

Creating a Middle School Reading Initiative

Dennis Jackson
Richard P. Santeusanio

Our goal in writing this article is to identify the seven building blocks required to implement a successful middle school reading initiative. We begin by sharing three fictitious—but common—scenarios that illustrate how some educators with good intentions and good ideas fail to make a difference in a middle school reading program.

The Top-Down Approach

Superintendent Dr. Ralph Sullivan of the Top Down City School District doesn't like what he sees as he reviews his middle school's state assessment scores. "Things are going to change around here," he says to himself. "Our kids deserve better than what we are providing for them." So Dr. Sullivan, in his opening day remarks to his staff in the fall, declares that one of the district goals is to improve reading scores, with particular emphasis on the middle school. At the end of the year, the scores from the middle school arrive. There is no improvement. Why?

While it can be argued that it takes more than a year to improve test scores, Dr. Sullivan himself contributed to the stagnant scores because he merely announced reading at the middle school was a priority. He had what Fullan (1999) calls "moral purpose"; he wanted to do what was right for the middle school in his district. But he had no plan to develop a comprehensive middle school program.

The Autonomous Approach

Seventh grade teacher Marsha Jones at the Independence School wants her students to be good readers, and she knows what to do. "It is time for me to put my degree in reading to work," she tells a friend over a Saturday afternoon lunch.

Marsha does indeed do the job. When the scores for her language arts classes are reported at the end of the school year, significant progress is documented. Her students move on to grade eight—to a team of teachers who do not have the same focus on reading Marsha had with her students. The gains made at the end of seventh grade are lost at the end of grade eight. Why?

The simple answer is that while most schools can point to pockets of success and innovation, real and permanent school improvement occurs when teachers work collaboratively and “buy in” to a school-wide reading initiative.

The Commodity Approach

Principal Wayne Mackin of the Materials Middle School wants his students to be the best readers in the state. “We’re above average now,” he tells his assistant principal, “and we’re going to get to the top. We can do it if we can just get the right materials in the hands of our teachers and students.”

Wayne does indeed get many new, attractive language arts books into the Materials Middle School classrooms. Teachers and students use the new materials for a few years. And, while the student reading scores continue to be above average, they are far from being among the best in the state. Why?

Principal Mackin did the right thing in providing his teachers and students with resources. But he did not provide the teachers with the training needed to use the materials effectively.

These three scenarios illustrate five of the seven building blocks required to initiate a comprehensive middle school reading program. All seven are needed to implement and sustain an effective reading program.

- 1. Moral Purpose** Fullan (1999) defines moral purpose as “making a positive difference in the lives of all citizens,” in this case students. However, he also notes that achieving this positive difference is enormously complex, but not impossible. When good things happen in schools, it always starts with one or more educators approaching an issue with a moral purpose.
- 2. Planning the Change** The person or group who plans the middle school reading initiative should consider Fullan’s (1991) recommendations in planning the change. As they relate to planning a middle school reading initiative, planners should recognize several things:
 - Initial ideas of what the change should be will transform and continue to develop.
 - Teachers, the implementers, need to work out their own meaning of what the reading initiative will look like.
 - Conflict and disagreement are fundamental to successful change.
 - Relearning is at the heart of a change in a middle school reading program.

- Effective change takes time.
- Slow implementation does not mean outright rejection of the values inherent in the reading initiative.
- Not everyone will embrace the reading initiative.
- No amount of technical support and expertise will make it totally clear what action needs to take place to implement the reading initiative.
- The real agenda is changing the culture of the school.

3. Collaboration and “Buy In” Michael Fullan (1999) eloquently describes the meaning of a collaborative culture:

“Collaborative organizations fan the passion and emotions of its members because they so value commitment and the energy required to pursue complex goals. But instead of leaving passionate teachers to sink or swim, the true value of collaborative cultures is that they simultaneously encourage passion and provide emotional support as people work through the roller coaster of change” (p. 38).

So what are the characteristics of a collaborative culture? According to Fullan (1999), such cultures foster diversity while building trust, accept the presence of anxiety, create knowledge, combine connectedness with openhandedness, and fuse the spiritual, political, and intellectual.

