

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Principals as Literacy Leaders

Every school is contextually unique. Some schools are deeply engaged in academic reform efforts to combat the effects of generational poverty in their neighborhoods. Other school systems grapple to prevent teen suicide. Educators across the board endeavor to help students cope with and overcome the myriad of obstacles they face on a daily basis. The issue is not whether tensions exist in schools, but how we choose to address them.

Although students who grow up in middle class households typically have parents who advocate for their well-being, students who grow up in underserved communities often have fewer positive role models and limited exposure to more worldly experiences and perspectives than their more economically affluent peers. Educators understand that an academic divide endures between groups of students, and schools often perpetuate inequities that result in unequal lives.

There are effective strategies that any principal, in any setting, might consider implementing as a means to overcome the challenges faced by educators who aim to improve student learning in their schools and classrooms. These strategies, however, are not intended solely for educators who work with underserved students; they are universal, proven by research to work for all student populations, and align to the competencies described in the International Literacy Association's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017*.

If we truly believe every child has a basic human right to read, principals have a moral imperative to monitor and ensure equitable practices that nurture students' self-efficacy and lead to comparable academic outcomes. This vision can be accomplished when principals enlist the cooperation of others and model and reinforce practices that advance learning and literacy. The framework presented here, consisting of challenge, clarity, and feedback and their related indicators, is explained such that these structures are useful in multiple educational environments, including primary classrooms, secondary science labs, professional learning communities, and in the other common spaces where teachers and principals work.

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Crafting a Learning Culture: Principals as Lead Learners

Although the term *principal* may imply that an individual has exclusive decision-making power on a school campus, reform and improvement efforts work best when principals collaborate with staff to develop collective agreements that are valued, visible, and provide direction to all members of the school community. Forums where staff members are asked to weigh in about the current and desired state of the school are excellent opportunities for principals to model openness to collaborative processes.

Careful attention must be paid to the mechanisms and climate of these meetings, as principals' behavior can prevent or promote ownership toward a collective vision. Although some principals may have less training or experience than teaching professionals, principals are responsible for setting high literacy expectations and engaging colleagues in reflective conversations about instructional practices and student learning. Intentional structures for collaborative decision making ensure that all teachers see themselves as responsible for helping students to meet literacy goals. By flattening the hierarchical structure that is typically inherent in schools, principals signal that they are also learners, creating a deeper sense of community and promoting equity within the staff.

When principals foster community and equity among staff members, increased commitment toward initiatives occurs. Initiatives are more successful when people feel connected and contribute toward an identified outcome. Principals who establish learning-centered climates model curiosity and vulnerability, signaling to others that they do not have all of the answers but are eager to learn. By inviting people to conversations, instead of allowing people to sit in the back, principals are rewarded by dynamic teams who learn together and create better ideas and efforts than no one individual could produce alone.

Processes that foster collective action are an important first step to improving student performance because individuals with different strengths and loyalties are united around a shared purpose. Lasting change, however, requires that principals continually evaluate instructional quality to ensure teachers are supported with the latest research on literacy learning

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and knowledge of culturally and linguistically relevant curriculum. Data should inform ongoing conversations about shared definitions of literacy expectations and student performance. These shared definitions become hallmarks of the school culture, deepening staff commitment to quality instruction through discussions and shared experiences.

Principals' ability to create a collaborative leadership structure is crucial to empower all staff to sustain a school culture where learning is visible and valued at all levels. Effective principals articulate how student achievement is bolstered, rather than hindered, by the cultural and linguistic capital of the school community. As lead learners, principals are positioned to affirm this diversity and advocate for relevant curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices that lead to increased student outcomes.

Although teachers employ numerous strategies throughout their teaching days, not all that is taught is necessarily learned. Because variability in student needs, attributes, and interests exists, teachers must be supported to provide strong learning environments for every student. The following sections detail the application of three research-proven, high-yield influences that are essential components to a high-quality instructional program: challenge, clarity, and feedback.

These influences are action oriented and universal to all ages and content areas. As lead learners, principals' engagement must be greater than simply monitoring for these elements when conducting learning walks is recommended. This works best when principals regularly self-reflect on their own leadership practices with teachers and "walk the talk." Teachers, as well as students, appreciate being led by principals who understand how to stretch their thinking without causing fear or intimidation.

Challenge

Keeping an eye on students' cognitive engagement is crucial to learning such that students are appropriately challenged. Learning is supposed to be challenging. When teachers do not plan instruction with appropriate rigor and interactive tasks, students may disengage or act out. Students neither have the stamina for, nor are they interested in, lessons that are lecture oriented or involve a series of initiate-respond-evaluate questions that are posed and answered by the teacher. Rather,

students respond to instruction that is in the “Goldilocks” range: not too difficult and not too easy.

Content can be categorized by its complexity, which is important so that each day students are provided with a wide range of learning experiences in school. Students would feel defeated if teachers provided only difficult tasks to students; few have the ability to endure those conditions. Instead, teachers should plan activities that allow students to explore new ideas and knowledge while reinforcing previously learned concepts. In addition to challenging activities, providing students with an array of cognitive demands builds their fluency, stamina, and strategic thinking throughout the school day.

