

Home > Resources > Classroom Practice > Instruction

Essential Literacy Partnerships at the South Lawrence East Elementary School

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Since joining the Coalition of Essential Schools in February 1999, the South Lawrence East Elementary School has used the CES Common Principles as the foundation for enhancing our school culture and ensuring student success. We regard literacy skills – the abilities to decode and comprehend grade-level text, to engage with text thoughtfully, and to express oneself clearly in writing – to be essential competencies for all children to master before they leave our school. As we are located in an urban setting where more than 85 percent of students identify the language of the home as something other than English, we must provide individualized and personalized instruction to meet a diversity of learning needs, to meet our literacy goals for each student, and to attain our district’s commitment to “Proficiency for All.”

A Partnership for Literacy

Given the needs of a large second language and minority population, it is crucial to provide learning environments rich in vocabulary and literature and with a strong phonics foundation for decoding and fluency. We also want our students to learn and practice comprehension strategies that promote thinking deeply about meaning. Our teachers must clearly understand the constructs of building comprehension strategies through curriculum mapping, an ongoing flow of assessment information, and opportunities to read as much as possible.

To help us meet our literacy goals, we began a partnership in the spring of 2000 with the Eliot-Pearson Center for Applied Child Development (CACD) at Tufts University. CACD provides customized support to schools that seek to improve literacy teaching and learning, and its child development and literacy specialists have developed the “Learn to Read by Reading” (LRR) model. We chose to adopt LRR’s balanced approach to literacy instruction in large part because it is based on values that are consistent with the CES Common Principles, emphasizing explicit teaching of essential reading and writing strategies so that children learn to think deeply about text; warm, inclusive and supportive communities of readers and writers; differentiated instruction to meet diverse learning need; intensive support to the most at-risk students; varied forms of authentic assessment to inform day-to-day lesson planning; time for students to engage in authentic reading and writing while the teacher acts as a coach; and ownership and innovation on the part of teachers.

Literacy Instruction in the Classroom

The LRR model depends on a skillful and committed approach. Our teachers must understand the strategies used by proficient readers and writers, use assessment to identify their students’ learning needs, and plan instruction that meets these needs. The model requires a high degree of personalized teaching, collaboration with colleagues, and ongoing reflection.

In our classrooms, we have a daily two to two and a half hour literacy period with the following elements:

Readers’ Workshop – approximately one hour

Writers’ Workshop – approximately 45 minutes

Phonics/Word Study – approximately 15 minutes

Interactive Read Aloud – approximately 15 minutes

Readers’ Workshop and Writers’ Workshop consist of a focus lesson, reading/writing and conferring, and a group share. The daily Focus Lesson is a short, whole-class, teacher-directed lesson that often involves teacher demonstration or “think aloud,” followed by a “guided practice” in which students try out what they have just been taught. During the Reading/Writing and Conferring phase, students practice the strategies from the focus lessons, while teachers work with them individually or in small groups. Teachers plan their large- and small-group lessons based on careful analysis of the notes they take while conferring with

individual students. The workshop ends with a brief Group Share during which students share their work and their use of the targeted literacy strategies.

Phonics/Word Study is taught on a daily basis through short, teacher-directed lessons emphasizing decoding, encoding (spelling), word recognition, and vocabulary development. Because research shows that phonics is best taught systematically, LRR includes detailed lesson plans designed to help children master the phonic elements in a logical sequence.

During Interactive Read Aloud, the teacher reads high-quality children's literature to the entire class, and then engages students in thoughtful, reflective discussions in response to these readings.

These structures allow us to realize the principle of "Student as Worker, Teacher as Coach." Students spend much of the Readers' and Writers' Workshop blocks reading and writing independently, practicing literacy strategies while the teacher confers with individuals or small groups. During more teacher-centered components, explicit instruction and modeling precede opportunities for students to practice what they have just been taught while the teacher "guides from the side."

A Coaching Model of Professional Development

A coaching model has also been central to our professional development in literacy. Coaches from CACD work side-by-side with our teachers in their classrooms, demonstrating lessons, co-teaching, and providing informal feedback. They have also worked with us as we plan lessons and organize instruction into lesson trajectories and units of study. As we enter year seven of our partnership, we continue to refine focus lessons, improve guided reading and writing groups, and ensure we meet the needs of all our students.

