It was a professional developer’s dream. The phone rang. A school’s literacy leader asked, “Can you come help us with our next steps?” The school was not merely willing to allow visitors in classrooms, but reaching out to invite visitors in for critical feedback in developing a professional development plan to improve literacy.

So early one morning, a small team of volunteer literacy leaders met to do a walk-through of the school to collect observations and data. At the debriefing, all agreed the teachers were struggling with how to design and use assessments more productively. The next step for their professional learning was clear. And the team walked away with a clearer understanding of themselves and the process of schoolwide implementation.

Literacy in Action, a program focused on improving literacy skills for all children in urban El Paso, Texas, was realizing its dream. Schools were seeking “critical friends” to help teachers evolve and improve their practice.

THE BEGINNINGS

In 1999, the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence began to focus on literacy after middle and high school faculty in the three urban districts found students were having trouble with the reading and writing involved in the Connected Mathematics Program, a mathematics curriculum at the core of the collaborative’s work since its inception in 1991. (See “El Paso collaborative for academic excellence” on p. 22.)

The collaborative continued its work in mathematics and science, but began Literacy in Action to develop teachers’ skills and abilities to teach higher-level reading and writing. Collaborative leaders and education consultants designed a standards-based program grounded in a 2½-hour daily literacy block where students spend one hour each on writer’s and reader’s workshops and a half-
hour on skills development. The most intensive efforts were aimed at pre-kindergarten through 6th grades, although the initiative continues through 9th grade.

Literacy in Action schools have shown results. The percent of students reaching proficiency levels on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAA$) in reading and writing has increased significantly in participating schools. The first schools to participate, for example, increased proficiency after four years for 4th-grade reading and writing, as well as in mathematics. From 1998 to 2002, proficiency grew by 11.1% in reading, 9.5% in writing, and 11.7% in mathematics more than schools not in the program.

THE PROGRAM

While the core of the literacy program is intensive teacher professional development, the collaborative's role is to grow leadership and knowledge in the schools. Each participating school agrees to:

- Make the initiative its first priority rather than one piece of many efforts;
- Fund a full-time literacy leader with strong content knowledge;
- Allow the literacy leader to work full time with teachers, attend a week-long summer professional development session, and attend professional development one day a week during the academic year;
- Have the principal's commitment to lead the initiative, demonstrated by the principal's participation in principals' seminars and support for the school literacy leader;
- Redirect resources to the initiative for teacher released time, substitutes, and stipends;
- Provide $1,000 for each classroom to develop classroom libraries and $100 per teacher for professional collections; and
- Engage parents in a meaningful way.

In exchange, the collaborative agrees to:

- Provide weekly professional development for literacy leaders grounded in professional readings. The collaborative provided books as anchor texts (titles listed above) for both literacy leaders and teachers;
- Provide monthly professional development and support for principals and assistant principals grounded in professional readings such as *Going Public*, by Shelley Harwayne (Heinemann, 1999), and selected readings on leadership and implementation by Richard Elmore and others;
- Provide professional development in specific literacy content areas like genre and author studies primarily to literacy leaders, but also to teachers; and
- Provide an eight-day Cognitive Coaching Foundation Seminar to literacy leaders, principals, and assistant principals.

Professional learning begins with the literacy leader and the principal, along with a team of teachers, attending a two-day overview of the program. The school's literacy leader then continues on through a one-week summer session focused on content. The literacy leader attends sessions over three summers, with each session geared to that level in the cycle. Literacy leaders from schools that began the process earlier lead some sessions for newer groups.

Weekly professional development sessions are the heart of the program. Most of the professional development takes place in hosting schools. The meetings are designed to help the literacy leaders reflect and collaborate on how to implement the program, share their own progress, and continue to develop their own content knowledge about reading and writing, as well as discuss how to support their teachers. Once early participants got beyond how to set up the classroom,
for example, they delved into assessing reading levels of books. They then were able to help teachers identify appropriate books to challenge students in their independent reading.

Professional development at the school level took many forms: co-teaching, coaching, and collaborative planning, book talks, analyzing student work. Some schools moved quickly to schoolwide implementation, others began working by grade levels, while other schools worked more slowly. Each school progressed depending somewhat on teachers' willingness and enthusiasm for the project.

BUILDING BLOCKS
To help literacy leaders build their schools' capacities, the collaborative focused on developing their use of three resources: 1) state and national literacy standards, 2) nationally recognized content specialists, and 3) a flexible observation checklist to focus classroom visits. With these resources, literacy leaders and principals can identify classroom issues and challenges.

Using standards
Literacy leaders not only studied Reading and Writing Grade by Grade: Primary Literacy Standards (New Standards and Primary Literacy Committee, 1999), but also analyzed student work examples while talking through what criteria demonstrate work at different proficiency levels. They then could look at student work from their own schools to see what areas teachers needed to focus on, enabling them to customize the professional development at their schools.

