



Considering How to Lead Schoolwide Improvement in Reading

1



Imagine this . . .

You walk into the school conference room early in August. You see that the superintendent is already there to meet with the school leadership team about recently released test scores. Your school did not make adequate yearly progress in reading. You already met the principal, also new to the school, but this is the first time you meet the grade-level chairs, the reading teacher, and the assistant principal. After introductions, the superintendent gets right down to business by stating, “The reading test results need to improve. I want you to know that reading is a priority in our district and I believe success in reading is key to achievement in all content areas through high school. What can I do to support your efforts?” The principal looks everyone in the eye and says, “What are your thoughts, team? What will WE do to improve OUR students’ reading performance?”

This scenario reflects the plight of many schools we work with and illustrates what school leadership teams encounter in an age of heightened accountability. More than ever before, we need a clear vision about quality reading instruction. Also, the stakes are high for schools to take steps necessary to attain that vision. But there is good news. Research enlightens us about what works and what does not work in the integrated arenas of reading instruction, school leadership, and professional development. Educators are challenged to

2 THE LEARNING COMMUNITIES GUIDE TO IMPROVING READING INSTRUCTION

become familiar with what is known about quality teaching, leadership, and professional development and to transfer that knowledge to practice in an ongoing, consistent, systematic way.

We believe that effective leadership is essential to improve the teaching and learning of reading. Furthermore, we think that leadership in professional learning communities includes all teachers and administrators who have the desire and the initiative to make a difference in student reading performance. This book provides leaders focused on quality reading instruction with knowledge and tools for school improvement that leave no child or teacher behind.

Effective school leadership teams create learning communities where continuous learning is not limited to students between the ages of five and eighteen. The adults in the building are learners as well and model lifelong learning through ongoing reflection on teaching and learning. Stories of successful schools reveal that deep and abiding change is a difficult task that requires the cohesive efforts of school teams. Effective leaders build cohesion by shaping cultures that honor and support continuous learning and recognize the collegial and social aspects of learning. Thus, effective leaders initiate professional learning communities to encourage, not discourage, continued growth in practice. These leaders accomplish this task using a variety of professional development experiences that target student achievement.

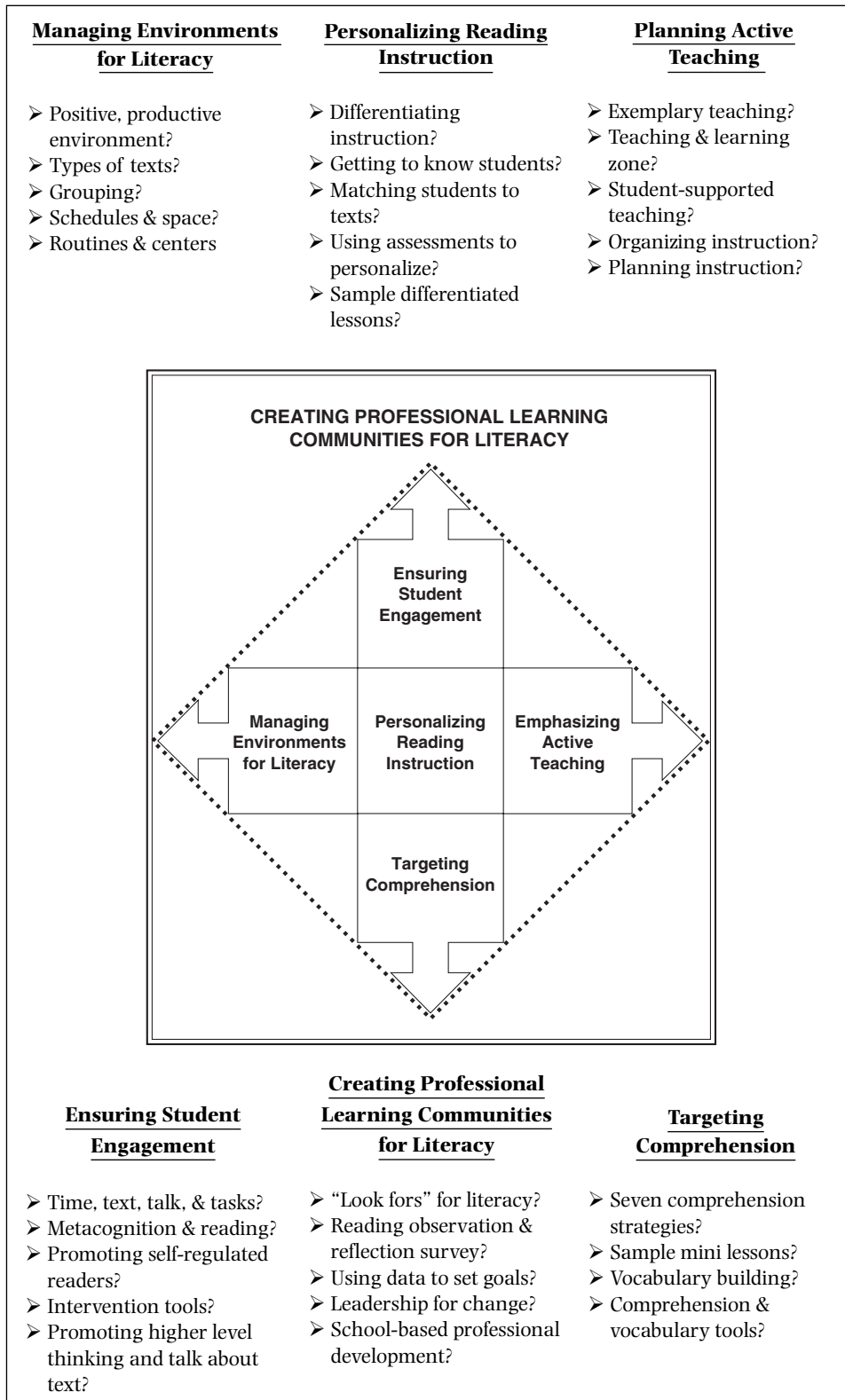
Building professional learning communities will not necessarily lead to improvement in teaching and learning unless such communities engage in focused, sustained, content-driven professional growth experiences. In other words, effective leaders identify focused efforts that address the right content, in the right way, at the right time, in a culture that is conducive to continuous learning. Quality professional development integrates pedagogy with the content that teachers deliver, in the schools where they teach.