Over the years, we have increased the abilities of our own staff members to provide coaching within our school. Two master level teachers serve as full-time content specialist coaches, working closely with the principal to enhance instruction, monitor student progress, and implement interventions as appropriate. They collaborate closely with the CACD coaches to identify areas of need within the school and assist teachers who have questions about particular instructional practices.

In 2006-2007, we expanded the roles of our school-based coaches and developed two Laboratory Classrooms, one for literacy and the other for mathematics. Each coach plans and delivers the workshop instruction daily to a selected group of third and fourth grade students. Teachers in the school visit each "Lab Class" three times during the year, for a total of nine observations. During the visits, they use a reflection summary tool to record their experience and learning. Following the visits, they meet with the coach for debriefing and discussion. These Lab Class visits have proven to be a tremendous catalyst for teacher learning. Because the coaches and students get to know each other in a personal way, teaching and learning becomes authentic, and lessons can build upon one another over time. Teachers apply their observations to their own daily practice. The Lab Class model provides powerful opportunities for teachers to act as coaches both to their students and to their colleagues.

Monitoring Our Progress

Another key component of our partnership with CACD/Tufts University as an LRR school has been the use of Learning Walks to review our school-wide progress in growing our literacy instruction and to create additional opportunities for teacher reflection and learning. Twice each year, the principal creates teams of observers that include teachers, administrators, and a CACD coach. The team visits several classrooms, timing the visits to observe particular instructional practices (e.g., writing focus lessons or guided reading groups) that had been identified as focus areas for professional development.

We do not use Learning Walks to evaluate individual teachers. Instead, administrators and the CACD coach look closely at the literacy instruction taking place across the school to determine the impact of professional development efforts, to identify any confusions teachers may have, and address areas that require continued attention. Teachers who participate in the Learning Walk team use the visits as opportunities for peer observation and self-reflection. Following Learning Walks, "feedback sessions" provide additional opportunities for deep, meaningful discourse regarding teaching sophistication and learning nuances. Teachers are asked to complete the following sentences about each lesson observed:

I just loved the way...

Other teachers should come into this classroom to learn how to...

Observing in the classroom helped ME understand more about...

One thing I'd like to ask this teacher is...

We Have Come So Very Far

Our task is far from finished, but we have come so very far. Children love to read books they can select themselves. Classroom libraries are rich in genre studies, author collections, poetry selections, chapter books, and read aloud titles. Teachers utilize professional development, coaching opportunities, peer observations, and collaborative teaming to consistently improve their practice leading to incredible levels of refined practice and sophistication of lesson delivery. Support structures, including tutorials and guided reading groupings assure that struggling readers are receiving additional daily instruction. Our school feels alive with literacy, full of children who love to read at school and at home.

Our efforts to implement a balanced literacy model have helped our school to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress in English Language Arts for several cycles. Although state and federal mandates are making such goals more and more difficult to reach, we are confident that our commitment to continued professional learning and growth, along with our Common Principle guideposts, will help us ensure the success of each and every one of our students.

South Lawrence East Elementary School

Affirmed in Membership with the Coalition of Essential Schools 1999

Grades one through four

520 students, 44 teachers

Lawrence, Massachusetts Public School Demographics

Pre-kindergarten -12th grade enrollment: 12,820

87% Hispanic

83% Low income

83% First language not English

24% English Language Learners

18% Students with disabilities

Related Resource

For more on the South Lawrence East Elementary School, see "Personalization, High Standards and the Assessment Debates" in Horace Volume 18, Number 2, Winter 2002. This article is available online at www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/219.

Thanks to the continued support of our superintendent, Dr. Wilfredo T. Laboy, the partnership with CACD has been a key element of our commitment to the CES Common Principles of CES. For more information about the LRR model, contact Lynn Schade, CACD Program Director, Tufts University, 177 College Avenue, Medford, MA, 617 627-2892, ase.tufts.edu/cacd.

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Ms. Toomey continues to be inspired and renewed by the power of collaboration and the excitement that comes with helping each child to succeed.

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