

GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

WITH TEACHERS TAKING THE LEAD, A DIVERSE DISTRICT TACKLES LITERACY

“Every day, every student will come to school and be met with learning opportunities at his/her personal developmental level in all subject areas. He/she will leave school having been challenged, feeling successful, and looking forward to tomorrow.”

— Vision statement for Aptakisic-Tripp School District No. 102, Buffalo Grove, Illinois

By Julie A. Brua and Matthew K. Moreland

The Aptakisic-Tripp School District No. 102 in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, serves a community where more than 46 languages are spoken. In 2011-12, the district unpacked, powered, scaled, and paced the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards and created student learning targets.

As assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and multilingual education and building principal for Pritchett Elementary School, we faced the dual task of implementing the standards while also supporting our staff with its work in reading with a range of diverse learners.

Our goal was lofty. How can a district leader and building principal create a professional learning environ-

ment that has a grassroots feel yet empowers teachers to embrace the new standards while also learning instructional strategies that lead to improved literacy achievement within a district where more than 58% of families speak a native language other than English?

This is the problem of practice we addressed as members of the Learning Forward Academy Class of 2014. Working with Academy coaches Nikki Mouton and Lisa Castro and our Academy classmates, we sought to enhance our understanding of how to support our staff in making professional learning decisions that would result in increased student achievement in literacy.

HOW WE BEGAN

The impetus for the project came from a strategic design process that put teachers at the forefront. The English language arts subject-area leadership team crafted student-



Photo by VICKIE WALTER

From left, teachers Tatyana Santamaria, Nicole Holmes, and Sara Jang organize the 12 systems of strategic actions in *The Continuum of Literacy Learning* by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell.

friendly learning targets and writing rubrics that emerged from the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards.

As a result of these new learning targets, teachers began to ask for strategies that would support their knowledge in literacy instruction. We surveyed staff about their teaching strategies and solicited feedback from focus groups on teacher knowledge of best practices in literacy.

On district-level surveys, more than 66% of teachers said that they would like to learn strategies in close reading, and 82% said they would like to learn strategies in guided reading. A building-level survey showed that 71% of teachers would like professional development on close reading with students, while 67% would like professional development on the close reading continuum — how to

establish the purpose of a close read with students, weave in new vocabulary development, provide opportunities for children to turn and talk, and guide students through text-dependent questions.

From there, we set goals for district and building level:

- **District goal:** To support staff to develop knowledge of self-selected reading strategies by demonstrating the skill to match the reading content with the appropriate strategy.
- **Building-level goal:** To work with staff on learning and using the close reading strategy.

To support staff in assessing strengths and weaknesses in teaching strategies in the area of reading, we used exit slips and surveys to help us determine if the professional development was effective.

At the building level, we collected data through staff surveys on teacher needs for the school year on close reading. Another survey gauged the staff's comfort level in teaching the close reading strategy. At the end of the school year, we used the same survey, much like a pre- and a post-test.

We created a student achievement goal for reading at the building level: improved student reading scores as measured by Measures of Academic Progress assessments or gains in guided

reading levels as measured by Fountas & Pinnell. These SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound) goals focused on ensuring that 50% of students reach growth targets in reading from fall to spring.

Kindergarten and 1st grade used Fountas & Pinnell levels to measure student growth through three letter jumps from fall to spring. Measures of Academic Progress measured student growth in reading for 2nd- through 4th-grade students.

The school district set a goal of 50% of students meeting their reading growth target. The close reading strategy was a key action step for all grade

levels, and that was the focus for professional learning.

To learn more about the Learning Forward Academy, visit www.learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/academy or contact Kristin Buehrig, programs associate, by phone at 972-421-0900 or email kristin.buehrig@learningforward.org.

DISTRICT-LEVEL ACTION STEPS

Through this process, English language learner, special education, and regular education teachers were integral in determining the district's English language arts learning targets. While supporting teachers and students with the new Common Core learning targets, we needed to be cognizant of how district and building leaders balance developmentally appropriate learning levels for these diverse populations while at the same time assisting them with strategies to support the academic rigor.

We determined four action steps to support teachers with their understanding of literacy.

1. Use surveys to capture feedback from staff on their teaching strategies.

Reading specialists helped create a district-level survey that would pinpoint staff needs in teaching strategies in reading. When asked, "Which literacy topics would you be interested in learning more about during the school year?" staff responses showed an interest in understanding strategies of guided reading and close reading.

A guided reading design team, made up of general education teachers, reading specialists, English language learner teachers, and special education teachers, taught sessions on running records and finding appropriate texts through research-based materials. The team also suggested opportunities for teachers to

incorporate close reading into small-group instruction.

As a result of the survey and focus group data, the elementary schools set aside time during faculty meetings, professional learning days, and team meetings to build capacity and understanding of close reading and guided reading topics. The English language arts subject-area leadership team focused its work and meetings on academic vocabulary and close reading strategies.

2. Create common assessments for grades 1-8 that focus on key reading and writing strategies.

The district goal was to assist teachers in their understanding of close reading by creating common assessments for grades K-8 that focused on key reading and writing strategies. Throughout the school year, teacher teams studied the work of Robert Marzano and Norman Webb to craft common, summative assessments that linked to the English language arts learning targets through an assessment design process.

