

# Lessons Learned in Building School and Community Partnerships to Improve Reading Achievement Challenges and Opportunities

by Kim Day, Josh Clark, Jennifer Barton Burch, and Leslie Evans Hodges

The Schenck School in Atlanta, Georgia, was founded in 1959 by David Schenck, an Orton-Gillingham trained educator, to serve students with dyslexia. The school also provided tutoring services and training courses in neighboring independent and public schools. Building upon those experiences, in 2013 the school launched a non-profit, The Dyslexia Resource (TDR), to share its reading expertise. TDR's mission is to empower communities to serve dyslexic learners by providing 1) teacher training in The Schenck School's reading model, 2) remediation services for students struggling with reading, spelling, and writing, and 3) partnerships to provide advocacy for individuals with dyslexia, support teacher development, and/or provide targeted remediation within schools.

With the advent of TDR, the school was poised to develop partnerships to have a greater impact across the metro Atlanta area. Questions arose around the type of work we wanted to accomplish. Would we focus on teacher training and direct services only for students identified with dyslexia or other reading disabilities (RD), similar to our school program? Or would we provide teacher training and services for any students struggling to read? We chose the latter, considering only 30% of Atlanta's fourth-grade students scored at or above the Proficient level on the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), with students of color scoring below their White peers by almost 50% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). These scores reflected little progress for Atlanta's students, as the 2017 NAEP scores were not significantly different from the 2015 or 2013 scores. Similarly, Atlanta's students did not fare much better on the end-of-year state exam (Georgia Milestones Test of English Language Arts) with Atlanta Public Schools (APS) reporting only 31.9% of students in grades 3–8 scoring at or above proficiency in 2017, 33.3% in 2018, and 36.9% in 2019 (see APS Insights at <https://apsinsights.org/>).

Unfortunately, these results are comparable to other urban areas across the United States. Atlanta has many students growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods who struggle to learn to read, including many Black students whose families have experienced structural and institutionalized barriers to prosperity for generations (Eaton, 2011; Sharkey & Elwert, 2011; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). APS is attempting to address educational disparities, which are often related to where families live in Atlanta. In 2014, APS initiated a Turnaround Strategy to

improve the educational outcomes for students living in its poorest neighborhoods.

## Lessons Learned

In January 2018, TDR began developing a model for collaboration with low-performing schools in APS. Although only a short period of time, our journey has provided valuable lessons on partnering with schools and districts to support reading achievement.

**Lesson 1: Aligning with the school's and/or district's existing priorities and partners is important to integrating the work into everyday practice.** Increasingly, districts and states are implementing what are commonly referred to as “turnaround” programs to support chronically low-performing schools. In these contexts, schools and districts are often provided with additional resources to work with external partners to implement services to improve student outcomes. Nevertheless, it can be overwhelming and create barriers to supporting teachers and staff. Therefore, we work to align with existing initiatives in schools, so that our support provides “added value” to addressing their needs. From the beginning, we have coordinated our efforts to draw on the expertise of both organizations. Moreover, we meet regularly with school staff so that our efforts are not perceived to be disconnected from the school.

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**Lesson 2: Collaborative planning and early successes matter to immediate and continued success.** Our approach to partnership is phased, so that supports can be delivered in a manner that is responsive to the needs of the school and district. The planning phase is devoted to securing necessary approvals, introducing partners to the teachers, students, and families, and establishing a fund-raising strategy for the duration of the partnership. In some cases, the planning phase might also include direct service delivery to students.

## Abbreviations

APS: Atlanta Public Schools

MAP: Measures of Academic Progress

NAEP: National Assessment of Educational Progress

RD: Reading disabilities

TDR: The Dyslexia Resource

**Lesson 3: Relationships with teachers and school staff are critically important.** The TDR remediation specialists rely on the faculty's expertise at every step. Teachers and staff provide feedback on students' performance on reading tasks, share informal reading data, and collaborate in forming intervention groups. They also help with logistical issues such as scheduling intervention groups, space, and understanding school procedures. We find teachers' insights into which students work best together have a profound impact on students' success. We realize that by acknowledging their school and student expertise, teachers and staff are more welcoming of our support.

