

# Evaluation of the Vermont Strategic Reading Initiative: Year 3 Evaluation

A report prepared for the Vermont Department of Education  
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## INTRODUCTION

The Vermont Strategic Reading Initiative (VSRI) is a statewide project committed to improving reading beyond grade three in Vermont schools. A major goal of the project is to improve upper elementary, middle and high school students' abilities to understand, analyze and interpret the materials they read.

As described in its program literature, the VSRI's "most comprehensive strand is the School Reading Improvement Project, in which a select group of schools has committed to a school-wide program of improving student reading achievement through close consultation and colleague support activities. Each school receives weekly visits from a VSRI Reading Consultant and collaborates systematically with other pilot projects." Each school sends a leadership team of 3-7 teachers to a summer institute, with two follow-up teacher meetings held in the fall and spring of the subsequent school year.

This past spring, the VSRI hired Char Associates, an independent evaluation firm in Montpelier, to conduct an initial evaluation of the VSRI as the pilot project completed its third year. The purpose of the evaluation was to provide participant feedback on the pilot project to inform and improve the work of the VSRI as it begins a new three-year phase of work.

Sample and Methods: During the 2004-05 school year, ten Vermont schools participated in the VSRI.

<b>School (Type; # students enrolled)</b>	<b>Number of Years of VSRI Participation</b>
School A (K-8; 162 students)	3
School B (Middle School/High School; 491 students)	3
School C (Middle School; 483 students)	3
School D (K-8; 118 students)	2
School E (Middle School; 136 students)	2
School F (Elementary; 269 students)	1
School G (Elementary; 487 students)	1
School H (K-8; 96 students)	1
School I (K-8; 68 students)	1
School J (Elementary; 73 students)	1

The schools, located in nine different towns across Vermont, consisted of four K-8 schools, three elementary schools, two middle schools, and one middle school/high school. The schools varied considerably in size of student body, ranging from 68 to 491 students. Five of the ten schools had participated in VSRI for more than one year: three schools for three years, and two schools for two years. For the remaining five schools, this was their first year of participation in VSRI.

A total of six different reading consultants served the ten VSRI schools.

All ten schools participated in the current evaluation effort. Individual teacher surveys were administered to all team members in seven of the VSRI schools, while teacher focus groups and principal interviews were conducted in three VSRI schools. A total of 57 VSRI educators participated in the evaluation (41 educators completing surveys; 13 teachers and 3 principals participating in focus groups or interviews.). The focus group schools were selected to represent a cross-section of schools along a number of dimensions (e.g., number of years of VSRI participation; different consultants; different age groups in schools.) The focus group sessions and interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis. All data collection efforts were conducted in April and May 2005.

Prior to administering the VSRI educator surveys, the evaluator also administered an information survey to each of the VSRI consultants to provide background information on their assigned VSRI school(s). The evaluator also reviewed a number of project documents, including initial applications submitted by the VSRI schools, sample texts read by VSRI teams in literacy circles, and other program literature on the VSRI.

The results of the evaluation are presented in three sections: impact of the VSRI on participating teachers and their classrooms; school-wide impact and sustainability of the VSRI; and participants' assessment of specific VSRI program components. The report ends with some concluding remarks on major findings and future program considerations.

## EVALUATION RESULTS

### I. Educational Outcomes of the VSRI: Impact on Self and Classroom

**Summary:** Participants reported that the VSRI had a positive influence on their professional development, classroom practices, and students. Teachers indicated that they were implementing VSRI strategies fairly regularly in their classrooms, and they reported few barriers to incorporating VSRI strategies independently in their classrooms.

Areas of positive outcomes: Participants reported that the VSRI had a positive influence on a number of areas pertaining to their professional development, classroom practices, and students. The vast majority of survey respondents indicated that they had experienced either “some” or “a lot” of positive impact from the VSRI (Figure 1).

Ratings were highest concerning participants’ own professional development, as pertaining to their knowledge and skills in reading instruction, and interactions with other teachers regarding literacy. Benefits were also cited regarding their classroom instruction in language arts and other content areas, leadership roles in literacy, and knowledge about reading assessment. Most teachers also indicated at least “some” improvement in their students, concerning their reading abilities, their attitudes towards reading, and their learning across subject areas.

