

Buckhorn High School

The Alabama Reading Initiative

The Alabama Department of Education launched the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) in 1998 to achieve grade-level reading for every Alabama student in grades K–12. ARI is largely a teacher training effort that begins with the state department of education conducting a five-day summer session that trains teachers to identify students who struggle with reading and to help these students read at grade level.

Schools must apply to participate in ARI. Applicant schools are selected based on perceived “commitment” and “readiness,” which schools demonstrate by having 85 percent of their faculty, including the principal, attend the summer training session and by agreeing to model effective instruction for other schools. Once accepted, ARI schools must adopt the goal of 100 percent literacy—that is, all students will be able to read and comprehend any material they typically encounter in classrooms. Empowered by the strategies learned at their summer training session, teachers return to school ready to conduct assessments that will identify struggling readers. Once schools are aware of the specific challenges students face when trying to read, teachers work together to implement strategies that will help students read with more accuracy and ease. In cases where a student needs special attention, his or her classroom teacher will work with a literacy coach who will provide more intensive reading instruction while assuring that the student does not fall behind in learning specific class material. ARI requires monthly trainings for all reading coaches.

As of December 2004, 511 schools across Alabama participated in ARI; 25 percent of those schools served students in grades 7–12. Since 1999, the number of students who demonstrate reading proficiency has increased by 8.8 percent in ARI schools—more than double the progress in non-ARI schools.

Buckhorn High School—Using ARI to Address and Tackle Literacy Problems

Buckhorn High School, in New Market, Alabama, has a racially and economically diverse population. Thirty percent of its 838 students are students of color, and 21 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. In the beginning of the 1998–99 school year, Buckhorn High School was performing at or above average on all of Alabama’s accountability standards. However, 25–30 percent of Buckhorn’s student population was reading below grade level. A schoolwide assessment revealed that 123 students were reading at elementary grade levels, with many at the fourth-grade level or below. Therefore, they struggled not only in English classes but in science, math, and history courses as well.

To address this problem, the school's faculty applied to become an ARI site in 1999. Once accepted, Buckhorn High School became one of the first high schools in the state to become part of ARI. Buckhorn faculty members attended the ARI's intensive summer training, where they learned how to incorporate reading instruction into their subject areas and how to help those students whose inability to read at grade level affected performance in their classes.

Buckhorn teachers worked together to develop a "creative, combined-curriculum." This intervention had teachers focus on teaching reading rather than simply assigning it. Using high-interest, low-difficulty texts, teachers created lessons that were both interesting and accessible to students. Content-area teachers made assigned texts easier to navigate by using graphic organizers, which armed students with specific strategies that helped them develop a mental picture of what they read.

The use of student data was a critical component of ARI at Buckhorn. In order to implement ARI effectively, Buckhorn educators conducted private, individual assessments in which students read aloud so a faculty member could identify the specific difficulties of each struggling reader. Some teachers, using tools they had learned from ARI's summer academy, spent the first three weeks of the school year evaluating each student's reading ability. Students who read below grade level were not placed in remedial classes but instead were paired with Buckhorn's ARI-trained reading specialist. The specialist provided students with an individualized action plan that addressed their specific learning needs and also met with these students periodically to ensure that the students' needs were both correctly identified and met.

Teachers and administrators also used data for ongoing formative and summative assessments that monitored students' progress. Throughout the school year, teams of teachers from each department as well as teams of teachers from across different subject areas gathered test data to identify areas where students struggled, such as comprehending technical math or science textbooks or writing an English paper. They also used this data to identify students who were struggling in many subject areas and therefore might have been having greater difficulty mastering basic literacy skills, such as advanced phonics or fluency. Teachers then used this information to construct lesson plans and study guides that clarified concepts which students found most difficult. Even the principal of Buckhorn used student assessment data to inform administrative decisions concerning professional development programs for teachers or financial resources. For instance, if a large proportion of students were testing below grade level, he considered using school funds to hire an extra reading specialist.

Four years after Buckhorn launched ARI—with almost a third of its ninth graders reading below grade level—100 percent of the students targeted by the intervention passed the reading portion of the Alabama Graduation Exam and earned a diploma. In addition, 95 percent of Buckhorn eleventh graders passed the Alabama Graduation Exam (which students can begin to take in tenth grade)—almost 10 percent more than the average school in the state. Students' commitment to reading is demonstrated by more than test scores. During the 1998–99 school year, students checked out fewer than three hundred books from their school library. In 2002, the number of books checked out was more than one thousand.



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