



Improving Literacy Training and Paying Dividends

Funds from Reading First Ohio Have Seeded e-Read Ohio

A White Paper from Reading First Ohio Center

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Summary

In an era of over-the-top energy costs and multi-billion-dollar state budget deficits, it doesn't seem likely that a federal education grant over four years would go very far. But in the quest to improve reading results in grades K-3 of Ohio's neediest schools, these dollars from Reading First Ohio have gone much further than expected.

In fact, e-Read Ohio, a program of literacy professional development (PD) for teachers, has built upon these dollars to expand training from:

- ❖ grades K-3 to pre-K-12
- ❖ native English speakers to English Language Learners (ELL)
- ❖ the most accessible, urban schools to the most remote, rural schools in the state
- ❖ teacher-student literacy improvement to parent-child literacy improvement

Few other states have invested their Reading First funds with such leverage. e-Read Ohio has yielded benefits both intrinsically (2295 teachers taking courses to help over 41,000 early readers in 114 schools in school year 2007-08) and extrinsically (modernization of State Institutes for Reading Instruction, development of in-state e-learning expertise, expansion to a learning center of twenty). It has equipped teachers with an ongoing program of techniques scientifically proven to help children become better readers.

This paper explains how Reading First Ohio's investment has paid dividends in the form of e-Read Ohio, and how training and professional development for teachers in the state have benefited. It describes the integral role e-Read Ohio plays in schools implementing Reading First Ohio, with assessment data on its effects on teachers. Its intended audience of educators and decision-makers will see that properly teaching the teachers themselves is the first step towards properly teaching the students, and that this Reading First investment in professional development for teachers deserves to be continued.

Main Messages

- *e-Read Ohio combines expert commentary from national experts in their fields, interactive e-learning and scientifically based reading research (SBRR) to improve literacy education in Ohio's classrooms.*
- *By making this program of professional development widely accessible throughout the state, Reading First - and now e-Read Ohio - has helped 2300 teachers learn better to assess and teach reading to over 41,000 students in 114 schools in the 2007-08 school year alone.*
- *e-Read Ohio, developed and maintained at The University of Akron, deserves expansion and implementation as proven, viable training for every primary and secondary teacher in Ohio.*

Background

Reading First is the largest undertaking in the history of the federal government to improve literacy instruction for elementary students. To date, that has meant over \$6 billion to states to improve early reading instruction.

The Reading First initiative is part of *No Child Left Behind*, which has a congressional mandate to fund literacy improvement programs. Its educational focus comes from the

findings of the congressionally commissioned National Reading Panel¹, whose report supports scientifically based reading research (SBRR).

Reading First Ohio

To apply for funding, each state and territory wrote a grant proposal. Ohio structured its proposal to create the Reading First Ohio Center among Cleveland State University (to provide technical assistance and integrate principals and other support personnel), John Carroll University (to create and disseminate professional development and training for Reading First Ohio Literacy Specialists and teachers), and The University of Akron (to create online professional development for all K-3 teachers statewide, including teachers in Reading First schools).

The center at University of Akron (UA) assumed the task of creating professional development that uses SBRR in assessing, planning, and teaching in accordance with Ohio's English-Language Arts standards.

Why is Professional Development Important?

As the National Reading Panel gathered information from regional meetings on how to implement the literacy component of No Child Left Behind, its members discovered "intense interest in the quality and importance of teacher education."

Continuing education for practicing teachers comes from professional development, also called inservice education. This is the process whereby working teachers learn new techniques and supplement or refine existing techniques to help children read better.

Furthermore, the focus in Reading First is on using data to make decisions about whether and how to intervene for a student's success in reading. Teachers need training on how to gather, interpret and use that data.

Literacy professional development for teachers can take the form of classroom learning, slide presentations, face-to-face individualized e-learning, and group e-learning. The vehicles all support a common goal: helping teachers learn how to teach better.

SBRR is essential to this task because, in short, the academic community now knows what it takes to teach children to read, and the most successful methods are also the most scientifically based ones. SBRR is at the heart of literacy professional development for teachers because it embodies the **Five Essentials**: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The research underpinning SBRR has demonstrated that only proper instruction in and measurement of all five components leads children to read and understand accurately the words on the page – the essence of reading.

