

1 Schools and Districts Committing to Fail-Safe Literacy Leadership

ACHIEVING COMMITMENT

"I'm a born again reader!" exclaimed Dave Tucker, principal of East Ridge High School. Principal Tucker went on to share with his faculty that he thought he knew what he needed to know to be a good high school principal until he participated in the district's fail-safe literacy system planning sessions. As a result of his own professional growth in literacy learning, he wanted his entire faculty to become involved in rethinking how they could infuse their daily work with literacy learning so that all of the students would become better readers, writers, and content learners. As he shared his newfound commitment, the athletic coaches at the back table looked at their watches—they had students waiting on them for spring football practice. Then I took the microphone and asked the faculty if they knew why the coaches were present, and the art teacher, vocational-technology teachers, the band director, and the culinary arts chef. Within a few seconds, answers started coming: Because students like their classes, find them meaningful, and listen to these faculty. Yes! These teachers, chefs, directors, and coaches are key to reaching the students who

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most need support in literacy development and content learning. Next I asked the faculty, “What percentage of your students can independently read your on-grade-level content textbooks?” The answer was about 30%! From that point on, we had substantive discussion from all faculty members, because their value had been sincerely acknowledged and the need was established for each one to learn how to infuse their work with literacy learning so that all students could access their standards-based curriculum. Football practice would have to wait a little while longer.

Fail-safe literacy leadership begins with commitment of the leader to the premise that elementary, middle, and high school students can become joyful, independent readers, writers, and content learners. Without commitment from the principal, teachers who believe their jobs are to teach a standards-based curriculum only will not engage in literacy infusion.

To garner commitment from a diverse faculty, each faculty member needs to acknowledge that literacy is the key to students accessing the content learning for which they are held accountable. They also must be willing to try reasonable strategies that will accelerate content learning and not perceive them as detracting from content learning. Middle and high school teachers are serious about content learning and are open to commitment to literacy infusion once they understand that it benefits the students and the teachers themselves, as professionals. The fail-safe literacy system planning process is grounded in developing the capacity of the school community and creating commitment to continued improvement.

Laying the groundwork to empower all teachers to infuse their work with literacy learning and hence improve reading, writing, and content learning has as its foundation the purpose and result shown in the box.

Groundwork for Literacy Learning Empowerment

Purpose: To create a fail-safe system of literacy so that all students have access to the standards-based curriculum.

Result: All students will become joyful, independent readers, writers, and content learners.

Most middle and high school teachers and administrators buy into the purpose set forth here and the promise of the results. School

success is measured by reading, writing, mathematics, and other content learning. With this purpose and result understood, commitment to taking steps to achieve both is an acceptable agenda for most teachers.

Leading for Measurable Improvement

Leadership literature supports four constructs as important for improving student achievement in reading. These constructs are (a) data-driven decision making, (b) a focus on continuous improvement in student achievement, (c) leadership for change and innovation, and (d) shared curriculum focus on standards. Together these leadership constructs provide for the capacity building within a staff and school community that is necessary for long-term improvements.

Data-driven decision making is evidenced when standardized test results are analyzed and shared with faculty, students, and the broader learning community. Studying data beyond standardized test results is imperative and includes looking at data related to the entire school operation prior to making decisions. Leaders who are successful understand the synergistic nature of schools and that each component interacts and influences the others.

Focus on continuous improvement of student achievement implies that a professional learning community exists wherein teachers, parents, and students are always involved in the process of making the school a better place for students. Evidence of a professional learning community includes teachers discussing ways of improving individual and group performance at grade level, department, or team meetings. Shared decision making related to the school schedule and student schedules and to the use of time within and after the school day are common to ensure that learning time is maximized.

Leadership for change and innovation means that teams of teachers work together to solve the school's challenges. Professional growth experiences are encouraged and provided. A risk-free environment exists for trying out innovative practices and action research.

Shared curriculum focus on standards is most likely present in every school, given the era of high stakes accountability that exists today. Alignment of the standards-based curriculum, materials and technology, instruction, assessment, and professional development would be present. Other evidence includes teachers working individually with students to achieve standards, providing more time for students who need it so they can be successful with standards, and professional discussions regarding strategies to meet expectations of standards.

