



Sustained, Silent Reading—with Twists

By Wes Eby, Global Representative

SSR—Sustained, Silent Reading—has been a common strategy that elementary teachers have incorporated into their daily instruction for several decades. Also known by other names, such as DEAR (Drop Everything And Read), this is not a novel idea. However, I would like to share how one school, Wingate Elementary, used SSR to enhance the reading program, adding fun, excitement, and creativity.

Why Did Students Need SSR?

First, I will provide some background. My administrative position at the school was as a language arts specialist. And this responsibility involved working with the staff to improve academic achievement not only in the language arts but in all the curriculum since language is crucial to every subject. Another responsibility was as the school's Chapter 1 (now Title 1) coordinator. This program provided extra funds for underprivileged and educationally disadvantaged children. Wingate Elementary, with more than 500 students in K-8th grade, served Native American children near the Navajo Nation in New Mexico. It was operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a government agency in the Department of the Interior. Most of the student population lived in campus dormitories during the week, supervised by surrogate "parents." While some students returned to their home each weekend, many remained at the school for a full month before their parents picked them up or school employees transported them to their homes. Many academically low achieving students had either failed or dropped out of the public school system. More than 80 percent were eligible for the Chapter 1 funds from the federal government, providing the money to hire bilingual classroom aides.

A major area of academic weakness was reading. Historically, the students scored below grade level on achievement tests in any area that required reading skills. When the school administration became

convinced that a whole-language approach to learning was worthy of trying, it was implemented school-wide. While this major change in the curriculum involved many facets and a variety of learning activities, this article's focus is on Sustained, Silent Reading but with a couple of twists.

The administration required the teachers at all grade levels to schedule a daily SSR time for a minimum of 20 minutes. The students could choose the reading material as we desired that reading be easy and pleasurable. And part of the mandate was that the staff had to participate in SSR to serve as a model. If I entered a room during that time, I grabbed something to read and sat down and read along with the class. In addition, the dormitories had one hour of study time for homework, four nights a week. The administration also required that at least 20 minutes of that hour be for SSR. And it worked! Once implemented, the teachers and dorm staff cooperated, even better than anticipated.

A Million Minutes

The first twist was establishing a reading goal for the school. The principal challenged the students, "I bet you can't read a million minutes." While it seemed a daunting goal, we were rightly motivated and believed it was doable. To manage the record-keeping, the teachers kept a simple log sheet to record the number of minutes and the number of students each day. The same was true for the dormitories. The logs came to me on Friday, and with my secretary's help, we tallied the weekly cumulative minutes for the entire student body.

To keep track of the school-wide total, two of our dormitory staff had the task of creating a visual aid in the cafeteria, a campus facility that everyone in the school visited frequently. Using sheets of paper, they created the "road to reading" that started up and down walls, winding round and round, and even across the ceiling. Each sheet represented so many minutes students read. And over the weeks and months, we observed the reading road as it became longer and longer and longer.

When implementing SSR, the administration invited the student council to decide the reward if the students reached the goal. The student council's decision surprised us: All the staff had to come to school dressed as punk rockers. While the reward seemed rather strange, the administration accepted it and promised to participate fully.

Throughout the year, the "road to reading" consumed the cafeteria—the walls and ceiling declaring progress. And the students achieved the challenging goal three weeks before the end of the school year. Celebration time! The long-awaited day arrived for the staff to become punk rockers, and our cooperation was at its full! I remember black leather vests, pink hair, funky sunglasses, chains, and wrist spikes. We looked as if we were attending a Halloween party! But the important thing was the success—an ambitious, significant goal reached and surpassed.

In the next year, the administration increased the goal to 1,100,000 minutes. This time, the faculty sponsor of the student council guided these leaders to choose a reward more in line with reading. This time the staff had to dress in their favorite story or comic book character. Again, the staff proudly honored the students' success. The principal dressed as Cruella De Vil from *101 Dalmatians*, a PE coach was Hagar the Horrible from the comic strip, and two female teachers were the Queen of Hearts and Little Red Riding Hood. I came as the muppet Kermit the Frog. And there were more. What an imaginative, creative staff!

WKRK—Wingate Karate Reading Program

We added a second twist at the beginning of the second year. As the administrators observed during SSR, we noted that some of the reading material was not challenging, at least not as much as we desired and hoped. While any reading, whether magazines or comic books, is beneficial, the administration decided to increase the level to provide better content choices. Thus, WKRK was born—an acronym for Wingate Karate Reading Program. We selected a committee composed of teachers and aides from all levels with the assigned task to develop a comprehensive list of approved books ranging from easy picture books for kindergarten to novels for the mid-schoolers. All books were available either in the school libraries or in the classrooms. The students were required to select two-thirds of their reading choices from the approved list. Each teacher kept a record of the books read and assumed accountability for determining learner comprehension of the book's content.

For rewards, the students earned a karate “belt”—long, colorful ribbons with a picture of a bear cub, the school mascot, reading a book. The first white belt was earned for reading 10 books. Each belt of a different color required more and more books. The final black belt was earned for a total of 225 books, certainly not a one-year accomplishment. The WKRK reading record became a part of the students' cumulative folders. One of the joys I had was to award the karate belts to the boys and girls in school assembly programs. Before I retired, I was thrilled to present the first black belts to two kids with a voracious appetite for books—thanks mostly to SSR.

Conclusion

The result? Impressive, improved achievement test scores. SSR was just one of many meaningful activities implemented in the whole-language curricular program. Our vision and hard work culminated in our school receiving a prestigious award from the government for student achievement.

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