**An Introduction to Mr. Amante’s Class and RTI²**

**A Case for Reflection and Discussion**

(Adapted from Kearns, “Reading Case Study, #2, http://www.studentprogress.org/library/CaseStudy/reading\_grade4\_comprehension\_3-4-09.pdf)

**About Mr. Amante and His Students**

Mr. Amante has been teaching Grade 4 in Jefferson County Public Schools for 9 years, 7 of them at Carver Elementary. Like all of the other teachers at Carver, Mr. Amante began using RTI2 three years ago. Like all of the other upper grade teachers, Mr. Amante has noticed fewer readers with serious reading difficulties since the beginning of RTI2. However, he has also noticed that he has many struggling students.

Mr. Amante has 26 students this year, and they reflect the ethnic diversity of the school. About 75% of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. He has several ELLs, but most of them are considered proficient, having learned English throughout elementary school.

**Core Instruction in Mr. Amante’s Classroom**

Mr. Amante makes extensive use of the primary text adopted by the District, *Reading Adventures*. JCPS mandates that all Grade 4 teachers provide explicit literacy instruction for 90 minutes each day, follow a standards-aligned pacing guide that includes *Reading Adventures*, and implement a balanced literacy approach with a specific instructional design (explicitly including gradual release of responsibility)[[1]](#footnote-1). The pacing guide gives teachers benchmark dates by which they must complete certain lessons. Mr. Amante thinks the pacing guide has benefits and drawbacks. One benefit of the pacing guide is that it keeps him moving and assures that students have access to a rigorous curriculum and an evidence-based instructional model aligned to the state standards. On the other hand, he feels that the pacing guide limits his ability to reteach particularly challenging lessons. Mr. Amante uses the unit themes as the focal point of his classroom, but he wishes he had more time to examine themes in more detail. The Grade 4 program includes a unit titled “Our Heritage,” and he enjoys exploring students’ diverse cultures. The unit, however, only lasts 3 weeks. He wishes he had more time. He understands, however, that the other units cover other good topics, and he has followed the pacing guide consistently (and, he admits, he does spend an extra few days on the Heritage unit and still teaches mostly in whole group).

*Reading Adventures* is tied to state standards, and Mr. Amante is pleased with the progress many of his students made across the four years he has been teaching it. The program includes reading comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and writing lessons. One disadvantage of the Grade 4 program had been the absence of tools to track students’ progress. Mr. Amante has always had high expectations for students’ comprehension improvement, but he has found the end-of-unit tests too specific to give him a sense of their overall improvement. A great benefit of the introduction of RTI², therefore, has been the introduction of progress monitoring tools. JCPS now requires all Grade 4 teachers to measure students’ academic progress using a new universal screener.

**Getting Started with RTI … Mr. Amante Begins the Year**

JCPS requires that all Grade 4 students are screened three times a year using the *Universal Maze*—a standardized, universal screening instrument. Students’ results on the *Maze* will be used to determine if Mr.Amante’s students are on track to meet grade level benchmarks for reading.

This year, it is going well for him. He follows the pacing guide carefully and does all of the standard lessons. In addition, he supplements the curriculum with a few additional texts because he wants to provide exposure to other types of information about each unit topic—to ensure sufficient practice with complex texts and more deliberate efforts to build students’ background knowledge. He knows that content knowledge is very important for strong reading comprehension, and he feels his additional texts deepen content learning. He is careful not to supplement too much (and get off track), and he uses some of his science or social studies time to supplement/complement the unit theme[[2]](#footnote-2). For example, Mr. Amante’s social studies instruction focuses on American heritage during the *Reading Adventures* “Your Heritage” unit, and he has planned his science instruction so that he covers the science unit on conservation while he and his class are on the *Reading Adventures* unit titled “Our Planet: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.”

In addition to a pacing guide, the District has required the Grade 4 teachers to check each other’s fidelity to the program. Mr. Amante and his colleagues have been checking their program fidelity (against the literacy implementation guide) since the first year of RTI². They were initially concerned, but they understood that it was important to be sure that all students receive high-quality instruction: “RTI² doesn’t work if we aren’t sure everyone is getting good instruction,” they said. All of the Grade 4 teachers at Carver initially felt uncomfortable giving critical feedback to each other. They did the checks anyhow, and they found that it was helpful to observe each other because they learned new tips and tricks when they did this. They realized the value in watching each other, comparing student work, and collectively analyzing *Maze* and other standardized data, and they found the constructive feedback helpful for improving their implementation.