**Figure 1: Areas of positive impact resulting from VSRI**

	None (“1”)	Very Little (“2”)	Some (“3”)	A Lot (“4”)	NA or NR	Avg. Rating*
<b>Knowledge and skills in reading instruction</b>	0	5% (2)	34% (14)	61% (25)	0	3.6
<b>Interaction w/ other teachers re: literacy</b>	0	10% (4)	29% (12)	61% (25)	0	3.5
<b>Classroom instruction in language arts/English</b>	2% (1)	5% (2)	34% (14)	34% (14)	24% (10)	3.3
<b>Classroom instruction in different content areas</b>	0	10% (4)	46% (19)	27% (11)	17% (7)	3.2
<b>Leadership role in literacy in school</b>	2% (1)	15% (6)	46% (19)	37% (15)	0	3.2
<b>Knowledge and skills in reading assessment</b>	2% (1)	10% (4)	63% (26)	24% (10)	0	3.1
<b>Students’ reading abilities</b>	0	7% (3)	76% (31)	10% (4)	7% (3)	3.0
<b>Students’ attitudes toward reading</b>	0	12% (5)	61% (25)	19% (8)		2.9
<b>Students’ learning across subjects</b>	0	15% (6)	61% (25)	10% (4)	15% (6)	2.9

(n = 41)

\* (Responses converted to 4-point rating scale: 1 = none; 2 = Very Little; 3 = Some; 4 = A lot)

This range of VSRI impact was corroborated by participants’ own descriptions of what they saw as the main impact of the VSRI work in their classrooms (Figure 2.) Almost half of the educators surveyed described increased teacher knowledge and awareness of reading strategies and instruction. About a third described either changes in their classroom practice, with an increased emphasis on reading strategies and how it related to different content areas, or improvements in student learning.

**Figure 2: Participants’ descriptions of main impact of VSRI in their classrooms**

Area of Impact (% of respondents)	Sample Quotes
Increased teacher knowledge & awareness (48%)	<p><i>“I have a better understanding of student reading ability and how that impacts their ability/opportunity to learn when reading is necessary (content, procedures, opinion, etc.)”</i></p> <p><i>“I’ve learned how to teach students to read better rather than simply testing to see if they understand the reading.”</i></p>
Changes in classroom practice (34%)	<p><i>“I am more intentional about the content text structure, note-taking in content areas, questioning, and looking for main ideas.”</i></p> <p><i>“I am more intentional in teaching the specific strategies; using the posters as teaching tools. Students now point out and use a common language of reading strategies. It has impacted how I teach social studies. I have learned to help students use the strategies when reading content.”</i></p>
Student Outcomes (31%)	<p><i>“Students are aware of strategies and how to use them. They feel like good readers when they can name a specific strategy and how they used it.”</i></p> <p><i>“I have seen a tremendous increase in the reading comprehension skills of my students. This increase in understanding has occurred when reading fiction and non-fiction.”</i></p> <p><i>“My students have grown a lot in their reading habits. They are excited about reading and the reading strategies. They get excited about making connections, determining important ideas and imaging.”</i></p>

(n = 40)

A number of teachers interviewed described changes that had taken place in their classrooms as result of their work with the VSRI. One middle school science teacher described how he now had his students work differently with their science textbooks, and called students’ attention to various text features (e.g., their visuals, captions, headings and other textbook features), rather than focusing simply on reading and extracting the meaning or the vocabulary on the page.

A middle school mathematics teacher described how he previously used to give his students a new math term, such as “function,” and then give them a definition. Through his work with VSRI, he said he would now introduce the term as the key word of the day, have students go through that page of the math text, and discuss what they think a function is. From their discussion, students would then arrive at a definition for the new term.

Both teachers and principals interviewed described how they felt their involvement with the VSRI had led to improvements in their students’ engagement with written text, increased comprehension, and their interest in reading. Several schools were fortunate to have had a previous grant that enabled them to purchase a large number of new books across reading levels and genres, with one even setting up a special new book room and loaning library in the school. Teachers in these schools described how important it was for students to have this increased collection of books as a concrete outlet for their newly piqued interest in reading. Another principal described how a community volunteer had regularly made new free books available to each student each spring for a number of years. In contrast to previous years, the volunteer noticed this spring a dramatic increase in all students’ interest in reading – all being eager to choose a book for themselves, and excitedly reading and discussing what they read on the book jackets in order to pick out a book. The principal attributed these changes to both the VSRI and the SIG reading grant that had preceded the VSRI project.

