

Building a Successful Literacy Team

A Special Report from the International Reading Association

This text is adapted from Nancy DeVries Guth and Stephanie Stephens Pettengill's "Developing and Coordinating a Schoolwide Literacy Program" and "Developing a Comprehensive Literacy Community" in their book *Leading a Successful Reading Program: Administrators and Reading Specialists Working Together to Make It Happen*, published by the International Reading Association.

For more about this book, visit www.reading.org.



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As an administrator, you have responsibilities and are accountable to stakeholders across the whole literacy community—students, parents, school board members, teachers and staff, other administrators, and more. Each group has expectations for literacy performance and participation, and each asks for your support in ensuring that expectations are met.

For your school or district to rise to this challenge, it is not enough to focus on low-achieving students. Instead, a deep commitment to literacy, as evidenced by time allotted every day for reading and writing, appropriate materials, and ongoing staff development, is essential for continued progress for *all* students. This commitment requires a strong administrator, a knowledgeable reading specialist or lead teacher, and supportive staff. It requires a literacy team.

The Key Players

Schools that show positive literacy results are those where the whole school community commits to helping students meet high expectations. As the school's instructional leader, the building administrator is also the literacy leader—and the essential voice in establishing a collaborative atmosphere in which literacy teaching and learning can flourish. He or she first needs to collaborate with central office personnel (depending on the district, this could be a superintendent or assistant superintendent, a language arts supervisor or coordinator, or some other district-level administrator) to establish a literacy vision for the school; next, the building administrator can move toward implementation by striking a literacy committee.

Here, the reading specialist or coach is critical. With the support of the principal, the expectation should be set that the specialist is a facilitator for everyone in the building and can help all teachers—

and thus enhance all teachers' expertise to meet the needs of each student, every day, in every classroom. The specialist will serve as the chair of the literacy committee, joined by the principal, representatives from each grade level (or from each department in a middle or junior or senior high school), the media specialist, and often specialist representatives such as the school librarian, music teacher, art teacher, or physical education teacher.

Establishing the Vision

A conference between building and central office administrators is a great way to begin the school year. In many schools and districts, administrators change at an amazing rate, so planning a conference like this every year is a good idea, as are briefer, follow-up meetings throughout the year to check in on progress and status.

During an initial conversation, the school's literacy vision, perceived needs, and commitment can be discussed. The agenda can be built around questions like these:

- What is the literacy vision for the school?
- What worked and did not work last year in the literacy program? What are the literacy goals and objectives for this year?
- How can we build staff support and enthusiasm for the literacy program?
- What district-level professional development is available?
- How can the master schedule be organized to help achieve the vision?
- How are parents going to be involved in the literacy program?
- How can central office personnel help school administrators, faculty, and staff achieve the literacy vision for the school?

A second topic for the meeting can be a review of principles for planning a comprehensive school literacy program, such as these developed by Nancy

DeVries Guth for the Stafford (VA) County Public Schools:

Principle	Examples
Access to a wide range of interesting material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange a visit by an author of choice. • Stock classrooms and media centers with magazines, short novels, and many copies of realistic novels.
Instruction that builds the desire and the skill to read	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train all teachers in reading strategies. • Skilled teachers support vocabulary and comprehension development with daily assistance.
Assessments that inform the students and the teachers of students' needs and strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use ongoing and student-friendly assessments. • Measure reading and writing progress in several ways, including reading logs and writing journals, and incorporate into classroom instruction.
Content area teachers who model and apply reading strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers read aloud daily from engaging informational or fiction texts and share read-aloud think-alouds with students.
Reading specialists and coaches who are available to assist struggling students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students come to media center for reading assistance. • Reading specialist team teaches with content area teachers and reading teachers. • A trained specialist provides before- and after-school tutorials in reading strategies.
At the middle and high school level, teachers who understand adolescents' complex literacy needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers provide adolescents with opportunities to develop reading skills through drama, through computer labs, and by writing and designing literary magazines.
A home-school literacy connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school sends parents newsletters featuring literacy ideas and recommended adolescent literature, invites parents to Homework Help Night to model reading and writing strategies, and provides parents additional copies of classroom novels to read with their children.