The learning targets selected for the assessments were correlated with those teachers used to set the purpose for close reading. This document was housed in a central location so all staff could have access when backward mapping their instruction to the assessments.

3. Bring in professional speakers to address instructional topics and model instructional strategies geared toward practical classroom applications.

Professional speakers helped us build our understanding of best practices in student literacy and achievement in reading. We studied the work of several experts in close reading, including Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and Sunday Cummins.

In addition, Timothy Shanahan, a local author of the English language arts Common Core State Standards, shared his model of close reading. This model became our ticket toward a common language and strategy with close reading and showed us how this strategy increases student growth and achievement in reading.

Louisa Baddeley, 1st-grade teacher, noted the impact on her practice: "Dr. Shanahan challenged me to think differently about how to teach reading."

4. Incorporate exit slips and evidence of completion after workshops to analyze feedback.

These surveys included questions related to assessment of strengths and weaknesses in teaching styles. As a result of follow-up sessions, teachers piloted these new strategies and discussed impact on student achievement. They embedded close reading into their reading lessons once a week.

We included strategic sessions for special education teachers, English language learner teachers, and reading specialists to focus on their understanding of guided reading and close reading strategies. These teachers worked on integration of content and the creation of close reading passages.

English language learner and special education teachers who pulled out students for specific support created close reading passages that aligned directly with the English language arts learning targets and literary content that general education teachers were using during their weekly lessons.

This support smoothed the way for implementation. Patricia Eliopoulos, an English language learner teacher, said, “The support I received on close reading over the year really helped me understand its purpose and how to actually implement it with my students.”

BUILDING-LEVEL ACTION STEPS

Reaching out to teachers for their feedback created a focus for assisting them with their ability to embrace the new practices of the standards. As the building principal did walk-throughs and assisted during team meetings, we discussed assessment results to improve teacher knowledge of close reading and student achievement.

At the building level, we created two action steps to support staff and implement the building-level initiative on literacy and close reading.

- **Provide extended time to model and learn key instructional strategies.**
- **Create extended time for staff to practice strategies.**

Teachers engaged in professional learning on close reading during faculty and team meetings. Teacher teams used half-day released time and extended plan time to work on mapping out lesson plans.

We worked with staff at any possible time available, including a close reading workshop for staff at lunchtime we called “Lunch/Laugh/Learn.” Attendance was voluntary, and sessions drew teachers open to learning.

Teachers had multiple opportunities to practice the strategy. We offered to model or team teach with staff members. Depending on the teacher’s needs, he or she could either watch the facilitation in the classroom or co-teach a lesson. Co-teaching a lesson proved to be highly effective, allowing teachers to make a smooth transition to a new close reading model of instruction.

Through the support of a new instructional literacy coach, we have assisted teachers in creating close readings using rigorous, integrated texts across K-4 classrooms. English language learner teachers, reading specialists, and some special education teachers are also able to model close reading strategies through guided reading small-group work to embed this important strategy into their work with students.

DATA OUTCOMES

As a result of this work, staff had much greater clarity about English language arts learning targets for students and teachers. Teachers asked for help in understanding specific strategies and engaged in professional learning designed to suit their needs.

Exit slips and surveys showed the impact: At the beginning

of the school year, teacher ratings on the effectiveness of professional learning averaged 3.5 on a 5-point scale. At the end of the school year, the overall average increased to 4.0.

At the building level, staff members completed the same survey that had been given at the beginning of the school year. A comparison of the two surveys showed a strong decline in the need for continued professional development in close reading.

Additionally, grades 1 to 4 met their SMART goal of having 50% of students reaching growth targets in reading. During the second year of implementation, kindergarten made a 7% jump in growth as a result of some work with the curriculum, and every other grade level met its SMART goal from fall to spring. During the third year of implementation, every grade level met its SMART goal from the fall to winter benchmark.

LESSONS LEARNED

In the quest to foster a family-oriented community where members can grow professionally, we learned several lessons.

Joining the Learning Forward Academy while serving in a school community where teacher voice is highly valued provided us with the academic resiliency to tackle the goals of staff awareness of strategies and student achievement in literacy.

We made professional development accessible and available to all teachers within the grade level. The use of feedback allowed teachers to ask relevant questions and see exactly how new strategies worked. We allowed teachers to be safely vulnerable by creating room for modeling in their classrooms and providing necessary resources to see an effective strategy in action. We heard comments by students such as “Do we get to do close reading today?”

By sustaining professional development so that teachers could reflect and revisit new models with each other and with experts, we were able to see continuous, improved student achievement.

We listened to teachers through feedback, goal setting, and reflection so they could help us understand what motivates them to learn about close reading and guided reading, creating a collaborative, instructionally charged balance between the needs of our teachers and higher student achievement in reading — and helping us to fulfill our vision statement every day for every student.

•
Julie A. Brua (jbrua@d102.org) is assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and multilingual education in Aptakisic-Tripp School District No. 102 in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, an adjunct professor at the University of St. Francis in Joliet, Illinois, and a graduate of the Learning Forward Academy Class of 2014. Matthew K. Moreland (mmoreland@d102.org) is principal at Pritchett Elementary School in Aptakisic-Tripp School District No. 102 and a graduate of the Learning Forward Academy Class of 2014. ■