule Look Like? — The First Grade Roundup](#)
- [How to Create a Structured Literacy Schedule for K-2 Based On the Science of Reading](#)
- [The Writing Rope: the Strands that Are Woven into Skilled Writing | Reading Rockets](#)
- [The Reading Rope: Key Ideas Behind the Metaphor](#)

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