Evaluation of the Texas Adolescent Literacy Academies (TALA): Interim Report #1

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

According to several reading researchers and government agencies, there is a literacy crisis in middle schools across the United States (e.g., Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger, & Torgesen, 2008; Slavin, Chamberlain, & Daniels, 2007). Over 70 percent of adolescents struggle to read and enter high school reading below grade level (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003; NASBE, 2006). Approximately two-thirds of eighth grade students read below the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and one-quarter read below the basic level (NASBE, 2006). In Texas, TAKS passing rates decrease in middle school. Since poor readers are at a greater risk for dropping out of high school (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003), adolescent literacy has become a "hot topic" for research and intervention (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2007). Additionally, research indicates that students with average reading ability are unprepared for reading in post-secondary education and the workforce (Kamil et al., 2008). The middle school years offer the last chance to build the foundation of literacy skills for high school success (Slavin et al., 2007).

Explicit instruction in four key areas has been found to lead to reading improvement: (1) phonics, (2) fluency, (3) vocabulary, and (4) comprehension. In addition, instruction that focuses on only one component of reading is not sufficient to promote literacy in struggling readers. Phonics, fluency, and vocabulary are factors necessary for reading comprehension to occur. As a result, an emphasis on comprehension strategies alone will not increase reading ability, especially in students who are struggling readers. The inclusion of multiple reading components within the same intervention has been found to be the most effective to improve reading achievement (Scammacca, Vaughn, Edmonds, Reutebuch, & Torgesen, 2007).

Response-to-Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tiered instructional model for educational assessment and intervention delivery. It is based on student progress data, which inform whether increasing levels of intervention delivery should be provided to students who are not responding to their current program of instruction (Colorado State Department of Education, 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2006; NASDSE, 2006). Many RTI models apply a three-tiered approach that entails primary (or universal), secondary, and tertiary instruction. Each level is synonymous with a tier and student movement among them is typically informed by progress monitoring data. Tier 1 should be characterized as high-quality (i.e., research-based) instruction provided to all students. Tier 2 instruction is not universal, but utilized for those students who do make adequate progress in reading after working with core curricula. Students who do not respond sufficiently to Tier 2 intervention enter Tier 3, which typically involves more comprehensive evaluation and intense services and might apply to about 5 percent of students

Research and evaluation on reading initiatives at the federal (e.g., *Reading First*) and state levels indicate that there is much to be done in order to close the achievement gap for learners in reading (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003; NASBE, 2006). Funding to close the achievement gap in reading has been focused on training and preparation of reading teachers, remediation for students reading below grade level, and an emphasis on early literacy strategies, including the promotion of family literacy. Over the last 12 years, Texas has focused on improving reading instruction in order to improve overall reading achievement for students at all grade levels. The most recent initiative is the Texas Adolescent Literacy Academies (TALA).

About TALA

Texas House Bill 2237 was created in 2007 in order to improve high school success and increase college readiness in Texas public schools, and provided specific direction and funding for TALA. TALA was created to improve literacy rates among middle school students. In order to achieve this goal, TALA focuses on improving teaching, rather than directly on students, by providing Grades 6-8 English language arts (ELA)/reading and content area teachers with successful, research-based strategies for improving their students' academic literacy.

The TALA Model

TALA instructional routines represent scientifically-based instructional strategies based on reading research. The emphasis is on implementation of a three-tier reading model consistent with an RTI model. This model emphasizes ongoing data collection and immediate intervention for students who demonstrate a need in one or more reading skills. TALA is tailored for the unique structure of middle schools and is framed within a school-wide approach to addressing the needs of struggling adolescent readers.

The goal of TALA is to provide professional development for ELA/reading and content area teachers in the use of scientifically-based literacy practices to improve academic literacy. TALA is intended to help prepare middle school teachers to design appropriate instruction for all students, including those who are struggling with reading due to limited English proficiency (LEP), learning disabilities, dyslexia, and other risk factors for reading difficulties.