**Lesson 4: Use the school's measures to demonstrate progress and success.** Schools and districts often have multiple measures that are used (and sometimes mandated) to monitor student progress and achievement. These measures are not designed to inform intensive intervention but rather to determine whether or not students meet grade-level standards. Therefore, schools are challenged to find measures that meet multiple requirements for screening, progress monitoring, and diagnostic decision-making, while also aligning with curriculum and standards. We've learned that using schools' measures is critical to preserving time for instruction and also for communicating outcomes to partner teachers and leaders.

For example, an initial 28 students were selected for remediation during the planning phase at one of our partner schools based on their performance on the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (MAP; Thum & Hauser, 2015) and teacher and/or instructional coach recommendation. MAP, a computer adaptive reading and math assessment, is administered three times a year to monitor academic growth. Students recommended for intervention scored between the 25th and 50th percentile on the mid-year administration of the MAP reading test (school year 2017–2018). After students were selected, TDR staff used additional measures to target intervention and establish groups (e.g., the TOWRE-2 [Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 2012]; informal measures of real and nonword reading, reading fluency, and comprehension). Administering these measures reduced the burden on teachers and school staff and informed our intervention. Importantly, it also affirmed the school's and teachers' professional practices and created opportunities to support data-based decision-making to inform reading instruction throughout the school.

**Lesson 5: In neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, many students may face extreme trauma, so forming caring and trusting relationships is critical to their academic success.** Prior to beginning intervention in the planning phase, remediation specialists and school staff met to discuss research on trauma-informed education (e.g., Chafouleas, Johnson, Overstreet, & Santos, 2016). Together, we considered positive supports already in place. It was imperative for the remediation specialists to initially build rapport with students in order to create an environment where students felt secure. Remediation specialists also worked with the school's staff to replicate classroom expectations during remediation sessions and to mimic the supports students were familiar with from their classrooms.

**Lesson 6: Building cultural competence is imperative and a continuous journey for practitioners seeking to support**

**educational outcomes for diverse and disadvantaged learners.** Like many teachers and clinicians in independent schools that serve students with disabilities, the TDR remediation specialists had little experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners or learners growing up in poverty. Over time, we've learned that our staff needs support to build their own cultural competence (Diller & Moule, 2005). Building cultural competence can be uncomfortable, as it requires not only reflection upon one's own culture, attitudes, dispositions, and biases, but also awareness of and response to systems and societal norms that have created the conditions we are encountering in our partner schools. It also requires self-discipline, tempering an eagerness to share the reading expertise of The Schenck School with patience and deliberation. Ultimately, the lesson we have learned and continue to learn is that our best efforts will not be realized if our approach to engaging with teachers, students, and families is not culturally affirming and sensitive to their needs.

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**Lesson 7: Achieving our goal of helping as many struggling readers as possible will require modifications to our typical approach to intervention.** In our partner schools, large numbers of students need intensive reading instruction, both to remediate current poor performance and to prevent future reading difficulty. This demand presents significant staffing issues, as small group and individualized instruction for only a handful of students will not result in improved reading achievement across the school. If we are going to make a significant impact in reading achievement, we know we need to increase the number of students in small groups while continuing to provide intensive remediation. Doing so required some "outside the box" thinking on our part, as we turned to new technology-based tools. We wanted to be able to work more efficiently with more and larger groups of students. Therefore, we incorporated an iPad application developed by the Hill Learning Center (Hill Learning System, 2017) that generates individualized word lists and controlled text for use with phonics, word recognition, and fluency instruction.

