

# The Need for Renewed Literacy Leadership Efforts at the Secondary Level

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## *The Need for Renewed Literacy Leadership Efforts at the Secondary Level*

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"We have an opportunity to blow the lid off school attainment, dramatically and swiftly reduce the achievement gap, and enhance the 'life chances' of all children, regardless of their social or economic circumstances."

(Schmoker, 2006, p. 2)

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Evidence indicates that secondary level students are not making adequate reading progress to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) by 2013-2014 (Hall & Kennedy, 2006). According to The Education Trust (2006 & 2006a), reading skills of African American and Latino high school seniors are not commensurate with the reading skills of white middle school students. The 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that "White students, on average, scored higher than Black and Hispanic students" on the eighth grade reading assessments (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005, p. 8). Large achievement gaps are notable throughout the United States.

The implications are clear – while education leaders need to continue to commit energy and resources to elementary education, they must dramatically step up efforts to improve secondary schools, especially for the low-income students and students of color who struggle the most (Hall & Kennedy, 2006, p. 3).

Quite often Language Arts teachers have the brunt of the responsibility for ensuring student literacy success. Focus is placed upon the instructional strategies Language Arts teachers use and the literacy competencies these teachers possess to effect student achievement – but the impact of the building leader and the need for principals to effectively guide the secondary reading program is not readily discussed in current literature or evidenced in the secondary practices of school system leadership. Without a doubt, though, the building level leader is an integral component in the success of a school. According to Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004), "Leadership is widely regarded as a key factor in accounting for differences in the success with which schools foster the learning of their student" (p. 17) and in fact, "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5). There is an overwhelming need to refocus the understanding, direction, and efforts of secondary administrators towards effective literacy achievement in the schools.

The twenty-first century administrator must be a different type of educational leader than the twentieth century predecessor. The number of demands on principals is almost daunting since the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2002. It is assumed an effective school leader is also an effective delegator - a supervisor and facilitator and not a micro-manager - being able to task various individuals with specific needs for the school to help facilitate a smooth, daily operation. But, in the day and age of high-stakes, standards-based accountability, the leader of a building must be able to understand the components of reading success and monitor the achievement – or lack thereof – of programs, staff, and students. And with this knowledge be able to help implement effective literacy practices to promote high student achievement – rather than delegating the task of implementing an effective literacy program to instructional leaders and other staff members.

Educational leaders must be able to effectively delegate tasks to manage the amount of responsibilities they have. But, principals can no longer delegate the task of literacy to other staff members in the school and assume that effective literacy instruction and practices are being implemented in the building. Rather, the principal must work in a side-by-side manner with instructional personnel to ensure effective cross-curricular literacy practices are taking place.

No longer can the work of the principal be distinct from that of teachers. Instead, principals' roles become symbiotic with those of teachers. Instructional leadership binds principals

more closely to teachers and to the everyday activities of classrooms(Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001, p. 17).

### *A Change in Focus*

A systemic change needs to be enacted at the school, district and higher education levels. This change must reflect a revision in principal focus to meet the achievement needs of all students. "Secondary schools have one of the largest impacts on student achievement because it is aligned with each student's exodus into society" (Jacobs & Kristonis, 2005, p. 2). At the building level, the principal must revise current supervision and leadership practices, as well as change the organizational and academic structure of the school to ensure a cross-curricular approach is being taken to effective literacy. At the district level, leaders must ensure that principals are not over tasked with duties not pertinent to instruction, allowing the building leaders time and flexibility to implement and monitor best literacy practices. It also requires more district level assistance for principals to help foster an understanding of what is the best approach to literacy within each building and across disciplines. Finally, institutes of higher education must revise principal preparation programs to reflect the immediate need for principals to be proficient in effective literacy practices across curricular areas and how to successfully implement these practices with all staff.

### *Research on Secondary Literacy Achievement*

Sixty-eight percent of the eighth graders in the United States have either not mastered or achieved only partial mastery of prerequisite literacy knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at that grade level. (The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, 2005, p. 15)

Many high school students are not reading as well as necessary to be academically successful...high schools have rarely addressed literacy and literacy instruction directly. High school teachers and students often view literacy simply as a tool to use in the acquisition of facts...NAEP statistics indicate that reading scores of 12th-grade students have remained flat for 20 years (The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, 2000, p. 45).

The United States government has been testing students to discern their competency levels in reading, mathematics, and other content areas for over thirty years (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). The most recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2005 were taken from assessments of over 165,000 fourth grade students and 159,000 eighth grade students from around the country. The NAEP report shows a narrowing of the achievement gap between eighth grade White and Black students and between White and Hispanic students from the 2003 and 2005 tests (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue). This seems to indicate improvement in reading, especially in the wake of the passage of the NCLB legislation. In fact, a closer look at the data reveals not an improvement in reading ability, but a decline. The national average between the 2003 and 2005 school years dropped 1 point (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue).