Early Work

Early in the life of the grant, the UA center licensed a teacher education platform from an out-of-state vendor and began co-developing the courses, or "modules," to be delivered

¹ National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

electronically over the platform. In the process, the UA team learned about instructional design, conducted research on the cognitive demand of effective online training and became gradually more proficient in designing e-learning modules.

After two years, several challenges arose. Managing the long-distance relationship with the vendor became daunting. The center saw the pedagogic value of more interactive modules with more video footage, but building this into the product exceeded the scope of budgeted work. There was concern over the cost of maintaining statewide licenses to the platform beyond the life of the grant. Ultimately, having learned many lessons in how best to deliver online professional development to teachers, the team at UA wanted greater flexibility in the creation of the e-learning modules.

e-Read Ohio is Born

To meet these challenges, the center at UA created its own, internal e-learning design and development groups in 2007 and collectively called them e-Read Ohio. It also switched from developing courseware for the out-of-state vendor's platform to developing online courses for an Ohio-based system. This gave them the necessary control over the growth and customization of creative instructional design.

The UA team also worked with the State Institutes for Reading Instruction (SIRI), developed in the late 1990's by the Ohio Department of Education as a summer intervention course for teachers. Instructors presented information on specific topics in a face-to-face workshop format familiar to most teachers. Educators considered SIRI a sort of research and development department, where the state could build infrastructure for boosting the capacity of the teaching profession through new technologies. SIRI held the potential, the visibility and the statewide reach on which e-Read Ohio could deliver existing e-learning modules and build new ones.

Seeded with the Reading First Ohio money aimed at K-3 literacy teachers in the state's neediest schools, e-Read Ohio has created an effective vehicle for designing, building and disseminating professional development for teachers all over the state. As it progresses into modules and courseware for grades 4-12, e-Read Ohio returns the Reading First investment far beyond its original K-3 scope.

Funded by Reading First Ohio, e-Read Ohio piloted its first modules, Scaffolding and Differentiated Instruction, in Reading First schools. Since then, the model has been to create a module, pilot it within the Reading First schools, and then disseminate it to schools beyond Reading First. eRead Ohio systematically studies the results, rolling the best methods in online professional development into future modules.

Helping the Teachers First

The findings of the National Reading Panel had documented the fact that, to help students, it was first necessary to help teachers. Most of the educational community had accepted this, and e-Read Ohio's online courses became the vehicle for this help.

Goals and Conditions

e-Read Ohio's objective is to deliver professional development that is:

- ❖ **Innovative** – Not only to use SIRI as the springboard for the continued development of the courseware, but also to replace SIRI with a “blended model” of face-to-face instruction and online, interactive components of true e-learning (discussion groups, video clips, learning communities).
- ❖ **Evolving** – To fold outside e-learning research back into the modules over time, and make e-Read Ohio’s own e-learning research widely available.
- ❖ **Comprehensive** – To develop an entire menu of SBRR modules that would support teachers in a variety of literacy-related topics.
- ❖ **Authoritative** – To capture and disseminate through online courses the most recent research and thinking of national experts in literacy education.
- ❖ **Accessible** – To make this program of professional development for teachers Internet-accessible, so that even the most remote schools in need of professional development can obtain it.
- ❖ **Transferable** – To offer college credit to teachers enrolled in graduate studies, and hours towards a school district’s incentive program.

In schools that implement the courses, e-Read Ohio has established optimal conditions for achieving these goals:

- ❖ **Job-embedded** – Teachers follow the courses as part of their normal job. While they may make time for them in any way that suits their regular teaching duties, they must take the classes while teaching. For example, they may take them during the summer if they are teaching summer school.
- ❖ **Supported** – Teachers receive the support of a School Literacy Consultant (SLC) who improves teacher practice by meeting with them, conducting their e-learning, and going into the classroom to observe them and model the techniques shown in the courses. The job of the SLC is not to supplant teachers as the literacy expert in the classroom, but to help them be literacy experts in the classroom.
- ❖ **Sustained** – True professional development in any field is ongoing, so e-Read Ohio works best when teachers work with it over time, rather than episodically. The modules help to validate and reinforce teachers’ best practices, and the advantage of repeating courses as a refresher is part of the program.
- ❖ **School-based** – In order to effect real change, all teachers involved in a school’s literacy instruction take the course, rather than isolated teachers.

