

# LITERACY LESSONS LEARNED

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**F**or more than two decades, I've worked with schools to enhance instruction and improve student achievement through the implementation of schoolwide literacy initiatives. Years of practice and trial-and-error learning in some of the nation's most diverse high schools have taught me that literacy initiatives are the most important—and the most challenging—programs to implement in middle and high school.

Because the challenges that accompany the implementation of schoolwide literacy initiatives are so great, schools have tried every way possible to avoid them, pinning their hopes on one magic potion after another. But with the recent adoption of new, higher state standards, more and more school leaders are accepting the fact that literacy must, at the very least, be one of their focal points. This is especially true for principals in schools with significant populations of low-income students.

In addition, new college and career ready standards have made literacy a shared responsibility across all content areas. English teachers, as well as math, science, and social studies instructors, are now expected to integrate literacy throughout their lesson plans in addition to implementing rigorous course content. If purposeful reading, writing, and discussion aren't occurring regularly in every classroom, your school is already two years behind in implementing the new standards.







## Why Literacy?

Literacy skills are more important than ever before. A high school diploma is no longer a terminal degree. Technology has made work more complex, which in turn has driven up the requirements for most entry-level jobs. The reality is that an 18-year-old who doesn't have the skills for college or a career is effectively sentenced to a lifetime of marginal employment and second-class citizenship.

No matter what the standards are, literacy remains the key to improved student achievement. Literacy—purposeful reading, writing, and discussion—has always been the cornerstone of education. Ensuring that all students read and write proficiently impacts prospects for success across all coursework in all content areas, including math. Literacy is not an add-on; it's the foundation upon which all learning goals are achieved.

Literacy improves learning. Literacy skills and the ability to comprehend and apply course content are inextricably linked. By integrating literacy into classroom instruction, content teachers are ensuring that students will not only gain a deeper understanding of the content, but that they will be able to apply the concepts used in meaningful ways.

### Lesson 1: Literacy Is a Long-term, Schoolwide Change Initiative

Integrating literacy in all content areas is a long-term process, not a one-time event. In most cases, you'll need three years to put all the elements in place and five years to make those changes a sustainable part of your school's culture. Until all students are succeeding in college-level courses with respect to student literacy, your work isn't done.

## If purposeful reading, writing, and discussion aren't occurring regularly in every classroom, your school is already two years behind in implementing the new standards.

That doesn't mean you'll have to wait three to five years to see positive results. In fact, you can expect to experience a number of short-term wins along the way. For example, improving schoolwide instruction will result in significant improvements in student behavior, including a reduction in negative behaviors. Also, focusing on academic vocabulary can yield significant early gains while you build the capacity of your teachers to integrate literacy into their lessons.

Even when components of the program are in place, expect "slippage" to occur. When faced with doubt, uncertainty, and stress, teachers will revert to old habits—to "the way we've always done it." Look at your literacy initiative as a way to change habits, and everyone knows it's much harder to change old habits than it is to build new ones.

Integrating literacy, reducing teacher talk, increasing student practice, engaging all students, and teaching for mastery, not covering content, are all huge changes in habits, and building new habits take time and a lot of follow-up. That's right: changing habits is mostly about follow-up and the will to carry out your literacy plan. As best-selling author and consultant Jim Collins says, "Great schools are about will, not about circumstance."

### Lesson 2: Literacy Is More Than a Program

Literacy instruction and high-quality instruction are inseparable. Literacy is not a software application, a computer lab, an afterschool program, or a summer program. While a literacy initiative many

contain all of those elements, literacy instruction begins and ends with high-quality instruction in every classroom.

Schoolwide literacy is about improving the reading, writing, and discussion skills of every student, not just struggling students. To be sure, interventions on behalf of struggling learners are an important part of a literacy initiative, but the key to success is what happens every day in every classroom. While interventions—or, as I call them, "lifeboat" programs—are a must for struggling students, a school's success cannot rest solely on attempts to save struggling learners. Seek to continually reduce the need for intensive interventions by improving the quality of instruction in every core classroom.

### Lesson 3: Literacy Is a Culture Changer

School success is no longer about a few all-star teachers. Today, school success is about what we do together schoolwide to improve student achievement. Individual teacher performance has given way to assessments of team effort.

Just as the culture of the classroom is the sum of the teacher's attitudes and expectations, so too is the school culture a result of the staff's collective thoughts, beliefs, expectations, and conversations that lead directly to both individual and group behaviors.