Initial investigation of principal implementation of these constructs suggests that when the focus was on a subset of these

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constructs, such as *just* data-driven decision making or *just* shared curriculum focus on standards, the gains in student achievement were not predictable. The interaction of leadership that deliberately and purposefully employs all four constructs can, apparently, expect upward growth. Of interest is that these gains in student achievement were not restricted to any demographic area (urban, rural, or suburban), student race (White, African American, or Hispanic), or economic conditions or to the background and experience of the principals (Chanter, 2002; Cupid-McCoy, 2003; Roberts, 2004).

Indicators of each construct can be seen in Accountability Practices of Educational Leaders (APEL), in Appendix A. Some of you may want to take the APEL to see how you score. Better yet, you may want your teachers or leadership team to complete the APEL to provide you with perceptions of others regarding how you incorporate the four constructs. Just as we need to use data to drive decisions regarding student learning, we need to use data to provide us with reflection on how we perform as literacy leaders so we can continuously improve.

Other research supporting the four constructs indicates that principals who are improving student achievement over a three-year period have established literacy as a priority and have adjusted their leadership style to be more data-driven and focused on individual students. As a result of studying disaggregated data on students, these principals are examining their own practices, resulting in

- reallocation of student and adult time at school
- more professional development in literacy learning
- emphasis on personnel selection focused on literacy learning
- scientific research-based selection processes for materials and technology
- refocus of their personal professional time on student learning

These research-based concepts of leadership are echoed in student achievement gains made by the two vignettes that follow and are further discussed as we proceed through the chapters.

Improvements in a Florida Middle School. One such middle school principal is credited with the greatest improvement in the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) scores in his large school district and has gone from a state-assigned grade of C to an A. On the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 data assessment, the school also fared well. The school has almost 2000 students, of whom 54% receive free and reduced-fee lunches. It is a Title I school, with approximately 27% African American students, 20% Hispanic

students, and 43% White students. To improve student achievement, the lowest level of readers was assigned to a year-long, intensive reading program supported with technology. The time spent in reading for these students was double the remainder of the student population. Additionally, the principal purchased new materials and technology for the students in intensive reading.

Another example of a school using data to make decisions regarding use of time and resources targeted the 25% of the students reading at the lowest levels. After one year, the students achieved a gain of 75% on the FCAT in reading. In addition to these students being placed in an intensive reading class, a schoolwide focus on professional development that would infuse all content classes with literacy took place with the principal taking the lead role, supported by a curriculum resource teacher. Rethinking use of adult time also played a part in this improvement and maximized time for literacy learning. Administrators tutored the lowest readers and promoted vocabulary development via morning school news televised in each classroom. Teachers who had senior interns from the local university and release time during the last portion of the semester tutored the lowest performing students during the release time.

Improvements in a Kentucky Elementary School. Marshall Kemp, superintendent of Logan County Schools, Kentucky, recognized that intervention with the lowest performing Title I elementary school was essential to increasing student achievement. With data available on student achievement over a period of years, this stable community school was selected for the Reading First Grant. As the school evaluated what was working and what was not working in kindergarten through third grade, the data showed that consistent implementation of research-based instruction and assessment was missing. A comprehensive plan of professional development, in-class coaching, new instructional materials and technology, and assessment was implemented. Special education support teachers who previously pulled students out to provide intensive support now go into classrooms to work with those needing intensive intervention. Observation of students, interviews with teachers, and assessment data point to significant improvements in student achievement. This school has implemented a fail-safe literacy system in which the teachers, students, and administrator acknowledge and celebrate the positive changes in students, particularly those who struggle with reading the most.

