Aurora (CO) Public Schools responded to the Colorado State Model Content Standards for Reading and Writing and the accountability measures attached to the state assessments by implementing the Aurora Achievement Initiative in 2001. Originating from literature on best practices and large-scale school reform, the goal of the districtwide initiative is to increase student achievement through effective delivery of teaching and learning for all students. Implicit in the initiative’s intent is the understanding that effective instruction in literacy eliminates the need for the majority of literacy interventions for students.

A Three-Year Journey
In 2003, Dean Stecklein, the new principal at Aurora Central High School, used a range of data and the foundation established through the Aurora Achievement Initiative to implement a three-year restructuring plan that would significantly affect language arts instruction. Through data analysis, he recognized that language arts classes were not addressing state standards; were not addressing the demands of state assessments (the Colorado Student Assessment Program [CSAP]); and most important, were not addressing the literacy needs of the unique student population drawn from a community of minorities and immigrants who often live in poverty.

As the data indicate, on the basis of NCLB criteria, only 65% of Aurora Central students were proficient in reading in 2003, according to the CSAP. By 2005, almost 80% of students in grades 9 and 10 demonstrated proficiency. Meanwhile, the number of English language learners increased by 21% and the total number of students tested increased by 47%. Preliminary data for 2005–06 indicate a 3%–4% increase in reading proficiency despite an increase in the number of English language learners who are being assessed earlier in their language development.

Year One: Strong Foundations
The foundations for change were district led, data driven, and mostly visible at the administrative level. At Aurora Central, change happened primarily at the philosophical level and had few structural changes. The main structural change provided increased literacy opportunities for selected students on the basis of data. These students were the first to receive literacy instruction in addition to their regular English classes.

The focus for the year was setting the groundwork for professional development through planning a demonstration classroom, independent libraries, and writing instruction. One hour of weekly meeting time was locked in and attendance was mandatory. Teachers read professional literature, engaged in collegial dialogue, observed other literacy classrooms, and learned to notice students’
behavior as readers. The journey was often bumpy as teachers tried out literacy practices on the basis of their developing understanding and abandoned more traditional ways of teaching. Teachers began to discover the power of a literacy classroom that was grounded in the reading and writing process versus the standard English curriculum. We often say that the process has gone fairly well considering we are trying to change all the wheels on the bus while the bus is moving.

Year Two: Focusing on Literacy
During the second year, teachers in the language arts department began to shift from literature to literacy instruction in earnest, especially at the 9th- and 10th-grade levels.

The Plan

All students in grades 9 and 10 receive a foundation of sound literacy instruction, and additional literacy opportunities are available if they are needed. Students who have the highest literacy needs are purposefully scheduled with teachers who have the most literacy expertise.

Every day, teachers enter their classrooms, bringing with them instructional understanding, knowledge of their students as readers and writers, access to a wide range of authentic reading resources, and support from their administrators and their instructional coach. This is the start of literacy intervention for the day.

Aurora Central’s literacy plan includes:

• Schoolwide focus on literacy
• Primary literacy instruction for all 9th- and 10th-grade students, 50 minutes daily
• Additional literacy instruction for identified students, 50 minutes daily
• Special education literacy instruction, variable time based upon IEP
• Double period literacy instruction for English language learners during their first two years, 100 minutes daily
• Small-group tutoring with a certified teacher, 30 minutes three times a week
• Summer school for incoming 9th-grade students and current 10th-grade students
• After-school enrichment that focuses on 9th-grade students and English language learners
• Literacy support in social science classes, 50 minutes daily.
The most significant first step was the establishment of individual classroom libraries. Funds were shifted within the department and at the building and district levels to help teachers establish independent libraries in their classrooms.

As teachers made time for students to read from self-selected books and began to note behaviors during independent reading, ideas for professional development about reading instruction emerged. These ideas led to conversations about various aspects of reading and writing instruction. Through professional development, teachers explored small-group guided reading, independent reading, reading demonstrations, reading response, independent writing, writer’s craft, and writing demonstrations. Teachers also examined the school district’s secondary reading and writing continua and struggled to find connections to their classroom instruction.

