



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper

The Literacy Leadership Team

A Literacy Leadership Team is a management tool for:

- simultaneously supporting learning and teaching for the ENTIRE community-students, teachers, educational leaders,
- enhancing literacy environment, and
- building a literacy culture through collegiality and collaboration.

One way for the Literacy Leadership Team to implement school-wide change is through the development of a school-based literacy plan of action. This action plan includes the processes and people involved, resources needed, what and how data will be collected, implementation of the action plan, and finally, an evaluation of how the action plan worked. The action plan may continue as long as the concern is valid (supported by student data), or once the goal, or goals, have been met, the cycle would start all over again, much like the instructional cycle of teaching: assess, plan, instruct, evaluate, begin again. One overarching idea is thinking about moving students ahead in their learning.

The following description of the stages involved in creating a literacy plan of action outlines the cyclical nature of the process. This process involves collecting and analyzing data, studying and planning a course of action, implementing a course of action based on new knowledge, and determining the effectiveness of the course of action. There are no two approaches that are exactly alike because the needs of the students and the knowledge needed to meet those needs vary from school to school. Learning is ongoing. Therefore, the work of the Literacy Leadership Team will evolve as time progresses.

Investigating an Area of Concern

This initial stage of the plan requires Literacy Leadership Teams to devise a plan to methodically and thoroughly observe and study students' literacy knowledge. Yet, in our quest to provide immediate support to students, it can be tempting to determine a plan of action without thoroughly investigating the area of concern. Research suggests that the greatest amount of time should be invested on this initial stage of the plan. Sagor states,

“Teachers who rush to complete the problem formulation (investigating) stage are more likely to flounder in their later efforts, whereas teachers who take their time to reflect on and define their problem

are more likely to pursue questions yielding meaningful results” (1992, p. 12).

Literacy Leadership Teams who take the time for this initial phase of their action plan will find that their ability to select appropriate practices that will meet students' needs will be enhanced.

The students in our classrooms approach literacy with varied strengths and needs. For those who are not demonstrating adequate academic progress, it is crucial that we gain a thorough understanding of their literacy knowledge. While analyzing standardized data used for screening and determining outcomes is a place to begin, Literacy Leadership Teams will be more equipped to select and implement an effective plan of action after collecting formative data such as those listed below.

- Student work samples
- Informal assessments (oral reading records, writing rubrics, 1-minute readings)
- Research journals, logs (records of observational data, formal assessments, and informal assessments)
- Videos, photographs, and audiotapes
- Anecdotal records based on observations
- Teacher checklists
- Student interviews and surveys
- Tests
- Report cards
- Parent interviews and surveys
- Student reflective journals
- Student strategy-use records
- Results from state-wide testing

By collecting and analyzing data from several different sources, the root of students' literacy needs are likely to be revealed, allowing Literacy Leadership Teams to make informed decisions and thereby selecting the most effective and efficient intervention. This does not neglect the value of standardized test scores. Standardized test data is useful in highlighting students' strengths and areas that need to be addressed. The 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 (Gaffney, Hesbol, & Corso, 2005).

Studying and Planning a Course of Action

Your literacy leadership team has identified one or two areas of concern. Now what? The temptation may be to start brainstorming instructional practices for addressing this concern(s) right away. Slowing down to really study and learn about your concern(s) at this point will enhance the team's ability to plan an effective course of action.

Ellen Ferrance (2000) calls this "problem-solving, not in the sense of trying to find out what is wrong, but rather a quest for knowledge about how to improve" (p. 2).

There are many sources for gaining information about the concern(s) you have identified. Sources may include:

- Literacy Coaches
- School or District Curriculum Resource Teachers
- Mentors, Peer Teachers, Colleagues
- Parents, Students
- Professional Journals or Books
- Internet Sites
- Workshops, Conferences
- Feeder Schools, Other Schools
- University Schools

This process of collaborative learning facilitates "developing priorities for school-wide planning with potential to motivate change" that address "school concerns rather than questions that affect individual teachers" (Ferrier, 2000, p. 15). It also leads to a deeper understanding of the concern(s) identified by all team members and sharing ideas of how others may have overcome similar challenges (McKay, 1992, p. 28). Emily Calhoun (1993) shares two additional reasons for this collaborative study of the identified concern(s). They are:

1. Enhanced development of the literacy leadership team as a "problem-solving entity".
2. Broader exploration of the concern(s) is more likely to lead to instructional practices that benefit a more diverse group of students.

After your team has a firm understanding of the area of concern(s), a plan to put this new and/or renewed learning into action may be developed.

Your literacy leadership team might be tempted to develop a plan that incorporates all the information from their collaborative studies. Overcome this temptation or you will find yourselves spread so thin that you struggle to do anything well. As a group, identify specific goals that you and the staff at your school can realistically manage. Think through the details as much as possible. Some questions you may want to consider include:

- How will understanding of the plan be shared with all stakeholders?
- Will professional development be needed to implement the plan?
 - Who will facilitate this learning?

- How will these learning experiences be designed?
- Are resources or materials needed? How will they be obtained?
- Are funds required to implement the plan? Where will they come from?

After your team has developed an area of concern(s), studied that issue and developed a plan based on what you learned, you are ready to get started.

Implementing the Plan of Action

Once you have established an area of concern and you have studied and planned your course of action, you are now ready to implement your plan. As you begin putting your action plan into place, remember the key to successful implementation is to stay focused on student learning. Too often we become sidetracked and our focus seems to shift and move away from our area of concern. The following questions will aid in maintaining your focus and ensure for a successful implementation of your action plan.