Also, teachers complete a knowledge assessment before and after participating in a course to measure improvement in both their knowledge of content and their intent to apply the techniques they have learned. e-Read Ohio uses the data to gauge the effectiveness of modules and the improvement in teacher knowledge across course objectives.

e-Read Ohio: Online Courses in Literacy Instruction

e-Read Ohio is a multi-faceted initiative. The UA center has put in place the infrastructure for professional development, a wide-ranging program of rich multimedia courseware, a combination of online and classroom delivery, a central staff of experts in e-learning research, and highly leveraged connections to Ohio’s literacy education community to reach and support teachers everywhere in the state.

How Does e-Read Ohio Work?

A Regional Literacy Consultant (RLC) trained by the Ohio Department of Education meets with a school district to determine professional development needs based on measurements and school data. Once the RLC and the district have selected the necessary courses, the RLC trains school-based literacy consultants (SLCs) on the corresponding e-read Ohio modules, for example, Fluency or Assess-Plan-Teach. SLCs then deliver the face-to-face sessions of the professional development to the teachers and coach individually in classrooms (see Figure 1).

Teachers take online courses and participate in discussion boards. An eRead Ohio instructor (eROI) leads the online discussion and monitors the teachers' overall progress in the course.

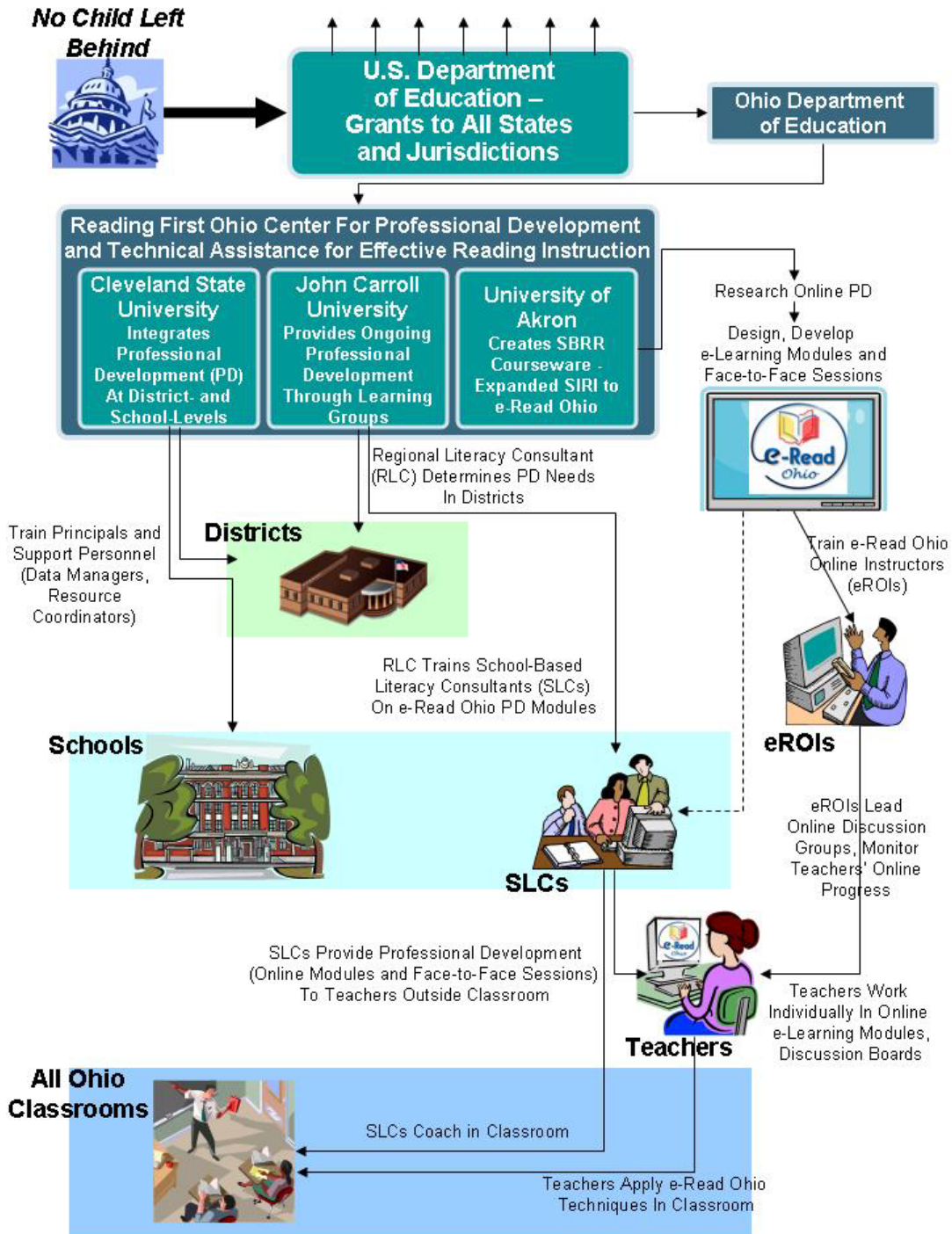


Figure 1 - e-Read Ohio Delivery

What's in an e-Read Ohio Module?

Teachers in e-Read Ohio's online modules learn interactively in simulations, video analyses and case studies. They watch expert video, view classroom footage to observe

model teaching in action and apply SBRR literacy techniques straight from the modules. They work individually, in online discussion groups, and sometimes in statewide online learning communities. The e-Read Ohio menu of modules covers the most important topics and techniques in SBRR, including differentiating instruction (DI), scaffolding and the Five Essentials.

Modules are built around reusable **learning objects** such as video footage of literacy experts, rich multimedia components, teacher-oriented video that models techniques, and online discussion groups. Each of these categories in isolation has demonstrated value, but when combined and supplemented with face-to-face meetings and the support of the SLC, the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts.

The online modules first build the teacher's background knowledge, explaining current research in the topic and the steps in the literacy technique. Next, the teacher watches video clips demonstrating the technique in action, follows the examples and refers to online interviews with experts. Finally, the teacher has the opportunity to practice the technique interactively with the module and then in the classroom with the guidance of the SLC. Thus, the course moves towards the **gradual release of responsibility** at the heart of high-quality professional development.