In addition, the role of the district literacy coach was more clearly defined. District literacy coaches supported Aurora Central by working alongside teachers on a weekly basis as they established literacy practices in their classrooms. As change began to take hold, Michelle Otte—a teacher who taught in her own demonstration classroom, planned professional development, and coached teachers daily—was hired as a teacher leader. In Aurora Public Schools, teacher leaders are chosen for their understanding of the reading and writing process and their ability not only to articulate these understandings to their colleagues but also to implement these practices in their classrooms. Although they provide instructional support and

### Adequate Yearly Progress Report 2003–05
(Colorado Student Assessment Program [CSAP])

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Whole School</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>English Language Learners</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged</th>
<th>Students w/Disabilities</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>65.08 (587)</td>
<td>61.5  (226)</td>
<td>63.27 (471)</td>
<td>72.94 (170)</td>
<td>62.60 (393)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>28.57 (112)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>79.77 (766)</td>
<td>81.53 (157)</td>
<td>74.50 (447)</td>
<td>91.30 (138)</td>
<td>74.31 (397)</td>
<td>78.45 (297)</td>
<td>51.33 (113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>79.82 (867)</td>
<td>84.49 (187)</td>
<td>74.81 (524)</td>
<td>90.98 (133)</td>
<td>74.16 (476)</td>
<td>77.94 (535)</td>
<td>54.70 (117)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Actual number of students tested)
leadership within a building, teacher leaders are completely separated from the teacher evaluation process. The communication between teachers and teacher leaders is confidential. As teacher leader, Otte developed a demonstration classroom, coached 10 teachers weekly throughout the year, and worked collaboratively with administrators to plan and facilitate weekly professional development.

**Year Three: Student Focused and Literacy Based**

Aurora Central has completed its third year of literacy reform, and teachers are discovering that their classrooms are student focused and literacy based. The district's Secondary Reading and Writing Continua are no longer sources of frustration but tools to help teachers understand their students as readers and writers. Daily literacy instruction became literacy intervention. Teachers believe that the best literacy intervention for a student is excellent daily literacy instruction.

For many teachers, this has been a transformative experience. Of the cadre of teachers who collaborated to redefine their work, many would have identified themselves as literature teachers, some as special education teachers, and a few might see themselves as ESL teachers or content specialists in either foreign language or social studies. Now faculty members are beginning to view themselves as literacy teachers: teachers who understand reading and writing processes, teachers who can discuss what a reader can do, and teachers who can look at student writing and determine individual next steps. It is through ongoing professional development, teacher and administrative commitment to change, and instructional coaching that this high level of instructional expertise has developed.

**Moving Forward**

Three key factors have contributed to this groundswell of sound literacy instruction in classrooms at Aurora Central. First is the establishment of a demonstration classroom. In this classroom, teachers can see the instructional frameworks and the reading and writing continua brought to life. As teachers from within the building and around the district observe this classroom in action, they see student-focused instruction and students engaged in authentic reading and writing opportunities. Because the demonstration teacher works through the same issues that other teachers are confronted with as they make changes in their own classrooms, she is able to work collaboratively with her colleagues in a coaching setting.

Teachers may choose to visit the demonstration classroom during one of their planning periods or plan a visit using released time. Teachers are expected to come with their questions about literacy instruction. Each visit is followed by a debrief session during which the teacher leader and the teacher observer discuss the teacher's questions of what he or she observed. Teachers are expected to change their practice as a result of their visits to the demonstration classroom.

Another key factor is the use of data. Beginning in year three, teachers worked with Assistant Principal Lynn Fair to use standardized test data as one tool to inform instruction. Teachers were asked to disaggregate CSAP data using an organizer to make initial decisions about instruction. As teachers began to disaggregate data, many made such comments as "It's not valid for our kids," and "I know them intuitively." To provide additional support for teachers when they create data-driven instruction, Fair met with teachers for formal student achievement meetings. During these meetings, the conversation was focused on identifying groups of students and their needs. As a result of repeated conversations, teachers are more sophisticated in their use of data to make instructional decisions, to measure growth over time, and to gauge the impact of their instruction.

The initial success experienced in classrooms by both students and teachers has led to increased success. This is the third key factor. Students and teachers look at instruction differently than they used to: teachers expect more from students, and students feel empowered as readers and writers across a wide range of topics and genres. Increased expectations have led to greater rigor in the classroom and increased student stamina, independence, and performance. PL

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**Resources**