Implementation of VSRI strategies in classrooms: Most participants indicated that they implemented VSRI strategies fairly regularly in their classrooms (Figure 3). 81% of the respondents reported that they understood the VSRI strategies, and either regularly used them in their classroom (59%), or had at least taught a few lessons with them (22%).

**Figures 3: Level of implementation of VSRI strategies in classroom**

<b>Not believe in VSRI strategies</b>	<b>Aware but not done</b>	<b>Aware &amp; co-taught</b>	<b>Understand &amp; taught a few lessons</b>	<b>Understand &amp; regularly use</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>No resp.</b>
0	0	7% (3)	22% (9)	59% (24)	7% (3)	5% (2)

(n = 41)

Teachers reported relatively few significant barriers to incorporating VSRI strategies regularly and independently in their classrooms (Figure 4). When presented with a list of possible barriers to incorporating the strategies, almost a third (32%) reported having no barriers to utilizing the strategies. A little less than a fifth indicated the need for more VSRI training or the need for more appropriate reading materials for their classroom. Some teachers referred to the competing demands on their time and energies, and limited buy-in from colleagues (responses coded as “other”)

**Figure 4: Perceived significant barriers to incorporating VSRI strategies**

<b>Perceived Barrier</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents (#)</b>
No barriers	32% (13)
Need for more VSRI training	17% (7)
Other	17% (7)
Lack of appropriate reading materials for classroom	15% (6)
Lack of administrator support for initiative	10% (4)
Preference for other reading approaches	10% (4)
Limitations in my current understanding	7% (3)

Problems with quantity of training	7% (3)
Competing instructional practices that seem more important	7% (3)
Problems with quality of training	5% (2)
Poor student response	5% (2)

(n = 41)

Teachers interviewed primarily spoke of challenges in terms of the time involved and having the time to meet, to observe, or to plan the lessons. One team also spoke about the difficulty in staying focused and not bringing in the myriad of day-to-day matters of the classroom when they met for their weekly VSRI meetings.

## II. Educational Outcomes of the VSRI: School-wide Impact and Sustainability

**Summary:** Participants reported a high level of personal commitment and “buy-in” to the VSRI program for themselves, their fellow literacy team members, and their school administration. They viewed the level of “buy-in” of their colleagues who were not on the literacy leadership team as more modest. They saw the VSRI’s main impact in their school in their colleagues’ greater awareness of the VSRI strategies and approach, an increased emphasis on literacy strategies in the school, and increased discussion about literacy with colleagues. Cross-teacher exchanges were primarily the sharing of ideas, activities and successes. There was generally little mention of coordination of efforts across classrooms, or of addressing a particular team-wide or school-wide plan of implementation.

Most respondents were fairly optimistic about the likelihood of a school-wide spread of reading strategies across content areas in three years, and yet they saw this spread as somewhat predicated on continued support from the VSRI. Thus, the VSRI schools, even those in their third year of the program, did not view the VSRI initiative as yet independent and self-sustaining in their schools.

School-wide dissemination and impact: Six of the seven schools surveyed reported that their literacy leadership team had brought VSRI strategies to the rest of their school faculty. The one school in which the literacy team had not yet shared these strategies with their colleagues was one of the four first-year VSRI schools.

Participants reported a high level of personal commitment and “buy-in” to the VSRI program for themselves, their fellow literacy team members, and their school administration. Almost nine out of ten participants (88%) believed strongly that the VSRI strategies were valuable ones that should be regularly incorporated in their school’s reading instruction, while seven out of ten (71%) felt that both their literacy leadership team members and their principal strongly believed in the VSRI strategies as well.