How Is e-Read Ohio Innovative?

e-Read Ohio's biggest stride is in its transformation of SIRI, which had a traditional, workshop format, into a rich interactive vehicle with the potential to create online, statewide learning communities. The opportunity for communication among peers facing similar situations is one that teachers rarely find elsewhere.

Having learned early on, however, that no single model (computer-based, face-to-face, teacher preference, etc.) is perfect, the center at UA has deployed its courses in a **blended model** that combines computer-based coursework, online discussion groups and in-classroom sessions. These methods of delivery complement one another and provide the strengths of teacher-led instruction, student-led pacing and student-led engagement with materials.

e-Read Ohio is also an example of how **research** begets research. The UA center is an avid consumer of e-learning research, plowing into its online modules the latest answers to the questions, "What works?" and "What doesn't work?" Correspondingly, as more teachers in more schools work with more modules, e-Read Ohio makes public their assessment data in reports and presentations at national conferences.

Benefits of e-Read Ohio

The program, infrastructure and support benefit schools, teachers and ultimately students all over Ohio.

To the State of Ohio

As described above, the Reading First Ohio Center at UA originally engaged an out-of-state vendor for production and implementation of courses, and e-Read Ohio is the result of the center's decision to produce and implement the courses themselves. This has saved the taxpayers 22% in production costs and 58% in implementation costs.

Furthermore, while the center still spends a portion of its budget on out-of-state vendors and national experts, the lion's share of the funds spent on e-Read Ohio now stays in the state.

To Reading First Ohio Schools

The Reading First Ohio Center estimates that, from 2004 to 2008, at least 1100 teachers in 66 Reading First schools have participated in e-Read Ohio. The knowledge and skills to which teachers have been exposed through their use of the modules has had the potential to positively influence the learning of 22,000 students.

e-Read Ohio Benefits

- *Cost savings of 22% in production and 58% in implementation*
- *Participation of over 1100 teachers in 66 Reading First schools, potentially reaching 22,000 students*
- *Participation of nearly 2300 teachers in 114 schools statewide, potentially reaching 41,000 students*

Every year, new teachers join the staff of schools that have implemented Reading First Ohio. Incumbent teachers have already been working to Reading First standards, so the schools use the Five Essentials modules from e-Read Ohio to bring the new teachers up to speed on the fundamentals of Reading First.

