



At Falcon Ridge Elementary School in Minnesota, teachers engage in professional learning focused on improving literacy in the New Prague School District. Johna Anderson, reading specialist at Falcon Ridge, sees evidence of transformation: “We’ve seen changes in the ways that teachers set up rituals and routines in their classrooms.”

CONNECT THE HEART AND HANDS OF LITERACY



LINK CURRICULUM RENEWAL
TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
FOR A SOLID
IMPROVEMENT PLAN

BY SANDI NOVAK AND BONNIE HOUCK

Imagine you're a visitor entering a school for the first time. How would you know that reading is a priority here? What would you see and hear as you moved throughout the school? What are teachers and students doing in classrooms? How are students interacting with their teachers and peers? What resources are being used? Is evidence of student learning posted on classroom walls or in the hallways?

The answers to these questions reveal the belief systems and values that educators and school leaders have about reading instruction and student learning. Studying these elements can be instrumental in developing an aligned system of professional learning and collaboration that has the power to change the literacy culture of a school and district.

CURRICULUM AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

According to Alvior (2014), curriculum is the “heart” of any educational organization. Realizing its importance, many school districts

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engage in a curriculum renewal cycle. Doing this well can be a crucial factor in students' academic success (Steiner, 2017).

During a typical cycle, the district identifies an area of study, at which point district and school personnel dive deep into reviewing curriculum, studying research-based practices, and analyzing student data related to the subject. In districts that value reflective practice and continuous improvement as “the hands” that guide and implement learning, educators also study current instructional practices and overall culture of learning in classrooms. Effective schools will assess all areas of strength and need before

purchasing resources or providing professional development.

New Prague School District in Minnesota is finding success by linking a systematic professional learning process to the curriculum renewal cycle. As teachers implement the curriculum, they're reaping the benefits of a well-designed, carefully implemented plan for professional development and resource allocation.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWED

A few years ago, New Prague involved teachers from each grade level in three elementary schools to review literacy standards and develop common assessments to monitor reading progress. With the curriculum articulated, the leaders were ready to determine resource and professional learning needs.

Guided by the two coauthors who served as literacy consultants throughout the process, the leaders began by conducting two rounds of literacy classroom visits (Houck & Novak, 2016) in all classrooms in the district. Literacy classroom visits are

walk-throughs in which observers look for evidence of research-supported practices that have a direct effect on literacy achievement. Teachers also completed a survey of their understanding and use of best practices in reading.

Looking at these data, school leaders found many strengths, as well as two crucial areas of need: Classroom libraries were not positioned to support the reading needs of students, and instructional planning lacked intentional focus and delivery.

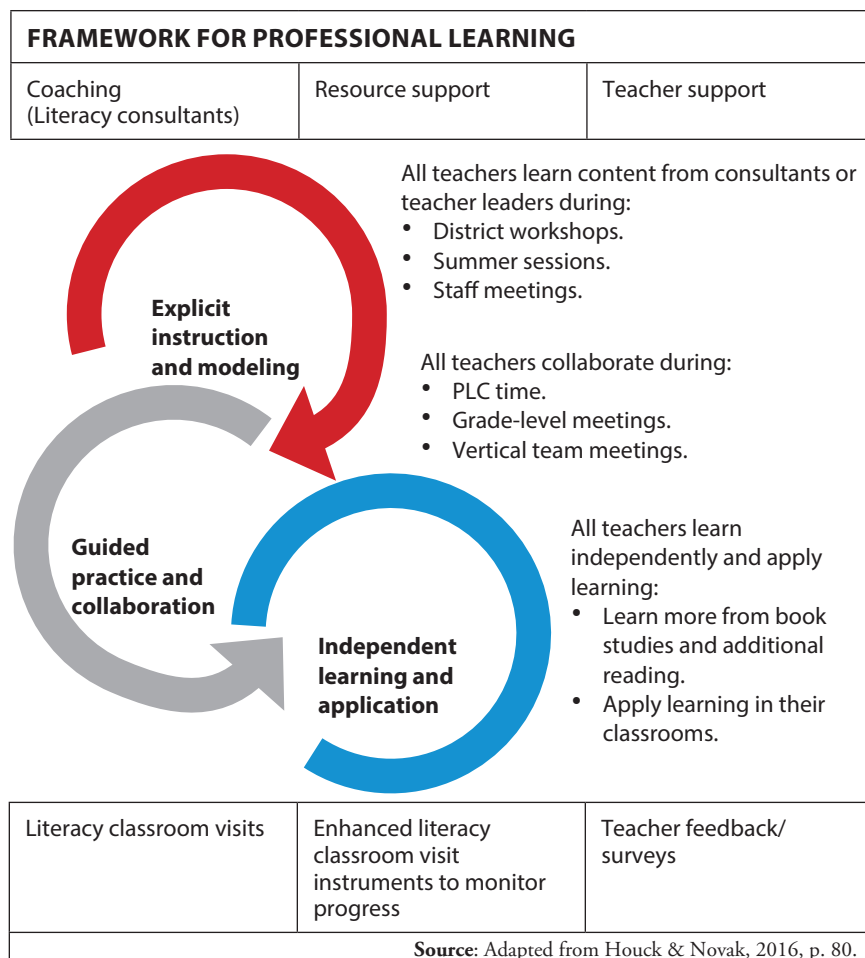
REVAMPING CLASSROOM LIBRARIES

Classroom libraries are core resources in fostering motivation, interest, and opportunities for students to practice reading skills and strategies necessary for comprehension development. Most of the district's classroom libraries not only needed new resources to ensure a balance of fiction and informational texts that students would like to read, but also needed to be organized to support student self-selection.

