Is Your School Fit for Literacy?
10 Areas of Action for Principals

November 2005

Janet S. Gaffney, Ph.D.
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Kristina Hesbol, Ph.D.
DeKalb (Illinois) Community School District 428

Laurie Corso
Educational Consultant

LEARNING POINT
Associates™

Contents

Introduction

Have you ever skimmed the lists of *10 Ways to Get Fit* that are published in popular fitness magazines or newspaper health sections? Readers from a range of fitness levels use the lists to check the status of their current knowledge and activity. We borrowed this idea as a way for school leaders to review their school's level of literacy fitness. Some leaders may find that their schools are on track in all or most areas, or they may identify one or more areas that need to be given greater priority or addressed in a more systematic manner. Others may find areas of strength as well as areas of neglect. Some readers may discover an area that piques their curiosity, and they may want to delve deeper into the literature with colleagues.

We thought you might enjoy and benefit from taking stock of how your school's literacy fitness stacks up against our Top 10 list. You may want to invite teachers to assess your school's literacy fitness, and compare your assessment with their perceptions. You might also expand your reach by seeking input from school board members, parents, and external consultants.

Every school leader has experienced pressure from parents, the local community, and state and federal governments to improve literacy. The expectation of continuously improved performance on high-stakes tests has changed the rules of the literacy game. Administrators are not able to count on the performance of the majority of students to pull up school averages, because the accountability mandates of No Child Left Behind (2002) require improved performance by children in all subgroups (gender, economic status, ethnicity, and special education). Over-focusing on the bottom line—that is, the number on a scale—may distract responsible leaders from attending to the processes that facilitate or interfere with academic achievement.

Please take a moment to review our list. See if you find places where you might bolster activities that, in turn, will be reflected in literacy outcomes.

1. Make It Personal and Take It Personally
(or, You've Decided to Get Fit)

What is your personal level of tolerance for underachievement in oral language, reading, and writing? At what point is the proportion of children with below–average performance in reading and writing (the size of the gap) unacceptable to you? Are you responsible?

Step back for a moment and consider similar questions in relation to physical fitness. We can think of a multitude of reasons for skipping a day of exercise, including fatigue, boredom, or lack of time. Sometimes, the excuses win out for several days. We then cross some boundary, and the idea of fitness no longer seems to matter. We stop counting the number of days since our last workout; we cease to be responsible. At this point we need a jolt to get back on track and to draw a line that we will not cross under any circumstances.

Where do you draw the line for literacy learning in your school? Do you and your staff know what percentage of children in each class and each grade are reading or writing below grade level?

Try this activity. On the class lists for each grade, highlight the name of every child who you think is reading or writing below grade level. Invite teachers to do the same, and compare your estimates with the teacher's judgment.

One literacy leader asked teachers to record the names of children whose literacy success was in jeopardy, and to put the list in a secure place for periodic review. The teachers reported that listing the names of children who might fall between the cracks made it more personal than using numbers or the generic "they." These teachers renewed their commitment to improving the literacy progress of children they had not yet reached.

In another school, more than a third of first graders were not meeting minimum reading levels. First-grade teachers made a pact that no child would leave their classrooms at the end of the year unable to read at an acceptable level.. Teachers scrupulously monitored children's progress, focusing instructional attention on children whose progress concerned them. They swallowed their pride, abandoned methods that did not produce results, and worked together—even switching children to different teachers. The teachers reduced the number of children not meeting minimum reading levels to one or two per year (Michael Bradley, Lennoxville, Quebec, RTeacher listserv, retrieved May 28, 1997). Clearly, this self-imposed, zero-tolerance agreement among colleagues made a difference for the children—and for teachers in Grade 2 and above.

The "Countdown of 1000 Days" became the mantra of a network of four schools that provided written guarantees that every child entering kindergarten would learn to read by the end of second grade (Wheaton & Kay, 1999). A contract outlined the responsibilities of the school, teachers, and parents to achieve this "no excuses" goal. Once again, teachers were not welded to a specific pedagogical approach. Rather, leaders and teachers focused their time, personnel, and professional development resources on children's literacy success, and expanded their reach to parents and the community. While these high-need schools did not achieve 100 percent success on their 1000-day timeline, they significantly improved the percentage of successful students.

This was accomplished by, among other things, instituting special before-, after-, and summer-school, as well as individual plans for students still "under warranty."

What level of tolerance are you willing to sustain? What is your "take-action" threshold?

2. Encourage Talking, Then Listen
(or, Check Your Pulse)

What if you really did not know how to do a new form of exercise? You would likely turn to friends for recommendations of centers, instructors, DVDs, or books. You might ask more than one person, and screen opinions based on how you perceive the person's level of expertise. You would be cautious of fads that might quickly fade. The greater the investment of time and money required, the more advanced the research you'd be likely to do.

Now, what if you really are not sure how to improve literacy instruction in your school? Often leaders believe that they must know more than others in order to lead. What if the opposite were true? What if your ability to lead, and the potential outcomes, depended on you *not knowing* how to solve a significant problem? If you already knew what to do, you would have achieved the desired results. You would not need to listen to others or enroll a team. So, if this is a new approach, practice saying things like "I don't know" and "What do you think?" and "How can we find out?" One rule of thumb is to ask real questions— that is, ones to which you don't yet have answers.

