> ✔ **Teacher is guiding students' reading, strategy application, and collaborative discussions.**

THE VIEW
FROM THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE

AN OBSERVATION PROTOCOL BOOSTS LITERACY LEADERSHIP

By Sandi Novak and Bonnie Houck

"Leadership content knowledge in regard to teaching young children to read must focus both on how students learn literacy and how teachers support that learning."
— *Stein & Nelson, 2003*

> ✔ **Students are actively listening, purposefully engaged, and interacting with peers.**

Educational leaders understand their role in creating a schoolwide goal of continuous learning for teachers and students. They know the importance of identifying and providing the resources and professional learning necessary to foster improvements with the greatest potential to increase student achievement (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). However, not all principals have a strong knowledge base in all areas of instruction.

School leaders often lack the specific teaching experience, knowledge, or expertise needed to be an instructional leader in reading and literacy learning (Hoewing, 2011). Principals and other administrative leaders need professional development, resources, and tools to guide them in building a continuous progress model in literacy learning.

In order to create a schoolwide system of improved practices that focuses on a strong literacy culture, we need to pay attention to school and district leaders' professional learning needs. Their needs are different from teachers.

LITERACY LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Although research emphasizes the principal as instructional leader, little has been done to examine the literacy knowledge principals need regarding literacy teaching and learning or how districts build literacy leadership capacity.

Principals who value literacy know they need to gain the knowledge necessary to collaborate with teachers to ensure all students learn to read and write. Stein and Nelson (2003) found that educational leaders who aren't proficient in their knowledge of literacy instruction have a dif-

✔ **Teacher is assessing strengths/needs and collecting anecdotal notes.**

✔ **Students are actively listening, purposefully engaged, and interacting with teacher.**

ficult time determining the key qualifications that excellent teachers possess.

To develop this expertise, principals must understand the foundational research-based practices that support literacy instruction and what effective instruction that fosters student growth and achievement looks like. In addition, they must understand how to work with the school community to create a literacy culture within a professional learning community (PLC).

Creating a literacy culture begins with working to develop a common belief system about learning and literacy, common language, and instructional practices related to reading development.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR MINNESOTA PRINCIPALS

The Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association offered Minnesota principals professional learning that placed a high priority on literacy instruction and developing a collegial culture. As facilitators, we envisioned principals as instructional leaders who support teacher learning. To accomplish this, we designed a four-day professional learning experience focused on literacy leadership for principals to learn about and discuss effective literacy teaching and student learning.

Groups of principals met for their first two days of professional development during the summer to learn about

and be able to identify quality literacy instruction. They worked together to identify and gain the ability to discuss key components of effective reading instruction. They observed videos of teachers applying the learning target across the gradual release of whole-group, small-group, and independent reading, then later discussed what quality teaching and student learning looks and sounds like in strong literacy cultures. They gained access to tools and resources to use in their schools to determine teachers' understanding and use of best practices in literacy.

Back at their schools, they used an observation protocol called the Literacy Classroom Visit Instrument (see p. 49) to gather data to determine the status of literacy teaching and student learning. Principals observed all classrooms at least two times and gathered data using the instrument before returning one month later for their third day of professional learning on literacy leadership.

Principal Pete Otterson, a participant in the literacy academy, said, "Literacy classroom visits are very intentional and focused on specific strategies and components of literacy, unlike other walk-through forms I have used in the past. Literacy visits help administrators like me find trends within the entire school, whereas other walk-through forms are very broad and only allow me to give feedback to specific teachers."

On Day 3, they learned how to look for patterns in school data to determine next steps for their staff's professional learning. They reviewed, discussed, and learned from each other's data while thinking collaboratively about next steps. Later, they modified the Literacy Classroom Visit Instrument to help them determine whether the professional learning their teachers would receive was being implemented with fidelity.

Day 3 also focused on how to include reflective practices into the professional learning culture within the school. This helped principals understand that this model is based on the importance of teachers' professional growth and enhanced learning opportunities for students rather than evaluation of individual teachers.

At the end of Day 3, principals returned to their schools to conduct another series of literacy classroom visits in all classrooms. A month later, they returned for Day 4 of the professional learning with their updated school data.

During Day 4, leaders learned how to use the data to engage in professional learning discussions as well as to identify common patterns that would determine the potential professional learning for staff and additional resources needed within the school. They discussed how to share their data analysis and recommendations for resources and professional learning with teachers by using critical, nonevaluative language seated in data and how to elicit collegial conversations about a long-range plan.

Lisa Masica, a principal from Edina, Minnesota, said, "Many teachers completed teacher training coursework prior to the use of learning targets. Teachers are successful teaching small-group lessons but are less familiar using a learning target across the gradual release. Using the same learning target within whole-group, small-group, and independent reading is not common practice. The data gained through our classroom visits helped us to identify further need for professional development."