In each of these cases, the superintendent or principal took the lead to rethink use of adult time, student time, instructional materials

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and technology, assessment, and/or professional development to achieve content standards through literacy learning. These are key to improving student achievement and are supported by research and practice in schools today. Consider how you establish and demonstrate your priorities with each of these components:

- adult time
- student time
- instructional materials and technology
- professional development
- assessment

FAIL-SAFE LITERACY LEADERSHIP

Freedom High School

The following in-depth description of commitment to literacy learning made in opening Freedom High School in 2003 provides real-life examples of what schools can do in serving challenging student populations. Carl Colton, an elementary principal with a track record of success, was asked to open a new high school that would serve a population diverse both economically and racially. The majority of students were Hispanic and spoke English as a second language. Carl's first commitment was to make sure that all students were successful, so he knew that literacy learning would be essential if that commitment was to have positive results. Therefore he began with his own research and learning about how to infuse literacy into a high school and implement a fail-safe system of literacy. From the initial planning for and selection of the leadership team, including department chairpersons, the promise was made that this high school would focus on literacy infusion.

Personnel

When candidates were interviewed for positions, they were told, "At the new school, instruction at all levels in all classrooms will have active literacy components." Then they were asked these questions:

- How is literacy promoted in your classroom?
- How are reading, writing, and speaking incorporated into your lessons?

These questions led to the opportunity for the interviewer to share the literacy vision for Freedom High School. Interviewees were

told that the long-term focus of professional development would be literacy infusion in all content areas, and participation would not be optional. This honest and direct approach allowed some candidates to self-select not to continue the application process and others to get excited about being part of a new vision for serving students.

Creating an Aligned System of Materials and Technology

Selection of textbooks, supplementary materials, hardware, and software was considered appropriate if it was literacy friendly. This meant that the materials selected were respectful of the students and provided support needed by diverse learners, many of whom do not read on grade level. In addition to literacy-friendly textbooks, each teacher would have a classroom library that reflected the content of the courses taught and the diversity of the readers in the classroom.

For students who read at the lowest level, the school opened with two classrooms for intervention. These used *Read 180*, published by Scholastic, Inc. *Read 180* is a balanced approach of software that builds vocabulary, spelling, and fluency, along with classroom libraries for independent reading and teacher materials for small group word study.

All language arts classrooms have *Reading Counts*, software published by Scholastic, Inc. that assesses students' reading levels with the *Scholastic Reading Inventory* (SRI) and provides quizzes on a multitude of reading selections. These products use the Lexile Framework, which provides information on students' independent reading levels and the readability of books so that books for independent reading can be easily matched to students' reading levels and interests. With the SRI in place in all language arts classrooms, an assessment that provides both diagnostic and monitoring data on reading achievement is available for charting student growth in reading.

Media Center

The media specialist was selected for her knowledge of technology and young adult literature. Unlike many secondary school media centers, this one promised to be a hub of activity for the high school students and teachers. In addition to the traditional selections, there were many adolescent picture books, as well as young adult literature, reflecting the commitment to motivate all students to be joyful, independent readers, writers, and content learners. Compact disks (CDs) and audiobooks were included in the selections, providing students with access to on-grade-level literature and content text even if they did not read at that level independently. This portable technology, along with videos and DVDs, supports development of

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vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, leading to enhanced content learning. Recent research supports the idea that library-media centers with well-selected materials and technology resources and well-trained librarians and media specialists can increase literacy achievement.

Professional Development

Colton knew that professional development would need to begin with the first person hired and continue throughout the school year. Once the leadership team and department chairpersons were selected, they participated in professional development on literacy infusion. They also attended specific conferences and institutes on the topic. Prior to the school's opening, in late July, the entire faculty participated in day-long seminars on literacy infusion to prepare for instructional planning using the new resources and to support meeting the new expectations. Follow-up sessions took place throughout the school year.

Time for Literacy Learning

As we all know, commitment shows itself in how we spend our time, and that means thoughtful organization of the school day for both students and teachers. Each day during second period, 20 minutes is reserved for silent, sustained reading in all classes.

Ninth grade is a critical time for high school students. Knowing this, the leadership team decided to organize ninth grade students in interdisciplinary teams that were housed together as much as possible to make literacy learning a commitment. The teachers on each of these ninth grade teams have a common planning time to focus on literacy and ensure the success of each student. Furthering this commitment was the assignment of a counselor, whose responsibility was to work solely with identified ninth graders reading below grade level.

Follow-up and Support

All teachers will not be at the same place at the same time with literacy infusion. For teachers to maintain this focus, they must develop their lesson plans using a template that facilitates the use of literacy strategies, the processes of literacy, and reading to and with students to provide access to content standards. Administrators, curriculum specialists, and the reading coach provide support, professional development, encouragement, and feedback.

