NOBLE HIGH SCHOOL, a large school located in rural southern Maine, embraces the concept of smaller learning communities, and its more than 1,100 students are heterogeneously grouped into teams. Although Noble was recently cited as a model of rural education (NASSP, 2004), its students nevertheless struggle to develop important literacy skills. On statewide measures, typically two-thirds of the students fail to meet minimum competencies. In addition, recent surveys indicate that many students at Noble are reluctant or resistant readers. In 2003, a districtwide initiative established the goal of having all students college ready by the time they graduated from Noble, and it quickly became apparent that Noble needed to adopt significant literacy reform measures.

The Noble High School Literacy Plan
The path of literacy reform began with initiating a comprehensive self-study. Noble contracted with the Center for Resource Management (CRM), which conducted a literacy audit of the entire school. The audit galvanized the school community’s conversation around literacy. After completing the audit, CRM provided a comprehensive report that offered recommendations tailored to Noble’s learning community, one of which was to hire a literacy coach. In 2004, Noble hired me as the literacy coach to design and implement a comprehensive and multifaceted literacy program. The literacy program contains four areas of focus: literacy assessment, school culture, literacy across the curriculum, and targeted intervention.

Literacy Assessment
The success of Noble’s literacy program hinges upon collecting diagnostic data and monitoring ongoing progress. Before 2004, Noble had little usable data that accurately measured students’ literacy skills. The only data available were those from state and national assessments. Because only the 11th-grade students in Maine take the state tests, schools are left to their own devices to assess the abilities of the students in grades 9, 10, and 12.

In 2004, Noble began administering the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) to all its students. The SRI is a computer-based instrument designed to assess reading comprehension. In 2005, Noble also began implementing the Diagnostic Assessment of Reading (DAR) as a follow-up assessment for students who scored below proficient levels on the SRI. The SRI and the DAR are used to identify students who are in need of strategic interventions and to record the progress of student reading achievement. In addition to the SRI and the DAR, two surveys were developed for students and teachers. The teacher survey was designed to determine current classroom practices and to assess teacher knowledge of research-based strategies in literacy. The student literacy survey identifies students’ perceptions of their own literacy skills and habits and their perceptions of teacher practices. Both surveys are administered annually.

School Culture
The tone of an entire school sets the stage for learning in classrooms. In 2004, results from the literacy audit,
After a literacy audit, a large school hired a full-time literacy coach to build a comprehensive literacy plan and foster a culture of literacy.

The program began with diagnostic data from a variety of sources, including student and staff surveys, and ongoing assessments show positive results.

Multiple levels of intervention—such as sustained silent reading and one-on-one support—complement other research-based practices.

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as well as the teacher and student surveys, indicated a school culture that did not embrace reading. For example, many students identified themselves as nonreaders, students were rarely seen reading outside of the classroom, and only a small percentage of students regularly used the school library. To change the culture of literacy (or nonliteracy), a schoolwide sustained silent reading (SSR) program was implemented at the start of the 2005–06 school year.

From the outset, staff members made a commitment to support SSR. In 2004, three teams piloted a version of SSR. These pilots were highly successful, and teachers requested that Noble adopt SSR schoolwide. To do this, I conducted a comprehensive literature review of SSR and designed a program that fit within the school’s style and structure. SSR became a whole-school practice on the second day of school in 2005. At the same time every day, students and staff members engage in SSR for 25 minutes. Very few restrictions are placed on what students can read during SSR and work is not assigned. It was debated whether to grade participation, but eventually the school council decided that assessing participation with a pass-fail grade would send the message that SSR was a valued part of the school day. Besides receiving a grade for SSR, students also earn one-fourth of a credit each year that can be used toward graduation.

For an SSR program to remain successful, it is essential to monitor how well it is being implemented. For example, the beginning of the end of many SSR programs occurs when teachers stop modeling reading during SSR. To monitor implementation in a gentle way, a group of administrators and teachers rotate their reading location each day and complete observations that do not disrupt the reading. More than one hundred observations have been conducted to date; results indicate that close to 90% of the students and almost all teachers read on a consistent basis. These observations have become a staple of the SSR program.

Initial results of the SSR program have been just as impressive. Book sign-outs in the library have almost doubled. In addition, the school culture around reading has visibly changed. Students can now be seen reading outside of classrooms. Staff members frequently recount moments in which they overhear students talking about books in the hallways. On one occasion, a teacher witnessed two students consoling another student who was crying in the hallway after SSR had ended. As the teacher approached, she heard the distraught student utter through tears, “I just can’t stop crying. The end of the book was just so sad!” When all the students laughed at this, the teacher knew all was well.

**Literacy Across the Curriculum**

The third component of the literacy program focuses on supporting literacy instruction in the classroom. This calls for all teachers to be aware that literacy plays an essential role in every content area. It also expects teachers to implement research-based best practices and strategies in the classroom. For many educators, this is a frightening prospect. To mitigate this fear, all teachers must come to understand that all disciplines require students to engage with texts. I help teachers recognize what kinds of texts are appropriate to use in their classrooms and what strategies and practices will best support students in becoming effective readers of these texts. For example, physical education teachers may ask students to “read” what is taking place during a basketball game. Art teachers teach students how to read paintings and photographs. Math teachers focus on numbers. These are all legitimate texts. Thus, literacy across the curriculum focuses not only on printed materials but also on visual and electronic media.

A variety of strategies have been implemented to help teachers increase their awareness and understanding of effective literacy instruction. One essential support has been the direct coaching that I provide to individual teachers who are developing lessons and units.
of instruction. I also work with teams and departments to create literacy plans that develop strategies and practices relevant to their discipline. For example, one team recognized that students were confused by the lack of clear note-taking expectations and strategies, so the team and I identified key note-taking strategies that research has shown are effective. All teachers on the team agreed to teach and support the use of these strategies in their classrooms. In addition to direct coaching, I also offer after-school courses and workshops for district staff members on various areas of literacy, write a bimonthly literacy newsletter, and provide guidance to the administrative team regarding policy decisions that affect literacy.

