

How to Best Help Struggling Readers

Summary: Teachers use a variety of methods to help struggling readers, but which are the most effective? In an article for *Better: Evidence-Based Education*, researcher Robert Slavin synthesizes results from twenty years' worth of studies on struggling readers to identify the most impactful interventions.

Practical Applications

Slavin's analysis revealed the following results, and he suggests examples of programs that were particularly effective in each type of intervention:

- “One-on-one tutoring by specially trained teachers is, not surprisingly, one of the most effective strategies.” Within one-on-one tutoring, tutoring that focused on phonics was more than doubly as effective as tutoring that focused on non-phonics topics.
 - *Example programs: Reading Recovery, Early Steps, Targeted Reading Intervention, Reading Rescue*
- One-on-one tutoring by paraprofessionals and volunteers is less effective than when the tutoring is done by trained teachers, but well-trained paraprofessionals and volunteers can still be highly impactful – the training is critical.
 - *Example programs: Sound Partners, Books Buddies, SMART*
- Small-group tutoring is moderately effective, but it is especially important that the groups are as small as possible and that the groups focus on phonics.
 - *Example programs: Quick Reads, Corrective Reading, Voyager Passport*
- Within whole-group instruction, the most effective methods for struggling readers were cooperative learning such as partnering up students, teaching metacognitive ‘learn-to-learn’ strategies where students monitor their own learning, and combinations of cooperative and metacognitive strategies.
 - *Example programs: Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC), Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS), Direct Instruction/Corrective Reading*
- Technology was a dog that didn't bark: overall, computer-assisted instruction was “found to have the smallest effect on the attainment of struggling readers,” suggesting that it should be used carefully and in conjunction with other methods.

Conclusion and Citation

As Slavin notes, “the most important message from research on programs for struggling readers is that proven solutions are available,” including many that are inexpensive yet effective if implemented well. If teachers carefully select strategies and programs that fit their particular students' needs, every struggling reader can significantly improve his or her skills.

Slavin, R. “What Works for Struggling Readers.” *Better: Evidence-Based Education*, (Fall 2011), pp. 4-5 <http://bit.ly/lgi0C> (subscription only).