### **Promising Results, Sobering Realities, and More Lessons to Learn**

Armed with the knowledge gained from these lessons, TDR has begun to provide greater support to low-performing schools. For example, in one of our partner schools, with the hiring of one additional remediation specialist and the use of the iPad application, the number of students served increased to approximately 100. The school and our partners asked that we track student outcomes on measures used by the school

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and district: the MAP and/or the state-mandated Georgia Milestones test (for students in grades 3 and 4). Baseline performance from the fall MAP assessment, as well as performance with students who received intervention during the planning phase, helped determine which students would receive TDR remediation in grades 1–4. Our team conducted preassessments on students whose baseline reading score on the MAP fell between approximately the 10th and 30th percentiles using the same informal measures used during the planning phase. We worked with the school’s instructional coaches and teachers to establish small groups with identified students in grades 1–4. Our average dosage was 25 hours (11 hours in fall, 14 hours in spring). This equates to an average of 37 sessions during the 2018–19 school year.

Remediation sessions were conducted at a 1:3 teacher to student ratio, lasted 40 minutes, and occurred twice a week. A typical session had four components: phonemic awareness, decoding, encoding, and comprehension and vocabulary. Each component used the essential elements of the Orton-Gillingham approach: multisensory techniques (visual, auditory, kinesthetic/tactile), direct and explicit teaching, and sequential lessons (i.e., based on the previous lesson’s successes and an analysis of errors; Sayeski, Earle, Davis & Calamari, 2019).

Students receiving TDR remediation demonstrated improved reading skills on the MAP Reading Test. Students showed gains

when comparing percentile scores from fall 2018 to spring 2019 (see Figure 1). As expected, younger students tended to demonstrate greater gains over the course of a school year, as did students who began the year performing more poorly. The MAP Reading Test also provides Lexile scores for students based on their performance (see Figure 2). A Lexile score is a measure of both a child’s reading ability and the difficulty of a text (Clark, 2019), and can be compared to benchmarks established as grade-level Lexile scores. For example, a Lexile score of 520L indicates grade-level reading for third grade, based on criteria established by the Georgia Department of Education (*gadoe.org*). Third grade is a critical year in Georgia because it is the first year students take the state-mandated Georgia Milestones test. Although the mean Lexile of third graders who received TDR remediation was below grade level, the third graders’ average Lexile score increased from 140L (beginning of first-grade level) to 438L (end of second-grade level). This equates to approximately two years of reading growth in just one year for those students who received TDR remediation.

All in all, these results are promising and suggest our partnership is helping to improve reading achievement. However, we would be remiss if we did not note that gains in student performance were small as many students need continued remediation, especially those in the upper grades. At the end of the school year, the entire partnership team met to discuss

