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Adolescent Literacy

An effective reading program develops reading competence in all students and is based on proven practices. Three components are critical to the design, implementation, and sustainability of powerful reading instruction: professional development that equips educators with a solid knowledge base; effective instructional tools that are aligned to the knowledge base; and school systems that support and nurture implementation.

—Diamond, 2006

Improving students' ability to read and comprehend increasingly complex texts across grade levels and content areas is the foundation for all effective school-reform initiatives. The vast amount of information students are now required to absorb and synthesize into working knowledge requires today's youth to develop complex literacy skills not required of students in the past. As a result, teachers are being asked to move away from the conventional lecture model, which exposes students to the essential details most likely to appear on a test, and toward facilitating students' active participation in the learning process. This shift is critical if the goal is to enable students to continue to access, absorb, and synthesize new information as they move into adulthood. Thus, educators must shift from the traditional instructional model that focuses on teaching students what to think about by providing a "trivial pursuit" of facts and details toward a more complex system of teaching students how to think.

Changing tradition is not an easy task. However, when we begin to examine state and national standards, it becomes clear that how we measure student achievement is changing and with that change must come modifications to instruction. Many states are moving toward educator evaluation systems that evaluate teachers not on what is covered but instead on what students

learn. This means that teachers can no longer close their doors and continue to deliver instruction independent of the school-wide literacy goals but instead must work collaboratively with their peers to develop instructional plans and systems that address the needs of all students.

Shifting from covering the content to teaching students how to be active, independent learners requires educators to adopt a new way of thinking about adolescent literacy. It will also require that teachers adopt a new way of work, making the most of their collective capacity to meet their students' needs and maximize student literacy outcomes. It has been our experience that teams that adopt a problem-solving/response to intervention (PS/RTI) framework as a means of developing common instructional goals for all students, identifying barriers to student learning, designing and implementing instructional plans to address the barriers, and consistently and regularly monitoring student progress are more successful in achieving their school literacy goals than schools that do not adopt such a framework. As such, we hope to provide readers with practical recommendations and research-based resources to begin to better address their students' literacy needs through the implementation of a PS/RTI framework in their schools. Ultimately, our goal is that with the guidance and resources provided herein, literacy leadership teams will take the first step toward better understanding their students' needs and making the changes necessary to ensure their students' success.

Defining Literacy

Traditionally, literacy is defined as the ability to read and write. However, determining whether or not a student possesses sufficient reading and writing skills is not that simple. It is, in fact, sometimes controversial. Most high school teachers can share examples of students who can read words and write legibly but who can't effectively read grade-level text with comprehension on their own. Some adults possess the ability to read simple language and are capable of holding jobs but have difficulty reading more complex texts, such as journal articles, informational texts, loan papers, or contractual agreements. Others are capable of reading more complex texts if they are relevant to their daily lives but spend little time reading for pleasure or gathering information outside their immediate needs. Still others possess the skills to read a variety of texts for a variety of purposes and apply those skills on a regular basis. In essence, people possess various levels of literacy, ranging from those with very limited literacy skills to those who exhibit highly complex literacy skills. Educators are left to answer the question, "What constitutes 'sufficient' literacy skills?"

To begin to answer this question, we turn to the UNESCO Institute for Education (2008), which defines literacy as:

the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling [an individual] to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potentials, and participate fully in the community and wider society. (p. 25)

This definition provides a detailed explanation of what one should consider “sufficient” literacy skills. Clearly, the definition goes far beyond simply decoding words or recalling facts. Instead, a student’s ability to read increasingly complex texts, requiring increasingly complex literacy skills, has become the gatekeeper not only to higher education but also to the ability to function and prosper within society as well as in the global marketplace. As a result, we argue the role of education is to ensure that students possess the skills necessary to allow them to function as literate adults, fully capable of participating in and adapting to an ever-changing society. For this to occur, schools that serve students in grades 4 through 12 must begin the process of redefining curriculum and instruction in order to incorporate literacy support as part of daily instruction across all content areas.

Literacy as a School-Wide Issue

The implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 focused on reading in grades K through 3 while essentially ignoring the importance of reinforcing reading/literacy skills beyond grade 3. Unfortunately, it is not unusual to discover that students who perform well on reading assessments in grade 3 often struggle on subsequent reading assessments. The acquisition of skills required for students to read with comprehension become more difficult over time because texts become increasingly complex, focus on highly complex topics and themes, contain information in multiple formats, and require students to synthesize information from a variety of sources and formats (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010). Students in grades 4 through 12 are often expected to read increasingly complex texts independently without the benefit of instructional support. Lacking continued literacy instruction and support, once-proficient students begin to fall behind, becoming more dependent on teachers to provide them with information from text rather than developing the skills necessary to read

independently and gather their own information. Over time, students' lack of literacy skills are compounded by a decrease in the time students spend reading, which negatively impacts their achievement across all content areas. As a result, we begin with the belief that literacy should be regarded as a system-wide issue, requiring both a school-wide and a vertical articulation response from schools that serve students in grades 4 through 12.