Jen Mahan-Deitte, an assistant principal from Minneota, Minnesota, noted trends of whole-group instruction from the literacy classroom visit data. When she shared the data with teachers, they thought the solution would be to have her visit the classroom at different times during the literacy block of time. Prepared with the observation instrument, Mahan-Deitte strategically mapped herself in classrooms at alternate times for a couple more rounds of data collection. When the data revealed a similar pattern of whole-group instruction being done in most classrooms, teachers were ready to address this area of need with professional learning.

Mounds View Public Schools sent all 10 of its principals to the literacy academy. Later, the group conducted a round of literacy classroom visits as a team. Principal Nathan Flansburg said that it helped the principals build common language and become more aligned across schools. "By conducting the literacy classroom visits together and reviewing the data as a group, we feel like we are improving systematically," he said. "The data tells a story of our strengths and where to go next."

Equipped with extended knowledge of what good literacy instruction looks like and how to monitor if professional development is implemented with fidelity, these principals returned to their schools with confidence to lead their literacy improvement efforts.

LITERACY CLASSROOM VISITS

The literacy classroom visit captures the essential research-supported elements of the literacy culture and components of effective instruction. It provides a framework and resources that guide and support a principal as she works with her team to create a school and classroom culture of literacy and establish effective instructional literacy practices that cultivates self-motivated readers, thinkers, and problem solvers.

The data collected provides a basis to discuss the strengths and needs of a school community using broad data patterns that focus on the school or district, not on individual teachers. The heart of the model is the Literacy Classroom Visit Instrument. This tool guides principals, leaders, and teachers in observing critical look-fors in literacy classrooms and in the overall literacy culture of a school.

The literacy classroom visit uses the best aspects of walk-throughs as they are brief, frequent, informal, and focused visits to classrooms by observers for the purposes of gathering data about literacy practices and engaging in some follow-up.

Like instructional rounds, literacy classroom visits can be done with teams and focus on student learning and collabora-

LITERACY CLASSROOM VISIT INSTRUMENT

Teacher /grade	Date/time	Observer	
CLASSROOM CLIMATE AND CULTURE			NOTES
❏ Students are actively and purposefully engaged in literacy-focused learning activities. ❏ Classroom library is organized to support self-selection and supports class size/level (300+ texts). ❏ Classroom library has a balance of fiction/informational texts at varied levels. ❏ Rituals, routines, and procedures in place (Interactive I-Charts, process for book selection, etc.). ❏ Displays of student work show development and celebrate literacy learning. ❏ Interactive word walls are used to support writing and vocabulary development.			
LEARNING TARGET/INSTRUCTIONAL GOAL			
❏ Learning target/goal is posted in student-friendly language. ❏ Learning target/goal identifies demonstration of learning (performance criteria). ❏ Learning target/goal is taught and monitored across the gradual release of responsibility.			
OBSERVED METHOD OF INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY			
❏ Whole-group lesson/minilesson ❏ Small-group ❏ Independent reading and application			
WHOLE-GROUP INSTRUCTION			
❏ Teacher is leading a focused minilesson or lesson using time effectively for age range. ❏ Teacher is explicitly teaching/modeling effective skill/strategy (learning target). ❏ Students are actively listening, purposefully engaged, and interacting with teacher. ❏ Students are actively listening, purposefully engaged, and interacting with peers.			
SMALL-GROUP GUIDED PRACTICE			
❏ Teacher is guiding students' reading, strategy application, and collaborative discussions. ❏ Teacher is listening to students read individually while others read quietly. ❏ Teacher is assessing strengths/needs and collecting anecdotal notes. ❏ Students are reading and discussing texts at their instructional level. ❏ Students are practicing the skill or strategy explicitly taught and modeled in whole group.			
INDEPENDENT READING AND APPLICATION			
❏ Teacher is conferring one-on-one with reader. ❏ Teacher is assessing development and recording data. ❏ Students are reading self-selected books from a bag or bin and applying strategies learned. ❏ Students are conferring with teacher for reading skills and/or demonstrating learning target. ❏ Students are actively working at some other connected literacy enhancement activity.			
STUDENT INTERACTION AND UNDERSTANDING			
❏ Students can explain the skill/strategy. ❏ Students know what they are supposed to learn and how they are expected to demonstrate that learning in whole or small group or on their own. ❏ N/A (Did not speak with student).			
COMMENTS/FEEDBACK:			
POSSIBLE PROMPTS FOR PEER DISCUSSIONS (PLCS):			

tive discussions around descriptive, nonjudgmental data. However, they are unique in that they concentrate specifically on research-supported literacy practices that have a direct effect on literacy achievement.

Over time, they illuminate patterns in these areas related to the whole school and grade levels rather than on individuals, documenting observed evidence of a developing culture of literacy as well as research-supported effective instructional practices throughout a school.

Instructional leaders find literacy classroom visits to be an important tool in that they are unique in purpose, process, use of data, and implementation. The purpose is to provide educators with the tools, strategies, and processes to foster learning environments where children become successful and motivated readers and writers.

