

# Systems Change for Literacy Gains

Strong literacy programs can be the foundation for improved instructional practices and better student outcomes schoolwide.

By **Gerry Brooks, Nayal Maktari, Karen Scott, and Jeffery Williams**

**W**yoming principal Jason Hillman was determined to transform his below-average elementary school. His passion and commitment to team-building helped turn it into one of the highest-performing schools in the state.

A Michigan elementary school principal credits consecutive increases in state rankings to a collaborative process that focuses on student assessment data, timely interventions, and flexibility to meet student needs—nearly a third of the student body are English learners.

In a Kentucky elementary school where over half of the incoming kindergarten students are identified as not ready for instruction, the principal relies on specially trained teachers to help improve the instructional practices of the entire Spanish immersion team.

These schools have something in common: a strong leader and an intense focus on improving literacy to improve outcomes schoolwide.

### Assessing School Needs

Sound instructional decisions are the result of sound literacy assessment. School leaders must ensure that there is a schoolwide, seamless assessment system with multiple measures to gather information about the students and guide instruction, built on the premise of constantly monitoring and adjusting instruction using formative assessment rather than waiting for a once-a-year statewide measure. Assessment and instruction work together to ensure literacy growth.

According to authors Billie J. Askew, Gay Su Pinnell, and Patricia L. Scharer in *Promising Literacy for Every Child: Reading Recovery and a Comprehensive Literacy System*, certain assessment characteristics must be met. The assessment must:

- Be easily understood by school professionals, match the school's beliefs about literacy learning, and inform instructional decisions;
- Provide baseline information about a student's literacy achievement

and enable teachers to understand their students as readers and writers;

- Ensure ongoing monitoring of student progress and provide a systemic process to observe literacy behaviors;
- Provide authentic reading and writing tasks;
- Show teachers a path of progress and help them develop a common language;
- Document progress across the year and improvement through the years; and
- Enable educators to predict student performance on standardized or state assessments.

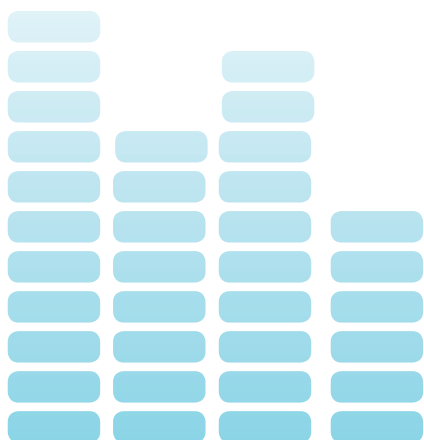
The comprehensive literacy framework provides the most effective and efficient delivery possible whether whole group, small group, or individual. The best instruction is planned with the needs of the students at the center with the intent of creating self-regulated independent learners.

## Systemic change requires the development of district- and building-level literacy leadership teams.

### Systemic Change

To develop systemic change within a school or district, teachers and administrators must examine practices and seek to grow as learners. They understand that learning is reflective of needs—not reactive. In *Systems for Change in Literacy Education: A Guide to Professional Development*, authors Pinnell and Carol Lyons stress that learning must be continuous and self-renewing if schools desire to progress, listing these characteristics of effective systems:

- The responsibility of professional learning is shared;
- There is a commitment to ongoing learning;
- Learning is grounded in the work of students and teachers;
- Learning takes place in an atmosphere of inquiry;
- Learning is accomplished through conversation;
- Data are used for practical purposes; and
- Communication takes place within and beyond the community.



Strong literacy interventions for students who struggle are a foundational element of a comprehensive systems change model. Diligent attention to implementing early interventions that work can be the difference between minimal or large-scale success with struggling learners. Reading Recovery is one such effective early intervention. In Reading Recovery, first-graders who are in the lowest 20 percent of their class work one-to-one with a highly trained Reading Recovery teacher for 30 minutes daily until they reach their classroom average on literacy measures.

The lessons can last from 12 weeks to 20 weeks, and the program offers more than 30 years of data showing success across all demographics and types of systems. It has been praised by the National Center on Response to Intervention, the National Center on Intensive Intervention, and the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse, where it received the highest possible rating

for general reading achievement of all beginning reading programs reviewed.

### Developing Literacy Leadership

Another consideration for systemic change is the development of district- and building-level literacy leadership teams. At the district level, the team might include the curriculum director, Title I coordinator, language arts coordinator, principals, literacy coaches, and Reading Recovery teacher leaders. This team oversees district literacy initiatives—creating protocols and resources, setting expectations for instruction and assessment, and analyzing data to determine the effectiveness of programs and policies.


Equally important are building-level literacy leadership teams that might consist of the principal, guidance counselor and psychologist, and special education teachers, Title I, English language, and Reading Recovery teachers. This group creates and monitors the school's literacy plan for classroom instruction and assessment, sets short-

and long-term goals and monitors results, for both the school and the students. Such leadership teams are critical to systemic change because they establish ownership and responsibility.

### Getting Everyone Involved

Change systems that focus only on schools, teachers, and students cannot succeed; families and communities must be part of the process. The school team must reach out with resources, information, and increased communication about expectations and results. Ideas to invite the larger community include:

- Sending books into homes for parents and children to read every night;
- Designing school events for families to learn about literacy initiatives and ways to support students;
- Creating a volunteer program for parents, businesses, and other community members that begins with high-quality training;
- Highlighting achievements and efforts in local media; and
- Designing summer institutes for families to help prevent “summer slide.”

The first step to becoming a learning community is taking time to assess the current status of literacy teaching and learning in your school. Examine your beliefs and expertise. Be the catalyst for change and school improvement. 

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