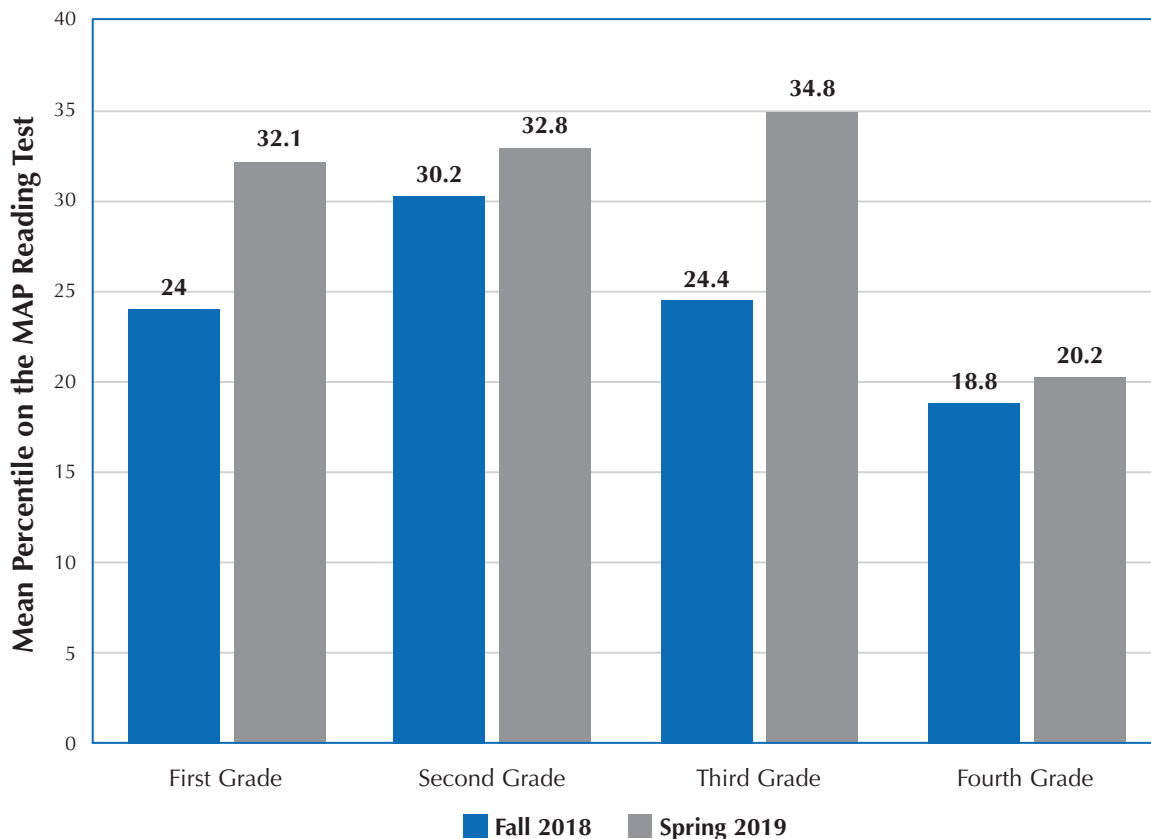


Figure 1. Mean Percentile of MAP Reading Test for Remediation Students. For all grades, the mean percentile on the MAP Reading Test increased from Fall 2018 to Spring 2019 for students receiving TDR remediation services.

lessons learned and to begin planning for the next year. Although students receiving the TDR remediation demonstrated growth in reading, many still ended the school year below grade level as measured by the MAP. Together, we decided on changes with the goal of improving reading skills for students receiving the TDR remediation and their peers who continue to struggle with reading.

**Lesson 8: Balancing time for assessment and intervention is difficult but necessary to produce gains in achievement.**

TDR now works with students earlier in the school year to increase instructional time with students. Preassessments for both the school and TDR are administered within the same assessment window and remediation groups established approximately four weeks earlier. The previous year’s end-of-year tests are used to help select any new students for TDR remediation. Finally, in an attempt to determine the optimal dosage for getting struggling students to reading on grade level, we have decided to “double-dose” a group of third graders who have struggled to make gains with reading (i.e., see second grade in Figure 1). This group will receive 40-minute remediation sessions four times per week. Selected students in grades 4 and 5 who continue to fall below grade level (i.e., scores below the 20th percentile) will receive additional literacy instruction through the school’s Tier 3 literacy centers and/or Early Intervention Program.

**Lesson 9: Teachers and school staff require continuous professional learning that aligns with the school’s curriculum to improve reading outcomes for struggling learners.** We have

learned that alignment is important for instructional consistency, and that teachers and school staff may need support to do so in a manner that doesn’t feel disconnected or additive. Therefore, TDR provided professional learning sessions for grade-level teams during the first year and will continue to do so. These sessions are delivered as part of the school’s existing professional learning communities, and include sharing instructional strategies and content and reviewing student data with classroom teachers. TDR remediation specialists also worked with instructional coaches over the summer to align the school’s scope and sequence for reading instruction and TDR’s remediation framework. Thus, in subsequent years of the partnership, students will receive similar information and strategies from classroom teachers and TDR remediation specialists, further reinforcing learning across the classroom and remediation sessions.

