





Set the Stage for

Quality Feedback

Principals provide feedback to support literacy instruction

By Todd Schmidt and Lindsay Stumpfenhorst

Any literacy program is only as good as the people who implement it. Thus, it is vital that we principals not only lead the learning when it comes to enacting and refining quality literacy instruction, but also take the time to build and maintain positive relationships with our teaching staffs. With a foundation of mutual respect and trust, a principal will have greater success in providing timely, constructive feedback that can be used to refine instructional practice.

Principals who need to shore up their knowledge of elementary literacy instruction would do well to immerse themselves in Gay Su Fountas and Irene Pinnell's *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children*, which emphasizes guided reading as a key component of an elementary literacy program. Students need exposure to high-quality, engaging texts in whole and small groups, in addition to individual instruction. Doing so not only increases the quantity of students' individual reading time, but also emphasizes explicit instruction in fluency, vocabulary, and phonological awareness.

It's also important to build time into the day for students to engage with other students, to discuss and write about what they read. Too often, literacy instruction tends to be "one-size-fits-all," so it's important for grade-level teams to find ways to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of small groups of students as well as individual reading needs.

Create Time for Quality Instruction

Using *Guided Reading* and Fountas and Pinnell's 2010 book, *Research Base for Guided Reading as an Instructional Approach*, as a framework, our grade-level teams worked toward providing individual, small-group, and whole-class literacy instruction throughout the day. One of our first steps was to utilize cross-curricular opportunities in science and social studies to practice guided reading strategies, especially with high-interest, nonfiction texts.

It was difficult for our grade-level teams to find time to meet not only the needs of the struggling students, but also the needs of those who require reinforcement or enrichment.

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We crafted push-in as well as pull-out opportunities, utilizing Response to Intervention and Instruction (RtI²) strategies described by Austin Buffum, Mike Mattos, and Chris Weber in *Pyramid Response to Intervention*. We also used instructional aides and part-time credentialed teachers to provide additional support for struggling students and enrichment literacy opportunities for students who were at or above grade level. In upper grade levels, teachers used literature circles to group students according to reading level and give them time to engage in various fiction and nonfiction texts.

Another challenge, particularly in the primary grades, is finding time to pull students for additional supports without missing whole-class instruction or specialty classes such as art, PE, or music. In an effort to mitigate this problem, a few primary teachers began exploring and experimenting with Gail Boushey and Joan Moser's *The Daily 5*, because it was similar to small-group center rotations already familiar to many primary students and teachers. Its emphasis on literacy and differentiation through five rotations—read to self, work on writing, read to someone, listen to reading, and do word work—was a natural progression for our teachers.

Now, all teachers in grades K–3 spend the first 90 minutes of each day utilizing the Daily 5. Parent volunteers listen to students read and assist with word work. Coupled with RtI², this routine has given our classroom teachers time to meet with individuals and small groups to provide them the remediation, reinforcement, or enrichment they need without pulling them from whole-group instruction. It works so effectively that one of our kindergarten teachers now uses literature circles during her Daily 5 rotations to provide enrichment to those students who were already reading above grade level while finding time to work on phonics, letter recognition, or other fluency strategies with struggling students in her class. She has shared this strategy with the primary team, and several other primary teachers are looking to implement a similar model during the upcoming school year.

Fire Up Students and Staff

Upon walking into Washington Elementary, you may see staff members walking through the halls in hip waders, holding fishing poles and a tackle box filled with gummy worms. We are fishing for readers. Teachers laugh, parents grin and shake their heads, but while handing out sweet treats, the principal has a brief reading conference with almost every student. (“What book are you reading now? Do you recommend it?”) We don’t just preach the importance of reading; we talk about it, model it, and encourage our teachers to do the same.

When it comes to reading instruction, we don’t mess around. Solid Tier I instruction and, if needed, support using research-based Tier II and Tier III curriculum make up the foundations of our reading block. Team conversations that center on data and best practices inform instructional decisions for each student.

