LETS FACE IT: changing the mind-set and practices of middle level and high school teachers is not easy, especially when it comes to getting them to accept shared responsibility for infusing literacy supports across every classroom for all students. Many faculty members wish that students came to them fully literate. Others do not see teaching literacy as their job. Some leaders are uncertain about what they can and should do to get everyone on board and ensure that a literacy improvement effort is successful.

First, a good literacy action plan is essential to a successful schoolwide literacy initiative. Schools that are making progress in improving students’ reading and writing scores have a data-based plan in place that includes intensive interventions for struggling readers and expectations for content-area literacy support. Other features of a good plan include attention to how data will be used; allocation of time, technology, and personnel resources to support literacy development; and attention to school structures and policies. Effective literacy action plans incorporate opportunities for teacher professional development, time lines, and descriptions of how progress will be measured.
But a good plan is not enough. School leaders must implement, monitor, and revise the plan as necessary and make it an ongoing blueprint for action throughout the school. What kinds of actions and leadership practices help ensure that the plan gets off the shelf and is enacted on behalf of students? In our literacy research and consultancy with middle level and high schools in the Northeast, we observe—and support—a set of leadership practices that are worth sharing because they seem to make the difference between successful initiatives and ones in which not much progress is made.

**Far More Than Basic Reading**

School leaders must help teachers broaden their thinking about literacy. This is an important first step to developing acceptance and commitment. Many content-area teachers resist a shared role in literacy instruction because they equate literacy with basic reading skills. Many feel it is the job of English teachers or special educators to teach students how to read, not theirs. The bottom line is that most content-area teachers underestimate their role in helping students learn to read and write about more-complex texts in each content area. And the reality is that most middle level and high school teachers know few strategies that they can use even when they are willing to do so.

Principals should explicitly emphasize that a literate student is one who knows how to use reading, writing, listening and viewing, speaking and presenting, and critical thinking skills to learn content; who can use those skills to communicate what he or she learned; and who can transfer that learning to new situations. Most students need help to do this in each content area. Because teaching skills in context is highly effective and promotes transfer of those skills to other areas, it follows that content teachers know their subject matter and the literacy demands of their classes—are the best-suited teachers to provide content-area literacy support. Teachers more readily realize the importance of explicit strategy instruction when their role is redefined in this way and they receive professional development to improve their capacity to provide such instruction.

Clarifying, reinforcing, and referencing a more inclusive definition of literacy helps teachers broaden their perspectives. Within such a context of expectation and support, teachers are generally far more willing to examine how they can add more reading, writing, speaking, and critical thinking—and more instruction in reading, writing, speaking, and thinking skills—into their classes.

**Practical Suggestions.** Work with teachers to create a schoolwide literacy vision. Use a think-pair-share activity during a faculty meeting or facilitate a definition-building activity on a workshop day so teachers use a structured process to reach a consensus on a definition of literacy. Visit department and team meetings and ask teachers to identify what skills students need to read, write, and think well in their content areas. Use questions to get the conversation started: What types of texts will students encounter in this field? What types of reading and thinking are important? What types of literacy demands are embedded in content-area standards and in content-area assessments? What types of agreements will teachers make to ensure that students have adequate reading and writing opportunities and instruction in every class?

**Example from our work.** A small rural high school implemented a schoolwide literacy initiative. The steps by which the principal got “buy-in” and commitment included an unwavering focus on literacy over three years, teacher professional development, expectations that literacy support strategies would be used across content areas, policies and structures that supported teachers, schoolwide sustained silent reading, and time to discuss strategies at faculty meetings. When teachers were asked what made the difference, the expectations of the principal, the broader definition of literacy, the high-quality professional development, and the shared ownership of the initiative by teachers emerged as key themes. Did student reading and writing achievement substantially improve? Yes. The 11th-grade state assessment scores in reading and writing went up in the second and third years of the project. Reading scores that had been two points below state average in the baseline year were four points higher than the state average in the last year. During the first year of the literacy initiative, less than 10% of the school’s 11th-grade students met the state standard in reading. By the third year, more than 50% of 11th-grade students were meeting the reading standards and the gender gap had been eliminated.