It is in this kind of a culture that teachers will ultimately “buy in” to something like a middle school reading initiative. This will happen when the vast majority of the staff:

- believes the reading initiative addresses a need.
- is clear about what its role is in implementing the initiative.
- knows how the initiative affects their time, energy, and need for professional development.
- recognizes that the reading initiative will be rewarding in terms of interaction with peers and others (Fullan, 1991).

4. Resources In order for any reading initiative to be successful, the necessary resources must support it. Among the key resources for a successful secondary reading program are materials and time.

- **Materials** Simply stated, a classroom cannot have too many reading materials. To grow as readers and to learn the content of a discipline, students need the opportunity to explore and read a wide range of texts. These can include novels and nonfiction books, magazines and newspapers and short stories, poetry, and essays. Make sure that the materials are in as good shape as possible. The subtle message that we give students when we offer them materials that are not well cared for is that we have little respect for the

materials (or the students) and that they, in turn, need not show any respect for the materials (or us) (Burke, 2000).

Many schools and districts also provide students with locally developed language arts “guidebooks” that provide students with the tools they need to become stronger readers and more efficient learners. These guidebooks not only define basic standards for the types of activities in which students will engage but also provide them with guidelines and strategies to help them solve learning and reading challenges they may encounter. They also provide content teachers with a tool for explaining and discussing the learning strategies of their discipline.

- **Time** The resource of time needs to be considered within the context of both implementing a reading initiative and supporting students as they become more successful readers and learners. Little can be accomplished without the necessary time. In the classroom, students must have the opportunity both to read and discuss their reading—its content and the processes they used to help themselves learn and understand. And initiatives aimed at supporting students’ growth as readers and learners need time to develop and grow. In this era of quick fixes, the time to create, implement, reflect upon, and revise an initiative is becoming too rare while, at the same time, increasingly necessary (Braunger & Lewis, 1998).

- 5. Professional Development (PD)** Lyons and Pinnell (2001) provide us with some characteristics to keep in mind when planning and developing PD for a middle school reading initiative. They suggest gathering information about the school; planning a wide variety of learning experiences; establishing clear goals and a common vision; assessing and focusing resources like time, people, and materials; teaching specific instructional procedures; establishing a culture that encourages reflection, feedback, support and problem solving; coaching and providing in-class demonstrations; using student data to inform the PD; monitoring the impact of PD; and designing ongoing opportunities.

While the typical PD involves a consultant or university presenter who works with teachers, Robb (2000a) suggests, among a number of PD alternatives, teacher study groups led by a facilitator. For a middle school initiative, for example, math teachers might form a group to discover ways of helping students read word problems and symbols, social studies teachers might focus on maps and graphs, and language arts teachers might study the reading-writing connection.

- 6. Key Components of a Comprehensive Reading Program** The key components of a comprehensive reading program can be distilled into three simple elements: opportunity, choice, and instruction. Each of these elements applies to all students: our best readers, our average readers, and our students in need of special intervention.

- **Opportunity** Students (and all members of the school community) need the chance to read often and widely. Initiatives that support this opportunity are independent reading, read aloud, and programs that provide students with the time to read, such as Sustained Silent Reading (Robb, 2000b).
- **Choice** Allowing students to have a voice in selecting the materials they read ensures that they will be engaged in their reading and that they will read texts that are comprehensible. It is easy to see how choice links directly with the resource of “materials” identified above, since a range of materials provides students with options and relieves teachers of the burden of assigning texts that may be too simple or too challenging for students (Burke, 1999).
- **Instruction** Good teaching supports the role of schools in helping students grow to become literate adults. It is through instruction that we “show them how to do it better.” Instruction is the opportunity for schools and teachers to share with students the processes of getting meaning from text as well as the understanding that reading is a problem-solving activity—one that constantly poses challenges to the reader and requires a variety of strategies (Langer, 2000).