Consider ways to get everyone else talking, so that you are free to listen. You might create different forums for discussion in order to tap into different personnel clusters. For example, you might host a before-school breakfast club on Tuesday, a "lunch bunch" on Thursday, a "happy hour" crowd on Friday. Everyone is invited—from teachers and literacy coaches to social workers, parent coordinators, parents, teaching assistants, secretaries, bus drivers, and community partners. To get concentrated coverage in a compact time period, keep the conversation moving among participants. Plan some ways to start fresh conversations; for example, you might ask participants what they believe the important questions are.

Hall and Hord (2001), known for their earlier classic work on identifying "Stages of Concern" within the process of change, suggest two practical methods for seeking input. "One-Legged Conferencing" is the term they use to describe those brief hallway, playground, and lounge conversations between colleagues. An "Open-Ended Statement of Concern" is a way of gathering written responses to the question, "When you think about [name of innovation], what are you concerned about?" In their text, these authors provide a systematic way to analyze the responses relative to their seven Stages of Concern, which range on a continuum from Stage 0, Awareness, to Stage 6, Refocusing. They recommend concentrating your efforts over a short period of about 2 to 3 weeks. The goal is to take your school's literacy pulse.

Now, try to view your school the way those on the outside see it. This your chance to get clear about what everyone else thinks. Who is on the outside looking in? Many people hold opinions about your school: parents; central administrators; principals and teachers from other elementary schools; staff members at Head Start, early childhood centers, and preschools that feed into your school; faculty from the middle and high schools that your children will attend; and instructors and professors from community colleges and universities.

To use an exercise analogy, if everyone thinks the exercise machine you bought for four payments of $29.99 from a 4:00 a.m. cable channel infomercial is junk, you might as well know

that's what they think. That everyone else believes you went off the deep end doesn't mean you did—but you should at least consider the possibility.

A school team will need to approach the information-gathering process in ways that allow external partners to offer their perceptions and suggestions without reproach. A range of processes may be used simultaneously to elicit responses from individuals and constituent groups. A principal may meet with individual central administrators to ask a few important questions around a target area. The principal may probe the responses in for a better understanding of perceptions, but should not attempt to defend or explain past decisions or practices. In addition, an independent facilitator could interact with constituents in focus groups. Experienced facilitators have a myriad of techniques for eliciting opinions and synthesizing responses. An advantage of using facilitators is that comments can be shared with a school team without identifying their source. Finally, teams may distribute surveys or request written responses to open-ended questions, though these may be time-consuming to craft well and the response rate may be poor or not representative.

Record great questions and, most important, write down anything that rankles, irks, irritates, pushes your buttons, raises the hair on your neck, makes you defensive. Do not respond, except to say things like, "Talk more about that." "Why is that important?" "Do you have other examples?" "How common is this?" "What do you think would work?" "What would it take to change that?" "How would you like it to be?" "What would you like to see happen?"

While you are on this conversational journey, take note of people who get inspired or who inspire you or others. These are the people you will want to invite to be your fitness buddies later.

3. Take Stock of What Is Good
(or, Identify Your Strong Points)

Before beginning an exercise regimen, experts recommend taking an inventory of one's strengths. In the process of change, we do not want to risk throwing out activities, practices, or programs that are making useful contributions. Principals must first determine what is going well in a building in order to provide continued support for worthy activities.

Analysis of data from multiple sources is an efficient way to identify strengths. Principals may survey teachers to ascertain what teachers feel is going well and to identify focus areas. School leaders can review authentic classroom assessments to determine areas of strength and areas of deficiency for students.

Reports from state standardized tests also hold a wealth of information that may impact classroom instruction. These results, when disaggregated, can showcase students' greatest strengths, as well as areas that need to be addressed more specifically. These data also reflect the achievement levels of diverse student populations, and can assist in targeting students who will benefit from extra support. For example, after one school team disaggregated the data from a standardized reading assessment for third and fifth graders, it was found that students scored very high on the ability to answer explicit questions and lower on answering questions requiring inferential thinking. This team also noted that students scored very high on word analysis and very low on vocabulary. These results were particularly interesting, because teachers had anticipated that their students would score lowest on word analysis and highest on vocabulary! This information immediately impacted classroom instruction, as teachers used data-driven decision making (Mathews & Crow, 2003) to shift their instructional emphasis. Teachers focused on inferential questioning while continuing to support children's ability to answer text questions that were explicit in nature. Teams developed strategies to incorporate vocabulary instruction across the curriculum, with anticipated payoff in improved student outcomes.