According to NAEP results, the White-Hispanic achievement gap in eighth grade reading was reduced by two points (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). The data show, though, that the scores of white students, in fact, dropped two points, rather than the Hispanic students' scores increasing (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue). The White-Black gap, twenty-points, remained the same between 2003 and 2005, with both student groups decreasing by one point.

Economically disadvantaged students, indicated on the NAEP test by those students receiving free- or reduced-lunch, scored lower on the reading assessment than those students who were not eligible (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). Students eligible for free- or reduced-lunch scored the same between 2003 and 2005, while there was a one point decrease in the scores of students not eligible (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue). In 2005, there was a twenty-three point gap between the reading achievement of not-eligible students versus eligible (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue).

In a 2002 analysis of high school sophomores in the United States, it was found that almost ninety percent of the sophomores were proficient in simple comprehension skills (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). While this number sounds good at first glance, the statistic for student proficiency decreases significantly to forty-six percent when students were required to move beyond simple comprehension to make simple inferences (National Center for Education Statistics). Only about eight percent of the students had the "ability to make complex inferences or judgments based on combining multiple sources of information" (National Center for Education Statistics , p. 6). The same study found that White students scored more proficient in reading at each of the three levels mentioned above than Black students and Hispanic Students (National Center for Education Statistics). It was also found that students with a lower socio-economic status (SES) scored less proficient than students with a higher SES status (National

Center for Education Statistics).

These staggering statistics lend credence to the assertion that there is an immediate need for a renewed focus on literacy practices at the secondary level.

### *Strategies to Renew Literacy Efforts*

A change in literacy leadership practices requires efforts at the school, division, and higher education levels. Although it is impossible to address every possible strategy to initiate a change in focus for the implementation of effective and systemic literacy practices in the schools, it is possible to highlight key strategies that can encourage this process.

### *Building Level*

Principals that increase their schools' focus on instruction will certainly improve their students' performance, for more instruction is surely better than less. But exponential leadership comes from the marriage of an intense organizational focus on instructional improvement with a clear vision of instructional quality (Supovitz & Poglinco, p. 4).

The current structure of secondary schools acts as a barrier to successful inter-disciplinary activities implementation. "Isolating teachers in individual classrooms, departments, and grade level configurations militates against the efficient or effective sharing of individually held knowledge" (Louis, 2006, p. 6). Principals must overcome this limitation to achieve literacy success. A cross-curricular approach to literacy is needed. This is not limited to the traditional "four core subjects" of Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies. Physical Education, Work and Family Studies, Photography, Technology Education, Band, Chorus, Art, and the other courses students are able to take must incorporate sound literacy practices.

When you are in the midst of a grove of trees, do you see a forest or do you see the individual trees? When a principal is in the midst of daily operational duties for the school, it is sometimes difficult to see the bigger picture, the "forest", amongst the "trees" – amongst the staff, students and community, etc. According to Heifetz and Laurie (1997), school leaders need to step back and take a balcony view of what is occurring within the school. Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (2001), in a further expansion on Heifetz and Laurie, states:

A leader must strive to become an objective observer rather than an interpreter. Getting on the balcony means seeing what is occurring rather than what one would like to occur" (p. 16)...Just as teachers "monitor and adjust" their classroom practices based on how students are performing, leaders must learn to monitor and adjust progress towards the vision based on what they see from the balcony (p. 17).

Principals who acknowledge the inter-connectedness of schools are at a marked advantage when it comes to effecting change and supporting high student achievement. A systems-thinking approach to educational leadership requires – and allows – principals to explore how independent educational priorities and goals are actually directly related to one another (Thornton, Peltier, and Perreault, 2004). Strategy, coherence, culture and capacity are key concepts of systems thinking. Yet unless they are embedded in reform practices that improve learning, they will become, in Yogi Berra's words, 'Déjà vu all over again'" (Kramer, 2006, para 6 ).

Principals who approach leadership in a systems thinking manner should have a coherent instructional program. "In contrast to excessive numbers of unrelated, unsustainable improvement initiatives in a school, instructional coherence contributes to learning by connecting to students' experiences and building on them over time" (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 56). Principals can and must work with staff to develop an instructional framework that encourages and supports implementation of an inter-disciplinary approach to literacy. Current curricula are written in isolation of one another. Whether developed at the school or division level, curricula must be written in concert with one another. This includes integrating content areas across grade levels, as well as developing a vertical articulation that lead up to the curricula from previous grade levels.