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When teachers provide students with activities that stretch their thinking, students see their own capacities for learning and overcoming challenges develop. They activate prior knowledge, use resources to surpass difficulties, and solve their own problems. Empowered, these students feel a sense of accomplishment and are willing to try new things.

However, in other classrooms, many students perceive they are failures when they experience a challenge and do not get it right the first time. Following a mistake, often there may be an unwillingness to participate based upon a fear of not rising to a set standard. Perfectionists, and other students who usually excel, may choose to disengage in order to save themselves from failing.

Fostering resilience, then, is a key responsibility of both teachers and principals. Teaching is complicated and requires the support of principals who invest in teacher and student learning and well-being through conversations that uncover any necessary material resources and emotional supports that are needed to meet ambitious learning goals. Teachers should identify and explicitly articulate the incremental steps that will lead to overcoming a challenge.

When principals enter classrooms, they should see and hear students in small groups, working purposefully and collaboratively to solve problems or negotiating the meaning of a text. Precise language and carefully crafted supports build resiliency and clearly communicate learning expectations to all levels of learners.

Clarity

When teachers explicitly tell students what they are supposed to learn and why they are learning it, students are more likely to become attached to a learning goal and engage meaningfully in class activities and discussions. Clarity is achieved when students are able to articulate the knowledge they are acquiring or skills they are practicing during a given period of time. Relevance occurs when students are also able to connect content to a larger purpose that makes sense in their day-to-day lives or how the learning might be useful in the future.

Learning is not the same as work. Work implies finishing a task, essentially doing some work task that may or may not include conscious attention to established learning standards. Work feels like you are doing something for someone else, and the focus centers on completing the work and pleasing the superior.

Although completing tasks is necessary, being intentional with the language used when providing instruction that might focus students on task completion instead of learning targets is important. Without careful consideration to what students should understand by the end of the period, teachers may compromise students' comprehension of desired skills and concepts. In work-centered classrooms, teachers are often concerned with monitoring the time on task so that assignments are completed.

In learning-centered classrooms, teachers make learning the priority and view the activity as a means to an end, instead of an end in itself. When a focus on learning exists, less rigidity to assignments occurs because teachers are dedicated to ensuring that students meet learning goals and provide differentiated instruction that meets students where they are.

In these classrooms, students are afforded more freedom and choice to demonstrate their knowledge and proficiency of skills. Instead of judging performance of a task, teachers in learning-centered classrooms provide descriptive feedback that tells students how they are doing and the purpose for learning and that guides students to self-assess their levels of understanding.

Clearly communicating the expectations of learning to students begins with planning. Working in teams, teachers might engage in discussions of a particular grade-level standard to jointly determine the big picture of the standard and what is

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being asked of students. By identifying the key nouns and verbs of a standard, coupled with an understanding of students' prior knowledge, teachers deepen their understanding of the standard.

Teachers are positioned to formulate an instructional plan that includes focused and guided instruction and opportunities for students to participate in collaborative discussions and independent reflections over a designated number of class periods. When teachers view instruction as connected steps toward a greater end, they are able to craft specific learning intentions that provide students with the necessary clarity to successfully reach the big picture of the grade-level standard.

Learning intentions may be called goals, aims, outcomes, or objectives, but they mean the same thing in this context: They specify what students are supposed to learn and are often paired with success criteria. Success criteria explain the evidence students must demonstrate to show they have achieved the period's learning intention. Teachers share success criteria with students by providing exemplars and checklists or by modeling the elements of a quality product.

Success criteria may also be described through the use of "I can" statements such that students gauge their own progress throughout a lesson. Learning intentions and success criteria provide students with information about their learning that is concrete, accessible, and actionable. When students are provided with a "where to next" direction in the form of success criteria, they are more likely to take ownership of their learning and seek additional challenges.

Learning walks are one of many opportunities principals can use to look for evidence of challenging activities and the requisite explanations and supports that accompany them. Principals who are lead learners not only celebrate overcoming challenges but also demonstrate that making mistakes is part of the learning process. Effective principals understand that maintaining a learning-centered environment is an ongoing pursuit, as is clearly communicating expectations. School systems work well when symmetry among challenging content, clarity of expectations, and a culture that embraces feedback exists.

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Feedback

A culture of feedback can be designed when principals intentionally frame learning opportunities for all members of the school community, including the principal's own actions. Feedback-oriented cultures, then, are not limited to transactions in classrooms; instead, public processes are established that invite commentary about all aspects of school life that include, but extend beyond, teaching and learning. Lead learner principals take this responsibility seriously by sincerely and regularly soliciting input that is shared and acted upon.

Quality of instruction should be of great concern to principals, as they are charged with overseeing all programs on their school campuses. Although analyzing summative assessment data is one way of evaluating program effectiveness, evaluation works best when a system for collecting formative evidence of student learning is in place. Instead of viewing feedback as one-sided information that tells students of their progress or performance, principals and teachers should use the same information provided to students and regard it as feedback to themselves that indicates the learning that stuck and which concepts need additional attention.