While this example speaks to the use of standardized tests, teachers have daily opportunities to "take stock of what is good" and use data to drive their classroom literacy instruction. The results of teachers' informal assessments may be reviewed to promote collaborative discussions among teachers and literacy coaches about how to use student strengths to guide instruction. Using evidence from assessment tools and inviting teachers to talk about the strengths of their students, can provide a principal with valuable feedback that will lead to a deeper understanding of how progress in reading and writing evolves across grade levels. Daily, ongoing observational records of individual students corroborate and flesh out the scores from standardized group tests, and help teachers make instructional sense of the data. Imagine how pleased a teacher would be to have a principal initiate a discussion about classroom teaching with a request to share evidence of students' competencies in oral language, reading, and writing. Areas of students' peak achievements often mirror teachers' instructional strengths.

Review of data will also facilitate identification of the teaching staff's areas of expertise (Hall & Hord, 2001). Tapping into in-house experts for professional development, rather than only bringing in outside consultants, will likely have a refreshing impact on the literacy climate in the school. The shift in professional development is toward building capacity within a system. The

use of teachers to facilitate professional development for colleagues and staff has grown (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). These educators are typically referred to as literacy facilitators, coaches, or coordinators. These individuals can root their work in the real life and problems of the school, are available for daily problem solving, help build an open learning environment in the school, provide ongoing professional development for teachers, provide ongoing coaching within the context of classrooms, and are members of the school community (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Principals may build a system from the inside out by cultivating literacy coaches from the current cadre of personnel.

Finally, when surveying the environment for strong points, consider the full array of personnel resources (i.e., teachers, parents, teaching assistants, parent liaisons, social workers, etc.), and map out the evidence that illustrates the strength of their contributions. A visual display will facilitate communication, promote the development of creative initiatives that support student learning, and provide a powerful illustration of the available assets, which will add momentum to the school's process of literacy renewal.

4. Prepare Yourself
(or, You Don't Run a Marathon on the First Day)

One of the challenges of changing one's teaching approach is that we don't have practice once the game has started. While professional development is ongoing, activities that ensure the development of expertise are not typically provided. However, a few high-quality programs, such as Reading Recovery, have found creative means to include authentic, real-time opportunities for observing and reflecting upon teacher-child literacy interactions by using a one-way observation window (Gaffney & Anderson, 1991). The challenges that face those in administrative positions when they step into teaching situations are even greater than those for teachers. To become literacy *leaders*, administrators need to "walk the walk," teaching children to read and write by applying up-to-date theories and using current instructional methods.

School and district literacy leaders do not walk into offices filled with ready children, and they already have responsibilities that overflow the workday. Using the exercise analogy, leaders must register with a fitness center and make a commitment—in this case, to make *teaching practice* a priority in their schedules.

Leaders may be concerned about exposing gaps in their knowledge to teachers who may be observing this new phenomenon. Our experience is that teachers are both cautious about and captivated by principals who put themselves in the vulnerable position of learning a new teaching approach. During a professional-development series on assessment of reading and writing competencies and the difficulties of struggling learners, teachers were surprised when their curriculum director chose to fully participate, electing to assess a child with challenging behaviors. The teachers were eager to assist the administrator as needed, but simultaneously wondered why the director was even interested in learning via full participation. In sum, the teachers were both energized and a bit unsettled by the director's involvement. Teachers notice when school leaders get an in-service event under way and then sneak out, so when leaders not only stay but engage in the activities, the perceived value of the activity is raised another notch.

In one elementary school, the principal has extended a standing offer to substitute for one period each semester, to allow teachers to observe another teacher. This idea fosters collegiality in addition to providing the principal with a teaching opportunity. A principal might also offer to teach alongside a teacher who wants to experiment with a new activity or approach, and who would benefit from additional teaching assistance.

In another district, the principal of an elementary school with the highest literacy need initially tutored a child who was significantly low in achievement. Now, she plans her teaching experiences by determining her own learning needs relative to the students. When the school's standardized test scores showed adequate progress in reading but not writing, she identified a child who performed poorly on the writing test and began a systematic instructional program for him. She used the assessment tools that the teachers were using, found helpful resources, planned lessons, and monitored his progress over time. The teachers in her school have no doubt that she can walk the walk.

If it has been a while since you exercised your teaching muscles, do not be discouraged. Start small, but be consistent. Spend some time in classrooms during the literacy block every day. Make a commitment to work with a child on reading or writing every day for a month or two. Get a personal trainer, if necessary. You might shadow the literacy coach on "rounds" to teachers or, better yet, invite the literacy coach to coach you. Finally, choose your words and actions wisely: Everything you *do* or *say* adds or detracts from the literacy fitness of the school.

5. Enroll a Literacy Design Team
(or, Work Out with Buddies)

The entire community must be activated in order to impact the literacy learning of all children, especially students whose progress has not kept pace with their peers. A critical function of the principal is to engage parents, teachers, staff, administrators, students, and business and church leaders in a focused effort to develop a community that thrives on literacy. While a large percentage of administrators have graduate degrees in areas other than curriculum and teaching, few educational leadership programs include coursework in literacy for aspiring principals. Principals, therefore, will need to become "lead learners" (Barth, 2003), kindling a collective social responsibility to literacy through a personal demonstration of commitment.