The TALA program consists of two separate academies: the ELA Academy and Content Area Academy. The ELA Academy is designed for reading and English language arts teachers. The Content Area Academy targets math, science, and social studies teachers. Both academies provide professional development in scientifically-based, general literacy instructional strategies. The ELA Academy also provides training in the use of a diagnostic and progress monitoring assessment and reading intervention instructional strategies.

The Format of TALA

The ELA Academies consist of three days of face-to-face training, followed by a one-day online practicum follow-up. The Content Area Academies consisted of 1.5 days of face-to-face training, followed by a half-day online practicum. TALA trainers provided examples of the strategies and their applications, both in hard copy and video formats, with appropriate subject area materials in the middle school classroom. The content is organized into seven units with individual modules that last between 30 and 75 minutes. Units 1-3 were covered in both ELA and Content Area Academies, while units 4-7 were only covered in the ELA Academies.

Implementation of TALA

Regional Education Service Center (ESC) leaders were in charge of operations for the implementation of TALA statewide. The Texas Education Agency established education service centers to serve as a first point of contact for school districts, parents, and other community stakeholders, and to provide leadership, training, and technical assistance. The ESC leaders scheduled TALA ELA and Content Area Academies in their respective regions, established locations, set dates and times, and worked with their IT staff to set up the registration information in their catalog and develop a registration database to track participants.

TALA utilized a training of trainers (TOT) model in order to prepare trainers for the implementation of TALA statewide. First, the State TOT was held in March 2008, where master trainers trained state trainers. Three Regional TOTs were conducted in May 2008 in which state trainers trained regional trainers. Finally, regional trainers conducted TALA Classroom Teacher Academies throughout the 20 ESC regions with a maximum of 50 participants. Teachers who teach at campuses that are rated Academically Unacceptable (AU) in reading were required to attend TALA. ESCs planned to conduct approximately 100 ELA classroom teacher academies and 100 Content Area classroom teacher academies between June 2, 2008 and August 15, 2008. Grade 6 teachers attended these trainings in the summer of 2008, while Grade 7 and Grade 8 teachers will attend trainings in summer 2009.

Approach to the TALA Evaluation

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) contracted with ICF International (ICF) to conduct a statewide evaluation of TALA. The comprehensive evaluation approach was designed to:

- Evaluate the quality of the TALA training, including the materials developed for use in training, the training of trainers, and the training of classroom teachers;

- Evaluate the quality and level of ongoing implementation of the TALA training in the classroom;

- Evaluate the effects of the TALA teacher training on student outcomes; and

- Conduct an analysis of financial data to assess the cost-effectiveness of TALA.

Phase One is an evaluation of the TALA training, including an evaluation of the quality of the content, the delivery of the training at the state, regional, and classroom teacher levels, and trainer perceptions of the training that they attended and conducted. Phase One also addresses Evaluation Objective 4, focusing on how funds were allocated to develop and implement TALA, while Phase Two of the evaluation addresses objectives 2-4. This report focuses on Phase One of the evaluation.[1]

Phase One Methodology

Specific research questions were developed to address each of the four overall evaluation objectives. These research questions guided the selection of data sources, the development of instruments to collect new data, and the analysis of the data.

Several data sources were used to address the research questions for Phase One of the evaluation, including TALA archival planning materials (e.g., steering committee meeting minutes, program rules), TALA training materials, TALA training observations, state trainer interviews, and the regional trainer survey. Instruments developed in order to collect data from these sources included an expert review protocol, the TALA training observation protocol and semi-structured field note template, the state trainer telephone interview protocol, and the regional trainer survey. An expert review panel (consisting of five nationally recognized experts in literacy, professional development, and special education) reviewed the TALA content and materials. Members of the ICF evaluation team conducted observations of TALA trainings at all three levels (State TOT, Regional TOT, and Classroom Teacher Academies), conducted state trainer telephone interviews, and administered the regional trainer web-based survey.