The call to provide continued reading support and development for students in grades 4 through 12 is reinforced through substantial research on adolescent literacy (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010; Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; National Institute for Literacy, 2007; Meltzer, Smith, & Clark, 2002). Despite substantial evidence to the contrary, many secondary schools approach adolescent literacy with the belief that once students receive the foundational reading instruction provided in grades K through 3, they no longer require additional reading instruction. Snow and Moje (2010) refer to this misconception as the "inoculation fallacy" and contend that simply providing students with foundational reading instruction is insufficient to support student achievement over time and, ultimately, will not allow educators to adequately contend with the adolescent literacy crisis we now face.

A New Approach to Adolescent Literacy

Instead of falling victim to the inoculation fallacy, school systems must begin to build and implement effective literacy programming beginning in grade 4 and continuing through grade 12. The intensity of adolescent literacy issues demands that these literacy initiatives include both high-quality literacy instruction across core academic areas to support all students' comprehension of increasingly complex text combined with targeted remediation for students whose reading skills are below grade level. The long-term success of literacy programs and ultimately successful school reform are accomplished through effective literacy programs that address the needs of all learners rather than focusing only on students who are not meeting grade-level standards. Thus, we warn schools that developing reading intervention programs without ensuring the existence of high-quality core instruction is unlikely to achieve the desired student outcomes.

The adoption of a PS/RTI framework will assist schools to identify and define specific literacy problems, ascertain and analyze the barriers to improving student literacy outcomes, develop and implement a research-based

literacy program, and monitor progress toward achieving desired goals in order to determine the effectiveness of the plan.

The implementation of a PS/RTI framework will allow teams to develop effective literacy programming that includes the following:

- ♦ A multitiered system of student supports
 - Cross-curricular reading comprehension strategy instruction
 - Targeted reading intervention for students reading below grade level
- ♦ Data-based problem solving
 - Identification of barriers to improved student literacy outcomes
 - Design of instructional/intervention programming to address identified barriers
 - Progress monitoring to determine effectiveness of instruction and intervention plans
- ♦ Teacher support through professional development and instructional coaching

Multitiered System of Student Supports

The implementation of a multitiered system of student supports serves as the basis for a comprehensive literacy program. Providing multitiered supports ensures that all students have access to the intensity of instruction required to support their progress toward grade-level literacy goals. Within a multitiered system, all students receive “core” instruction, the focus and intensity (e.g., amount of time) of which is determined through an analysis of school-wide data. Some students may require an intensification of core instruction, which can be accomplished through differentiation designed to address individual student literacy needs. Differentiation within core instruction may be sufficient to meet the needs of some students, while others may continue to require more intensive supports. Determining the intensity of student needs is best accomplished through the ongoing collection and analysis of progress-monitoring data (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010; Gutierrez, 2009; Wise, 2009). Students whose progress is insufficient to meet literacy goals with core instruction and differentiation may require supplemental literacy support in addition to core instruction.

However, schools that find a substantial percentage of their students reading below grade level and/or making insufficient progress toward literacy goals should consider strategies to strengthen core literacy instruction school-wide as the first line of defense. Moving away from an intervention model to an initial instruction model requires a significant shift in thinking at

the secondary level. With this shift, literacy instruction becomes an integral part of core instruction and is embedded across the curriculum to ensure all students are developing the skills they need to independently comprehend increasingly complex texts across disciplines and grade levels.

In addition to strengthening core instruction, schools should consider scheduling reading intervention time within their master schedule to allow for additional supplemental literacy instruction. With time built into the master schedule, students who are not demonstrating progress within core instruction alone have ready access to additional support and instruction (i.e., Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention) (Brozo, 2010).

Core Literacy Instruction (Tier 1). The importance of core literacy instruction is never more evident than when a school's instructional teams identify barriers to students' success within their specific content areas. Without fail, regardless of the content area, student literacy issues are typically identified as the primary barrier to students' success, highlighting literacy as a school-wide issue.

Designing effective core literacy instruction begins with reviewing student literacy data to determine the percentage of students with grade-level literacy skills. A school that determines that fewer than 80% to 85% of its students are reading on grade level should begin by focusing on strengthening core literacy instruction. Schools with more than 85% of their students demonstrating reading proficiency may conclude that core instruction is adequate for addressing the needs of the majority of the students and is, therefore, effective. In this case, the school may choose to focus on developing tiered intervention supports to address the needs of the 15% to 20% of students for whom the core is not sufficient. Unfortunately, it has been our experience that a majority of secondary schools face percentages of nonproficient students well beyond 15% to 20% and must, therefore, focus on core instructional planning.