Reading First Ohio schools have also chosen to address literacy needs among the growing population of English-language learner (ELL) with an e-Read Ohio module aimed specifically at these students. The course raises teachers' awareness of potentially confusing English-language idioms (e.g., "touch base with him," "hold on to your hat") and demonstrates multiple representations of concepts. The module also exposes teachers to techniques for helping students from backgrounds as diverse as Appalachia, Latin America and Asia.

To All Ohio Schools and Beyond

The Center also estimates that in school year 2007-08, 2295 teachers statewide took e-Read Ohio professional development courses, with potential impact on over 41,000 early readers in 114 schools.

Assessment data and satisfaction surveys between September 2006 and August 2007 from teachers using e-Read Ohio show:

- ❖ an increase from 57% to 69% in the number of correctly answered questions on course content;
- ❖ strong intent to apply the materials that they learned in the training to their classroom instruction;
- ❖ positive feedback on the online environment, the course content, the support provided by instructors, and the experience of using the discussion boards;
- ❖ agreement that the most effective parts of the course were the course content (reflection prompts, assignments, opportunity for face-to-face interaction with peers, organization) and the ability to watch techniques and examples in the online videos.

As funding wanes for professional development in the form of expert speakers and ongoing inservice training, e-Read Ohio's courses capture on video the knowledge of national

authorities in literacy education and make it accessible to the teachers in any participating school. This allows teachers, even those in financially strapped or remote districts and schools, to enjoy the benefits of high-quality training.

Teachers adopting the scientifically based methods that comprise e-Read Ohio no longer need to rely on anecdotal evidence, instinct or experimentation in evaluating students' literacy needs. Armed with proven techniques and supported in the classroom by the SLC, teachers can intervene sooner and more effectively.

Finally, there is a ripple effect outside the state as the successful transformation of SIRI into e-Read Ohio has come to the attention of educators in other states. Dr. Curtis Bonk of Indiana University notes, "This is the right moment for the power of e-Read Ohio because we have this perfect e-storm happening. e-Read Ohio opens up the possibilities for learning for any learner at any place and time, and this program, in effect, enables us to do that. e-Learning is the next wave."

Next Steps

Angela Sangeorge, Director, Office of Literacy, Ohio Department of Education

"Reading First gave us the opportunity to really explore – we had money and resources, and we were able to hold teachers responsible. We used design and planning to collect a lot of data and create a statewide literacy plan for professional development based on Reading First. We now offer e-learning from Reading First funding for any teacher in the state, so we'll soon be up to 200 schools taking part in the plan for school literacy coaches for embedded professional development."

Conclusion

Like all other states with Reading First programs, Ohio has spent part of its grant on "teaching teachers how to teach reading." e-Read Ohio, however, represents a model unique in the nation for investing the Reading First dollars in an in-state program, rather than spending those dollars out of state. Teachers learn, practice and apply techniques with measurable literacy benefits for elementary and secondary students, and every school in Ohio can benefit from the program.

For several reasons, e-Read Ohio is a work in progress:

- ❖ Its staff constantly develops new literacy modules to meet the evolving needs of teachers and their students.
- ❖ The modules help validate, reinforce and improve teachers' best practices, so the schools have an interest in both repeating courses every few years as refresher training and taking new courses to deepen teachers' understanding of literacy techniques.
- ❖ Schools constantly modify their curriculum to encompass new discoveries in education, so teachers face new material and need scientifically based ways of communicating it.
- ❖ Veteran teachers move among schools, and new teachers arrive in schools every year.

- ❖ New students from low-performing demographics enter the classroom with new literacy needs every year.

e-Read Ohio deserves expansion and continued funding as an effective vehicle for developing and disseminating literacy training to the state's teachers. Beyond returning the original Reading First investment, e-Read Ohio is paying literacy dividends as a robust method of disseminating professional development with great fidelity to all Ohio teachers.

For More Information

Visit www.ereadohio.org/whitepaper for more information on e-Read Ohio.

Subscribe at www.ereadohio.org/newsletter for updates in the evolution of e-learning and professional development for teachers.

Contact the e-Read Ohio office in the Reading First Ohio Center at the University of Akron at 330-972-6664 or info@ereadohio.org.