# Strong leaders help teachers adapt to improved literacy instruction

BY KELLY HASTINGS AND JENNIFER PAULSEN

**E**mbarking on an initiative to implement evidence-based reading instruction can be both exhilarating and daunting for school and district leaders. Some may think that adopting a curriculum grounded in the principles of the science of reading will automatically ensure success. Choosing a strong curriculum is a crucial step, but it's important to remember that change happens because of the people involved, and, for many, change is hard.

Despite our best intentions, many initiatives falter due to a lack of fidelity in implementation. This gap between vision and execution can stem from various factors, including inadequate professional learning, resistance to change, top-down demands, a failure to sustain momentum over time, and difficulty translating theory into practice (Hall & Hord, 2015; Joyce & Showers, 2002).

A common pain point for school and district leaders is the discrepancy between the desired outcomes and the

actual practices observed in classrooms. Many education systems adopt a science of reading approach to better address students' literacy deficiencies and invest in professional learning and resources, but find that educators struggle to put new instructional approaches into practice, especially if they don't receive feedback about whether they are implementing the initiative with fidelity. This challenge not only hampers student progress but also undermines trust, credibility, and sustainability.

Given the complexity of change, leaders play an essential role in achieving implementation fidelity. They face challenges and pressures in making such a transition, from aligning instructional practices to fostering a culture of continuous improvement. But by leveraging strong leadership strategies and the principles of implementation science, they can navigate these challenges and shepherd their schools to higher literacy achievement.

## NURTURING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE

School and district leaders must cultivate their leadership skills to avoid implementation pitfalls and effectively guide changes in practice. Leaders who possess the following set of foundational skills are better equipped to inspire, guide, and sustain change (Fullan, 2014).

**Leaders play an essential role in achieving implementation fidelity. By leveraging strong leadership strategies and the principles of implementation science, they can navigate challenges and shepherd their schools to higher literacy achievement.**

**Self-awareness and respect** form the bedrock of effective leadership. Leaders who deeply understand their values, strengths, limitations, and opportunities for improvement are better able to navigate challenges with authenticity and integrity and can cultivate a culture of openness, where diverse perspectives are valued.

Leaders overseeing transitions to the science of reading must first understand their own beliefs and biases about reading instruction, let go of conflicting beliefs, and trust the evidence on how children learn to read. They must also have respect for the learning process in themselves and others to model a commitment to continuous improvement.

**Self-regulation** and intuition enable leaders to navigate uncertainty and complexity with confidence and adaptability. In times of change, leaders must remain composed under pressure and make sound decisions based on both data and intuition (Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

By balancing analytical insights with intuitive understanding, principals can make well-rounded decisions. This approach not only helps in navigating the complexities of changing literacy strategies, but also supports teachers and inspires confidence. Consequently, the school community experiences a sense of stability and shared purpose.

**Effective communication** is essential for building trust and alignment among stakeholders. Principals leading a science of reading transition benefit from actively listening to teachers' experiences and concerns to better understand classroom-level challenges and needs. Soliciting regular feedback through meetings or surveys is one way to get this information.

Another is by assembling a school-based implementation team with grade-level representatives for vertical and horizontal conversations. Other effective communication strategies are to ask thoughtful questions, promote ongoing professional learning, engage in classroom walk-throughs, and collaboratively provide constructive feedback.

**Promoting continuous learning for oneself and others** is essential for staying relevant and resilient in an ever-evolving educational landscape. By investing in professional learning, coaching, and collaborative inquiry, leaders empower their teams to embrace change as an opportunity for growth and improvement.

When making a science of reading instructional transition, a leader needs to have enough knowledge to lead the change process, but also adopt a learner's stance and encourage teachers to do the same.

By prioritizing professional learning, principals equip teachers with the latest research-based literacy strategies, enhance their instructional skills, and foster a collaborative culture.

**Celebrating team and individual successes** fosters a sense of camaraderie and motivation, sustains momentum and morale, and reinforces achievement and excellence. Principals can publicly commend teachers for using new instructional strategies that show student progress by throwing a celebration when the school achieves a proficiency milestone. Celebrating individual and collective efforts highlights the importance of each teacher's contribution and the power of collaborative success.

A positive mindset that values change as an opportunity underpins all of the other leadership skills mentioned above. In addition, leaders who approach challenges with empathy, patience, and curiosity inspire team confidence and resilience.

Leadership coaching is a valuable form of professional learning that helps leaders develop the critical skills mentioned above and navigate the complexities of change management with ongoing feedback and support. Coaches serve as confidential allies who offer perspective, challenge assumptions, provide guidance based on best practices in leadership theory and practice, and encourage leaders to identify and leverage their unique talents and capabilities.