Learning teams have been shown to be an effective strategy for cross-functional learning (Stiggins, 1997). When professional growth is perceived as a joint responsibility of teachers and the principal, learning is embraced as a continuous and shared process. The culture of the school shifts to that of an exciting learning organization in which innovations are generated, discussed, and evaluated by team members (Fullan, 1995; Senge, 1990). The power of teamwork changes the atmosphere of the workplace in perceptible ways. Conversations in one elementary school that had not achieved adequate yearly progress took a dramatic turn — from a litany of excuses and the familiar blame game to an orientation toward problem solving and action — when the responsibility for children's literacy progress was taken on by a designated team rather than placed solely on the classroom teacher. Teachers who previously felt isolated and stuck were reinvigorated by collegial consultations and shared responsibility.

Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, and Kleiner (2000) view the development of a shared vision as central to a learning organization. The ability to collectively hold a common vision of a future that does not yet exist has been central to change initiatives across organizations for hundreds of years. In schools where leaders provide the conditions for such a process to occur, genuine commitment to the shared vision is fostered, rather than merely compliance, and it becomes woven into the tapestry of the school's culture. In *Reading to Inform Your Writing*, Harwayne (2001) describes the interwoven nature of reading and writing. As a principal in New York City, she chose to teach writing lessons weekly in order to stay in touch with the process of teaching from the child's view, to learn from other teachers, and to demonstrate effective literacy practices. Additionally, she recognized that these first-hand teaching experiences helped her to advocate more strongly for scarce resources within the district, to support literacy initiatives for her faculty and students.

The essence of authentic teaming is the synergy generated among diverse team members as they experience success on their shared journey. Principals should consider building a literacy team with individuals who represent different perspectives, grade levels, and job responsibilities. High-quality teams work collaboratively rather than competitively, entertain risky ideas, and assess their effectiveness in light of both instructional processes and outcome data (van den Berg, 2002). Principals who are instructional leaders work to build a supportive network in which professionals and paraprofessionals are provided the resources and conditions needed for children to achieve literacy goals. The principal must free the literacy team to focus on substantive literacy content rather than mundane organizational items. Questions such as "How

do we know that students comprehend classroom texts?" will lead to meaningful team explorations that are rooted in principles of literacy pedagogy and assessment validity. In a learning organization, the power to make decisions and the responsibility for learning is spread across the members of the village.

6. Promises We Will Keep
(or, It's Not Just About Willpower)

We often attribute the success of a person who maintains a new exercise program to willpower or determination, as if people have different levels of this innate quality. However, research on how people change suggests that success may be related to an individual's stage within the change process. Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (1992) determined that people move through five stages of change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. Although linear progress is possible, people typically cycle through a spiral pattern in which they return multiple times to earlier stages. The practical implication is that people addressing the same issue are likely to be at different stages, and therefore require different ways to stay engaged in the process. These researchers found that developed insight, raised consciousness, and self-reevaluation were characteristics of changers at the earlier stages. At the preparation stage, people choose to commit to action, believe in themselves, and initiate some actions. During the action stage, people rely on obvious signs of behavioral change, overt and covert reinforcement, discussion of problems and solutions, and the helpful support of others. Maintenance is ongoing, and intermittent boosts may be needed to stay on track.

These stages, which originated from research on changing habits, may be applied to changing oral and written language instruction in a school. Though more complex, due to the institutional context and multiplicity of players, the phases of change may map onto the process of developing teaching across a school. Each individual must be vested in the mission and the vision of new possibilities, having gone through the hard work of awareness of problems, reflection, evaluation, and decision making. According to the research on intentional change (Prochaska, et al., 1992), if people move into action without having invested effort in the earlier stages, the outcomes will be short-lived.

A major challenge is blending the vision of all persons who are critical to the change process. In one professional development program aimed at helping teachers create learning breakthroughs for students whose progress was stalled, the facilitator invited the participants to write a personal values and mission statement (Covey, 1989; Senge et al., 2000) focused on their core beliefs and commitments about teaching and learning. These personal statements of professional passion were words for each person to live up to. Participants were awed by the courage and commitments of their peers.

After participants share their individual statements, the whole group may be invited to develop a common vision statement that encapsulates their combined commitment to literacy learning for the students in their school. The advantage of a shared vision is that you only need to agree about the destination, not the route. We want to encourage the full faculty to carve their commitment in stone. What is the bottom-line collective agreement for students in this school? Even if the goal is not achieved at first, the school team will become much closer by making a promise and sharing the will to fulfill it.

7. Setting Annual Goals
(or, Set Your Fitness Goals)

Setting goals is the most important step in beginning a fitness program. Similarly, setting annual goals to improve teaching and learning are essential to improving literacy in schools. SMART goals are **s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**ttainable, **r**esults-oriented, and **t**ime-bound (O'Neill, 2000). Goals must be specific in order to be effective, and must clearly articulate what the participants expect to achieve. Limiting the number of goals to no more than two also scaffolds success, since, over time, faculty members become increasingly knowledgeable, develop teaching expertise, and collect data about children's progress in the focus areas. The process of establishing specific goals based on student performance orients conversations and attention to *learning*, rather than *teaching*. Describing what children will know and will be able to do relative to the school's goals at specific time markers helps the faculty concentrate their efforts and increase the probability of success.