**Figure 5: Regard VSRI strategies as valuable ones to incorporate regularly in school’s reading instruction**

	Not believe at all (“1”)	Believe a little (“2”)	Believe Some (“3”)	Believe strongly (“4”)	No resp.	Avg. Rating
<b>You, as teacher</b>	2% (1)	0	7% (3)	88% (36)	2% (1)	3.9
<b>Literacy leadership team members</b>	0	2% (1)	22% (9)	71% (29)	5% (2)	3.7
<b>Principal</b>	2% (1)	12% (5)	12% (5)	71% (29)	2% (1)	3.5
<b>Other school faculty</b>	5% (2)	17% (7)	63% (26)	7% (3)	7% (3)	2.8

(n = 41)

\* (Responses converted to 4-point rating scale: 1 = none; 2 = Very Little; 3 = Some; 4 = A lot)

Participants considered the level of awareness and “buy-in” as somewhat more modest for their teaching colleagues not on the literacy leadership team. About two-thirds (63%) felt their teaching colleagues “believed some” in the VSRI strategies, while almost a fourth (22%) reported that their colleagues believed in the VSRI strategies only a little (17%), or not at all (5%). A number of educators candidly expressed that they did not see much happening throughout the school as a whole, and that most of the discussion and collaboration was occurring within the literacy leadership team, or among grade-specific teams.

When describing what they saw as the main impact of the VSRI in their school, three primary areas of impact emerged: colleagues’ greater awareness of the VSRI strategies and approach, increased emphasis on literacy strategies in the school, and increased discussion about literacy with colleagues. A number of teachers specifically mentioned the value of adopting a common, more consistent language to use when addressing reading strategies in their classrooms.

**Figure 6: Participants’ descriptions of main impact of VSRI in their schools**

Area of Impact (% of respondents)	Sample Quotes
Greater awareness of reading strategies by teaching colleagues (37%)	<p><i>“More teachers and paraprofessionals are more aware of reading strategies and how to teach them to a variety of learners.”</i></p> <p><i>“The VSRI work has made all teachers more aware of what is being taught at each grade level.”</i></p>
Increased emphasis on literacy strategies in school (29%)	<p><i>“Everyone is at least familiar with VSRI strategies. In addition, many staff members have incorporated the strategies in their teaching. I think this has been invaluable in content areas, in particular.”</i></p> <p><i>“It is focusing our attention on developing good readers in our school in all academic areas. It has helped us realize how much work we need to accomplish to get our students to be better readers.”</i></p>
Increased discussion about literacy with colleagues (26%)	<p><i>“It has fueled dialogue about reading and the rest of the literacies among staff.”</i></p> <p><i>“Staff has had more discussion of strategies, more talk about reading, teaching with purpose, and using assessment for instruction.”</i></p>
Use of common language around literacy (13%)	<p><i>“Agreeing on a common language has been helpful. Students arriving in my class will have a common language and experience.”</i></p>

(n = 41)

Even among the Year Three schools, there was little reference to coordination of efforts across classrooms, or addressing a particular team-wide or school-wide plan of implementation. Cross-teacher exchanges were primarily described as sharing of ideas, activities, successes and challenges.

*“We have had some informative teachers’ meetings when many members of the faculty shared activities that they had developed or used in their classes. It felt as if we were all on the same page regarding literacy and all working together.”*

*We have had sharing at staff meetings – the things teachers are implementing in the classrooms – successes and not-so-successful activities.*

One of the teacher groups interviewed had been part of the VSRI for a number of years, and indicated that they felt that they were now at the point where they largely organized their meetings themselves rather than relying on their consultant, a sign of their increased leadership and maturity as a literacy team. At the same time, the meetings they described still seemed to be largely book discussion groups and sharing of classroom experiences, rather than a more coordinated effort across classrooms.

A teacher in another school admitted, “I don’t see the VSRI work impacting our school as a whole. We are not all participating as we should.” Another added that while she felt there was increased conversation about literacy in their school, this was primarily triggered by the presence of the VSRI consultant, rather than happening independently of these consultant visits.

*I think [the VSRI] has gotten more teachers talking with each other about literacy and how to improve instruction. Unfortunately, I feel that this only took place at the time of visits from our consultant leader at VSRI. It has sort have been “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” process here at [our school.] We are told literacy is important but we don’t devote a lot of time to it.*

Several VSRI consultants concurred in their assessment of often needing to prod and structure teachers’ continued utilization of VSRI strategies in their classrooms. In one school, the VSRI consultant structured the VSRI as a for-credit course that involved weekly readings, assignments, peer observations, and lesson critiques. The teachers interviewed from this school indicated that this structure ensured a certain level of serious and mutual commitment and follow-through that would be difficult to sustain in a more informal, loosely structured arrangement.