Mr. Amante credits the fidelity checks with helping him strike a better balance between what he wants to teach and what the standards require. His interest in certain subjects (e.g., conservation) sometimes meant he spent too much time on them, at the expense of some skills. Now, the fidelity checks assure he teaches all the key lesson content, and he has developed creative ways to fit supplemental instruction into his day, as we saw above. The Grade 4 teachers met during their planning periods on the days they observed each other and discussed their implementation. This led to improvement in everyone’s implementation. Mr. Amante has felt more confident in his instruction—and that of his colleagues—because of this. In addition to providing instruction whole group, Mr. Amante does some instruction in small homogenous, guided reading groups and literacy stations. *Reading Adventures* includes resources for these groups, including lessons designed to support reading fluency and reteach abstract vocabulary and difficult comprehension skills (e.g., inferencing). Mr. Amante meets with his small groups at least 3 times a week for about 10 minutes per group. These groups give him the opportunity to provide more carefully targeted instruction. The groups are not part of secondary intervention; however, because they are for all students they are part of his core/ Tier 1 reading program.

**Targeted, Supplemental Support and Progress Monitoring**

Now that Mr. Amante has his Maze and some additional progress monitoring data, he can analyze them to see which students may need more assistance than *Reading Adventures* can provide. JCPS has given Mr. Amante a cut-off score/percentile to determine if students are “at-risk,” based on the recommendations of the National Center on Progress Monitoring.

Mr. Amante knows which students are not responding to primary intervention/ “good first teaching,” and Tier 2 intervention can begin. For Grade 4, there are two prevention options, *Fantastic Fluency* and the district-designed comprehension program, *Reading For Meaning*. Unfortunately, the *Universal Maze* does not really tell Mr. Amante which program would be best for his students. *Fantastic Fluency* is the secondary prevention program JCPS purchased for Grade 4 students who struggle with advanced decoding and fluency. Assessment suggested that two students, Cedric and Leslie would benefit from this instruction. It will be delivered by Ms. Morrison, another 4th grade teacher, based on the revised school schedule. It is important to note that students will *still receive Tier 1* instruction because *Fantastic Fluency* is purely supplemental, including only phonics and fluency instruction. If they were pulled out during primary instruction, these students would receive no comprehension or vocabulary instruction, and this could inhibit their ability to keep up with Grade 4 demands (even if *Fantastic Fluency* brought their word reading skills up to grade level).

Once a week, Ms. Morrison measures the progress of all *Fantastic Fluency* and *Reading For Meaning* students using the district’s progress monitoring tool, *PMEasy*. She has also chosen to administer Grade 3 oral reading fluency (ORF) passages to the *Fantastic Fluency* students, even though these data were not included in her main reports. Because these students are working on fluency, she wanted a direct measure of their fluency improvement. She may see, in fact, that these students improve in fluency on ORF but remain weak on *PMEasy*. If this occurs, her students may transition out of her program but then begin *Reading For Meaning* instruction.

Cedric’s progress is still very slow. He will need Tier 3 intervention in order to make adequate gains.

**Mid-Year Screening**

Now that Mr. Amante’s students are more than half-way through Grade 4, it is important to do a second screening. The screening procedure, using *Universal Maze*, is identical to the screening procedure at the beginning of the year.

Of Mr. Amante’s 11 original at-risk students, 6 continue to be at-risk:

* Zachary and Xavier received additional instruction from the beginning of the year. These were obviously good decisions because they are still struggling with grade-level skills at the midpoint of the year.
* Cedric went through 7 weeks of progress monitoring and *Fantastic Fluency* for 8 weeks, but his scores are still very low. He will need to be referred for Tier 3 intervention.
* Brenda is a tricky case. She appears to be missing targets by slim margins in many cases (her progress slopes are just not good enough, and on the mid-year screening her score is very close to the cutoff). So, some would say she is a candidate for Tier 3. On the other hand, she may benefit from simply one more round of *Reading For Meaning* instruction in secondary intervention. JCPS has decided that students like Brenda should get a second opportunity to respond to intervention. These students, termed “nearly responsive,” are defined as students who nearly missed slope or screening targets after secondary prevention. These students always get a second chance to respond before tertiary prevention is considered.
* Yasmin and Emily appeared to be making adequate progress based on their slopes during the 7 weeks of progress monitoring. They are both just below the cutoff now. So, secondary intervention is the obvious next step for them. More progress monitoring is not needed to realize that they probably need additional support to meet grade-level standards.
* The remaining 5 students who were initially at-risk are above the benchmark now:
* Isaac, Quinn, and Roman were doing fine after the progress monitoring period, and continue to do fine.
* Katherine and Leslie both benefitted from secondary prevention and are doing better now.
* Finally, two new at-risk students, Paige and Ulises, have appeared. They are also candidates for secondary prevention. Although we have not engaged in extensive progress monitoring, we have a sense of their slopes based on their initial scores and their present scores. They are not making adequate progress, and additional support can begin immediately.
1. Note: JCPS has different core adopted texts and other instructional materials, as well as different requirements for literacy instructional minutes for different grade bands. However, each is expected to follow the standards-aligned pacing guides, instructional minutes expectations, and model instructional design. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note: in the secondary grades, teachers coordinate across content areas to similarly create more opportunities for students to work with complex texts and build content knowledge. For example, the social studies and ELA teachers have co-developed unit on the French Revolution that leverage close readings of Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* and original source documents to build students’ understanding of the time period and events. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)