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[1] Phase Two of the evaluation will be completed by August 31, 2009.

For this report on Phase One of the TALA program evaluation, researchers conducted a series of exploratory and descriptive analyses to understand the distributional properties of survey and observation data. This quantitative data were mixed with qualitative findings and content analyses to generate overall statements about the quality of TALA trainings, stakeholder perceptions, and budget allocations.

Phase One Findings

Expert Review of Materials

TALA instructional strategies were perceived by the Technical Advisory Board (TAB) members as important and necessary for adolescent readers. The routines require active teaching by the teacher, high levels of student participation, and require the students to become "more cognitively engaged in learning." Many of the instructional routines are representative of best practices in literacy and scientifically-based research practices. The TAB recommended that, in order to improve the implementation of TALA in the schools, teachers need systemic support from reading coaches and school administrators, on-going training, classroom follow-up, and opportunities to practice the routines with feedback. In addition, the TAB members suggested that teachers should see models in the classroom, during and after the training. Lastly, the TAB members felt that the trainers should use actual texts in training so the teachers will see how the material will work in their classrooms and to make sure that teachers are exposed to a large number of instructional routines that are taught in conjunction with their texts. In other words, this would help teachers learn how to fuse the content with the strategies.

Observations of TALA Training

The TALA Regional TOT and TALA Classroom Teacher Academies were highly rated by observers. Trainers at the Regional TOT and Classroom Teacher Academies were able to effectively implement the components of the TALA training. In both trainings, the presenters/trainers explained and reviewed TALA content, provided examples and elaborations, and distributed and used the handouts. Both trainings (Regional TOT and Classroom Teacher Academies) had lesser occurrences of modeling the routines and having the participants practice the routines independently or with each other. The trainers were less likely to use the videos in the Classroom Teacher Academies.

Regional and Classroom Teacher Academies were rated as being reflective of best practices for professional development and the culture of the training sessions facilitated the engagement of participants in the TALA training. However, observers were hesitant to report that the Regional TOT prepared participants to present the TALA training. For example, observers rated perceived preparation as low for "working with adult learners" and "differentiation of instruction for various learning styles."

Observers rated the TALA Regional TOT as exhibiting high implementation, following the activities and content as presented in the training materials. This rating is reflected in perceived preparedness of regional trainers to present the activities as outlined in the training. Also, the culture of the Regional TOT was perceived as positive as well as the perception of regional trainers to maintain a positive learning environment. However, there was less implementation of the TEKS and TAKS in the Regional TOT and observers reported lower beliefs that the training built participants' skill in linking their instruction to the TEKS and developed participants' understanding of the TAKS student assessment system.

Perceptions of TALA Training

Both state and regional trainers had positive perceptions of the TALA training. The majority of trainers had the prerequisite skills needed to conduct the training (e.g., previous experience as a teacher, previous professional development experience). The overall impressions of the training that they attended to become a TALA trainer were favorable, reporting that the training was effective in helping them prepare for their role as a trainer. The trainers felt adequately prepared for the training that they conducted based on the training that they attended. The one issue that emerged in both state and regional trainer perceptions was the need for more time/additional days to learn and present the TALA content due to the large amount of material covered in the training.

Discussion and Next Steps for TALA

The overall findings of Phase One of the TALA evaluation provide evidence that TALA content is representative of best practices for literacy instruction and is explicitly aligned to national and state standards in English Language Arts (ELA) and Reading. Evidence is also presented for the effective implementation of TALA routines at all levels of training (state, regional, and classroom teacher). The TALA training had a positive climate, conducive to learning. The training of trainers prepared the state and regional trainers well for their role as a TALA trainer.

Phase Two of the evaluation will assess whether TALA classroom teacher academies led to a change in teaching practices and if the TALA influence student achievement. Finally, the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of TALA will be assessed in Phase Two.