

Strategic Reading and the Talent Development Model

Strategic Reading is an intensive literacy improvement curriculum designed for ninth graders who enter high school reading two or more years below grade level. Developed by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, Strategic Reading is a key element of the Talent Development High School model for comprehensive reform of schools that face serious discipline, attendance, achievement, and dropout problems. First implemented in 1994 at Patterson High School in Baltimore, the Talent Development model is now used in more than fifty high schools across the United States.

Incoming ninth graders are assigned to the Strategic Reading curriculum on the basis of their eighth-grade standardized test scores, or on a placement exam if eighth-grade scores are not available. In high-poverty urban high schools, the percentage of students who enter ninth grade reading one or more years behind grade level is often greater than 80 percent. In practice, therefore, some Talent Development High Schools simply assign all of their ninth graders to Strategic Reading.

Strategic Reading divides an eighty-to-ninety-minute class into four activity periods, each of which is devoted to a different mode of approaching text. In the first period, “Reading Showcase,” a teacher reads the day’s text aloud. Students present their questions and reactions orally. Discussion emphasizes the text’s genre and style. In the next period, a “Focus Lesson,” teachers model the use of skills and strategies for reading comprehension. In the “Student Team Literature” period, students work in groups with partner discussion guides to respond to text in writing. In the final period, students may meet with teachers for their periodic assessment conferences, or may select their own material for reading on their own.

Strategic Reading teachers attend a three-day workshop for intensive initial professional development, where they participate in simulated classrooms. Expert in-class peer coaches model-teach or coteach lessons, make sure all materials are available, discuss strengths and weaknesses of lesson delivery, and otherwise troubleshoot in a collegial relationship. University specialists conduct short refresher workshops at each school throughout the term. Each coach works at two local high schools. During implementation of Strategic Reading, a curriculum coach assists staff through modeled lessons, coteaching, and feedback.

A study of nonselective Talent Development High Schools in large northeastern, urban districts indicates that the model is effective in increasing the rate of ninth-grade completion. Where as many as half of ninth graders in the district studied do not earn sufficient credits to be promoted to tenth grade, the percentage of ninth graders who earned sufficient credits jumped an average of thirteen points when the schools studied adopted the Talent Development model.

Success Story—Benjamin Franklin High School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Benjamin Franklin High School, a high-poverty Philadelphia school, has 1,435 students in grades 9–12, 1,280 of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The students are mostly minority: 95 percent black, 3 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent white, Asian, or American Indian/Alaskan.

Implementation of the Strategic Reading model has had a positive result in this high-poverty school. Results indicate that a typical student gained nearly a year's worth of reading ability in a four-month period. Four out of ten students gained more than a year, and some gained substantially more. Almost two-thirds of students had catch-up gains, improving their reading ability by at least five months over a four-month period. About a quarter of the students showed no gain. Overall, greater gains were made on the reading comprehension subtest than on the vocabulary subtest. In reading comprehension, median performance rose from a 5.3 grade equivalent to a 6.5 grade equivalent, while for vocabulary it rose from 5.3 to 5.9.

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