The infusion of the standards into classrooms was more subtle. As literacy leaders spent time immersed in the standards, they began to use common language. This was particularly evident in discussions about writing, for example, when the talk turned to attributes of different genres and how the standards changed grade by grade. When literacy leaders worked with teachers and talked about the standards' connection to student work, the standards became a gauge for both student and teacher growth. Later, teachers began to use the language of the standards in their conferences with students. Teachers' knowledge of the standards helped them to consciously identify ways to better help students learn.

Content specialists
National literacy consultants are an integral part of Literacy in Action. The collaborative works with several types of consultants. One group acts as critical friends in helping with program design, structure, and strategies. Others provide literacy content knowledge in professional learning sessions for literacy leaders and school staff. For example, literacy leaders and model classroom teachers have had the opportunity to learn about poetry, author and genre studies, writer's workshop, and reader's workshop. These content specialists offer one- to five-day sessions up to four times a year. The collaborative also sponsors a guest author series in which noted authors discuss instructional issues with large groups of teachers two to four Saturdays over the academic year. Guest authors...
often spend the Friday before the session with literacy leaders, who continue the effort with teachers, studying the authors’ work.

Some visit classrooms to observe instruction and talk with school personnel and collaborative staff about the issues coming out of the implementation effort. They then help guide the next steps needed in professional development to enhance what teachers are teaching and how.

**Classroom visits**

Classroom visits are an integral part of most literacy leader meetings. The visits provide a foundation for the discussion that follows in the debriefing part of the meeting. Prior to meeting at a campus, the Literacy in Action program director coordinates the agenda with the school to establish the focus of the classroom visit. A school might want some feedback, for example, about the level of discussions in student-led response groups. At other times, the program director uses the opportunity to focus on a particular aspect of implementation she feels is important to look at in depth, such as how classroom libraries are organized, how teachers confer with students, or how teachers cultivate student responsibility in the classroom.

The meeting begins with a brief orientation to the focus, and then 15 to 25 literacy leaders spend an hour moving among classrooms, either schoolwide or by grade level. When they enter a class, they collect data to provide a foundation around which the classroom visits are focused. The checklist can be used for classroom visits are focused. The checklist is not a part of a teacher evaluation or review, but outlines benchmarks for implementing the literacy program (see p. 21). Early in the process, the literacy leaders along with the program director agreed on descriptions of the critical attributes of a Literacy in Action classroom. Articulating the characteristics helped the group resolve philosophical differences and individual interpretations into a shared vision and vocabulary. The checklist helps literacy leaders give schools and teachers specific feedback and data to refine their work. It also gives literacy leaders a chance to see what’s working and what the challenges are at other schools, helping eliminate excuses and fostering a different vision of learning for the specialists to apply on their own campuses.

The checklist can be used for schools to focus their literacy professional development or teachers can use it to assess their own classroom instruction. Principals use it in working with teachers. The literacy leaders group uses it to jot down notes that they later share verbally with teachers in their own school, with other literacy leaders, or with the principal to develop professional learning for the school. Focusing on the checklist grounds the classroom visits in the work and learning rather than the individual teacher or school.

The group debriefs after the classroom visit, inviting the hosting principal. Each person shares his or her notes and the group discusses observations, giving participants an opportunity to clarify their understanding of good teaching and learning. Observers leave notes including specific positive observations (“The teacher treated the students with respect,” for example, rather than “The teaching was great.”) and next steps. After several early walkthroughs, for example, literacy leaders noticed the school’s teachers overall were struggling to keep mini-lessons (direct instruction that is mostly teacher talk) to 7 to 10 minutes. Reducing teacher talk time gives students more time and opportunity to learn and apply the focus of the lesson. The observation led to more specific discussions among literacy leaders about what needed to happen in the mini-lesson and how they could support teachers in keeping the mini-lesson more directly and succinctly aligned with student learning goals.

**CONCLUSION**

If there were a message in a bottle that would reveal the secrets to successful professional development, it would say:

- Be consistent in implementing the changes over time.
- School leadership must commit to the process by establishing a trusting environment.
- Foster open communication among principals, literacy specialists, teachers, and program staff.
- Have a full-time, on-site staff developer passionate about the work.
- Prioritize professional development that emphasizes relevant teacher learning, continual reflection on
I. A LITERATE ENVIRONMENT

A. The classroom has:
- Child- and teacher-generated messages, labels, charts, word walls, and/or texts.
- Rubrics on the wall, especially for students’ current instructional focus.
- Current student writing/reading purposefully displayed.
- Rituals and routines posted.

B. The classroom library has:
- Trade books.
- Selected children’s literature.
- Reference materials.
- Textbooks.
- Leveled books.
- Catalogs/magazines/other reading materials.

C. Time is provided
- Classes have an uninterrupted 60+ minutes four days a week for writer’s workshop at a consistent time.
- Interaction is fostered
- Seating is arranged to encourage productive talk.
- Areas in the room are free for students to congregate, for conferencing, response groups, editing, mini-lessons.
- The teacher openly encourages/permits students to work freely with others.