Stonewall Jackson Middle School

Commitment to literacy learning is also evident at Stonewall Jackson Middle School, which has experienced drastic change in

student and teacher populations over the last 20 years. Carlotta Iglesias (since transferred) was an energetic principal fighting every day to provide excellence in learning for her students. More than half of the students come from poverty, and most speak English as a second language. Iglesias was direct with parents, students, and teachers regarding what was expected of them related to many things, but particularly literacy learning. She made a difference in student achievement by enhancing materials and expectations for teachers through professional development and parent workshops. Her approach was to use a research base as background knowledge and to provide appropriate resources first. Then she worked collaboratively to develop a fail-safe literacy system plan. When the planning took place, the collaborative literacy leadership team was well positioned for making informed recommendations.

Professional Development

Monthly, the entire faculty participated in professional development related to infusing literacy into all classes. These professional development workshops took place during planning periods. Although teachers need their planning periods, they found this scheduling convenient. Each session began with an overview of adolescent literacy and the key components of vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, with the target being access to rigor for all students. Then the teachers shared what strategies they had tried since the last session and celebrated their successes. Next the group developed a scaffold for new learning: They were introduced to new adolescent picture books, young adult literature connected to content standards, or other strategies for improving content learning. To ensure success, new resources were purchased to support content literacy learning, including adolescent picture books, nonfiction, and young adult literature that students and teachers found meaningful.

Four features made these experiences successful.

1. Each one was linked to the previous experience and was not isolated from the overall context.
2. All faculty members participated and were expected to use the strategies in planning for instruction.
3. Administrators attended the sessions with teachers and followed up with them in applying the strategies.
4. Resources (adolescent picture books and adolescent fiction and nonfiction) for teacher use were purchased, and their use was modeled in the professional development session.

These features modeled commitment to the continuous improvement in teacher learning, administrator learning, and student learning. They also speak volumes about how important every teacher is in improving student achievement through literacy learning.

Engaging Parents and Community

There is a profusion of educational literature that supports parental involvement and the relationship of that involvement to student achievement. At the middle and high school levels, we often mistakenly assume that parents do not want to participate at school or that their adolescents will discourage attendance. We may discover that these assumptions are erroneous if we provide a positive culture for participation and create a setting that reflects the needs of the parents. Often parents have had a negative experience at school themselves; parents are intimidated by school personnel; or, in parents' home culture, the role of parents in relation to the school is quite different. If the parents are not proficient in English, they may believe that they can do nothing to help their students at home—but we can teach them otherwise.

At Stonewall Jackson Middle School, a volunteer parent coordinator arranged for parent workshops on a regular basis. These workshops supported the parents in understanding the expectations at Stonewall Jackson Middle School and how parents could assist at home. Because most of the parents work more than one job, just getting to the workshop could be difficult for them. To make it easier, dinner was served for the parents and children who come. One student told me he attended for the pizza and cake, even though he actively participated in reading *Holes* and seemed to enjoy it! Volunteer middle school students provided care for younger siblings so parents could engage in the workshops without distraction.

One particular workshop focused on how to help students at home with reading. About 50 parents and their children (middle school age and younger) attended. The majority of parents requested the presentation in Spanish, so it was provided in both Spanish and English, as were all handouts. Parents were provided with questions they could ask their students each day about content reading and tips for developing reading skills at home. Reading to and with students was modeled with two popular texts: *Holes*, by Louis Sachar, and *Because of Winn Dixie*, by Kate DiCamillo. Before, during, and after reading strategies that parents could use at home were modeled, and the middle school students in the audience participated. Both parents

and students enjoyed the workshop and were thrilled that they were given a copy of both books to take home and keep. The next time I saw the students, they asked if I had more books for them!

Mobile County Public School System

Mobile County Public School System is the largest school district in Alabama and has made a commitment to literacy. The system's diversity in race, culture, and poverty challenge the educators serving the 68,000 students. The superintendent has identified improvement in reading as a priority.