## HARNESSING IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE

Once the leadership foundation is set, leaders and their teams can turn to the principles of implementation science as a guiding framework to ensure implementation fidelity. Implementation science offers a systematic approach to understanding how innovations are adopted, implemented, and sustained within organizations. This approach is noticeably different from — and more effective than — the way new initiatives are often rolled out, which is simply to start and figure it out as you go.

Implementation science emphasizes the importance of creating an organizational climate that supports innovation and continuous learning with a shared vision for change. One key aspect is recognizing that change is a dynamic and iterative process (Aarons et al., 2015).

Rather than expecting immediate results, educators must embrace a long-term perspective that also acknowledges the ambiguity of teaching and learning. This entails conducting thorough needs assessments, establishing clear implementation goals, and monitoring progress through ongoing data collection and analysis from different perspectives as collaborative activities.

Key to this effort is the creation of an implementation team, which must include teachers because the team's purpose is to support the people carrying out the change effort (Pizzuto & Carney, 2024). The implementation team designs and carries out a comprehensive plan that includes the needed professional learning.

The plan should address these questions: What will teachers be doing? What will students be doing? What resources will be needed? How will this initiative be evaluated? It should have transparent and explicit look-fors (observable practices such as the use of evidence-based instructional materials), articulation of what will be measured or evaluated, and processes and protocols for district leader, school leader, and teacher walk-throughs tied to the same look-for instrument. Having transparent and explicit expectations for walk-throughs ensures consistency in observation and feedback for all levels.

Conducting a continual needs assessment is another essential part of an implementation science approach. Leaders should regularly assess the evolving needs and priorities of educators and students to inform decision-making and resource allocation.

This includes teachers observing one another and providing feedback and asking questions, as well as collaboratively using data to monitor progress, identify areas for improvement, and make evidence-based adjustments to implementation strategies. Leaders cannot tell teachers what needs to change; it needs to be a two-way discussion. This builds the capacity of the team and solidifies trust.

Using formative assessments to monitor the implementation and success rate of instruction that reflects the science of reading research will allow the organization to continually monitor both the successes and the needs of the initiative. The implementation team may need to make midcourse adjustments to individual and group challenges based on ongoing data.

In leveraging the strengths of the group, leaders can highlight bright spots of instruction and use those classrooms for peer-to-peer observation sites. Growing the skills of all teachers through capacity building, collaboration, and trusting relationships is at the heart of successful change management.

Once positive changes begin to occur, the team should document the processes in place to achieve success, as well as the input from all stakeholders, to understand and sustain the change. Then it's time to plan for the next stage, including embedding professional learning for next year's new teachers and administrators. Too often, people forget about sustaining the change, so it is important to consider it throughout the entire implementation process.

## PIVOT AND ADAPT

As school and district leaders seek to build leadership and embed implementation science with a focus

on professional learning, they must also be prepared to pivot and adapt their strategies based on emerging needs and challenges that teachers bring to the forefront.

This is possible when leaders are in classrooms regularly, discuss what they see with teachers without judgment, and collaborate with teachers on the implementation team to listen to what is going well and provide the support teachers need.

This requires a willingness to embrace innovation, iterate on existing practices, and course correct as necessary. It can be messy. By pivoting strategically and embracing a culture of continuous improvement, school and district leaders can forge a path for improved student success toward the transformative potential of powerful literacy education for all students.

## REFERENCES

**Aarons, G.A., Ehrhart, M.G., Farahnak, L.R., & Hurlburt, M.S. (2015)**. Leadership and organizational change for implementation (LOCI): A randomized mixed method pilot study of a leadership and organization development intervention for evidence-based practice implementation. *Implementation Science, 10*(11). doi.org/10.1186/s13012-014-0192-y

**Fullan, M. (2014)**. *Leading in a culture of change.* John Wiley & Sons.

**Hall, G.E. & Hord, S.M. (2015)**. *Implementing change: Patterns, principles, and potholes.* Pearson.

**Joyce, B. & Showers, B. (2002)**. *Student achievement through staff development.* ASCD.

**Leithwood, K. & Sun, J. (2012)**. The nature and effects of transformational school leadership: A meta-analytic review of unpublished research. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 48*(3), 387-423.

**Pizzuto, J. & Carney, S. (2024)**. *Implement with impact.* Solution Tree.

•

**Kelly Hastings (Kelly@EnlighteningLeadership.com) is a leadership and innovation coach with Enlightening Leadership and a former secondary principal and educator. Jennifer Paulsen (jenniferpaulsen23@gmail.com) is a former elementary principal, reading specialist, and teacher.** ■