II. RITUALS AND ROUTINES

A. Mini-lesson comments
- At the beginning of writer’s workshop, the teacher uses 5 to 10 minutes for direct instruction focused on one concept: craft, procedure, or skill.
- Student writing and good literature are incorporated into mini-lessons.
- The teacher models what good readers and writers do, reading from his/her own writing and taking students’ suggestions for revision.

B. Conferencing with students
- The teacher routinely conducts informal conferences.
- The teacher routinely conducts formal conferences.
- The teacher regularly reviews/analyzes student work.

C. Response to writing
- Students work with response partners, groups, and/or the teacher as needed.
- As responders, students listen closely to the story (responses make sense and are tied to the story).
- Students’ initial responses identify one good thing from the writing.
- Students’ second responses identify what readers are curious about or find confusing in the writing.
- Readers listen attentively to responses to improve their writing.
- Students’ responses tie into the writer’s craft.

III. STUDENTS

A. Responsibility
- Students follow rituals and routines.
- Students work well with others.
- Students remain on task.
- Students revise their work.
- Students are editors for others and themselves.
- Students know what they want to accomplish.
- Students understand the rubrics and other indicators of quality, and work toward meeting the set standard.
- Students routinely assess their own work.

B. Choice
- Students choose their own topics to write in different genres: memoir, narrative, informational, poetry, nonfiction, plays.
- Students read self-selected texts.
- Students select response partners and/or groups.

IV. STUDENT WORK

A. Types
- Students periodically publish pieces.
- Students write in a variety of genres during the year.
- Students maintain personal writer’s folders and/or notebooks.

B. Quality
- The student’s work meets quality standards described in Reading and Writing Grade by Grade: Primary Literacy Standards for writing.
- The classroom rubrics reflect the standards.

C. Primary standards
- Students are routinely engaged in accomplishing the Primary Literacy Standards for writing: 1. habits and processes, 2. writing purposes and resulting genres, and 3. language use and conventions.
- 25-Book Campaign: Students have a goal of reading 25 books throughout the year to develop the habit of reading and reading in a variety of genres to allow for rich vocabulary development, which impacts comprehension.
- Students log books read and genres.
- Response Wall: Found in the classroom or hallways, students and teachers read the writing of their fellow authors in the school and the literacy leader collects and posts responses from a class or a faculty about a particular book or pieces written in a certain genre. The response wall makes the work of writers public and provides an opportunity for conversation around growth as writers, as well as about genre or content.
El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence

El Paso represents the fifth-poorest congressional district in the United States and is a binational community with the city of Juarez, Mexico, just across the border. El Paso has a population of 650,000, with about 70% Hispanic; 135,000 students attend El Paso schools, with 85% of them eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch. In 1992, only about one-third of the Latino and African-American students passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS).

With failure rates so high, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) became concerned about the number of students from El Paso schools who needed remedial education. The El Paso schools, equally concerned, raised the point that almost 80% of their teachers were graduates of UTEP and the problem of student achievement therefore belonged to both of them. Both systems agreed serious reform was needed and that any reform effort must involve the K-16 system. Susana Navarro, now executive director of the collaborative, with help from the Washington, D.C.-based Education Trust, decided to create the collaborative to reform the K-12 school system as well as teacher education programs. She had served as director of the Achievement Council, a California organization focused on minority education, before moving to El Paso.

The El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence was formed in 1991 with a wide range of educators and community and business leaders. Members include the superintendents of the three large local school districts, the community college president, the president, provost, and dean of the College of Education of UTEP, the mayor, representatives from the business community and the Chamber of Commerce, a county judge, state education resource center personnel, and representatives of interreligious sponsoring organizations.

The goal of the collaborative is to ensure that all children are successful in school and are prepared to enter and be successful in a four-year college. The collaborative will achieve this goal by reforming the education system (K-16) and by involving the community in the reform effort.

The collaborative has seen dramatic increases in student participation and achievement in academic courses.

- In 1992-93, 63% of students were enrolled in Algebra 1 by the end of 9th grade. By 1997-98, 99% of students were enrolled in Algebra 1 by the end of 9th grade.
- Enrollment in Algebra II increased from 45% to 81% in 2002-03, and enrollment in chemistry in 11th grade increased from 32% to 78% over 10 years.
- Students in El Paso also improved their TAAS scores.

Students in El Paso also improved their TAAS scores.

- The combined passing rates in math for Hispanic students in grades 3, 8, and 10 increased from 36.2% in 1992-93 to 89.2% in 2001-02; for white students, the rates increased from 63.1% to 94.9% during those years; and for African-American students, the rates increased from 32.3% to 87%.


The goal of the collaborative is to ensure that all children are successful in school and are prepared to enter and be successful in a four-year college.

Six years into the process, the Literacy in Action team has developed a deeper understanding of the conditions for successful professional learning. We learn, we observe, we question, we refine — continuing to raise the bar for learning and deepening understanding each step of the way.

REFERENCE

New Standards and Primary Literacy Committee. (1999).