

# “We Can’t Afford to Rest on Our Laurels”: Creating a District-Wide Content Literacy Instructional Plan

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*Districts in communities experiencing population shifts are being challenged to address three concerns simultaneously: be responsive to the strengths and educational needs of students from increasingly diverse backgrounds, provide meaningful professional development for an expanding or contracting workforce to meet those needs, and ensure that state and federal accountability targets are met. This study reports on the efforts of one such district to design and implement a district-wide content literacy instructional plan for its middle and high schools. The results of the study show that the district was able to meet all accountability targets despite shifts in student demographics and a 16% increase in the number of teachers on staff.*

Secondary schools across the country are struggling to ensure that their students make adequate yearly progress in reading. These progress targets are set each year to ensure that all students in an educational system, especially those in historically disadvantaged subgroups, receive deserved attention (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The predominant focus of scholarship and research has been directed at urban schools across the nation, where 95% of first- and second-generation immigrants and 85% of all African American students attend school (Fix & Passel, 2003). However, suburban schools have received comparatively less attention, despite the fact that they look increasingly similar to urban schools (Frey, 2001). For example, nationwide, the majority of Hispanics (54%) now live in areas designated as suburban (Suro & Singer, 2002).

This shift in student demographics can be acute in rapid-growth school districts around the country. Communities like Broward County (Florida), Clark County (Nevada), and Maricopa County (Arizona) have seen not only a rapid rise in the number of students served each year but also a dramatic change in who is being taught in their schools. For example, Broward County experienced a 58% increase in school population in the 1990s (Office of Urban Planning and Development, 2003). By 2003-2004,

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*NASSP Bulletin*, Vol. 90 No. 1 March 2006 37-48

DOI: 10.1177/0192636505283862

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<http://bulletin.sagepub.com> hosted at <http://online.sagepub.com>

nearly 65% of the students enrolled were members of ethnic or racial groups that would have erroneously been described as “minority” at an earlier time in U.S. history (Broward County Schools, 2004).

Districts with declining enrollment face similar challenges. Loss of center-city populations have hit some urban districts hard, such as the Detroit, Michigan, Public Schools, which has estimated a loss of 10,000 students in the past year (Moore, 2004). Also, rural districts are not shielded from this phenomenon. Small districts in Arkansas are considering consolidation in order to maintain supports and services. At the same time, the support needs are changing because of demographic shifts. For example, in northwest Arkansas, there has been an 800% increase in the number of Hispanic residents (Institute for Economic Advancement, 2004). Whether expanding, contracting, or experiencing demographic shifts, these changes add a layer of complexity to the challenge of improving student achievement.

Districts across the nation face pressures from outside as well as within. Chief among these external pressures are the state and federal mandates to “leave no child behind,” expressed in the form of annually increasing achievement growth targets and sanctions for not meeting those expectations. Community expectations of continued excellence, especially in districts that have enjoyed a long-standing reputation of high academic achievement, contribute to internal pressures. Administrators often serve as the lightning rod, a role made more complex by alterations in population size and demographics. In addition, veteran members of the school faculty may feel unprepared for the changes in the educational needs of the students arriving in their classrooms. As Hannaway, Fix, and Passel (2004) noted,

We should exercise caution about being overly narrow in defining what we mean by “urban.” Many schools and teachers in suburban areas are dealing with the same challenges as those in urban areas. Such challenges may be particularly trying for older, experienced teachers whose daily classroom life has changed dramatically in a short period with the influx of new types of students. (p. 9)

Some school districts have adopted a proactive stance to address the complexities of shifting enrollment and accompanying changes in the strengths and educational needs of both students and staff. One response has been a schoolwide focus on literacy (e.g., Fisher, 2001). In this model, teachers within a school agree on specific content literacy instructional strategies. These strategies are used multiple times a week to teach the content of the class. Over time, these strategies become familiar to learners, increasing metacognition (National Research Council, 2005). As students become proficient, they begin using these strategies across their classes.