Using data to set goals is very important. Many schools are DRIPs, that is, **d**ata **r**ich but **i**nformation **p**oor (DuFour, 2004). Teachers, principals, and other literacy leaders need to learn how to organize, analyze, and use data that are already accessible—as well as to identify areas within the current assessment scheme that are neglected. Rigorous analysis of student performance data yields specific areas of strength and need, which help faculty establish focused, results-oriented goals and understand the reasons for pedagogical and instructional change. While this idea may seem simple and straightforward, the implementation is not.

In an initial orientation meeting conducted by the first author with 25 intermediate-grade language arts, remedial, and special education teachers, participants were provided copies of the state-tested reading and writing performance of their students. The data were disaggregated by school, grade, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability. The purpose of the session was to seek the teachers' input into their priorities for future professional development. Following presentation and discussion of the assessment data, every teacher shared with the group an individual self-assessment about areas in which their teaching was strong and areas in which they wanted more assistance. Interestingly, it was not until all of the participants had spoken once, and most had spoken twice, that one teacher referred to the significantly depressed data on student writing performance to identify an area of general need.

To make the point that this issue is not limited to teachers, elementary principals in a suburban district were invited to record estimates of children's reading and writing achievement, as well as rates of retention and referral to special education of first graders in their buildings. Then, the principals were each provided the actual data for their buildings. Most were surprised, and a few shocked, by the difference between their estimates and reality. Yet, these data had been previously distributed to the principals, and therefore were readily accessible.

Schmoker (1999) tells us, "What gets measured, gets done". Covey (1989) asks us to "Start with the end in mind," one of the seven habits of highly effective people. Standards-aligned classrooms (Stiggins, 2004) help teachers clearly identify, before instruction begins, what they want students to know and to be able to do as a result of the lesson. Stiggins also distinguishes between assessment *of* learning, which is summative, and assessment *for* learning, a formative

process that examines how teachers may help students learn more. This reiterative process helps teachers know *why* they are teaching *what*, as well as *how* they are teaching, and leads to clarification between and ownership of teaching and learning.

Goals cannot be maintained without the opportunity to take risks. Principals and teachers need to support one another as they learn collaboratively about what works in literacy instruction. Since 75 percent of adult learning is self-directed (Arin-Krupp, 1982), adult learning shuts down when teachers feel threatened by a managerial, top-down principal. The relationships that develop and evolve through working together on shared goals enhance the professional lives of both teachers and principals, with a renewed sense of purpose as well as joy in the satisfaction of deeply meaningful work.

Once goals have been identified, the team must design a plan by which to attain them. Goals can be attained when the steps are carefully planned, and when a realistic time frame is developed. As a goal, "to decrease by 25 percent the number of children performing below the satisfactory cut-off point as measured by the state reading assessment" is more attainable than "to increase the level of student achievement by 10 percent annually for the next five years for all students."

To be results-oriented, selected goals should focus on the outcome rather than the plan. Language that supports a goal must represent an objective toward which teachers are both *willing* and *able* to work. A goal can be both lofty and realistic, but every goal should represent substantial progress. A higher goal is frequently easier to reach than a lower one, because a low goal exerts low motivational force. The most challenging accomplishments, achieved through extensive work, bring the highest levels of professional satisfaction and lead to the generation of even higher goals for the future.

A goal is probably realistic if you truly believe that it can be accomplished. Additional ways to check whether your goal is realistic include determining whether you have accomplished anything similar in the past and asking yourself what conditions would have to exist to accomplish this goal. When one principal arranged for teachers to meet regularly in teams to analyze data, identify strengths and growth areas, and pinpoint strategies to address them, third-grade reading comprehension scores increased from 31 percent to 97 percent. Teachers began to build on their students' success, and within 18 months their enthusiasm and accomplishments had transformed the culture of their school into a learning organization.

Goals should be time-bound, which makes it necessary to monitor student progress toward the goal at regular intervals. The time frame for implementation is built into the goal's language, and may be adjusted as goal-setting and goal-checking proceed. At an elementary school in Pittsburgh, only 1 percent of fourth graders and 3 percent of fifth graders scored at or above grade level on a standardized writing test. Following the adoption of a guided-inquiry approach to research projects, the fourth graders scored at the 30th percentile and the fifth graders rose to the 50th percentile, all in only one year (Hartmann, DeCicco, & Griffin, 1994).

