

# ELEVATING LANGUAGE

## Leveraging speech-language pathologists to support reading and writing for all students

By **Lakeisha Johnson, Jasmine Smith, & Nicole Patton Terry**

**a**s researchers in the Florida Center for Reading Research, we often serve as thought partners for teachers, principals, and other leaders who are working to improve reading and literacy achievement in their school. We relish the opportunity to partner with educators, working alongside our colleagues to ensure that all students are reading and succeeding in school.

Given our own experiences, including as a speech-language pathologist (SLP) and special education teacher, we know firsthand how much can be accomplished when all professionals in a school are working together as a team to support all students. So, it should come as no surprise that one of the first questions we always ask our school partners is, “How is your SLP involved in your school’s literacy instruction and intervention plans?”

### What SLPs know

Given their unique understanding of language development and intervention, SLPs are well-positioned to play an integral role on a school’s literacy leadership

team. Ample research evidence has demonstrated the critical linkages between oral language, reading, and writing. In fact, these skills grow reciprocally, with each supporting growth and development in the other.

Moreover, because students learn much about the world through language, it is also critical to instruction in science, art, social studies, music, and other content-focused classes. Although we humans have evolved such that language emerges innately, children still require purposeful and responsive interactions with adults and peers in their environment to develop language skills that support reading and writing. And in most schools, no one knows more about

language than your friendly neighborhood SLP.

### What SLPs can do

In many schools, SLPs are only involved in assessment and intervention activities for students with disabilities who have language-focused goals on their Individual Family Service Plans (IFSPs) or Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). However, SLPs can contribute at all levels of a school’s multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), including reading and writing assessment, instruction, and intervention.

For example, SLPs can help prevent later reading and writing difficulties by pushing into classrooms to provide vocabulary, knowledge building, and conversational

activities that help build strong language foundations for all students. SLPs can also coplan with classroom teachers to differentiate instruction by helping to create small-group language- and print-rich centers that students can rotate through during the school day.

SLPs also have extensive training in evaluation and diagnostics, so they can help the team interpret results from screenings and progress monitoring assessments and make decisions about student responses to instruction and interventions. They can also provide intervention (at all tiers) for students who are experiencing difficulty with specific language, reading, and writing skills.

Finally, SLPs have knowledge of how linguistic variation can shape the experiences students have in and outside of school. So, SLPs can be particularly helpful in schools with lots of linguistic diversity, including multilingual students and students for whom standard American English is not their first language or primary language used at home.

## Voices from the field: One principal's journey with an SLP

*What does this look like in a “real” school? Over time, we have learned much from principals on how to foster conditions to support schoolwide literacy efforts.*

*Below, Principal Jasmine Smith (second author) closes our article by sharing insights from her school's journey with her SLP:*

For the past six years, I have served as principal of a small Title I school. Nearly 50% of our students have their first formal school experience when they enter our doors to begin kindergarten. As you can imagine, this greatly informs the level of lift required to ensure that all our students are reading on grade level by the time they enter third grade.

In previous years, our literacy block was developed and implemented in a manner that allowed us to support all students and provide necessary interventions to those who needed it. Instruction that was both research based and data informed was central to our schoolwide plan. However, as wonderful as our plan was, it did not allow us to prepare for the impact of the global COVID-19

pandemic and the loss of in-person instructional time for our students.

During the 2020–2021 year, teachers at our school instructed students using a hybrid model. We started the school year with 9–12 students attending in person in our kindergarten and first-grade classes. Teachers taught early literacy skills to students while wearing masks. As a school leader, I needed to address the academic and social impact of COVID-19 on learning *and* I needed to find ways to address the communication and language needs of our students *and* I needed to make sure students were receiving quality literacy instruction.

In diving more deeply into our data with my assistant principal, reading coach, and SLP, we realized that all of our students had some sort of foundational language or communication need. For example, we had students who were reading proficiently, but had difficulties in writing and spelling. We also had children who had difficulties with both reading and writing. In addition, our data indicated that the majority of our students lacked the vocabulary necessary to understand increasingly complex texts and adequately support the written and verbal communication needed to be successful in their respective grade levels.

We decided to explore the use of a schoolwide approach for our speech

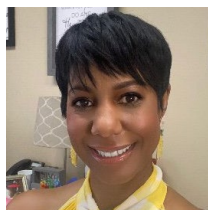
and language program. Our work began during the summer of 2021 as we hosted a summer program for all rising kindergarten through fourth-grade students. Our SLP worked alongside our teachers to provide targeted small-group instruction to all students. In addition, we made plans to better structure interventions and supports for students prior to the start of the school year using actionable data.

In our work together, it became evident that our SLP's unique understanding of language and its subsystems, coupled with our teachers' knowledge of content, allowed us to tailor our approach to classroom literacy instruction as well as the selection and use of intervention programs and materials to best meet the needs of our students. Our SLP also helped us to incorporate explicit vocabulary instruction at all grade levels, which has helped build our students' decoding, fluency, and background knowledge. At the close of the school year, 75% of our kindergarten students were reading on grade level. We also saw gains in reading at all grade levels.

Use of a whole-school approach for speech, language, and communication is proving to be a key factor to increased academic literacy for all of our students. As a principal, I just didn't realize how impactful our SLP could be to our whole school. Now that I know, I cannot imagine using our SLP any other way. ■



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