An additional benefit of this schoolwide approach is the consistent professional development for teachers. The California Department of Education (CDE, 2000) has recommended that secondary schools develop and implement a schoolwide literacy

initiative to improve student achievement. A template for the design of a schoolwide literacy plan can be found on the CDE Web site at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/rl/sd/documents/swlit04template.rtf>.

However, a school-by-school focus is time- and labor-intensive. This is even more complex in districts managing population shifts and changing enrollment patterns. It seems reasonable to ask whether a district-wide focus on specific content literacy instructional strategies could have a positive impact on student achievement in a district facing such challenges.

### **Presidential Valley Schools**

Presidential Valley Schools (district and school names are pseudonyms) educate just more than 23,000 students in Grades K-12. The district is classified as suburban, with 19% of its population of Hispanic or Latino origin, 6% of its population Asian/Pacific Islander, 6% of its population Filipino, 5% of its population African American, and 2% of its population Native American. Ten percent of the district population qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch, and 12% are students with disabilities. However, this district is challenged by a rapid increase in enrollment, averaging nearly 10% each year since 1999-2000. This increase has been fueled in part by rapidly rising real estate prices in California. As metropolitan areas have become prohibitively expensive for more residents, Presidential Valley has become a destination of choice for many families. What was once perceived as a small community far away from the city has become an “exurb” populated by people who work in the metropolitan areas. With the building spurt has come a more diverse school-age population: The students of Presidential Valley speak more than 50 languages and dialects.

The district is one of the highest achieving in California but has had difficulty meeting growth targets. In California, the state calculates an Academic Performance Index (API) for each school. The API is an aggregate measure of the school’s achievement and has served as the cornerstone of the statewide accountability system since the 1998-1999 academic year. It has a numeric range of 200 to 1,000, with 800 serving as the state target. The majority of the API comes from standards-based tests, rather than norm-referenced items, thus directly measuring students’ mastery of the English, science, social studies, and math content of the state standards. As part of the API, schools must meet their annual growth targets, which are calculated as the difference between 800 and the school’s score, divided by 7. Thus, a school with an API of 750 (and therefore a difference of 50 points from the state API goal) would have a growth target of 7 points per year. Newer adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets have been added, and Presidential Valley now hosts significant subgroups for all the racial or ethnic groups mentioned above, as well as English language learners, students with disabilities, and students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Like many districts, Presidential Valley has seen the number of accountability targets rise in the past 5 years.

At the time of this study, there were five secondary schools in Presidential Valley: three middle schools and two high schools. A staff of 432 secondary teachers were employed in these five schools with a total of 10,875 students. The middle and high schools were the focus of this investigation as they strove to meet the challenges accompanying changing enrollment in an age of accountability.

## **Developing the Plan**

Faced with projections of rapid growth, an increase in students from diverse learning and language backgrounds, and a continuous influx of teachers new to the district, the district director of secondary education determined that a focused approach was necessary to meet these challenges. Under his guidance, 15 teachers were identified to serve on the district leadership team (3 from each school). In addition, the director required that the 3 teachers selected to represent the school be from different departments. In other words, a school could not name 2 science teachers to the district leadership team.

The leadership team was charged with identifying specific content literacy instructional strategies that would be implemented district-wide in the secondary schools. As the director explained to them at the time, “We’ve always done a good job here, but we can’t afford to rest on our laurels.” The leadership team established two criteria for considering an instructional strategy: It must have a research base, and the strategy must be useful across all content areas. The leadership team settled on the following strategies for district-wide implementation:

- Note taking
- Read alouds
- Questioning
- Vocabulary
- Graphic organizers

The leadership team reasoned that each of these strategies could be used to provide students with access to the content in ways that build their knowledge through the use of language and literacy. Note taking was selected because many teachers already required it in their classes, although rarely in a consistent form. The Cornell note-taking system, developed by Walter Pauk (1989) for law students at Cornell University, was identified as the primary note-taking system to be taught at Presidential Valley. Read aloud sessions, identified by adolescents as the preferred method for the introduction of new content material (Worthy, 2002), were chosen because of the range of material available for all content areas. The leadership team selected questioning because of the research on the effectiveness of student-generated questions in content areas such as science (Chin, Brown, & Bruce, 2002) and mathematics (Mason, 2000). Instructional questioning strategies such as question-answer relationships

(Raphael, 1984) and question the author (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997) would receive attention in the district's literacy plan.

As with many secondary schools, vocabulary, particularly technical and specialized words related to content area learning, was identified as a particular concern for the leadership team. They were interested in the research of Farley and Elmore (1992), who found that knowledge of vocabulary served as a better predictor of reading comprehension than IQ scores. Therefore, vocabulary instruction was made a part of the district-wide literacy plan. Because reading comprehension of informational texts was viewed as a critical area of need, the team also chose graphic organizers as a method for visually representing concepts, presentations, and textbook readings. The pairing of graphic organizers with textbooks has been found to be particularly successful with struggling learners (Lovitt & Horton, 1994).

Once these strategies were identified as priorities for the district's literacy plan, the leadership team and secondary curriculum director designed a multi-year implementation plan. All agreed that capacity building at each school was essential to support the anticipated hiring of new teachers in the next several years. Therefore, a systematic rollout of the plan would be necessary. A summary of the district's rollout appears in Table 1 and is further described in detail in the following section.

### **Year 1 Professional Development— Introducing the District-Wide Plan**

During Year 1, 63 secondary school teachers participated in 5 full days of professional development focused on the district-wide content literacy instructional strategies. These 63 teachers were selected by principals because of their leadership roles or status on their respective campuses. The 63 teachers met from October to March and devoted a full day to studying each of the strategies. As part of each of the sessions, participants were provided time to work with others from their discipline on integrating the focus strategy into their curriculum. Teachers brought their textbooks and lesson plans to the seminars and identified ways to integrate the strategy into classroom instruction. For example, during the session on vocabulary instruction, a group of science teachers met to identify key vocabulary words for use each week in their respective classes (e.g., biology, chemistry, physics) as well as specific instructional approaches to vocabulary learning that they would use (e.g., Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002; Brassell & Flood, 2003). During another session, a group of social studies teachers identified graphic organizers that they could use with specific chapters of their textbooks (e.g., Burke, 2002; Wood, Lapp, & Flood, 1992).

The district implementation plan called for conceptual groundwork to be laid at each site. Therefore, participating teachers agreed to share ideas from the session at their next department meeting. This encouraged a spread of effect by providing all of the teachers in this district with some initial information about the district-wide literacy

**Table 1. Three-Year Implementation of District-Wide Literacy Plan**

Year	Number of Participants	Days of Professional Development	Efforts to Build Capacity	Going to Scale
1	N = 63	5 full-day sessions on literacy strategies (1 day per strategy)	All sessions included time for planning by content area	Participants shared information as part of monthly department agendas at schools
2	N = 11 • 254 in Year 2 cohort • 58 from Year 1 cohort	5 days (Year 2 cohort) 5 after-school follow-up sessions (Year 1 cohort)	Year 1 participants attended monthly follow-up sessions on use of strategies	Administrators received training on classroom observations of literacy strategies outlined in district plan
3	N = 309 • 175 in Year 3 cohort • 54 from Year 2 cohort • 55 from Year 1 cohort • 25 newly hired teachers	5 days (Year 3 cohort) 5 after-school follow-up sessions (Year 2 cohort) 2 days on peer coaching (Year 1 cohort) 5 induction program sessions (newly hired teachers)	Year 2 participants attended monthly follow-up sessions on use of strategies Year 1 participants attended 2-day training on peer coaching	Induction program for newly hired teachers included literacy plan Use of literacy strategies included in administrators' classroom observations

instructional plan. As one of the art teachers noted, “We were talking about read alouds during our department meeting. The whole room got excited when we realized that we had ‘permission’ to read to our students during the arts!” Principals reported another effect—requests from nonparticipating teachers to be included in next year’s professional development.