All teachers within a grade level now give reading instruction at exactly the same time. From an administrator’s point of view, it is impressive to walk from room to room and hear the echoes of key reading terminology and hear students engaged in text. This unison can also be beneficial in encouraging conversation about the specific ways in which a strategy was taught among teammates. Teachers who could benefit from assistance and mentoring are pointed in the direction of a colleague who has effectively put what they need into practice.

Fuel Change With Effective Feedback

To provide quality feedback, it is essential to spend considerably more time in classrooms than in your office. We belong to a professional learning network known as Principals In Action (find us on Twitter #PrincipalsInAction.) This group encourages,

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motivates, and challenges principals to spend time walking through classrooms, not just to observe and evaluate, but to build rapport and relationships, too. Getting out of your office and into classrooms enables you to be a stronger instructional leader, and teachers are more apt to accept feedback when they know you have been in their classrooms on a regular basis. Observations should not be considered “gotchas,” but rather opportunities to have conversations that lead to growth. If you observe less-than-ideal teaching practice but neglect to ask questions or offer suggestions until a documented formal evaluation, the culture and climate of your school will suffer.

Teachers tend to get anxious when principals walk into their classrooms scribbling notes, and then walk out. We have seen both the power a genuine, authentic positive comment—even written on a Post-it note—can have on a teacher and how it allows them to be more open to constructive feedback when the time comes.

In their book *Lead Like a PIRATE*, Beth Houf and Shelley Burgess advocate taking time to have “ANCHOR” moments with your staff. ANCHOR stands for Appreciation, Notice the impact, Collaborative conversations, Honor voice and choice, Offer support, and Reflect. Both of us are purposeful in taking time to appreciate some aspect of a teacher’s lesson and noticing its impact on a student. We have noticed that many staff members keep and post these notes on their bulletin boards or tack them onto their computers. Positive feedback is valuable, and it is a powerful way to build rapport and trust with your teaching staff.

A key component of giving feedback on literacy instruction is asking questions. Teachers know their students best and usually have an explanation or reason for what you observe. Take time to have a conversation and ask why they did what they did, rather than rushing to make suggestions for improvement. Asking questions can help you see whether there is a gap in instructional practices or established deficit patterns within a grade-level or teaching staff, which can be addressed with future professional development. We frequently use the app Voxer to communicate with staff in an instructional way. Following an informal walk-through or observation, we may reach out to the teacher via Voxer to ask questions. This practice gives evaluators a way to provide timely feedback and offer support as necessary to teachers who are struggling. Often, this

Give It Time

The summary of the quality literacy instructional practices that we are implementing at our sites makes it seem like these were easy transitions to make and execute. However, in reality, it was far from easy. It was messy, challenging, and at times, frustrating, but the effort was worthwhile. In *School Leadership That Works*, Robert Marzano, Timothy Waters, and Brian McNulty indicate that while first-order change tends to be incremental and fine-tunes established systems, second-order change is the type of deep change that “alters the system in fundamental ways, offering a dramatic shift in direction and requiring new ways of thinking and acting.” It is important to remember that change, on a grand—or even a small—scale takes time. For us, these types of changes and preservations would not have been possible if we had not invested considerable time in building and maintaining positive relationships with our staffs and fine-tuning the tools and strategies we utilized to give *and* receive feedback.

communication is ongoing and moves deeper into teaching philosophy. These conversations allow us to act as coaches rather than mere evaluators.

Ultimately, a good literacy program does not happen in a vacuum. It is a collaborative process that takes time and effort from both the principal and the teachers. Knowing the research and key components of a quality literacy program is a crucial component, but it is only part of the process. Establishing and maintaining positive relationships with your teachers is essential as well. You can build these relationships by blending positive and constructive feedback, and assuming positive intent when observing lessons. Engage and support your staff as they implement best practices to meet the unique needs of your student population. ■

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