The district addressed this fairly quickly, with both district and parent advisory committees allocating money in spring 2017 for new materials. In addition, teachers used a self-assessment tool to inspire ideas about how to reorganize their libraries. To deepen their knowledge about the contents of an effective library, teachers would also be offered professional learning over the summer. Broader and more intensive professional learning would be implemented during the school year — and that will be the focus of the remainder of this article.

PROMOTING INSTRUCTIONAL CLARITY

Knowing the standards is the first step to instructional clarity, but teachers also need to unpack standards into lesson-size goals, or learning



targets, to scaffold student progress toward mastery. Learning targets (Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011) are statements written in student-friendly language that convey the lesson's performance criteria in terms that students can understand. New Prague leaders learned from their literacy classroom visit data that learning targets weren't being explicitly taught and monitored across whole-group, small-group, and independent reading, despite the professional learning on the subject teachers had experienced in the past.

STARTING WITH A PLAN

School leaders used their data analysis to craft a three-year professional learning plan that specified the details — timeline, resources, topics, and

facilitators — for the first year of the plan, which focused on independent reading and applying the learning target in whole and small groups. Teachers also engaged in professional learning on conferring with students while they read independently.

With assistance from the literacy consultants, principals and teacher leaders developed a learning structure for the process. The Framework for Professional Learning (see above) aligns the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Fisher & Frey, 2013) with the Literacy Classroom Visit model — and shifts the ownership of new learning to teachers.

Here's how that framework played out in New Prague:

- Teachers and administrators districtwide participated in full-

day, half-day, and 90-minute workshops and summer sessions on focused instruction.

- Teacher leaders extended that content learning with 45-minute meetings that replaced regular staff meetings at the three elementary schools. Consultants prepared teacher leaders to facilitate the professional learning. This train-the-trainer model provided consistency within the district and helped alleviate the burden placed on school personnel to create and lead professional learning.
- Teacher leaders provided guided practice and facilitated collaboration within professional learning community (PLC) meetings at the school level. PLC meeting topics linked directly to the professional learning.

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- Teachers put their learning into action in their classrooms.

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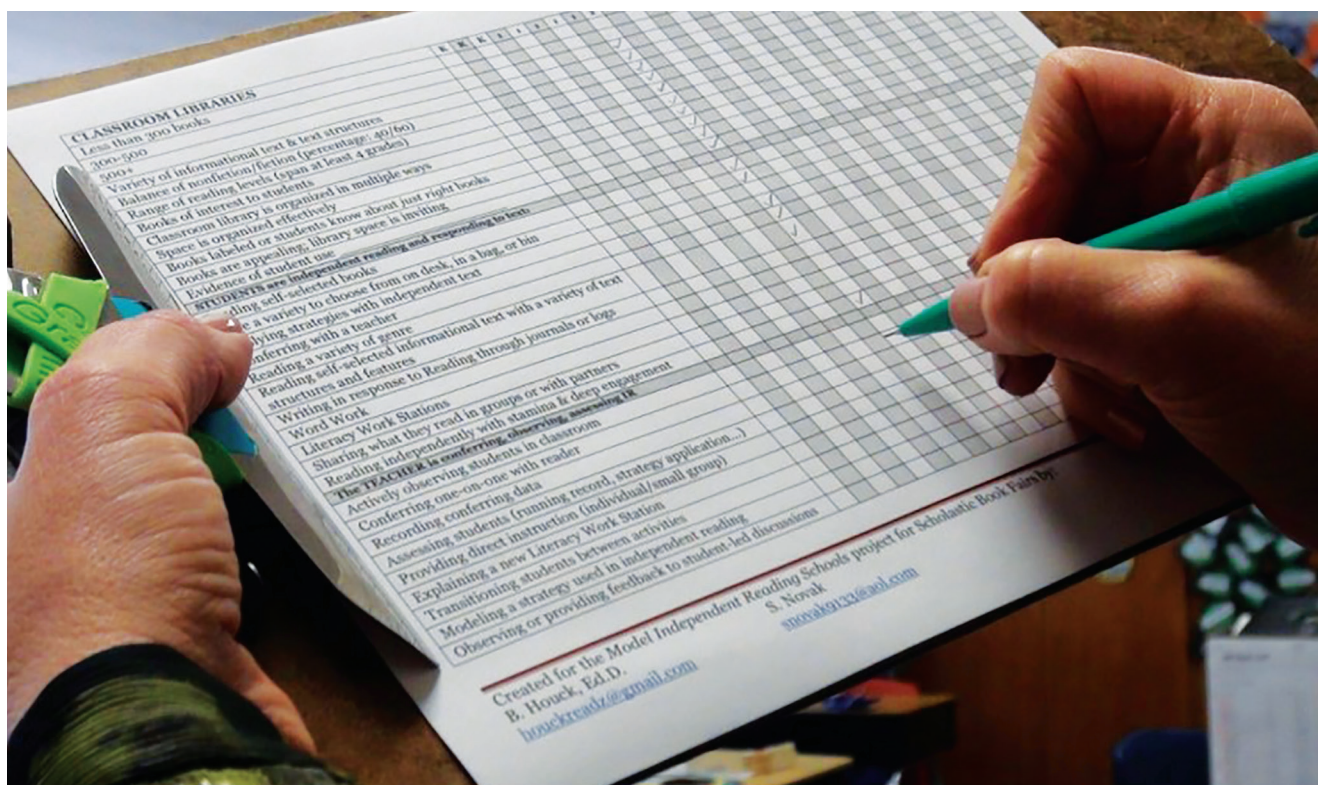
Pat Pribyl, principal of Raven Stream Elementary School, notes the importance of the three-year timeline. “This sent a message to teachers that we are committed and that we realize it takes time to grow a culture of literacy and develop readers,” he says.