In response to her experience as a high school administrator in a challenging school, Toni Worsham, now the Secondary English/Language Arts Supervisor, rose to meet the need to infuse literacy learning into middle and high schools. Middle and high school English and language arts teachers who participated in workshops were motivated with a commonsense approach to infusing literacy based on sound research. Many were excited to learn that their schools would receive young adult literature, nonfiction texts, and adolescent picture books for motivating students and developing vocabulary and concepts as scaffolding for building up to texts.

What is new and innovative about Worsham's approach? Rather than being satisfied with supporting the English and language arts teachers, she knew that real change happens with support from the principal in each school. Because of her excellent relationships with the principals, they agreed to participate in fail-safe literacy leadership workshops to build knowledge of literacy and to learn processes for creating school-based, fail-safe literacy system plans. Teachers look to administrators to provide leadership, set an example, and provide support. Because of Worsham's literacy leadership, all of these were provided to the teachers.

Next on Worsham's agenda was to share the wealth of strategies and materials with other content teachers in middle and high schools. With support from her content counterparts at the district office, fail-safe literacy workshops in the content areas were provided for middle and high school teachers. Participating teachers received classroom libraries appropriate for their class content and students' ages, so they could get started.

At the district level, Worsham's influence is being felt as she thoughtfully designs and implements a consistent approach to improving reading, writing, and content learning in the Mobile County Public School System. This approach includes

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- commitment of resources from the top
- workshops for English and language arts and content teachers for Grades 6–12
- workshops and support for principals so that they will be able to design and implement fail-safe literacy systems in their schools
- appropriate, respectful, literacy learning resources related to standards-based curricula for teachers
- literacy materials aligned with content curricula

REVIEW AND REFLECTION

When you reflect on the examples of fail-safe literacy leadership provided in this chapter, how high do you think your commitment is? With the NCLB, we have no choice but to give our best to every student as these fail-safe literacy leaders have.

- Of the four constructs—data-driven decision making, focus on continuous improvement of student achievement, leadership for change and innovation, and shared curriculum focus on standards—which are at the forefront of your priorities?
- Which ones do you need think about and implement more strategically?
- Of the actions taken by these leaders, are there any that you should consider?
- Are there some that you have already incorporated into your school or district?
- What resources, including technology, does your literacy system now include?

Fail-safe literacy leadership means taking risks, setting high expectations, and working hard, as you have seen from these examples, but the research and patterns for success are clear. We will work on them together to build capacity and commitment in the next six chapters.

As you read through the next six chapters, you will be led explicitly in how to create a fail-safe system for your school or district. The examples from schools and figures will make explicit what your work may look like. First you must commit to reading, writing, and content learning for all students. Then a literacy leadership team must be created, as described in Chapter 2. Chapters 2–5 take you through the

fail-safe literacy system planning process to develop a fail-safe literacy system unique to your school or district. Because there is a need to enhance literacy learning and accelerate measurable improvement in reading, writing, and content learning, many leaders are turning to technological applications to do so. With this in mind, Chapter 6 is dedicated to technology applications and integration that may become potential solutions or parts of solutions for the literacy learning needs identified in your fail-safe literacy system plan. Chapter 7 addresses how you follow through with communication, evaluation, celebrations, and enhancements to complete the fail-safe system of literacy.

HELPFUL TERMS

Accountability Practices of Educational Leaders (APEL): Instrument that uses the four constructs of data-driven decision making, shared curriculum focus on standards, focus on continuous improvement in achievement, and leadership for change and innovation.

Adolescent picture books: Picture books respectful of adolescents, with on-grade-level vocabulary, content, and language. Beautiful pictures, photos, or diagrams are characteristic of these books.

Audiobooks: Books that are accompanied by cassette tapes or CDs so students can hear while following along with the print. They provide access to on-grade-level content and literature.

Classroom libraries: Collections of texts on various grade levels and in various genres and content and interests areas accessible to students within the classroom. These libraries are part of the fail-safe literacy leadership process that will ensure success and create independent readers, writers, and content learners.

Lexile System: A system for identifying the reading comprehension level of students and of texts.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001: Reauthorization of the elementary and secondary education act.

Young adult literature: Literature that addresses interests and themes relevant to adolescents.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

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