Culture is what happens when the classroom door closes and no one is looking. Unfortunately, in most secondary schools, when no one is looking there is very little reading and almost no writing going on.



Despite advances in the field of adolescent literacy over the past decade, few middle and high schools across the country have successfully implemented or attempted to implement a comprehensive schoolwide literacy initiative. Cross-content or schoolwide literacy—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—is perhaps the most significant and necessary change in middle and high schools. Why? Because reading and writing instruction is more like a transplanted organ than a normal part of the culture of most middle and high schools.

I learned that, in order to shift school culture, I had to do two things. I had to change teacher expectations, and I had to dramatically improve instructional practices schoolwide.

However, school leaders cannot wait for a change in teacher expectations before beginning the important work of improving student literacy. We must pave the road as we walk on it. That means we must improve instruction while we are working to raise expectations.

#### **Lesson 4: We Must Change Our Expectations About Student Success**

Researchers agree that teacher expectations are critical to student success. In fact, a secondary student who has a teacher with high expectations is three times more likely to graduate from college than one who does not. Teacher expectations are much too important to be left to chance, but how many of us have a strategy for intentionally shaping expectations schoolwide?

Teacher expectations define the culture of a school. Those expectations are the “autopilot” that drives the school. When it comes to literacy, secondary teachers are

already on autopilot. In attempting to implement a schoolwide literacy initiative, every secondary principal will confront these three mindsets:

1. “Students should already know how to read!”
2. “I don’t have the time to teach literacy. I have course content to teach.”
3. “I am not a reading teacher.”

No matter how many professional development sessions you conduct or how many strategies you teach, unless you can change teacher mindsets, your literacy initiative will fail. As soon as you turn your back, everyone goes back on autopilot.

In the past, I used a multipronged approach to changing expectations that included weekly newsletters, professional development, regular presentations, and frequent conversations with teachers. The problems with this approach were that it took too long, it was hit and miss, and, most important, we had not developed a common language for discussing expectations.

Today, we begin by reading and conducting book-talks on Carol Dweck’s *Mindset*, which creates a common language around teacher expectations. We use “growth mindset” language in faculty meetings, and teachers integrate “growth mindset” language into their instruction and assessments. Where possible, we even have online mindset training for students.

#### **Lesson 5: We Must Improve Classroom Instruction**

In addition to addressing teacher mindsets and expectations around literacy instruction, school leaders must improve teaching practice. Changing teaching practice is a monumental task that will require considerable time and effort, but it is a task that needs your direct attention.

### **Seek to continually reduce the need for intensive interventions by improving the quality of instruction in every core classroom.**

Students do not become better readers and writers by listening to teachers talk. Yet teacher talk continues to dominate most secondary classrooms. We need less teacher talk and more student work. Why? Because the brain that does the work does the learning.

In our school and the schools in which I have worked, we have developed a common language around teaching and learning by adopting a schoolwide instructional framework and then beginning an instructional “boot camp” that comprises five key indicators of teacher success:

1. Maximize the use of instructional time schoolwide with a consistent focusing activity at the beginning of each lesson.
2. Ensure retention and mastery of the lesson with a closure activity that provides feedback to the teacher on student learning.
3. Maximize student engagement.
4. Use frequent checks for understanding and formative assessments to provide ongoing feedback to students.
5. Ensure that each lesson includes purposeful reading, writing, and discussion.

While this may be simple to understand, it is not easy to implement. Why? With the exclusion of our most skilled, veteran master teachers, we are changing the way teachers teach. In other words, we are attempting to get all teachers in our school to teach like our master teachers have always taught.

# THREE BARRIERS TO LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Use these guidelines to respond to common objections.

**Objection: “Students should already know how to read.”**

*Response:* “First, with a few exceptions, students are functionally literate, but they lack the skills needed to read academically at grade level. Second, all students can learn, but not all students learn at the same rate or in the same way. Many students, particularly under-resourced students, need direct, explicit literacy instruction every year or their skills will not improve. Finally, literacy instruction is not just for struggling learners. Even our best students need to improve their reading and writing skills.”

**Objection: “I don’t have the time.”**

*Response:* “The best place to teach literacy skills is in the content areas. Reading, writing, listening, and discussing course content improves student understanding and promotes higher-level thinking, application, and long-term retention of learned content.”

**Objection: “I’m not a reading teacher.”**

*Response:* “Teachers teach using language. We don’t expect teachers to be reading teachers. All we ask is that each teacher teach the language of his or her content area more directly and more explicitly. For example, science teachers need to teach students to read science texts, write like a scientist, and think and discuss like a scientist. It’s our job to show you, the teacher, how to do that.”