**Plan, Plan, Plan**

In our work with schools, we have encountered frustration with typical professional development, which teachers say is fragmented, not integrated with other initiatives, and not sustained. Frequent changes in administration often pull professional development agendas in widely differing directions and limit teachers’ motivation to invest in learning new classroom strategies. Teachers often bemoan the fact that new requirements are imposed before they have enough time to learn and fully implement prior expectations. Literacy-related hot topics—such as reading comprehension, writing across the curriculum, differentiation, and vocabulary development—are
presented during short early-release workshops or one-day professional development sessions, then rarely revisited.

**Practical suggestions.** Develop a three-year professional development plan that sequences professional development in meaningful ways, aligns with other schoolwide initiatives, and provides time for teachers to share their implementation practices. Before developing the plan, conduct a classroom-practice inventory and look at student performance data. Then target strategies that teachers are not using that will help address students’ literacy and learning needs. The plan should include multiple approaches to professional development—such as workshops, peer coaching, study groups, time for sharing and examining student work, and online courses—to address a variety of teacher learning styles. The plan should also build on previous successful professional development. For example, if your school had a Writing Across the Curriculum initiative or focused on differentiated instruction the year before, link current professional development to those earlier efforts and build on, not replace, existing expertise.

It is also important that leaders participate in professional development along with their teachers to demonstrate the importance of the classroom practices and to learn what to look for when visiting classrooms. Establish a clear expectation that all teachers will continue to expand their knowledge and practice base through professional development and provide choices in how they can meet this requirement.

**Examples from our work.** One middle school literacy audit revealed that content learning was hindered because many students did not know how to access, summarize, analyze, and communicate information. There was a need to emphasize higher order thinking before, during, and after reading. The literacy team developed a three-year professional development plan: year one stressed strategies for locating information and providing evidence, year two emphasized analyzing information and forming concepts, and year three focused on evaluating and synthesizing information and concepts. Teachers in each grade level were asked to agree to learn and practice a common set of six literacy strategies each year to provide consistent, frequent emphasis across content areas. The teachers’ sense of being overwhelmed by the plan was diminished when they realized they were being asked to incorporate a limited set of strategies and would have time and peer support to implement them.

One high school team we worked with decided to focus year one professional development on content-area reading, year two on content-area writing, and year three on differentiation using specific reading and writing strategies. Teachers in each grade level used common strategies. In another high school, departments wanted workshops to focus on content-specific literacy support strategies that matched content-area learning outcomes. Members of the literacy team from each department provided follow-up coaching and support. Because each literacy team had representatives from across the school and because the decisions were based on audit findings and existing school structures, teacher acceptance was high in each case.

**Essential, but Not Enough**

Many principals wonder why, after spending substantial money on teacher professional development, student performance does not improve. In our experience, this problem occurs most often when there are no follow-up procedures to ensure that what is learned is practiced. The principal must regularly monitor the content-area literacy instruction being offered to students, communicate expectations and accountability procedures, directly observe teachers’ literacy practices and provide feedback, and take appropriate action to see that all teachers comply with the literacy plan.

**Practical suggestions.** School administrators can take formal and informal steps to follow up after professional development. Strategies include literacy walk-throughs, classroom observations, team and department meetings, and personal and professional goals linked to literacy development. Many teachers will only make the changes that they know will be observed, so it may not be enough to say that implementation is expected—specific amounts of expected content-area reading, writing, and presenting may need to be spelled out. It is also important to clarify the supports that are in place to help teachers meet the expectations.

**Example from our work.** In one middle school, most teachers reported that they provided ample classroom time for...
Think about what motivated you to try and sustain your involvement with a new hobby, skill, or interest. Did others around you do it? Was there a compelling reason to work at it? Did you improve your skills to meet expectations? Did someone encourage you? In our work with middle level and high schools, we’ve discovered that the same four factors—environment, engagement, expectations, and encouragement—seem to affect teachers’ motivation to implement literacy instruction in their classrooms. Assess your own school with this checklist:

**1. ENVIRONMENT**

*Environment* refers to the structural, cultural, and physical conditions for teaching and learning within which a focus on literacy across the content areas takes place. Environment has a powerful and often overlooked effect on the willingness or reluctance of individuals to participate in new initiatives.