An excellent vehicle to facilitate both vertical and horizontal integration of curricula, including a strong emphasis in literacy, is to redesign the structure of the secondary school. A comprehensive reform effort can revolve around recent systemic changes in secondary schools focusing on the development of "small schools" or "academies" within larger school buildings. Research demonstrates that students perform better when working in a "small school structure" (Schnitzer, 2003) as opposed to a larger, perhaps more daunting and less personable, school (Plucker, Zapf, & Spradlin, 2004). Although emphasized in use at the high school level, this change in structural design is just as applicable at the middle school level. Principals seeking to develop a systemic approach throughout the subjects,

as well as looking to find ways to improve student success, should consider the implementation of the “Small Learning Community” (SLC) structure in their buildings.

SLC structures varying in the literature, focusing on the individual needs and requirements of the school. At the middle school level, principals may consider implementing a “House System”, where results have shown to promote “more positive student attitudes and higher achievement for all” (Green, 2006, p. 64). The “Houses” promote unity and collegiality amongst staff and students, especially at such a challenging time as the middle school years for youth. High school principals may consider implementing “Academies” where “the student body, the staff, and the facility itself are divided” (Schnitzer, 2003, p. 20) into distinct groups, based upon the needs of the school.

The principal can devise a bell schedule enabling the staff situated within the SLC, whether it is a “House,” “Academy,” or some other version of the Small Learning Communities, where all staff, regardless of content area, can plan together. The smaller staff numbers would enable teachers to work within one location to plan integrated units, sharing strategies, content, best literacy practices, and promoting the interconnectedness of subject matter. Tying this together from an instructional point of view would be Literacy Specialists. Rather than working with students on a daily basis, one literacy specialist, or more, needs to be assigned to each SLC. The Literacy Specialist is able to plan interactively with the staff of their assigned SLC, assisting with literacy applications where needed. During instruction, the Literacy Specialist can circulate throughout the classrooms of the SLC, on a pre-determined schedule developed in concert with the teachers, to assist with the unique needs of the teacher and students.

Many secondary administrators are not versed in how literacy should and can be integrated in content throughout courses. Building-based Literacy Specialists can aid principals as they focus on renewing literacy efforts within the building. Above and beyond working with specialists, it is apparent that principals must become better aware of best literacy practices.

This can be accomplished in a variety of ways by the principal, including, but not limited to: (a) reading current research; (b) working with personnel familiar with best literacy practices and integration of these practices across curricula; and (c) taking courses from universities and other training entities. These are just a few of the ways principals can increase their literacy fluency. It is impossible to enact any change in a school if the change agent is not familiar with the various nuances of the issue at hand.

There are numerous strategies, tools, and techniques at a principal’s disposal to implement change at the building level to focus on literacy. The following practices are only the beginning of a myriad of ways to implement effective literacy practices throughout secondary classes.

Literacy Vision – A school’s vision, mission, and beliefs – and the articulation of these three in the daily practices of staff – reflect the school’s attention to sound instructional practices.

A concrete vision of instructional quality provides a tangible representation of what effective instructional planning and delivery looks like, provides teachers with an instructional portrait they can work toward, and provides a picture that administrators can measure implementation against. (Supovitz & Poglinco, p. 4)

Building administrators and staff need to examine what the literacy vision is for the school. Too often reform efforts utilize a “shot gun” approach to improvement – which is essentially trying many different interventions to find out what works. “Leaders establish a public, persistent focus on learning by:…Articulating core values that support a focus on powerful, equitable learning” (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003, p. 14). The school, guided by the principal, needs to focus on a few powerful literacy strategies and implement these throughout the year. As the students, (and staff), become more comfortable with the strategies and techniques, more may be introduced the following year using a well designed implementation plan that does not overwhelm students. A scaffolding plan, in effect, will help encourage successful literacy practices. A few strategies of prominence include: strategic reading, PAR, prereading, annotation, vocabulary decoding, and context clues.

Observations – Whether a principal is conducting a formal observation, a five-minute walk through, using a “look-for” approach, or another method of observation instruction in the classroom, it is very important for staff to know what the observation expectations will be throughout the school year. This can be established at the start of the school year (or during the year if needed) by working with staff on what they believe are important facets to a quality observation. By allowing staff members to generate what they believe are solid instructional practices, which incorporate the school’s focus on implementing best literacy practices through curricula, there will likely be both a buy-in to the observation process, as well as a better understanding by all staff as to the daily expectations for instruction. Approaches to this can include an in-depth process of utilizing research, literature circles, and bringing in experts to help facilitate conversations with staff about literacy implementation or something as simple as working with staff in small groups to generate expectations and then reporting out to the larger staff. A key to the success of observations

is the consistency of the administration team and the ability to provide constructive, formative feedback!