How will you know if you achieved the goal? The faculty and staff will begin to generate questions, not all of which will have answers. Team members will begin to have conversations about professional issues centered on literacy, and they will increasingly become engaged in

meaningful reflective practice. Your school will begin to celebrate successes, and view "failures" as opportunities to delve into complex learning problems. The literacy team will discover that the issues that consume and challenge them do not have easy answers, not even by the experts. Teachers' learning merges with evolving organizational knowledge, creating new norms and revealing new issues in this continuous building process.
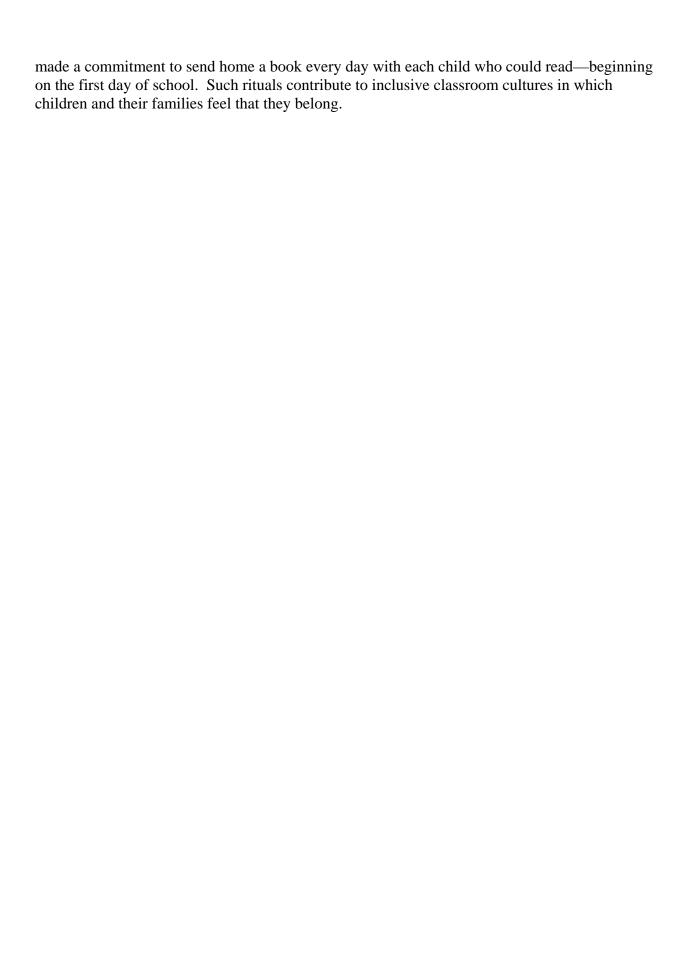
8. Structure the Day to Support Literacy Learning
(or, Commit Time for Exercise in Your Daily Schedule)

Scheduling time for exercise may be one of the biggest challenges in establishing a new fitness regimen. Similarly, principals leading school change efforts are also challenged by the way time has traditionally been conceptualized and allocated in the school day. One of the greatest gifts a principal can give a teacher is an uninterrupted block of time for instruction, especially in light of the value of blocked schedules for language and literacy instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). As an example, one Illinois district set aside specific blocks of time each day for language and literacy instruction. Grades K–2 are afforded a two-hour block in the morning, and Grades 3–5 are provided a similar block in the afternoon. These blocks are divided equally into 60-minute allocations for reading and writing, and the literacy block as a whole is a non-negotiable period that occurs five days a week. While at first this schedule configuration may seem like a logistical impossibility, streamlining the schedule to decrease the number of interruptions and shorten transition times, as well as judicious scheduling of classes such as music and physical education, leads to increased time for instruction.

When literacy blocks were implemented, teachers were able to go deeper into their instruction on a regular basis. They were able to provide more guided instruction and extensive interventions for students needing extra support. The extended periods also freed up time for literacy specialists, inclusion facilitators, and Title I teachers to coteach in the classroom on a consistent basis. In addition, grade level and literacy teams were consistently able to collaborate, since they now had joint planning periods. The classroom cultures evolved in more productive ways, with adults and children able to settle in together to their worthwhile work in language and literacy.

Classroom teachers need to invest time in developing literacy rituals and building a sense of classroom community (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). These investments will pay dividends as literacy-centered classrooms unfold and students immerse themselves in reading and writing. In classrooms where literacy rituals are established, you can see a variety of activities, including book buddies pairing up as they enter classrooms to share what they read at home the night before, students spontaneously choosing books from their individualized book boxes, and children taking turns talking about texts and making connections. In addition, in classrooms where a sense of community has been established, teachers model collaboration; students negotiate time, space, and resources with other students; and students evaluate their own learning. Most importantly, perhaps, teachers are willing to evaluate themselves based on student progress in reading and writing, and to share their self-assessment with colleagues.

When developing a literacy schedule for the school year, principals need to consider time outside the classroom walls. Literacy learning does not end as students exit the building, but should overflow into the home. What opportunities is the school providing for children and families to talk, read, and write beyond the traditional school day? Some educators have developed seamless ways to support the daily transitions across home and school. In some schools, for example, children go home with a bag of books that they can read independently every day. As an alternative to sending home notes, some teachers send children home with a memo recorder once a week, with a brief message from the teacher that the parent or guardian listens and then responds to, recording a message for the teacher. In one rural school, two kindergarten teachers

made a commitment to send home a book every day with each child who could read—beginning on the first day of school. Such rituals contribute to inclusive classroom cultures in which children and their families feel that they belong.

