

## 9 AREAS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

1. Explicit instruction in comprehension strategies.
2. Scaffolded instruction from direct instruction through independent practice.
3. Standards-based grade-level expectations.
4. Reading nonfiction and informational text.
5. Monitoring with classroom data.
6. Thinking and complexity above knowledge.
7. Accountable independent reading.
8. Data-informed instructional differentiation.
9. Classroom environments with smooth routines.



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# 4 SCHOOLS, 1 GOAL

UNIVERSITY-DISTRICT  
PARTNERSHIP NETS RESULTS  
FOR STRUGGLING READERS

By Rosemarye T. Taylor and William R. Gordon II

**H**igh school students who are not proficient readers struggle in content classes and often do not graduate from high school. However, they have promise to do so with well-designed and implemented reading curriculum and effective instruction. Without it, they may have difficulty competing in the global workplace (Gordon & Oliva, 2012).

One solution is to form university and school district partnerships that provide aligned, job-embedded professional learning. An example of this is Florida's East Learning Community High School Reading Initiative.

The East Learning Community, in central Florida, is a division of a larger public school district that serves 187,000 K-12 students. The learning community supports 38 school sites, including 25 elementary schools, one K-8 school, seven middle schools, four high schools, and one 9th-grade center.

As the community's area executive director and the university partner, we worked together to design and implement professional learning that would serve as a model of continuous improvement. Our focus was the lack of growth in student reading in the four high schools. Unacceptable learning gains from 2007-08 through 2009-10 on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) across the four high schools pointed to a need for systematic and continuous change to improve reading intervention instruction.

The overall goal was to create common language,

knowledge, and skills among intensive reading teachers, literacy coaches, and assistant principals — all responsible for reading achievement in the high schools. Collaborative, ongoing professional learning was accompanied by continuous walk-throughs by school and district administrators to provide feedback and implementation accountability.

## IDENTIFY TRENDS

Our first task was to observe reading classrooms in each high school to identify trends in instructional practices. Generally, classroom environments were positive, with good classroom management. Students were on task, trying to do their work, but often without success.

Teachers showed care and concern for students' learning and patience with their challenges. In a few classes, the relationship between the teacher and students appeared strained by students' lack of success on the learning task.

Using data from those school visits, we identified nine areas as content for the professional learning. (See box on p. 16.)

To address the primary goal of increasing student reading achievement, we created a super professional learning community (Taylor, 2010) comprised of a team from each of the four high schools that included all reading teachers, literacy coaches, and the assistant principals responsible for reading.

Eight full-day collaborative sessions were embedded in schools across two academic years for the super professional learning community. In the first session, we shared the purpose and parameters of the learning and gave an

overview of adolescent literacy to create a mental model of a reading intervention classroom.

Subsequent sessions began with class visits for the visiting school teams planned by the host teachers. The host teachers identified specific items on which they wanted feedback. For example, teachers from one of the high schools asked colleagues to look for data-informed differentiation, small-group work, and student stations and to provide helpful feedback. To encourage reflection, peer feedback was provided in the form of: “I like the way you or the students ... and I wonder ...”

Follow-up support included monitoring, feedback, and coaching from the literacy coaches and assistant principals.

### DEVELOP EXPERTISE

During year two, the super professional learning community built on the first year with practice in data disaggregation, data monitoring, and developing expertise in instructional differentiation. Additionally, Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and Webb’s Depth of Knowledge Taxonomy (Hess, Carlock, Jones, & Walkup, 2009) were used to increase rigor and thinking in student learning tasks.

Lesson study (Lewis & Hurd, 2011) provided the process for collaborative support and capacity building for continuous improvement. In the lesson study process, teachers worked together to develop standards-based lesson plans, implement those plans, and reflect on their success and needed changes.

Throughout year two, school teams developed learning scales (Marzano, 2006, 2007) and standards-based assessments for their instructional plans. Students used learning scales to monitor their own progress on learning goals (Marzano, 2007), and teachers used them to adjust instruction.