Based on our experience, we suggest that school leaders intent on improving teaching and learning in reading consider a framework of six broad elements: (1) personalizing reading instruction, (2) managing environments for literacy, (3) ensuring student engagement, (4) emphasizing active teaching, (5) targeting comprehension, and (6) creating professional learning communities (Figure 1.1).

Subsequent chapters describe each of these elements. The organization of each chapter includes a scenario, the research base, sample strategies, a summary of the big ideas presented in the chapter, and a constructive reflection. The constructive reflections are designed as tools for school-based professional development that fosters supportive learning communities.

Chapter 2 targets the primary focus of any literacy improvement effort: student needs. This chapter addresses the question, *How can teachers personalize reading instruction?* Shaping effective literacy instruction begins with matching books to students, and this requires teachers to get to know them. The extent to which teachers know their students determines the effectiveness of their reading instruction. In getting to know students, we must consider a variety of factors before a clear picture emerges. Strategies for getting to know students include those that reveal student interests, strengths, needs, level of reading, strategy use, and learning preferences. Chapter 2 addresses routines and strategies for getting to know students and personalizing reading instruction.

Figure 1.1 Framework for Improving Reading Instruction



4 THE LEARNING COMMUNITIES GUIDE TO IMPROVING READING INSTRUCTION

Managing environments for literacy is the second element for shaping quality reading instruction. What are effective strategies and practices for managing literacy environments? Effective classroom management either promotes or thwarts quality reading instruction. We find that teachers frequently have concerns about issues of classroom management. How should I group my students? What do I need to do to help students work cooperatively and productively? What are other students doing while I am with a guided reading group? What materials are essential to effective teaching and learning? What routines are necessary to provide an environment that is conducive to student learning? These questions and others are answered in Chapter 3.

The third element for improving literacy instruction is *ensuring student engagement*. How do exemplary teachers increase student engagement? Linked to active teaching, active student engagement in reading, writing, and talking about text influences whether high gains in reading are achieved. Chapter 4 describes specific research-based strategies that promote active student engagement rather than passive responses to reading.

Chapter 5, emphasizes active teaching, the fourth element of effective literacy programs. What is active teaching and what do exemplary teachers do to facilitate active learning? Research indicates that active teaching strategies positively influence student achievement in reading. What research-based active teaching strategies should teachers use to promote high achievement in reading and writing? How should the varied active learning strategies be implemented? Effective literacy programs examine the extent to which teachers engage in active teaching and provide professional development that builds requisite skills and knowledge.

Targeting comprehension is another crucial element for improving reading. The ultimate goal of all reading instruction is reading comprehension—that is, reading *is* comprehending. What must teachers do to target comprehension so that all students read at higher levels? While beginning reading instruction emphasizes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, researchers agree that “comprehension is the reason for reading” (Armburster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 48). Effective reading instruction requires teachers to model specific comprehension strategies and provide adequate time for students to practice strategies that good readers use (Pressley, 2002). What strategies promote comprehension? How can educators more thoughtfully teach comprehension strategies? Chapter 6 responds to these questions.

Chapter 7 discusses the importance of *creating professional learning communities for literacy*. Effective instructional leadership is inclusive, with teachers and administrators working collaboratively to improve literacy instruction. How can professional learning communities provide leadership for literacy? What school leaders do to promote and support effective reading instruction is fundamental to positive, sustained change in classrooms. What do leaders need to know about best practices in reading instruction? How can leaders encourage implementation of these best practices? What are the conditions for change and how can these conditions be fostered in schools and classrooms? How can leaders promote professional development that targets transfer of effective content and instructional practices in reading?

A reflection tool for school leadership teams to use is introduced in Chapter 7. This tool identifies “look fors” associated with teacher engagement, student engagement, instructional content, grouping patterns, and reading materials. Chapter 7 also suggests how the reflection tool can be used to identify gaps between current practice and research-based practices for reading instruction.

Why read this book? Because you want to create professional learning communities to improve reading instruction and increase student performance in reading. We present a framework of best practices for improving reading instruction and tools for reflecting on and assessing current practice. Also, we want to make leadership teams aware of effective professional development approaches for improving literacy instruction. The elements presented in the framework are components of an observation and reflection tool used in over 300 classrooms. We based this tool on current research conducted by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (Taylor & Pearson, 2000). The Reading Reflection Survey presented in Chapter 7 helps school leaders identify priorities and goals for improving reading instruction. Specifically, this tool enables school leaders to assess current practice and create action plans for professional development.

CONSTRUCTIVE REFLECTIONS

After reading this chapter about the framework for improving reading instruction, describe which element you think should be targeted first in your own professional practice. Explain why you believe this element should be addressed first and share your beliefs with your teaching team.

Complete the following “thinking at right angles” graphic organizer by listing three things you learned from reading this chapter (Figure 1.2). Also list feelings you experienced from reading the chapter and describe what your next step will be. Share your thoughts with your team.

Figure 1.2 Thinking at Right Angles for Reflecting on Chapter 1

Three things I learned:

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Feelings about what I read:

After reading the first chapter of this book, my next step will be...