**Checklist**

- Our school is a safe place for teachers to try out new approaches.
- When you walk into our school, it is easy to tell that literacy is a focus.
- Teachers are used to doing peer observations, team teaching, and peer coaching, and there is a structure to support this in our school.
- Teacher talk is often focused on instruction and student learning.
- The school’s mission and vision is taken seriously by all staff members and within the mission and vision is an explicit connection to literacy.

**2. ENGAGEMENT**

*Engagement* refers to the direct connection between the individual and the task at hand. In the case of content-area teachers, engagement relates to how literacy is seen as central or vital to their interests or goals as teachers.

**Checklist**

- Teachers across the content areas see literacy development as central to their job and they take responsibility for improving their abilities in this area.
- Teachers across the content areas understand how literacy relates to content-area learning, and they feel that they have many strategies to assist struggling readers and writers.
- Teachers believe that helping students become independent learners is important.
- Teachers understand that their content area has challenging reading, writing, and presentation requirements, and they help students meet the literacy demands of their content area.
- Students feel that they are competent readers and writers and are generally willing to complete content-area assigned reading and writing tasks. Teachers are not frustrated by the lack of student reading and writing skills or student resistance to reading and writing.
- Students use multiple strategies to learn from challenging texts and are largely independent learners. Teachers do not feel they are working harder than the students.
- Teachers understand that use of the literacy strategies will enable more students to learn and retain more content over the course of the year.
- Students are given multiple opportunities weekly across the content areas to use reading and writing to learn.
reading activities and used the literacy strategies that had been highlighted in professional development sessions. Yet student performance wasn’t improving. An analysis of the classroom practice inventory revealed that teachers were assigning reading tasks, but they were not explicitly teaching students to use reading comprehension strategies independently. The principal and the literacy coach observed that when the teachers guided literacy activities, students followed. But when students were expected to work on their own, they floundered and did not seem to know the purpose of different strategies or how to use them independently to learn. It became clear that the problem was insufficient formal instruction about the literacy strategies.

The literacy team responded by providing a workshop during a faculty meeting on the “gradual release of responsibility” model of instruction. Teachers learned how to explicitly teach, model, and provide guided practice before students were asked to apply the strategies on their own. Literacy walkthroughs showed that many teachers implemented this model following the workshop. Those who did not were asked to observe others who did. Gradually, this became typical practice throughout the school, and student reading performance improved.

**Check the Test**

When we report back to schools on student performance as part of our audit process, we focus on the local reading assessment results and multiyear trends on the state reading and writing assessments. Often, we are asked to explain the discrepancies among the percentages of students scoring on, below, or above grade level between different tests. We find that principals and

### EXPECTATIONS

*Expectations* refers to what an individual will be held accountable for by the school, the principal, the department, or the grade level or team colleagues. What is the expectation for teachers with regard to integrating literacy support and development into content-area learning?

**Checklist**

- There are clear expectations that teachers will use specified literacy strategies.
- Administrators hold teachers accountable for the frequent use of literacy strategies in content-area teaching and learning.
- Course descriptions include literacy expectations.
- Courses are well supported with a variety of teaching texts.
- All core content, special education, ESL, and foreign language teachers are required to participate in some form of content-area literacy teacher professional development. Teachers of other content areas are encouraged to participate as well.
- Student reading is assessed at the beginning and end of the year or the beginning of each year, and results are reported back to the faculty.

### ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

*Encouragement and support* refer to what is often necessary to help individuals feel comfortable enough to try new things and be willing to persevere when their initial attempts are unsuccessful or more challenging than anticipated.

**Checklist**

- Teachers feel comfortable asking for help from colleagues and the literacy coach to improve their skills in supporting content-area literacy development.
- Teachers have available to them a variety of ways to improve their skills in supporting content-area literacy development.
- Teachers feel that they have and can obtain needed support materials.
- There are scheduled times for teachers to meet and discuss the successes and challenges of strategy implementation. Teachers feel that everyone is on a journey of improving their skills in this area and that it is okay to be at a beginning point.
- There are resources, programs, and structures in place at the school to address the needs of really struggling readers and writers. Teachers know what these are and how to have students access them.