**Lesson 10: Scale.** Perhaps the greatest challenge TDR faces is scaling the partnership model and remediation program. Time is a significant factor in each of the lessons we’ve learned: relationships take time, assessment takes time, instruction takes time, professional learning takes time. Change takes time. We have also learned that schools differ, and we may need to adapt remediation lessons to accommodate the needs of their students. Thus, as we begin to meet with leadership staff of new partner schools, we consider these lessons learned. We know it will take time and intentionality to develop trusting relationships that will ultimately result in improved student

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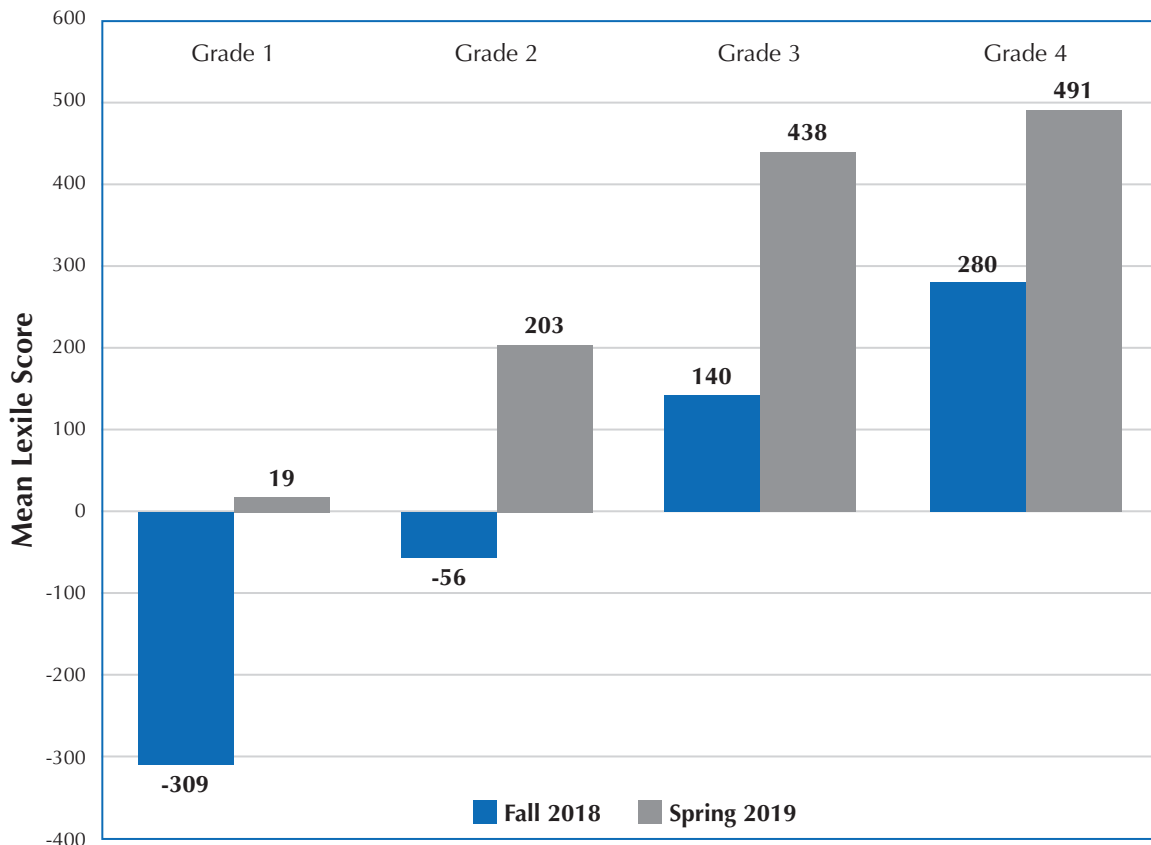


Figure 2. Mean MAP Lexile Score for Remediation Students. For all grades, the mean Lexile increased from Fall 2018 to Spring 2019 for students receiving TDR remediation services.



achievement. Although the challenges are great, the opportunities to partner with teachers and leaders across the city are unprecedented. Together, we will help ensure that all our children are reading and succeeding.

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