If the last 20 years have taught me one thing, it is that good instruction and literacy instruction are one and the same. The best place to improve literacy skills is by integrating purposeful reading, writing, and discussion into all content areas. In fact, when students actively engage with course content by reading, writing, and discussing, their retention and mastery increases.

## **Lesson 6: Capacity Building, Not Inspecting**

From a practical standpoint, middle schools and high schools simply lack the capacity to integrate literacy instruction into their daily instruction. Even when teachers are receptive to the idea of incorporating literacy into their instruction, they lack the training and resources to deliver that instruction.

When we know that our teachers lack capacity, it seems unfair to continue to use checklists and walkthroughs to inspect teaching. Instead, we need to adopt a common

language around instruction, set clear expectations, and build the capacity of our teachers to meet those expectations.

Professional development should be continuous, ongoing, connected over a period of years, job-embedded, and teacher-led. Smaller, more digestible chunks of information and shorter sessions are easier for teachers to understand and implement.

Teachers are already feeling overwhelmed. Relieve teacher stress by making this pledge to teachers: you will not be held accountable for anything, other than knowledge of your content area, that we do not teach you. A clear, consistent set of expectations for the integration of literacy into classroom instruction coupled with regular follow-up is another key to successful implementation.

## **Lesson 7: Focus on the Needs of All Students**

Literacy is all about meeting student needs, not fulfilling adult wants.

Knowing where students are is the key to knowing what you have to do to get them to where we want them to be. Begin by doing a literacy checkup—a schoolwide diagnostic assessment. If your school is like most, your assessment data will tell you that, for every year a student is in your school, you will need to make two years—not one year—of progress to prepare him or her to meet the literacy requirements of the new standards.

Use assessment data as a basis for discussion and problem solving as well as to create a literacy plan that will ensure that the needs of all your students, even your most successful students, will be met. Keep in mind that the key to long-term success is consistent, high-quality classroom instruction.

Provide additional resources to supplement classroom literacy instruction while you are building the capacity of teachers to integrate literacy into their normal instruction. For example, we employed a focused,

computer-based application for all ninth and tenth graders in English, social studies, and science classes, but we also provided additional instructional time after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer months. Finally, provide a more intensive intervention for students who need to make even greater gains. Do not place students in these interventions on the basis of a single assessment.

Finally, regularly monitor student progress. The neediest students should be monitored on a daily and weekly basis, while the strongest students may only need annual checkups.

### Lesson 8: A Failure to Implement

When researchers looked back over the past 50 years of school improvement efforts, they spotted the main problem: poor implementation. There are many excellent strategies and programs, but if we don't implement them with fidelity, they don't work. We already have all the knowledge we need to help our students succeed.

First, we need to have a laserlike focus on no more than three major initiatives. One of the reasons behind poor implementation is change fatigue: we are attempting to do too many things at one time. Second, we need to implement our initiatives with fidelity.

Less is more. Our school has won a number of awards, but not because we had better ideas than anyone else. We actually had fewer initiatives, but we implemented them better than anyone else. We also spent more time talking about *why* we chose a particular area of focus. My best advice is to have fewer "whats" and to spend more time on the "how" and the "why."

### Lesson 9: Leaders Grow Leaders

Schools are changing. Students are changing. Successful implementation of a schoolwide literacy initiative is complex and requires a different style of leadership. The reality is that one person can't do it alone anymore.

First, find a literacy or instructional coach who can provide not only the knowledge and expertise, but also the help to build teacher capacity to effectively integrate literacy strategies in their content area. Second, identify teacher leaders from throughout the school and invite them to participate in a leadership or literacy council. Under the co-leadership of the principal and the literacy coach, this group analyzes student assessment data and participates in the planning, program design, and evaluation of a multilevel literacy program. This group of early adopters also helps to pilot group recommendations before they introduce them to the entire staff in professional development activities.

High-performing schools develop teacher leadership throughout the school. In those schools, leaders grow leaders.

### Lesson 10: Nothing Significant Happens in a School Without the Personal Involvement of the Principal

If literacy is important enough to be one of three areas of focus, then it is important enough for the principal to be involved. You do not need to be an expert on literacy, but you do need to know enough to lead a literacy initiative. When it comes to new standards and schoolwide literacy, we are all learners.

Remember: The lead learner is the learning leader. **PL**

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