Praise does not provide quality feedback. Comments at the self-level such as “good job” and “you got it” are evaluative and do not tell students what was done well and what needs to be done next. Teachers who use unlabeled praise extensively run the risk of discouraging students’ freedom of expression, create dependency on the teacher for affirmation, and train students to evaluate their worth on the basis of their ability to please others. Praising students is not forbidden; rather, educators should be mindful not to mix praise with feedback about performance.

Feedback about performance should be descriptive, specific, and informative. Feedback that centers on known concepts is meaningless; students’ receiving feedback that entices them to move toward the next level in their learning is more useful. When students are engaged in challenging tasks, they are more receptive to feedback because that information is needed for them to continue learning.

There are three levels of performance-based feedback that educators should use with learners of all ages: task, process, and self-regulation feedback. Although providing feedback at the task and process levels is effective, learning occurs more deeply when feedback is provided at the self-regulation level.

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This occurs when teachers support students by prompting them to think about other ways to make sense of the issue at hand. A second-grade English learner who is struggling to understand the term *erosion* might be prompted to think about a previous science activity when wind or water caused soil to be transported from one location to another. Reflective prompts, including directing students to consider their own background knowledge, as well as other forms of scaffolded instruction, enable students to discover and evaluate their own ideas in relation to the challenge at hand. Students who engage in metacognitive processes learn to regulate themselves and develop personal agency.

Students who act on task, process, and self-regulation feedback learn strategies to track their own progress and are able to identify gaps between their current level of understanding and what needs to be learned next. Students who operate at this level do not rely on their teachers to tell them when a concept has been learned; instead, they seek out feedback from peers and teachers. A greater sense of self-efficacy emerges when students have confidence in their own capabilities and capacities. They are motivated by the success that they experience, which stems from educators' intentional planning of challenging content, clarity of learning expectations, and a culture of feedback.

Principals as Learning Leaders

Across the United States, too many students lack self-efficacy and are disengaged in their classrooms. In particular, students of color as well as those from marginalized populations suffer when educators fail to connect with them as individuals and engage them in meaningful learning opportunities at school. As such, an academic divide persists in U.S. society. Instead of perpetuating cycles of inequality, school principals are positioned to take action by flattening the hierarchical structure that is typically inherent in schools. By doing so, principals signal that they are also learners and establish a deeper sense of community by promoting equity within the staff.

Schools need collaborative leadership. Principals who establish learning-centered climates do so by modeling inquisitiveness and vulnerability. They acknowledge they do not have all of the answers and signal to others that their voices and participation are valued. When dynamic teams are formed around

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a shared purpose, initiatives are more likely to be successful because people feel connected and contribute toward an identified outcome.

Teachers use many strategies to educate students, and some strategies are more effective than others. Paying attention to those that truly matter is important: the high-yield influences that advance every student's learning, not just those who were born into fortunate circumstances. Principals are the lead learners and chief architects of culture and instructional programs at their schools. Principals must do more than monitor instruction—they must walk the talk by modeling challenge, clarity, and feedback at all levels. These influences, coupled with a commitment to collaborative leadership, will seal the existing academic divide and result in comparable student outcomes.

MOVING FORWARD

- Facilitate regular, ongoing learning-focused conversations with teaching professionals. Professional learning communities and book studies are useful formats that provide structure to these conversations and serve as tools to familiarize teachers with culturally proficient curriculum and instructional practices.
- Embrace a collaborate leadership approach with staff to develop shared agreements and definitions of literacy expectations and student performance goals. Sharing decision-making power fosters ownership and a collective responsibility to act.
- Articulate clear and consistent expectations that align to shared agreements.
- Draw on qualitative information gathered from a variety of sources, in addition to numerical performance data, to evaluate instructional quality and make necessary adjustments.
- Celebrate learning! Create a positive school culture that values learning at all levels. Effective principals shine the light on high-yield influences by providing descriptive and timely affirmations that further student outcomes. As with students, adults also need their share of challenge, clarity, and feedback from principals.

ILA RESOURCES

[Advocating for Children's Rights to Read](#)

This manual informs teachers and reading/literacy specialists, administrators, school and public librarians, families and caregivers, and policymakers how to enact the rights in classrooms, communities, and the world.

[The Case for Children's Rights to Read](#)

The goal of ILA's Children's Rights to Read campaign is ensuring every child has access to the education, opportunities, and resources needed to read. This companion resource identifies why the 10 fundamental rights were selected.

[Choices Reading Lists](#)

Download the Children's Choices, Teachers' Choices, and Young Adults' Choices reading lists for high-quality, popular titles selected by students and educators alike.

[Literacy Glossary](#)

Curated by a team of literacy experts, this interactive resource defines the shared language of literacy research and instruction.

[Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017](#)

This updated resource provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs.

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International Literacy Association: Literacy Research Panel 2018–2019

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 146 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.



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