Spread and Sustainability of VSRI Strategies: This view that the VSRI’s continued efforts were critical to promoting the use of VSRI strategies in a school is corroborated by two additional survey items concerning the spread and sustainability reading strategies throughout a school. First, respondents were asked what they saw as the likelihood of the school-wide spread of reading strategies across content areas three years from now (Figure 7). Most respondents were fairly optimistic, with over 80% believing that such prevalence of reading strategies was either somewhat likely (46%) or highly likely (40%).

**Figure 7: Likelihood of school-wide spread of reading strategies across content areas three years from now**

Highly unlikely (“1”)	Somewhat unlikely (“2”)	Somewhat likely (“3”)	Highly likely (“4”)	Avg. Rating
0	12% (5)	46% (19)	40% (16)	3.2

\* (Responses converted to 4-point rating scale: 1 = Highly unlikely to 4 = Highly likely)  
(n = 41)

At the same time, 81% of respondents felt the VSRI support was necessary to ensure such school-wide spread of reading strategies, and that such support was either highly necessary (44%) or somewhat necessary (37%).

**Figure 8: Necessity of VSRI support to ensure school-wide spread of reading strategies across content areas three years from now**

Very unnecessary (“1”)	Somewhat unnecessary (“2”)	Somewhat necessary (“3”)	Highly necessary (“4”)	Avg. Rating*
0	18% (8)	37% (15)	44% (18)	3.2

\* (Responses converted to 4-point rating scale: 1 = Very unnecessary to 4 = Highly necessary) (n = 41)

The average teacher response was that the likelihood of such a school-wide spread of reading strategies across content areas three years from now was somewhat likely, but that continued VSRI support was somewhat necessary to ensure such a spread.

Interestingly, respondents viewing such a school-wide spread as highly likely were not necessarily those who felt that continued VSRI support was unnecessary (Figure 9). Whether or not they felt that the school-wide spread of VSRI support was highly likely or somewhat likely, about half the respondents expressed their feeling that the VSRI support was highly necessary to ensure the continued fostering of VSRI strategies throughout the school.

**Figure 9: Likelihood of VSRI school-wide spread, by necessity of VSRI support**

	Support somewhat unnecessary (% by row)	Support somewhat necessary	Support highly necessary
School-wide spread highly likely (n = 16)	25% (4)	25% (4)	50% (8)
School-wide spread somewhat likely (n = 19)	10% (2)	47% (9)	42% (8)

During the focus groups, one team spoke about the challenges in the continuity of the VSRI program with other competing projects and texts. Their school had just become involved in a new K-3 program that separated out the primary grade efforts from those in the upper grades, potentially undermining the preK-6 connections that the VSRI and an earlier SIG grant had worked hard to establish. This team also struggled with the fact that the principal had just adopted a more traditional language arts textbook series that ran somewhat counter to some of what they had learned through the VSRI.

Another team described the financial and staffing challenges of being a small school. They thoroughly valued being part of the VSRI and would like to have continued being involved, but found the annual fee too high to continue for another year. They described their professional development efforts as too often being dependent on being accepted into special grant-funded initiatives, and that fee-for-service arrangements were often difficult for them to justify in their school budgets.

### III. Evaluation of VSRI Program Components

**Summary:** Participants appreciate many of the VSRI’s different program events and services. In particular, educators found the Summer Institutes and weekly visits with their consultants most helpful. They found the consultants’ direct work with the literacy teams and individual teachers especially useful, such as when consultants modeled particular reading strategies or observed teachers in their classrooms. Educators were consistently positive about their VSRI consultants and the expertise, dedication, and caring support that they brought to their schools.

Participants were somewhat less positive in their assessments of how effective their team worked together, or whether school-wide impact beyond their team had extended much beyond colleagues’ greater awareness of the VSRI reading strategies. Participants recommended increased efforts in learning how to work better as a team, having a clearer plan for school improvement, and learning how to build better buy-in from colleagues to achieve better school-wide implementation, follow-through, and sustainability.

Usefulness of VSRI events and services: To assess the relative value of various program components of the VSRI, participants were asked to rate the usefulness of different VSRI program events and services. The highest ratings were received by the Summer Institute courses, followed by the weekly visits with consultants (Figure 10). Positive ratings were also given to the *Reading to Learn* guide, and the summer leadership team planning meetings. The least enthusiastic ratings were given to the leadership team meetings at the follow-up gatherings, and to networking with other VSRI teams.