Teachers created assessments together to assure common expectations of students, allow comparison of results, and provide common data for teacher reflection. According to administrators,

at the end of year two, collaborative professional learning and data-informed lesson plan development with learning scales and common assessments had become normal practice.

As a result of follow-up observations and discussions with the administrators, we concluded that the project was successful and sustainable. Of the nine areas addressed through the

professional learning, we observed that teachers had moved to proficiency in all but three: thinking and complexity above knowledge; data-informed instructional differentiation; and accountable independent reading.

While there was more evidence of higher-level thinking expected from students, consistency was lacking. Teachers reported difficulty in finding time for independent reading because they were focused on the standards measured on the reading portion of the state assessment test. Although teachers used data to inform their instruction, differentiation remained an area for continued development.

Classrooms were more literacy-rich with student-made word walls reflecting research-based vocabulary instruction. Evidence of grade-level, standards-based instruction included student work displays along with student-friendly accountability measures such as exit slips.

Students were engaged in their work and were successful even with more challenging tasks. More teachers scaffolded instruction with modeling during direct instruction before moving students to guided practice.

An increase in effectively implemented pair and triad student-guided practice before independent practice allowed teachers to clarify misconceptions and reteach. Students received explicit instruction in comprehension strategies. Teachers in all classes employed visuals and prompts related to comprehension strategies and use of academic language. Teachers monitored student learning data as students read nonfiction and informational text.

Teachers posted learning scales in classes for students to use to monitor their own learning. Teachers used the learning scales to provide feedback and plan instruction responsive to students’ needs. School district and school leaders collaboratively reviewed data and discussed its implications with the school teams while supporting adjustment in instruction.

### POSITIVE CHANGE

The first year of implementation showed disappointing results as measured by the reading portion of the state assessment test. In two of the four high schools, a reduced percentage of students in the lowest 25% of 9th- and 10th-grade readers made learning gains; in the third school, students in the lowest 25% made a 2% improvement in learning gains; and in the fourth, students in the lowest 25% showed a 3% improvement.

In the second year of the initiative, during which teachers were fully implementing changes to their reading instruction, reading improvement grew. From the first to the second year of the initiative, the changes in the percentage of students in the lowest 25% making learning gains were:

- High school 1, from 41% to 56%;
- High school 2, from 43% to 67%;
- High school 3, from 40% to 68%; and
- High school 4, from 45% to 63%.

### COMPONENTS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SESSIONS

Generally, sessions included these components:

- Presentation of specific items for feedback.
- Class visits.
- Written and verbal peer feedback.
- Facilitated reflection on being observed, giving, and receiving feedback.
- New content/skill focus.
- Practice on a new focus.
- Job-alike group problem solving.
- School team planning.
- Reflection on the day’s learning and next steps.

Additionally, the two years of the initiative resulted in increases in reading proficiency for all 9th- and 10th-grade students. From 2011 to 2012, the mean increase in reading proficiency on the state assessment test for all students in the four high schools was 4%.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The challenge of achieving reading proficiency for high school students is one that needs to be addressed continuously. Although this case uses state assessment data, the contents will also apply to Common Core State Standards-based assessments.

There is no simple fix, as success is contextually based on student, teacher, and leadership factors. Through partnerships among universities, school districts, and schools grounded in continuous improvement in teacher, literacy coach, and leader expertise, along with capacity building, there is promise of improvement in reading proficiency.

These data show that when teachers, literacy coaches, and administrators engage in high-quality and respectful professional learning over time, with accountability for implementation, their practices can become more effective.

Learning new professional practice and ways of work, such as collaboration in planning and assessing, takes time and commitment. Immediate results may not show in student achievement as measured by formal assessments. Patience is required for those charged with the responsibility of improving teacher and leader effectiveness. Observable changes in teaching practice and in student responses to the teaching precede measurable increases in student achievement on formal assessments.

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### Workplace wisdom

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