7. Sustaining the Effort In these days of high-stakes testing, one of the greatest challenges facing teachers and schools that recognize the importance of establishing a school-wide reading initiative is to support and maintain the effort long enough for it to have an effect on the school and its culture. Too often, we find ourselves forced to take on the short-range focus of a discipline’s content rather than the long-range view of developing the processes that make students independent learners of a discipline. One simple strategy for ensuring that any initiative is sustained and supported over time is the use of a long- and short-term planning process.

In this process, the faculty establishes a yearlong goal. It then identifies a step that all staff members can take over the next 30 days. Members work individually or in teams to accomplish the agreed upon step. One month later the staff meets to discuss the outcome of the small step it took: what worked and what did not. Informed by this discussion, the faculty then identifies a second step toward the long-term goal that it will take for the next 30 days. The process of action, reflection, and planning continues throughout the school year, culminating in an evaluation of how well the long-term goal was achieved and the establishment of a new long-term goal for the next school year.

An Example

Let's take a look at how this model might play out using the *Reader's Handbook*. Westside Middle School has declared that improving student learning and reading abilities is its focus for the school year, and it is committed to using the *Reader's Handbook* as a key tool. At the initial staff meetings for the school year, the staff works to turn this declaration into a plan of action by identifying two long-term goals that it will work to achieve during the school year:

- to establish a school-wide common language for student and staff to use when talking about how to learn from and understand text
- to provide students with the tools to be successful learners in each of their courses

These two goals are fairly comprehensive, and experience has shown us that working to achieve goals that are too broad can often be doomed to failure. So, the staff of Westside, while keeping its long-term goals in mind, establishes a more achievable objective that will move it toward accomplishing the broader goal. After discussion, the Westside faculty determined that during the first half of the school year it would focus only on the first goal: establishing a school-wide common language.

At its initial meeting of the year, the staff worked to achieve the first short-term goal for the year: introduce the *Reader's Handbook* to all students by presenting the opening section, "How to Use This Book." Grade-level teams of math, science, social studies, and language arts teachers planned the specifics of how, over the next 30 days, they would accomplish this short-term goal and shared their plans with the entire staff. During the next month, the teams worked to implement their plan.

At the October staff meeting, each team reported its progress. Successes were shared, and problems were presented. The full group discussed the successes and shared potential solutions to the problems. Then, within the context of both the previous month's accomplishments and the long-term goal of establishing a common language, a new short-term goal for the entire school was established: to introduce the reading process to all students using Chapter 2 of the *Reader's Handbook*.

Again, teams met to devise their plans. Those plans were shared with the full staff and, over the next 30 days, implemented. At the next staff meeting, successes and problems were discussed and, within the context of the long-term goal, a short-term goal for the next 30 days was established.

This process of short-term planning within the context of progress toward long-term goals continued throughout the school year and provided the entire school with the focus and direction that resulted in the successful achievement of its goals. This process has several benefits.

- It provides an opportunity for all members of the school community to contribute to establishing both long- and short-term goals.
- It allows for both successes and issues to be raised and discussed in the process of reflecting and planning. (Too often we only hear about the positives when, in fact, helping to solve the negatives can be the key to a successful initiative.)
- It keeps the initiative up front, as a critical part of the community's discussion and fabric at each monthly meeting.

It is through the use of this or other “stay the course” efforts that the success of any initiative can be assured.

REFERENCES

- Burke, J. (1999). *The English teacher's companion*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann.
- Burke, J. (2000). *Reading reminders: Tools, tips, and techniques*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann.
- Braunger, J. & Lewis, J. (1998). *Building a knowledge base in reading*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Education Laboratory.
- Fullan, M. (1991). *The new meaning of education change*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fullan, M. (1999). *Change forces: The sequel*. New York: Routledge/Falmer Press.
- Langer, J. (2000). *Guidelines for teaching middle and high school students to read and write well*. Albany, NY: Center on English Learning & Achievement.
- Lyons, C. A. & Pinnell, G. S. (2001). *Systems for change in literacy education: A guide to professional development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Robb, L. (2000a). *Redefining staff development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Robb, L. (2000b). *Teaching reading in middle school*. New York: Scholastic.