#### *District Level*

It is the responsibility of the district level personnel to utilize a systems thinking approach when working with the schools. "Opportunities for system learning arises through strategic planning endeavors; evaluation of policies, programs, and resource use; 'action research' focused on system-wide issues; and application of indicators to measure progress towards defined goals" (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003, p. 11). An intense focus on how various components of the overall system impact one another will allow divisions to foster sound instructional practices across all disciplines, rather than segmenting instructional practices. Curriculum specialists need to – and must – work in concert with one another to integrate disciplines, rather than teaching as though concepts, ideas, and skills are not related to one another.

District leaders must work with secondary principals and schools to help develop a renewed focus on best literacy practices throughout all content areas. Professional learning opportunities can and should be offered to building administrators in best literacy practices, implementation of literacy skills throughout all content areas (not just the "four core" of Language Arts, mathematics, social studies), and how to monitor and guide instruction with best literacy practices.

The district must also conduct ongoing and professional development that teaches a consistent set of strategic reading strategies that are used by all teachers. Both teachers and administrators must be a part of this training – and in fact, not be separated into individual training units by job title. Too often the professional development impact is automatically eroded by delineating between the "administration" and "teachers". Integration of subject matter begins with the integration of all staff in training opportunities. A recommendation for the reading training is to teach staff how to instruct their students to read and interact with different texts and print material across all subject areas.

As mentioned before, it is vital that curricula be developed that is integrated. It is imperative that the central office spearhead this effort, providing the resources – including funds and personnel – to facilitate this. Also mentioned above, but worth repeating, is the need to have Literacy Specialists at each school. The number of specialists needs to be determined by the individual school structure, rather than doling out one or two to each school.

#### *Higher Education Level*

Institutes of higher learning has, or at least should have, an important role in helping current and future educational leaders develop the knowledge base and repertoire of skills that will foster and promote best literacy practices within the educational leader's school and school system. Instilling in educational leaders during their programs of study the importance of literacy throughout all classes at the secondary level will help to ensure their focus on this issue during their leadership tenures. Course work needs to focus on the implementation of literacy practices in all content areas in the schools, how to analyze achievement gaps and address these concerns and how sound literacy practices within classrooms can help bridge the gaps, and provide professional development competencies to educational leaders to help them work with staff to implement the needed practices and programs.

Programs aiming to develop school and division leaders need to focus on how the leader directly influences and impacts teaching and learning.

By concentrating on learning, today's school leaders shift both their own focus and that of the school community from inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results. Schools need principal leadership as much as ever. But only those who understand that the essence of their job is promoting student and teacher learning will be able to provide that leadership (DuFour, 2002, p. 15).

Moving beyond the leadership preparation programs, colleges and universities must also develop teacher preparation programs that instruct their teachers in training how to teach reading. Secondary English Teaching programs, along with the other content area specialty programs, do not teach their students how to teach reading. This vital, and tragically missing component, in the preparation program of our teachers is contributing to the secondary students' inability to be successful with their literacy skills.

#### *Schools – Systems – Higher Education*

The ideas above are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to implementing best literacy practices throughout schools, schools systems, and institutes of higher learning. There are many more ways to implement and continue efforts to focus on the need for literacy integration at the secondary level.

### *A Renewed Focus on Literacy Efforts at the Secondary Level*

In 1978, *Reading Instruction in the Secondary School* (Revised Edition,) was published. According to this text, “The wide range in reading ability among junior and senior high school students presents secondary school teachers with one of their most vexing problems” (p. 3). It goes on to cite various studies identifying specific concerns in reading achievement and identifies who is responsible for aiding in improved academic efforts – “These include the principal or administrator, the reading consultant, the special reading teacher, and the content area teacher” (p. 13). Recent data from various national studies on literacy indicate a continued lack of emphasis at the secondary level on best literacy practices – very much akin to the areas of concern – and personnel who can address the concerns – as the 1978 text. Whether surprising or not, it is disturbing, that the same issues acknowledged in a 1978 reading text are still present – and dramatically effecting the success of our students – in the twenty-first century.

There is a myth among many educators and the general public that elementary schools are where students learn to read and secondary schools are where students use reading to learn. Evidence indicates the contrary – that there is the need for continuing emphasis on teaching and utilizing best literacy practices throughout all grades, especially a renewed focus on these skills at the secondary level. Through an integrated effort at the building, district, and higher education levels, it is possible to direct instructional practices at the secondary level to focus on literacy to effect high student achievement across all disciplines.

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