9. Professional Development
(or, Maintaining Your Progress)

In order to sustain children's progress, a coherent professional development plan is required. Not unlike the promise of New Year's resolutions to lose weight or increase our fitness regimen, one can easily get sidetracked in the daily routines of schools unless ongoing staff development becomes part of the school's culture. Central to an effective plan is the use of data—celebrate areas of student progress while also examining areas where student performance is low. The goals that emerge from such analyses by a team will steer the priorities for staff development and guide the daily work of every member of the learning community. This reiterative process of establishing priorities also provides a common language for professional communication.

In a healthy staff development model, the principal, as a lead learner, identifies and honors the existing strengths of those within the school community (Barth, 2003). Daily school life is imbued with professional growth, not only with isolated, building-wide events. Teachers learn best from other teachers, in a context of shared leadership. Harwayne (1999) agreed to serve as principal of the Manhattan New School under the conditions that she could continue to teach writing on a regular basis and to work with teachers, as a teacher, and support classroom instruction. She modeled exemplary writing instruction for fellow teachers, and learned alongside her colleagues as a contributing member of an authentic learning community (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). As Harwayne and her colleagues demonstrated their teaching for one another, no additional funding for substitute teachers or consultants was required., . She acknowledged her team in order to build the internal capacity of the school staff, and through this systematic process the students became better writers.

Staff development can also take the form of study groups, which provide teachers and administrators an opportunity to learn together. Using such texts as *What Works in Schools* (Marzano, 2003), *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning* (Buehl, 2001), and *Strategies that Work* (Harvey & Gouvdis, 2000), participants can collaboratively inquire about research-based strategies that will support their work with students.

An important leadership responsibility is to explore and challenge the mental models of teachers. Mental models are the images and beliefs we hold about the world (Senge et al., 2000). As a school faculty increasingly becomes a professional learning community, these mental models become both more transparent and more aligned, converging in a shared vision.

Teacher leaders play an important role in this continual staff development process. As they model both exemplary instructional and assessment practices in the classroom, they also model reflective practice by recognizing and challenging their own mental models. By guiding teachers toward making a personal connection between what is happening in their classroom and the research on instruction, teachers develop ownership of their professional development. In Springfield, Illinois, teacher leaders have taken on the roles of school improvement literacy coaches in each school in the district. These coaches facilitate professional conversations that are consistent with adult learning models such as that developed by Kolb (1984), in which teachers have a concrete experience in their classroom, reflect about it, develop generalizations that can be applied to new teaching experiences, and then test and apply their new understanding in new

contexts to improve teaching and learning. Reflective questioning prompts teachers to explore the "so what" and the "now what" of issues they identify through the process. By incorporating reflective exercises into staff development, participants will make connections between new ideas and their own practice.

10. Family Involvement
(or, Enlist the Rest of Your Family in Healthy Options)

When a family becomes involved in your fitness goals, they are able to provide support in ways you could never imagine. The same support can come from families in your schools. Families need to be involved in their children's literacy experiences from the beginning, and should be invited to participate at every turn along the way. In effective schools, parents are not just informed about their child's learning, but are equal partners in the education of their children (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Parents and families are invited into the schools and are welcomed as partners in the learning community. A powerful example occurred in an Illinois school (McGee, 2003) where the teachers wore "I'm number two" buttons during parent conferences. When asked about the message, teachers were quick to explain their recognition that they, as teachers, come second to families. Parents are recognized for the valuable and primary role they play in their children's lives. When parents are involved in their child's literacy development, literacy partnerships evolve between schools and families. These partnerships can deepen connections and commitment for all parties involved. These literacy partnerships can commence with events such as a beginning-of-the-year family reading night, and should then strategically evolve into deeper, more meaningful exchanges.

Hindley (1996) describes how she involved parents in their child's literacy assessments. Prior to parent conferences, the child responds to a reading and writing self-assessment, which is sent home for parents' reactions. Then, the teacher shares the information during a conference, which leads to dialogue about everyone's perceptions, understandings, and goals.

The parents' knowledge base and literacy understanding can also be expanded through school-based literacy events. In one building, a first-grade teacher provided dinner and a time for families to talk about reading with children at home. She provided techniques for parents and siblings to use during oral reading at home that were consistent with how she supported the children at school. She demonstrated interactions with a child so that families could see guided reading "in action." Parents left the session with a bookmark outlining easy steps to help their child read, and a few books for practice (Corso, Funk, & Gaffney, 2002). This school also provided Saturday "Make and Take" sessions for families of kindergarteners and first graders. During these sessions, families learned how to make simple texts, based on children's oral language skills, for their child to read at home. They made books with the materials provided and took them home for their child to read.

Family involvement also goes beyond the classroom door, and should extend into community spaces. Consider having a literacy event outside the school building, at a neighborhood community center or public library. Oftentimes, teachers and staff are the main liaisons for connecting with the community. School teams may be encouraged to brainstorm ways to access all subgroups of the school population. Reach inside your building in order to reach out into the community.