Once the percentage of proficient students has been determined, the next step is to set reasonable yet ambitious school-wide student literacy goals. For example, a school may set a goal to increase the percentage of proficient readers from 65% to 70% by the end of the school year. However, just determining a literacy goal is not sufficient to ensure improving student literacy outcomes. Teachers will need support to understand how improvements in literacy will translate into improved student outcomes within their own classrooms. Otherwise, many will view this goal as irrelevant to their own teaching. As such, schools must include within their plans sufficient teacher support to ensure teacher buy-in. Thus, part of a well-defined plan must focus on teacher professional development and support to unite the staff around the literacy goal.

After establishing and building consensus around literacy goals, the next step entails working collaboratively with instructional personnel to identify

barriers that have precluded or could prevent the school from achieving the literacy goals. These barriers serve as the basis for the development of a school-wide literacy program that is implemented in every classroom across the school.

Core instruction serves as the foundation for all additional instruction. Supplemental (Tier 2 and Tier 3) intervention is provided in addition to core instruction for those students whose needs cannot be met through core instruction alone. Supplemental instruction is not meant to replace core instruction but is designed to provide additional support above and beyond core instruction in order to enhance the likelihood that students will be successful within their core courses (Brozo, 2010).

For many secondary teachers, the idea of setting literacy goals and including literacy instruction as part of content area instruction may seem foreign. Some teachers may complain that students in middle and high school should have already been taught how to read and that taking time during content-specific instruction to devote to teaching students to read undermines their curriculum. These same teachers often recognize many of their students cannot comprehend the assigned text, so they devote countless hours creating PowerPoint presentations, developing and sharing Cornell Notes on the overhead, or simply handing their students outlines of the text in student-friendly language in hopes that students will learn the material presented. This approach allows teachers to “cover” the curriculum but is not particularly effective in helping students develop the highly complex skills they need to access content on their own. The result is that students’ ability to become self-sufficient, independent learners is severely limited because students never develop the literacy skills they need.

Accordingly, a majority of secondary school teachers will benefit from support to understand how to help students develop “disciplinary literacy” skills required within their content areas (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). The concept surrounding disciplinary literacy requires that educators examine what it means to *learn* the content as opposed to simply *know* the content. This shift from *knowing* to *learning* requires that students develop a set of advanced literacy skills that allows them access to complex text across content areas. These advanced literacy skills do not simply develop as a result of foundational reading instruction. Instead, they require teachers to provide students with literacy strategies that students can employ when meaning breaks down, improving the students’ abilities to think critically, solve complex problems, and generalize knowledge beyond the educational setting. When teachers begin to examine what skills are necessary for students to *learn* within their content classes rather than simply be able to *know* or recall information, they are more apt to shift their focus away from telling students

what they need to know toward helping students develop the skills they need to become active, independent learners.

To this end, core literacy instruction ideally includes direct, explicit instruction in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition strategies combined with access to diverse texts and multiple opportunities to practice applying the strategies with feedback across texts from various content areas (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010; Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger, & Torgensen, 2008). It is important to note that literacy skills that are taught in isolation and are not connected to content area learning are unlikely to be highly effective (Langer, 2001). Literacy instruction and support should be embedded and integrated within core content instruction as a means of supporting student learning and should not be presented as a set of isolated tasks. Connecting literacy instruction to the process of learning content material is essential. Students who understand the connection between literacy skills and strategies and the mastery of content material are typically more motivated to engage in the learning process and apply the literacy skills or strategies within their content classes than are students who experience the literacy instruction as disconnected and unrelated to their content area learning.

For many students, the connection between literacy instruction and content area learning must be explicit. Teaching students to apply concepts and strategies across multiple texts, especially grade-level content area texts and supplemental materials, fosters student understanding of the utility of literacy strategies and skills beyond reading and language arts classrooms (Langer, 2001).

Ultimately, core instruction should be designed with an understanding that students are most likely to become independent, disciplined learners when literacy instruction includes explicit reading and writing instruction with multiple opportunities for students to practice these skills within authentic and relevant reading and writing tasks. Thus, the plans must include provisions to provide all teachers with the support necessary to integrate literacy instruction into students' daily lives.

Reading Intervention Instruction (Tier 2 and Tier 3). Small group and/or individual, personalized literacy interventions provided in addition to core instruction are likely necessary to provide adequate support for students who are reading significantly below grade level. These supplemental tiers of instruction are provided in addition to the core and not in place of core instruction.

Tiered intervention supports are most likely to be effective when they are closely aligned with core instruction, focused on achieving core literacy goals, and scheduled within the school's master schedule. Pull-out programs, which provide literacy instruction during the time when a student is scheduled to