Back at the School Building

The next step is for the building administrator to work with the reading specialist or coach, along with other members of the literacy team, to build and implement a schoolwide program. Since the needs of teachers, students, and the school community are different in each case, it can be helpful to start with some fact-finding.

1. Interview specialists in other buildings and districts. Use the experiences of others in the area to inform your approach to scheduling, assessment, instruction, motivation, and resource acquisition. By doing so, you'll gain ideas about such things as the efficacy of pull-out programs, ways to report assessment data to students, teachers, and parents and to use data appropriately in decision making, whether and how a core program has been implemented and with what successes or challenges, whether reading incentive programs have proven effective, and where budget money can be obtained for professional development resources.

2. Meet with key personnel to discuss the philosophy of the school. In order to work successfully with all members of the school community, it is essential to understand what has gone on before and to come to a shared understanding of what the literacy vision is for the year.

3. Compile a list of components of the literacy program and prioritize it. Using the literacy vision, the experiences of others, and the knowledge gained from the staff, you should be able to create a framework that will work in your building. Then, evaluate the framework in terms of what can be realized, given constraints of scheduling and budget, the need to use assessment to drive decision making, the expertise and availability of staff, and so on. With this evaluation, prioritize the list to ensure that goals are realistic and achievable. For example, in one middle school, a reading incentive program centered on a state reading initiative was in place in sixth grade, where it had proven successful. One achievable goal was to implement it as a voluntary program across all grades. With successful accomplishments, all members of the school literacy community will be motivated to tackle another project.

4. Begin building a professional resource collection. In order to have an effective literacy program, there must be a plethora of resources available to the literacy team. Solicit the team members' recommendations of what to include in a professional library, based on their own professional knowledge and their identification of needs.

5. Get to know the literacy team. Literacy leaders must know the name, grade level, and content area of every staff member in the building. Be a visible and welcoming presence throughout the building. Carefully hone your people skills, including communicating and listening, so that you can work effectively with all the personalities in the school environment.

6. Develop a map for the school year. Consider the following questions as you establish a week-by-week plan for how the school year will unfold (and remember to revisit and adjust as the year progresses):



Leadership

Literacy Program Development and Coordination

- What reading programs are used in the district?
- Is a basal series used?

Staff Development

- What type of professional development have the staff and administration requested?
- What are the best times and days to offer staff development?
- What needs to happen so not only the reading and language arts teachers attend?

Resources

- How will teachers request and receive resources?
- How will staff be aware of the resources that are available?

Instruction

Planning and Collaborating With Teachers

- When do the grade levels have planning time?
- How many teachers are assigned a reading period?
- Would teachers prefer to have students pulled out of the classroom or have the reading specialist come in?

Supporting Classroom Instruction

- What is the curriculum for each subject and grade level?
- What lessons will assist students with testing and content area reading?
- How many teachers are new or have never taught a reading class?

Providing Specialized Support

- What are the criteria for small-group instruction?
- Will students be pulled out of reading class or electives?
- How many groups can be scheduled in a day or week?



Diagnosis and Assessment

Administration and Interpretation

- At what grade levels are state- or districtwide tests given?
- Are certain diagnostic tools approved or required?
- How will data be reported to students, parents, teachers, and administrators?
- What assistance is needed for interpreting the data?
- What diagnostic tools should be used when parents or teachers request testing?

Development and Coordination

- Who will administer the tests?
- How will testing materials be distributed?
- When will testing occur?

7. Meet with teams or grade levels to discuss how students will be grouped and the goals and curriculum of the reading program. Keep in mind that a strong literacy program requires collaboration, and collaboration requires time to share thoughts and ideas. You will receive incredibly valuable information by becoming an expert listener, information that will enhance your role as a literacy leader.

Making Vision a Reality

A strong literacy program begins with strong leaders who are able to provide a clear vision of the program and are committed to supporting the vision with time, resources, and examples. Each school has the opportunity to begin every school year by designing or remodeling their school's literacy program to emphasize an aspect of literacy or to address specific needs.

But remember: No one model or plan works for everyone. The challenge, and the reward, is to set and implement the plan that best fits the needs and the strengths of each school's staff and students.