**Figure 10: Usefulness of Various VSRI program events and services**

	Not at all ("1")	A little ("2")	Some ("3")	A lot ("4")	NA	NR	Avg rating*
<b>Summer Institute courses</b>	0	0	17% (7)	56% (23)	27% (11)		3.8
<b>Weekly visits with consultants</b>	0	7% (3)	34% (14)	53% (22)	5% (2)	0	3.5
<b><i>Reading to Learn</i> guide</b>	2% (1)	12% (5)	39% (16)	44% (18)	2% (1)	0	3.3
<b>Summer leadership team planning meetings</b>	0	22% (9)	27% (22)	29% (12)	19% (8)	2% (1)	3.1
<b>Leadership team meetings at follow-up gatherings</b>	12% (5)	24% (10)	34% (14)	12% (5)	15% (6)	2% (1)	2.6
<b>Contact and networking w/ other VSRI teams</b>	27% (11)	22% (9)	27% (11)	2% (1)	17% (7)	5% (2)	2.1

\* (1 = none; 2 = A Little; 3 = Some; 4 = A lot)  
(n = 41)

Regarding the visits by their VSRI consultants and the services extended to their schools, participants valued most highly the consultants’ meetings with individual teachers and

with their literacy team, and classroom visits in which the consultants modeled reading instruction. Teachers also reported the usefulness of the consultants’ classroom visits to observe teachers, their supplying of reading resources, and meeting with school administrators.

**Figure 11: Usefulness of VSRI consultant services**

	Not at all (“1”)	A little (“2”)	Some (“3”)	A lot (“4”)	NA	NR	Avg rating*
<b>Meetings with individual teachers</b>	0	7% (3)	24% (10)	66% (27)	0	2% (1)	3.6
<b>Meetings with literacy team</b>	0	10% (4)	34% (14)	53% (22)	0	2% (1)	3.5
<b>Classroom visits to model reading instruction</b>	0	7% (3)	24% (10)	49% (20)	15% (6)	5% (2)	3.5
<b>Classroom visits to observe teachers</b>	0	12% (5)	32% (13)	41% (17)	12% (5)	2% (1)	3.3
<b>Supplying of reading resources</b>	2% (1)	15% (6)	29% (12)	44% (18)	7% (3)	2% (1)	3.3
<b>Meetings with school administration</b>	0	5% (2)	37% (15)	27% (11)	12% (5)	19% (8)	3.3
<b>Assistance with local reading assessments</b>	2% (1)	17% (7)	32% (13)	29% (12)	15% (6)	5% (2)	3.1
<b>Assistances with state reading assessments</b>	5% (2)	12% (5)	24% (10)	27% (11)	29% (12)	2% (1)	3.1
<b>Support of school-wide faculty literacy circles</b>	7% (3)	10% (4)	22% (9)	24% (10)	29% (12)	5% (2)	2.9
<b>Attendance at faculty meetings</b>	2% (1)	15% (6)	29% (12)	32% (13)	17% (7)	5% (2)	2.8

\*(1 = none; 2 = A Little; 3 = Some; 4 = A lot)  
(n = 41)

A number of participants described how much they enjoyed the support of their consultant, and how the consultant provided them with particular insights, new ideas, and guidance and support to try new approaches.

*Collaborating with my consultant has been great – it was very valuable to have him in my classroom working alongside me – he gave feedback that I could really use because he was there with me.*

*My consultant’s help and easy collaborative style encouraged me to try presenting a new research strategy to my students.*

Receiving somewhat lower ratings were consultants’ work concerning state and local reading assessments, and their support of school-wide efforts such as faculty literacy circles and faculty meetings. This finding is in keeping with participant views regarding the VSRI’s lesser influence on their non-literacy team colleagues, and a more limited scope of VSRI impact throughout their school, reported above.

