

Who Wants to Be a (Reading) Millionaire?

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A million is a pretty impressive number, whether you are talking in dollars or minutes spent reading. Have you ever considered what might happen if the students in your school read a million minutes at home over the course of the school year? It could happen.

Independent Reading— at Home and School

Reading is a competency learned not only through instruction but also through practice. The more reading a person does, the better reader he or she becomes. That statement appeals to us intuitively, but there is also a good body of research to support it.

In their summary of recent research on independent reading, Morgan, Mraz, Padak, and Rasinski (2009) noted that students' independent reading was associated with growth in word recognition, vocabulary, fluency, language syntax, comprehension, and motivation for reading. For example, Taylor, Frye, and Maruyama (1990) found that the amount of time upper elementary-grade students spent reading in and out of school was related to gains in reading achievement.

And it's not just independent reading at school. In a seminal international study on reading achievement, Postlethwaite and Ross (1992) found that reading at school was the number three predictor of reading achievement worldwide. The number two predictor was reading at home!

Yet the fact is that elementary and middle school students simply do not read much at home. In 1992, the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that only 44% of fourth-grade students in the United States read for fun every day, and 13%

reported never or hardly ever reading (see National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1992). For eighth graders, only 23% read daily for fun, and 24% never or hardly ever read.

As bad as those statistics might seem, they have gotten even worse over the years. Fifteen years after that study, the 2007 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NCES, 2007) found that only 40% of fourth-grade students reported reading on a daily basis, and nearly 20% read never or hardly ever. By eighth grade, less than 20% reported reading daily, and a third of students never or hardly every read.

Is there any wonder why there is a literacy crisis in the United States? Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) reported that the average fifth-grade student in their study spent less than 13 minutes doing any type of reading.

What would happen if we could get our elementary and middle-grade students to read, say, 25 minutes daily—double the average number of minutes reported by Anderson and colleagues (1988)? We suspect increasing daily reading to 25 or so minutes per day would have a great effect on students' reading achievement and their love of reading.

Can it be done? Some schools and teachers have done just this using a million minutes of reading as their goal (Baumann, 1995; Shanahan, Wojciechowski, & Rubik, 1998).

Becoming a Million-Minute School

Here are the steps to making your school (or classroom) achieve that million-minute mark in reading.

1. Organize a committee of teachers and parents to guide the Million-Minute Reading Challenge for

your school. If you are doing it in your classroom, ask a parent or two to join you in planning the program.

2. Determine your goal. For example, if your school has 300 students, and you want them all to read 25 minutes per day, Monday through Thursday, over the course of the school year, you have to do a little math:

$$25 \text{ minutes per day} \times 4 \text{ days per week} \times 36 \text{ school weeks} \times 300 \text{ students} = 1,080,000 \text{ minutes}$$

Changing any of those figures will change the total number of minutes, but whatever figure you come up with should become the goal. We think that a million or 2 million minutes are very impressive and worthwhile figures. (If you plan on doing this with just your classroom, the goal will be more modest. For example, if you have 28 students in your class, the goal would be 100,800 minutes.)

Kindergarten and first-grade students can be read to by their parents if they are not yet reading conventionally.

3. If planning a schoolwide program, approach the staff with the idea of the Million-Minute Reading Challenge. For a program like this to be successful, you need the buy-in of teachers and other staff members willing to encourage, remind, and challenge students to read at home.

4. Enlist the support of the parent organization. This is a great project that parents can easily and enthusiastically assist with once they are given the specifications and responsibility.

5. Design a weekly record sheet for students (and parents) to use at home. A simple three-column grid might have columns for daily time spent reading at home, name of material read, and a student comment about (or rating of) the reading. Be sure to have a space at the bottom where parents sign off each Sunday night. The record sheet is then distributed every Monday afternoon to students, taken home for completion, and returned the following Monday morning.

Figure 1 is a sample of a simple record sheet. Develop a way to organize and record the data—by

Figure 1
The Million-Minute Reading Challenge!

Help our school reach a goal of reading a million minutes at home this school year. All it takes is for you to read 25 minutes at home for fun every evening, Monday through Thursday.

Student Name: _____ Grade: _____ Teacher: _____

	Title of book or other material that you read	Number of minutes you read	Comments about what you read
Monday Sept 5, 2011			
Tuesday Sept 6, 2011			
Wednesday Sept 7, 2011			
Thursday Sept 8, 2011			

Parent's signature: _____

Please complete this form throughout the week and return it to school on Monday.

individual student, classroom, grade level, and school. Computer-based spreadsheets work well.

6. Create signs for the lobby of the school that indicate the cumulative number of minutes read. Update it each week. You might also want to have smaller signs for each grade level and classroom to encourage friendly rivalries (e.g., “Mr. Rasinski’s fourth-grade class challenges Mrs. Padak’s third-grade class to read the most minutes at home during the month of October”).

7. Plan school, classroom, and individual recognitions and celebrations whenever milestones are reached on the way to the home reading goal (e.g., every 100,000 minutes). These can range from a school rally to a simple announcement made on the school intercom and placed in the school newsletter or on the school website. Be sure to include parents in the planning for these events.

8. Develop a way to evaluate your program. Collect data on your students’ reading achievement at the beginning and end of the program. Then you can check students’ progress according to their participation in the program. Your central office support staff or local university colleagues should be able to help you run the necessary correlations and other statistical analyses. The important thing is to address the essential question: Is there a relation between students’ participation in the Million-Minute Reading Challenge and their gains in reading achievement? We feel confident that you will find a positive correlation between students’ increased reading and their growth as readers.

You might also want to survey students, teachers, and parents about the program: What are their

feelings about the program? How might it be altered to make it better the following year?

9. Start planning for the next year. Try to set your goal somewhat higher than the total number of minutes read the previous year!

Winning a million dollars on a television game show is a passing fancy. Reading a million minutes over a school year is a significant accomplishment that can change students for a lifetime.

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