Be careful to not pigeon-hole literacy by limiting the scope to children's book reading. Consider expanding book events to include other areas of literacy—such as "family write-ins," where families work together to publish a family story; a poetry session; or a story-telling event that

encourages family and community members to share stories from their lives. A wonderful example can be drawn from a literacy and family-focused classroom that used "family stories" to launch the children's narrative writing. The students interviewed family members for seeds for stories, and then brought these seeds into the classroom and grew them into full-fledged, illustrated memories of a family tale. These stories revealed the lives of different families, cultures, and people. Families came to hear their stories read aloud, and many cherished them as validation of their life histories. Literacy takes many forms, and it is the responsibility of educators to ensure that family involvement pervades children's school lives.

Concluding Thoughts

Our goal is to provide a scheme that may be used by principals, literacy leaders, and school teams to take stock of the literacy health of their school. The assessment may show that the school is *fit* on most factors, or that a boost is needed in several areas. Most importantly, as with physical fitness, is to determine priorities and a starting place. In terms of literacy fitness, we have emphasized the need to enroll others as equal partners and the importance of making decisions based on data. Lambert (2005) found that principals and teachers in schools with sustained improvement had progressed through three phases of development: instructive, transitional, and high capacity. While the principal takes the lead and demonstrates strength in the instructive phase, the leadership roles of teachers expand as they negotiate the transition phase. In schools with high leadership capacity, the leadership roles of principals and teachers are less distinguishable and more reciprocal. John-Steiner (2000) suggests that an integrative pattern of collaboration—in which roles are interchangeable, labor is divided, and knowledge is shared—has the greatest potential for innovation.

Now, take a step back. Prepare to stretch. Breathe in. Breathe out. What is your take-action point? Who are the key players to engage in the process first? What is possible for children's literacy in your school?

References

Arin-Krupp, J. (1982). *The adult learner: A unique entity*. Manchester, CT: Adult Development and Learning.

Barth, R. (2003). *Lessons learned: Shaping relationships and the culture of the workplace*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Buehl, D. (2001). *Classroom strategies for interactive learning (2nd Edition).* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Corso, L., Funk, S., & Gaffney, J. S. (2002). An educational evening out. *The Reading Teacher*, *55*, 326–329.

Covey, S. R. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon & Shuster.

DuFour, R. (2004). Schools as learning communities. *Educational Leadership*, *61*(8), 6–11.

DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. E. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Services.

Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2001). Guiding readers and writers grades 3–6: Teaching comprehension, genre, and content literacy. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fullan, M. (1995). The school as a learning organization: Distant dreams. *Theory into Practice*, *34*(4), 230–235.

Gaffney, J. S., & Anderson, R. C. (1991). Two-tiered scaffolding: Congruent processes of teaching and learning. In E. H. Hiebert (Ed.), *Literacy for a diverse society: Perspectives, programs, and policies* (pp. 184–198). New York: Teachers College Press.

Hall, G. E., & Hord, S. E. (2001). *Implementing change: Patterns, principles, and potholes*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Hartmann, J. A., DeCicco, E. K., & Griffin, G. (November, 1994). Urban students thrive as independent researchers. *Educational Leadership*, *52*(3), 46–47.

Harvey, S., & Gouvdis, A. (2000). *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension to enhance understanding.* York, ME: Stenhouse.

Harwayne, S. (1999). *Going public: Priorities and practices at the Manhattan New School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Harwayne, S. (2001). Reading to inform your writing. In S. Harwayne, *Writing through childhood: Rethinking process and product*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hindley, J. (1996). *In the company of children*. York, ME: Stenhouse.

John-Steiner, V. (2000). *Creative collaboration*. New York: Oxford University.

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning.* New York: Prentice-Hall.

Lambert, L. (2005). Leadership for lasting reform. *Educational Leadership*, *62*(5), 62–65.

Lyons, C. A., & Pinnell, G. S. (2001). *Systems for change in literacy education: A guide to professional development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Mathews, L. J., & Crow, G. M. (2003). *Being and becoming a principal: Role conceptions for contemporary principals and assistant principals*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

McGee, G., (2003, April). *Closing the Illinois Achievement Gap: Lessons from the "Golden Spike" High Poverty High Performing Schools*. Presentation at American Educational Research Association (AERA), Chicago, IL.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, Pub. L. 107–110, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 *et seq.* (2002). Retrieved November 15, 2005, from http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html

O'Neill, J. (2000). SMART goals, SMART schools. *Educational Leadership, 57*(5), 46–50.

Prochaska, J. O., DiClemente, C. C., & Norcross, J. C. (1992). In search of how people change: Applications to addictive behaviors. *American Psychologist*, *47*, 1102–1114.

Schmoker, M. (1999). *Results: The key to continuous school improvement* (2nd ed). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Senge, P.M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization.* New York: Doubleday.

Senge, P., Cambron-McCabe, N., Lucas, T., Smith, B., Dutton, J., & Kleiner, A. (2000). *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education.* New York: Doubleday.

Stiggins, R. (1997). *Student-centered classroom assessment*. (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Stiggins, R. (2004). *Student-involved assessment for learning*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Van den Berg, R. (2002). Teachers' meanings regarding educational practice. *Review of Educational Research*, *72*, 577–625.

Wheaton, C., & Kay, S. (1999). Every child will read—we guarantee it. *Educational Leadership, 57*(2), 52–56.