Now you are ready to work with your school’s literacy team to identify three to five strategies that you will use to improve teacher commitment to and ownership of a schoolwide literacy improvement focus at your school.

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teachers sometimes do not understand what specific reading or writing assessments measure or how they differ.

When examining state assessment results, it is important to understand what the test is reporting. State assessment data are most valuable when an item or a strand analysis can be performed or the results can be disaggregated. State assessments are criterion referenced—that is, they report student performance against what educators have determined are the knowledge and skills students should have at a particular grade level. When selecting or reviewing standardized or leveled reading and writing assessments, it is also important to understand what the test is reporting. Typically, the percentages are based on peer performance across the country, not what students should know and be able to do. These are very different purposes and help explain many of the discrepancies that we see between the two types of tests.

The content being measured and the approaches used to assess reading level vary widely. When educators understand what the tests measure and what the reports indicate, assessment data can be an invaluable tool to improve reading and writing achievement. All of these types of tests—state assessments, standardized assessments, leveled reading assessments, and diagnostic reading assessments—can provide important information. Extracting and using that information effectively, not worrying about whether two types of assessments provide results that match, is the goal.

**Practical suggestions.** Review each of the current student assessments with your literacy team. To the extent that you have discretion over local assessments, determine how useful the existing assessments are and how they can best be used to inform instruction. If you are in the position to select a new assessment, work with the literacy team to evaluate options on the basis of the information about students’ knowledge and skills each assessment will provide. The team will also want to consider the reporting schedule, costs, technology support required, parallel test forms, length of test, and other assessment features that are relevant for your student population, such as Spanish-language versions.

Ensure that you and your administrative team understand each of the assessments that are given to students, what they test, and what they report. Provide a summary of this information to teachers along with a plan for how the results of each assessment will be distributed and the expectation of how teachers will use the results to guide instruction or monitor progress.

**Examples from our work.** Teachers at a middle school gave three different reading assessments and it was impossible to track progress from year to year. Further, some of the tests were based on fiction reading selections and some on nonfiction, so it was difficult to diagnose what the tests were saying about students as readers. After looking at the situation with the literacy coach and the principal, a decision was made to go to a computer-based diagnostic test that would be used as a pre- and post-test each year. This way, the school is able to tell which students require additional intervention and literacy support, and the effect of a program can be determined.

In a high school, teachers were frustrated because students were required to achieve a 10th-grade level on the local reading assessment to graduate. Some students who performed well in class and on the state test were not passing the local test. The school literacy team leader’s review found that the local test measured reading comprehension by asking students to define words in short selections. Some students who could construct meaning from longer passages were not successful on this test. The school now plans to use a different assessment for graduation.

**Improvement Is Not Self-Sustaining**

Even if all of the described practices are put in place, continued vigilance on the part of school leaders is required. Some teachers will initially give only lip-service to a literacy initiative, feeling confident that this, too, will pass. When teacher commitment is uneven, a “Swiss cheese effect” occurs: students do not get consistent, frequent literacy instruction across their content classes and will not understand that the literacy strategies they learned in one class also apply to all content learning. Teacher morale declines when those who are leading the school’s efforts to embed literacy in their classrooms see others fail to do so and are not held accountable by school administrators to uphold the common agreements.

When schools implement effective literacy action plans, substantive literacy development is likely to occur. But the work is not done when most students achieve proficiency on the state assessment, or when graduation rates increase, or when a school successfully makes adequate yearly progress. These benchmarks show good performance, but “good” is not enough to prepare all students for the cognitive demands of the 21st-century workplace. New goals must be put into place as improvement targets are met. All students deserve to be appropriately supported and challenged to develop their full potential. Continuous improvement must be the ongoing goal for schools, and it must be led by principals who understand that literacy is not something extra on the plate—it is the plate, the foundation upon which academic learning and successful student performance depends. PL