### **Year 2 Professional Development— Expansion and Accountability**

The 2nd year of the implementation of the district-wide content literacy instructional plan involved the selection of an additional 54 teachers who would participate in a similar series of professional development sessions. This would mean that, by the

end of the 2nd year, more than 25% of the teachers in this district would have had extensive professional development, and they would have provided every other teacher with information about the district-wide plan via department meetings. Although the district would have liked to provide this level of professional development for every teacher in the district during the 1st year, finances, access to substitutes, and a host of other factors prevented this.

In addition to the second round of teacher professional development, administrators were provided with information on each of the instructional strategies and were taught what to look for when the strategy was being implemented appropriately. As the site administrators and the district director began to look for evidence that the information from the professional development sessions was being implemented, teachers increased their attention to the use of quality content literacy strategies.

Furthermore, the original group of 63 teachers was invited to participate in monthly paid, after-school sessions in which the district-wide strategies were reviewed. These sessions lasted for 2 hours and allowed these Year 1 participants an opportunity to refresh their thinking about the strategies and to share their successes and challenges with their peers.

### **Year 3 Professional Development—Going to Scale**

During the 3rd year of implementation, the district allocated funding for 175 teachers to participate in the professional development series focused on the district-wide content literacy instructional plan. This figure included the staff of a new middle school, the first to open with schoolwide literacy strategies in place.

In addition, the 25 new secondary teachers hired into the district participated in after-school professional development sessions focused on the district-wide literacy plan as part of their induction program, bringing the total percentage of teachers who had experienced the intensive professional development series to just below 70%. This is especially notable in light of the fact that the secondary staff increased by 16% during the course of this study.

During this 3rd year, the site administrators provided written feedback to participating teachers on their use of the specific literacy instructional strategies. By waiting until the 3rd year of implementation to formalize evaluation, the district ensured that teachers were not being assessed until they had opportunities to learn and practice the use of the literacy strategies in their classrooms. Administrators were more comfortable with this model because, like their teachers, they had a practice year to refine their observation and feedback skills on the use of the strategies.

With increased accountability came more supports for teachers. The 54 teachers from Year 2 were provided the opportunity to participate in paid, after-school sessions to sustain their focus on the district-wide plan like the cohort the year before had done. Furthermore, the 1st-year cohort, arguably the teacher leaders from the school sites, were provided with 2 full days of professional development on peer coaching.

They were each provided a copy of the book *Peer Coaching for Educators* (Gottesman, 2000) and participated in a book club and professional development series focused on their new role of peer coaching within their department or school to ensure that the district-wide content literacy instructional plan was fully implemented.

### **The Outcomes—Does Focused Professional Development Matter?**

In his welcome at the first professional development session in Year 1 of the district-wide literacy plan, the director of secondary education noted, “We know that our students can read; the problem is they *don’t* read.” His statement became a theme that the participants returned to again and again. Several criteria could be considered to determine the success of a district-wide content literacy instructional plan. Anecdotally, teachers, administrators, and parents consistently report that students are reading more today than before content literacy was a focus in the school district. It is worthwhile to note that the middle and high schools have established silent sustained reading (SSR) as a result of this focus because teachers and students reported that students wanted to read but were not being provided the opportunity to read. This increase in reading in and out of school is consistent with Pilgreen’s (2000) findings on the effects of a similar secondary SSR program.