Falcon Ridge Elementary School Principal Dave Giesen appreciates how systematic and focused the initiative is: “We’re being very deliberate in building a foundation of knowledge while being farsighted about the direction we want to go in the years to come. This intention has brought about a sense of comfort in the direction we’re going.”

A CLOSER LOOK

Each quarter, school leaders gather to learn from consultants about the upcoming professional learning they’ll deliver in each of their schools. For example, in January, two teacher leaders from each of the three elementary schools and their principals participated in a full day of professional learning with consultants on the topics of conferring during independent reading and using a system to take anecdotal notes.

They reviewed the three 40-minute professional learning segments they



At New Prague School District in Minnesota, a teacher leader uses a literacy classroom visit instrument as part of the district's professional learning plan. An ongoing series of literacy classroom visits benchmarked and monitored the implementation of new learning.

would be providing to their schools between January and April. They also had time to practice gathering data in two classrooms using the Enhanced Literacy Classroom Visit Instrument for Independent Reading.

Armed with supportive materials, training, and practice, teacher leaders and principals returned to their schools with their new learning and professional learning resources. Because the first round of training focused on using feedback while conferring with a student, teachers were asked to explain the process they used with a particular student, how they could tell that the student learned how to apply the strategy they had provided feedback on, what they learned about individual students as a result, and how their note-taking system worked for both them and their students.

After the teachers participated in training and had time to apply their new learning, leaders conducted classroom visits using the Enhanced Literacy Classroom Visit Instrument for Independent Reading to determine how well teachers were implementing the practices.

INCREASING TEACHER OWNERSHIP

Including teacher leaders in the process had a positive effect. Will Remmert, principal of Eagle View Elementary, says, "Having our reading teachers serve in a leadership capacity transformed the culture of our school. We are much more invested in becoming stronger literacy instructors and leaders as a result. Our professional development was rolled out in timely increments because we had a process to know when to introduce new learning and to build on it when teachers were ready. It was a recursive process."

Maren Bahler, director of curriculum and assessment, notes the value of having everyone in

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the building take ownership. "Our principals have spent a lot of time growing as literacy leaders through our administrative professional development training," Bahler says. "And our interventionists have been diligent about providing professional development to their teachers on a regular basis, while providing on-the-spot support. Throughout the year, our teachers are getting small doses of literacy professional development, with time to implement in between the training sessions. Everyone involved can continually reflect on and adapt instruction as needed."

OUTCOMES FOR STUDENT LEARNING

The commitment to creating a districtwide culture of literacy that values reading and learning is paying off. Principal Pribyl explains this growth in his school: "When the question was asked a year ago, 'What informs a visitor when they enter your building that this school values literacy?', I couldn't answer that question. Now I'm pleased to say that we're well on our way to demonstrating that we're a school of readers."

Summing up the transformation in teaching and learning, Johna Anderson, reading specialist at Falcon Ridge, notes: "We've seen changes in the ways that teachers set up rituals and routines in their classrooms. Students are independently reading for a minimum of 30 minutes daily in K-5 classrooms, and book talks are taking place among students and the staff. We've built a culture of literacy that's apparent as

soon as you enter our school."

The three-year plan is still in progress, but already, when visitors enter the New Prague Schools, they see the value placed on literacy. There are more examples of student work posted in hallways and in classrooms, learning targets with clear performance criteria are posted in all classrooms, students are reading and talking about books, the classroom libraries are larger and more organized, and more students can articulate the specific learning targets they're working on to improve their reading. Most of all, the school is now abuzz with self-directed and motivated readers.

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