**Targeted Interventions**

Addressing school culture and classroom instruction will do much to support the literacy development of most students, but these approaches are not enough to address the needs of the students who struggle the most. These students are often reading multiple grade levels below their peers. To catch up, they need targeted interventions that provide strategic instruction that will remediate their skill deficits and accelerate their learning. For example, a 10th-grade student reading at the 5th-grade level has averaged a half of a year of growth for each year he or she has been in school. To be at grade level by graduation, this student will need to improve seven grade levels in three years. This is no easy task, but many students can accomplish it. Noble established its literacy center to meet the needs of these readers.

Five instructors provide targeted instruction for struggling readers in the literacy center. These instructors are full-time staff members who provide one-on-one and small-group reading instruction. They use a handful of approaches to support struggling readers. Students reading at early elementary grade levels are eligible to receive one-to-one reading instruction that is founded upon the Lindamood Phonemic Sequencing (LiPS) and Great Leaps Reading programs. Students reading between the fourth- and eighth-grade levels are placed into one of two academic literacy classes. These classes incorporate strategies and materials from the Reading Is FAME program and the Reading Apprenticeship framework.

**Results**

Results from the first year of Noble’s literacy program have been very promising. The SSR program has close to a 90% rate of on-task reading. In addition, students have almost doubled the number of book sign-outs from the library, which indicates increased student reading. Observational data also support these results. Although encouraging students to develop the habits of readers is important, the primary goal of the literacy program is to increase student literacy achievement.

After just one year of implementation, students made significant gains in reading achievement. In spring 2005, 64% of students in grades 9–12 were reading at or above the proficient level. A year later in 2006, 84% of the students were reading at these levels. Results were based upon yearly performances on the Scholastic Reading Inventory. Gains were even more impressive for students who received targeted interventions. During one semester of interventions, the students in the academic literacy classes averaged more than two grade levels of improvement in reading. Ninety-six percent of students in those classes showed improvement. Lastly, the students who received
one-to-one reading instruction made the greatest gains. These were the students who were reading at the third-grade level or lower. Average gains were between two and three grade levels for these students. In addition, all students with one-to-one instruction showed improvements over the course of the year.

These data are very helpful in measuring and documenting Noble’s progress with literacy reform, but the data do not tell the whole story. The day-to-day stories of working with students are what we remember. At the end of the school year in spring 2006, many teachers e-mailed me about changes they were seeing in students’ reading skills and attitudes toward reading. Teachers who had initially been skeptical about SSR and the potential success of the literacy program told me not to change a thing. However, during the last week of school, a teacher sent an e-mail that provided a poignant reminder of why we began the literacy initiative in the first place. She wrote, “One of the students who has been going to the Literacy Center recently had an interesting question for me. First of all, it was a MAJOR accomplishment to get this young man to even flip through a dirt bike magazine during SSR in the fall. Lately, instead of being the last one into the room he has been arriving earlier and earlier. Now he is always the first in the room for SSR. He has moved from magazine reading to a full length novel. I’ve observed him even carrying it with him to other classes. He approached me last week and asked me if he could borrow the book over the summer. When I said yes, he promised to bring it back in the fall and sat back with a big grin on his face and dove back into his book!”

This story is a reminder that supporting literacy is not just about improving the reading scores of students; it is also about reconnecting them with the power of reading.

**Next Steps**

The initial results from the literacy program indicate great success, but the next steps of the program are already underway. There are three important issues to address in the next two years: First, Noble must offer targeted interventions all year. Students who are reading multiple grade levels below their peers need to be encouraged to use all the time they have before graduation to improve their reading skills. Therefore, we are currently seeking funds to continue the one-to-one reading instruction and academic literacy classes through the summer. In other words, the literacy center is developing a year-round model of literacy support.

Second, we must do more to support literacy across the curriculum. Teachers need as many opportunities for professional development as possible. We are designing a program to offer an extensive series of literacy workshops during the school day throughout the school year.

Finally, literacy cannot just be approached at the school level. Noble must bring the rest of the district, as well as family and community members, into the fold. Recently, a districtwide literacy committee was established to address this concern.

**Lessons Learned**

There are a variety of ways to address the literacy challenges that schools face. One successful program will look very different from other successful programs. However, two lessons from the early phases of Noble’s literacy initiative that educators can adopt in their own schools stand out: First, staff members must be included in the decision-making process when making significant changes. For example, teams piloted versions of SSR before adopting it schoolwide. The teams’ experiences helped me draft a plan for schoolwide adoption, which I then shared with the entire staff, who recommended changes. After I incorporated their recommendations into the plan, I gave it to the school’s governance committee for approval. The next step was meeting with teachers and teams to explain the logistics of how SSR would work. It is because of the participation of staff members and students that SSR was a success from the first day it was implemented.

Second, literacy reform must be founded on documented research. There is a wealth of research about effective literacy strategies and practices, but it is surprising to learn how many teachers are unaware of this useful knowledge. It is vital to share this information and provide multiple pathways for professional development that will enable teachers to learn what they need to know to improve the literacy instruction in their classrooms.

It is two full years after the literacy audit. We are proud of the progress we have made, but we know we must do more to meet the goal of having all students ready for college by the time they graduate. Like many schools, Noble’s efforts to improve student literacy are ongoing and require a comprehensive and multifaceted program that addresses literacy at the school and classroom levels. I encourage school leaders to investigate all of the resources available when designing a program that makes sense within their own particular contexts.

**Reference**