The process is a system of ongoing three- to five-minute planned visits focused on best practices of literacy instruction and student learning. Data patterns that emerge over time through the practice of visiting classrooms regularly provide a rich tapestry of information about student learning and teacher development.

Analyzing the accumulated data by employing deep reflection and conversation about the patterns that arise can tell the current story of literacy instruction. Ensuing conversations among leaders and teachers build community and partnerships, providing neutral data for discussions about common practices, and can guide ongoing professional learning experiences in schools and districts.

Sandy Giorgi, an elementary teaching and learning coordinator in Minnesota, said, "I believe once educational leaders see the data from literacy classroom visits and what is actually happening in the classrooms through the lens of what a student knows and can do, they will never go back to past practices. Resources are limited and the return on investment is critical to school communities. These visits provide a rich source of data that paints a clear picture of where schools and/or districts need to focus these limited resources."

ONE DISTRICT'S STORY

Lakeville Area Public Schools is a second-ring suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota, serving 10,000 students in eight elementary, three middle, and two high schools. District leaders are committed to building a long-term professional learning plan with a focus on literacy for elementary staff.

District leaders, principals, and learning specialists teamed up to develop an ongoing system of observation and data collection using literacy classroom visits as the core method of data collection to identify the resource and professional learning needs of elementary teachers.

The data collection process began with a survey to assess teachers' foundational knowledge of literacy practices reflected in the Literacy Classroom Visit Instrument. Leaders and teams

engaged in professional learning on its use and later visited every classroom in every elementary school using the tool. Then they analyzed and discussed the data to determine the current literacy culture and instructional practices in the district as a whole and in each school to establish overall strengths and needs.

The district developed a three-year, sustained, job-embedded professional learning plan for leaders as well as teachers using a cycle of quarterly professional learning provided by literacy experts. Leadership professional learning communities were built into the plan to support teachers and leaders.

The district used the Literacy Classroom Visit Instrument three times a year to collect data about the ongoing cycle of professional learning. Monthly check-ins using segments of the instrument helped identify the specific look-fors related to the professional learning. Leaders and school teams continuously discussed and analyzed data to differentiate professional learning opportunities to build common foundational knowledge as well as provide choice and voice in learning.

As the end of the first year of implementation approached, the district saw significant change in the development of common practices and the establishment of a literacy culture.

The majority of classrooms across the district now have established routines, procedures, and classroom management practices to support literacy learning. Lessons are more focused, and students practice the skills and strategies modeled while teachers monitor ongoing progress. More students are reading independently in self-selected texts and are using them to practice their learning.

Common practices can be observed within and across grade levels. Teachers have a common language to discuss their professional learning and development, and this practice has a positive effect on students' understanding. The commitment to develop a culture of literacy within schools and across the district is growing.

WHY INVEST IN LITERACY CLASSROOM VISITS?

Investing in professional learning for leaders and teachers using literacy classroom visits can:
- Establish a body of evidence about the overall literacy culture and instruction;
- Identify instructional patterns in teacher teams, grade levels, and content areas;
- Provide data to identify resource needs and reduce unnecessary budget expenditures;
- Guide professional learning planning and PLC team content;
- Inform a school community about the implementation of professional learning goals; and
- Ensure that students are learning and mastering grade-level standards and expectations (Houck & Novak, in press).

The most critical elements of effective classroom visits are

nity. Let's give them the time, structures, support, and choices they need to be fully engaged in improving practice and solving our most pressing educational challenges.

When we believe in our teachers, listen to them, and support their continual development, there is no telling what our educators and their students will accomplish.

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The view from the principal's office

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purpose, focus, and analysis. The literacy classroom visit model fosters development in all students with a particular focus on literacy learning to analyze how efforts within the school are affecting classroom practices that develop readers.

Literacy classroom visits meet the needs of leaders and teachers as they seek to collect and analyze accurate information about strengths and needs in current classroom practices in order to provide staff with the support necessary to grow. Continued visits can monitor ongoing progress in the developing literacy culture and instruction in a school or district.

School leadership experts say that robust and ongoing training can alleviate issues like rapid turnover rates and help keep new principals on the job. A 2013 report from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that "principals who did not get professional development the previous year were 1.4 times more likely to leave their school than leaders who did receive training" (Prothero, 2015, p. 10). Turnover in leadership ultimately means wasted resources for districts.

Although the specific professional development needs vary from new to experienced principals, the tenets of good career training remain the same. According to leaders in the field, it should be rooted in real-world/real-school issues, spread out over a period of time, and promote higher-quality instruction as well as develop a more powerful culture and climate within the school (Prothero, 2015).

Principals want and need to work in districts where their professional learning needs are fulfilled. In order to cultivate a culture of literacy and support effective literacy instruction that fosters student achievement, leaders need access to strong support and development, far beyond a mentor program in the first two years on the job.

Just as we do for teachers, doctors, and lawyers, we must continue to invest in principal skill development and support them in the complex work of leading schools.

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