During the focus group discussions, a number of educators described how they particularly appreciated the ways in which their consultants structured opportunities to make explicit connections between reading strategies, actual lessons and materials that embodied these strategies, opportunities for trying out these materials, and debriefing meetings when teachers could share what had and hadn't worked well. One group adopted a meeting structure resembling a graduate course, and incorporated readings, assignments, peer observation, videotaping, creation of lessons, and compilation of lessons into a bound "team book" at the end of the year. For a number of these teachers, it was their first opportunity ever to do peer observations, and they appreciated how the consultant had taught them how to offer a range of constructive feedback that would be useful. They described how while the project had been extremely time-intensive, it was especially valuable to have such sustained "job-embedded learning" as a team. As one teacher expressed,

*I like the fact that we actually plan and implement lessons. That it's not just, here are the strategies, do with them what you wish. It's more structured than that – we're actually taking a strategy, talking about it, practicing it as a group, and then planning a lesson around that strategy for our classes, teaching it, and then coming back as a group and discussing how the lessons went. I found it just so much more powerful. I think the way I teach has changed more as a result of this way it's structured. I think we all go to conferences and have wonderful intentions of taking all these great things we learned when we get back and using them, but then we never have the time to process what we've learned or to plan. So a lot of time those things get pushed to the back of the pile and never happen.*

Areas for improvement: When asked whether there was anything about the VSRI that wasn't as successful or effective as they had hoped, survey respondents were about evenly split in opinion. Of the 39 respondents, 18 felt that there were things that hadn't been as successful or effective as hoped, while 21 indicated that their expectations had been met. Of those 19 who felt that there were problems of some sort, about half (9) viewed the problem as centered on the work of their team and in their school rather than problems with the consultant.

*The problem lies within the faculty not the program. It's so hard to sustain the high level of energy throughout the school year.*

*[Our consultant is great, but not all that effective for us. It certainly is not because she isn't good, but that our staff is just so anti-getting help. Perhaps there needs to be more in place for what consultants should do when staff/schools won't ask for specific help. [Our consultant] was always so willing to give you things – examples/advice/do a lesson (anything you wanted) but so few of us (including myself) truly took full advantage of all [the consultant] could do for us.*

*I don't believe the entire staff valued this resource and used the materials effectively.*

A number of comments concerned the nature of the literacy team, and problems with how members came together as a team, and difficulties in working effectively as team.

*Our school team didn't come together as a team. We functioned as a smaller cluster of people that were using the instructional methods brought by [the consultant.]*

*Our 3-8 person team never really functioned as a team. Two critical players for whatever reasons did not become invested in this.*

One teacher described a situation that clearly underscored the interconnection between the functioning and membership of the literacy team, and the level of school-wide impact. In this school, a reading teacher expressed her belief that the VSRI program had gotten off “on the wrong foot” regarding the initial composition of the literacy team, when she had not been allowed to join the literacy team. She felt that this had resulted in most team members not having many skills in teaching reading and reading strategies, where their lack of knowledge had become evident at faculty meetings. This, she reported, “didn’t inspire confidence in the rest of the faculty. This meant the whole faculty wasn’t on board with literacy. Even after [several years], there are still some faculty members who aren’t on board.”

Only a third (6 of the 19) of those participants surveyed who indicated that there were problems viewed the shortcomings as residing with the program or the consultant. Two teachers in one school indicated that they wished their consultant had had more expertise in middle school and early adolescence, and felt that the consultant’s background in the elementary grades did not offer them the sufficient range of expertise that was most needed. One teacher said that their consultant’s continued focus on realistic fiction did not adequately address the needs of content area teachers in science or mathematics. Several teachers mentioned that some of the topics covered in the Summer Institute or by the consultant were somewhat repetitive, and that they were topics they felt had covered before. A few also indicated problems the time and travel necessary to attend the summer institutes and follow-up meetings, given the location of their school, and the desire to put this travel time towards actual meeting time in their schools.

Teacher discussions in three VSRI focus group schools provided additional insights into the school-consultant dynamics of the project. In general, educators in all three schools were quite positive about the work with their consultant, and the particular strengths and expertise the consultant offered the schools. Two of the schools felt that they had really come together as a team. One was highly involved in a graduate-course model of the VSRI, and were seriously invested in meeting regularly, observing each other’s classes, critiquing each other, and producing lesson plans that could be shared with others. A second school, having worked with their consultant over multiple years, felt that they were now ready to work fairly independently on their own, and lead their own school-wide book discussion groups around literacy. The third school was also quite positive about their consultant, but acknowledged that they did not feel that they had taken full advantage of what the consultant could have offered them, and that, in hindsight, wished they had had a better understanding of the range of support, services and expertise that their consultant could have provided.

