

Becoming a Literacy Leader

Supporting Learning and Change

JENNIFER ALLEN

Foreword by Karen Szymusiak and Franki Sibberson



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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This is not work for the faint-hearted. To do it well requires a calm disposition and the trust-building skills of a mediator combined with the steely determination and perseverance of an innovator.

Ellen Guiney



I Am

Who am I? What am I? I have read all of the definitions of reading coach, literacy specialist, and reading apprentice. I am reluctant to define myself as anything but a teacher. What I can do is tell you about myself, and share my stories about becoming a literacy leader.

I am fast talking, fast walking, and full of life. I spring out of bed each morning ready to tackle new challenges, and flop into bed at night depleted of all energy. My mind is always at work, churning with new ideas and thinking. I am a listener, a partner, and a subtle agent for change. I work with teachers, Title I reading technicians, parents, literacy specialists, administrators, and students. My work is multilayered. It begins at the district level as a member of the leadership team, collecting and analyzing data to determine district needs, plan initiatives, and set goals. From here it moves to the school level, where my responsibilities branch out in many directions: Title I coordinator, staff developer, and developer of curriculum and assessment.

The layers of my role move into the classroom, where I work with teachers and students. I support school initiatives by providing professional development for all staff. I provide opportunities for teachers to pursue new learning through participation in study groups.

I have worked as a licensed literacy specialist for grades 3 through 5 since 2000. Before that I taught third grade for nine years. I entered my current position as literacy specialist without a job description. The district had redirected their focus on literacy for grades K–5 because the results of state testing indicated that our students were struggling to *meet the standard* in reading and writing. I was hired to “support literacy.” There had not been a literacy specialist in my position for eight years. I have had the luxury of creating my identity as a literacy support person and establishing a partnership with the K–2 literacy specialist. My identity as a literacy leader has developed and evolved over the last five years.

We Are

We are a K–12 school district. We have four large schools. The George J. Mitchell School serves students in kindergarten through grade 3. There are approximately thirty classroom teachers and six hundred students, plus support staff. Students then move to the Albert S. Hall School, which serves students in grades 4 and 5. This school has roughly twenty teachers and three hundred students. After fifth grade, students move to the junior high school for grades 6 through 8 and then to the high school for grades 9 through 12. I work at the George J. Mitchell School (focusing on grade 3 teachers and students) and also at the Albert S. Hall School (grades 4 and 5).

The school district is in a small city in Maine. The free and reduced-price lunch population is about 56 percent, and we have a yearly transient rate of 33 percent. By tracking students over a three-year period we have found that our transient rate increases to more than 50 percent. Students come and go and come back. In this same town we have two private colleges that employ many professors. We are a hub for a regional hospital that employs medical staff. The children of these well-educated professionals are thrown into the mix of our struggling community—a community that once housed prosperous paper mills.

Shared Literacy Leadership

It feels awkward to write this book using the word *I*. I find myself typing the word *we* only to delete it and replace it with *I*. I am part of a team and it is through this shared leadership team that I support literacy. I collaborate with principals, literacy specialists, teachers, librarians, support staff, and parents. We work together to achieve goals that we have set as a district.

My journey as a literacy specialist includes my partner Rose Patterson, the K–2 literacy specialist. Although the stories I share reflect my personal experiences in becoming a literacy leader, my overall literacy journey includes collaborating with Rose since 2000. We work together generating new ideas, processing new learning, and ensuring that the literacy curriculum and student learning is streamlined for students in kindergarten through grade 5. We work to ensure consistency between grade levels, and across buildings within the district.

My work as literacy specialist in supporting professional development within the district is multilayered. I work at the school level to provide professional development at monthly staff meetings to all teachers, creating a common understanding of best literacy practices. I facilitate teacher study groups so that teachers' individual professional needs are met. In addition, I work with teachers and students in classrooms, supporting teachers as they implement new teaching strategies.

The district is committed to providing high-quality in-house professional development. The focus is on providing professional development to increase the quality of instruction that is delivered to students. By working in-house supporting teachers in literacy, I am able to respond to teachers' needs and provide modeling and follow-through support. Literacy support is delivered in the natural setting of the classrooms in which the teachers work. Professional development opportunities within the district have been designed to meet the standards put forth by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Staff Development Council (online at www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm) and incorporate the latest research on providing high-quality professional development. The position of literacy specialist as reading coach supports these standards for providing in-house professional development opportunities.

My Stories

One of the greatest challenges has been learning to balance the demands of the job. Because the role of literacy specialist as reading coach is relatively

new, I have traveled an interesting road in defining and shaping my role as a literacy coach.

This book is a reflection of my journey to becoming a literacy leader. They are my stories, the moments that have guided my own learning. It is my hope that by sharing my stories, others will be inspired to continue and persevere through their own journeys of becoming literacy leaders.

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