1. How will the staff and students be involved and what role will they play?
2. What professional development is needed?
3. How will you monitor the plan?
4. How will you support your staff during the implementation?

How will the staff and students be involved and what role will they play?

Change takes time, planning and commitment. In order for the plan of action to be successful school wide, every teacher must commit to the plan and be willing to make whatever changes are necessary. When teachers have an investment, then they are more likely to assume responsibility. Teachers and students alike need to take responsibility for establishing a literate climate within the school.

What professional development is needed?

Relying heavily on the literacy coach, professional development needs to be designed so that teachers are supported in long-term sustainable school improvement. It needs to be literacy focused, on-going and address the needs of the students and teachers according to the data that has been collected. Ginsberg (2003) maintains that professional development is most effective when it is part of a clear and consistent vision of learning that is shared school wide. According to Elmore (2002), educators learn more powerfully in concert with others who are struggling with the same problems. Realizing that learning is a collaborative, rather than an individual activity we can achieve our goals collectively through collaboration. Schools are most effective when teachers have the opportunity to share new ideas, ask questions and are encouraged to have collegial conversations.

How will you monitor the plan?

What data will you collect, who will collect the data, and how often the data will be collected are questions that need to be answered when thinking about how you will monitor the plan. Monitoring the progress of the plan needs to be on-going. If student learning is not taking place, you need to know this as soon as possible. You may need to back up and consider additional professional development or even go back to studying and planning and look at additional data or resources. The plan is cyclical and is designed to move back and forth according to the needs of your students and staff.

How will you support your staff during the implementation of this plan?

Teachers' knowledge varies; therefore it is important to support them according to their needs, background and experiences. Below are some suggestions for supporting teachers as they implement the plan of action, by utilizing the literacy coach.

- Videotape class sessions
- Conduct min-workshops throughout the year
- Form study groups
- Visit schools that have had success with similar concerns
- Research practices to address the concern
- Provide materials, resources and assistance to address concerns or challenges
- Collect and analyze additional data if more information is needed
- Create surveys, portfolios and interviews with school community
- Provide observation lessons in classrooms
- Celebrate successes

Determining the Effectiveness of the Plan of Action

Now that you are implementing your plan, how do you determine if your plan is being effective? How will you evaluate the plan? Ask yourselves these questions:

1. How has the plan impacted student learning?
2. Are further actions necessary? Do we need to continue, revise or discontinue the plan?
3. Do we need to target another area of concern?

Continue to collect and analyze data to answer these questions. The same data that the Literacy Leadership Team used to determine the area of concern can again be addressed to determine the effectiveness of the plan of action. Has student learning occurred? As you begin to determine the effectiveness of your plan, you need to make sure all members of the Literacy Leadership Team have been engaged in conversation with students and teachers. Discuss the challenges as well as the success of the plan. As you establish an area of concern, study and plan for a course of action, implement the plan and determine its effectiveness, keep in mind your focus.....*student learning*.

Sustaining Teamwork Throughout the Year

Sustaining the work of a Literacy Leadership Team is critical for the implementation of the action plan. One of the main goals of the Literacy Leadership Team is to create a team of literacy leaders within each school who will support and act as the vehicle for change. The team should become a working, learning community. Under the guidance of the literacy coach, they should strive to acquire knowledge in the area of literacy instruction over time through professional development and work through the steps of the action plan for their school. The members will be researching, studying, and planning as a team throughout the year. As part of their researching and planning they will come together as a study group. It is through the collaborative team work that transformation and change is possible. Sagor (1992b) states that it is in schools where there is a collaborative focus on literacy that transformation can occur.

According to Kevin Smith (Secondary Reading Specialist, Just Read, Florida!), in order for the work of the team to have impact, effectiveness, and sustainability certain things need to take place:

1. The team needs to work together. The team should be made up of all stakeholders: teachers, administrators, parents, community partners and sometimes even students. Ensure that each member is allowed input and has a certain role and responsibility on the team.
2. The team should lay the foundation for ongoing collaboration to take place by coming up with ground rules for their discussions and meetings. Ongoing discussion and dialogue is critical in the implementation of the action plan. This is also true in order to keep the team active throughout the year.
3. It is important that the team follows through the decisions and implementation of the action plan. They should not stray away from their common vision. It should be understood that the action plan is a working document that will be adjusted and revisited throughout the year, but that whatever the decision the team makes should be followed through. Again, this will involve continual discussion and dialogue among team members.
4. Often the team's work will take place beyond the school hours. Agreed upon meeting times should be adhered to so that members do not become overwhelmed or frustrated.
5. The work of the team should be honored and shared with all stakeholders: parents, faculty, and administration. This can be accomplished through faculty meetings, parent meetings, newsletters, e-mail, and postings on a team bulletin board.

6. Avoid becoming overwhelmed and frustrated by focusing and narrowing your focus to one or two things that are feasible. “Don’t bite off more than you can chew.”
7. It is important to celebrate and recognize the team’s efforts, commitment, and accomplishments. This is both motivating and re-energizing.

The work of the team is a shared journey that needs to be nurtured in a collaborative working environment. It needs sustenance, encouragement and support. It is an on-going process and a learning experience for all team members. In the end, it is through the long-term work, dedication and efforts of the Literacy Leadership Team that forward shifts can take place in schools.

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