When asked whether they had particular suggestions to improve the VSRI, a number of recommendations focused on the team-building and school-wide aspects of the program. Teacher comments included: learning how to work better as a team, taking a more pro-

active role in taking advantage of consultant resources and expertise, having an on-going plan for improvement, learning how to build better buy-in from colleagues beyond the literacy team to achieve better school-wide implementation and follow-through. Also, as noted above, teachers requested that their consultants be well versed in teaching the middle school grades and in how literacy could be addressed in content areas such as science, history and mathematics, rather than just in literature.

Some teachers also requested an increased range of offerings at the Summer Institute. Many of those interviewed have been part of literacy initiatives and grants for a number of years, and some found that the topics and issues covered were similar to ones they had addressed in previous workshops. For some, this was an advantage, since it gave them an additional opportunity to revisit some important concepts; for others, the topics sometimes felt repetitive.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This initial evaluation of the VSRI revealed that the ten 2004-05 VSRI schools were generally quite positive about their VSRI experience – their work with their consultants, and participation in Summer Institutes and in follow-up project meetings. They reported that they were now engaging in more discussions about literacy with their teaching colleagues, regularly incorporating VSRI strategies into their classroom practice, and observing improvements in their students’ engagement with text, comprehension, and interest in reading. Teachers also indicated good support from their school administration, a key factor in the success of professional development initiatives.

At the same time, teachers’ descriptions of the work they did together as teams were often largely in terms of book discussions and sharing of instructional practices, rather than a more coordinated effort across grades or disciplines. There was also little mention of the presence of any type of year-long plan and the extent to which they were making progress towards particular goals over the course of the year, or the ways in which participation in VSRI over multiple years related to some sort of clear multi-year plan. Teachers also recognized that there often was still a fairly limited level of buy-in and commitment from their teacher colleagues outside of the literacy leadership team, despite efforts to share their VSRI work with others.

Our impression is that the participants may be viewing the VSRI as more of a professional development effort involving a team of teachers in a school, rather than a more concerted instructional leadership effort, or part of a more systemic school reform effort. To the extent to which the VSRI wishes to take hold in Vermont schools as a deeper, more comprehensive, sustained, and sustainable effort that results in long-term change in schools, teachers, and students, the VSRI might consider addressing additional program elements focusing on educational leadership development, the building of instructional leadership teams, and adult development, as has been documented in other effective programs (e.g., Char, 2004; Char and Rockman, 2002; Ciardi, Kantrov and Goldsmith, 2001.) The team’s definition and articulation of specific year-long plan, with particular actions, tasks, and responsibilities, has also been proven as an effective tool to keep school teams and an outside consultant on-track throughout the course of a year, and to help formulate plans and actions for subsequent years. Clearer connections between instructional techniques, assessment of student work, and improved student performance might also enhance teachers’ ability to teach and integrate effectively the VSRI strategies and achieve more powerful student results.

We also recognize that the VSRI project is one of a number of literacy grants and initiatives that Vermont schools and teachers have offered to them as professional development opportunities, both in the past and in the future. In several schools, the VSRI was seen as an extension of earlier SIG work, often utilizing the same network of consultants. In others, it was seen as complementing isolated professional development workshops and conferences that teachers have attended. As the VSRI moves towards a fee-for-service model, it may be important for the VSRI to identify clearly, as well as to optimize, the distinct and unique features of the program, and what is specially afforded by the weekly work with consultants, and the VSRI reading strategies approach and focus

on grades beyond the fourth grade. It should also optimize the advantages of being part of a statewide project and a member of a special school cohort, in contrast to being part of something more local within one's district, or simply a participant in a workshop, conference or on-line seminar (Char and Rockman, 2000; Literacy Matters). Part of the consulting expertise provided both VSRI consultants and VSRI staff leadership could help schools articulate appropriate team-wide and school-wide goals in a year-long plan, arrange structured opportunities to address those goals, and chart their progress. Such a program should ideally span their individual professional development, their growth as an instructional team, their progress as a school, and the improvements demonstrated in their students' literacy skills and abilities.

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