Another way to determine the success of this initiative is to examine student achievement data. Although the district has historically been a higher performing district, the schools had some difficulty meeting the growth targets. It has been suggested that the tests are more sensitive to changes with struggling readers and that gaining a few top points is more difficult. Significantly, all five secondary schools met their accountability targets during the course of this study (see Table 2). Furthermore, in 2001, there was only one school with an API score higher than 800—the goal for every school in the state. By 2004, three of the five schools had reached the 800 mark. In the last 2 years of this study, the district has also met its AYP targets for each subgroup—an area of identified concern in this rapid-growth district facing changing student demographics. Clearly, the focus on content literacy instructional strategies did not detract from student learning of content and most likely resulted in changes in achievement. But the question is why. Why did this focus on content literacy instructional strategies at a district-wide level matter?

### **Explaining Why**

The first reason that makes sense from this experience is that students focus on the content when they understand how to think about it. As an AP Physics teacher said, “I thought this focus on reading would take away from the physics. It hasn’t. I think they actually do better in physics because I make sure they know how to read

**Table 2. Summary of Achievement Changes**

School	2001 Score	2004 Score	Met Targets
Lincoln High	755	758	Yes
Washington Middle	776	814	Yes
Taft Middle	803	815	Yes
Roosevelt High	747	775	Yes
Kennedy Middle	758	809	Yes

and think about physics.” When students are provided instructional strategies that ensure that they process the text, they learn more about the content (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Flood, Lapp, & Fisher, 2003; Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991).

The second reason is that consistency matters. When each teacher uses graphic organizers or teaches how to take notes, students learn systems. The days of learning how to take Cornell notes in biology and then using a different note-taking system in social studies and then a third type in English are over. Students learn the strategies and then use them across their day, thus focusing more on the content and less on the specific way that the teacher is providing the instruction (National Research Council, 2005). For example, consistent instruction of student-generated questioning strategies results in more sophisticated questions over time, with commensurate gains in comprehension (Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996).

Third, and perhaps most important, professional development matters. More than two decades of research by Joyce and Showers (2002) have articulated the role of professional development in raising student achievement at both high-performing and struggling schools. Stated simply, school and district initiatives require a commitment to professional development in order to foster new instructional repertoires of teachers. This ongoing professional development includes time when teachers can meet to discuss their practices, as well as peer coaching to elicit feedback from one another (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Furthermore, the systematic cycles of professional development, peer coaching, and accountability created a common vocabulary among educators at the schools (Sparks, 2004). Teachers new to the district who joined the expanding school staffs found that department members as well as colleagues from other disciplines used a common vocabulary of note taking, read alouds, questioning, vocabulary, and graphic organizers, regardless of content. A caveat: Not all strategies are created equally, and these strategies were not the only thing these teachers did. However, these district-wide instructional strategies became the foundation, serving as the core approaches students could expect in their classes.

## Conclusion

The results in Presidential Valley echo the findings of the Learning First Alliance study, which identified characteristics of successful district achievement initiatives (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, as cited in Calweti, 2004):

- A willingness by leaders to seek solutions without assigning blame
- Systemwide approach to improving instruction
- Focusing on student learning and guiding instructional improvement
- Decisions based on data, not instinct
- Adopted new approaches to professional development
- Redefined and extended leadership roles beyond the superintendent and principals
- District commitment to sustaining reform over the long haul. (p. 21)

Districts around the country face challenges similar to those seen in Presidential Valley. Rapidly rising or declining enrollment often affects the student demographics and may alter the profile of the school. Learners with a broad range of strengths and educational needs enter classrooms staffed by teachers prepared to teach in a community that no longer exists. Also, new staff members ensure that there are always people in the school who were not here the previous year and did not participate in the staff development on a particular program or approach. This necessitates a plan for building capacity to sustain district-wide efforts during cycles of change—akin to changing the tires while the bus is in motion. Finally, increasingly complex state and federal accountability systems ensure that no one can “rest on their laurels.” This district’s efforts at designing and implementing a systematic district literacy plan to meet these challenges is enjoying early success because of the leadership and commitment to long-term professional development.

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