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Research Brief VII


Balancing Direction and Support Implementation of a Four-Year Literacy Initiative

Center for Educational Leadership and
Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District

Findings from the second interim report



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
College of Education



Researchers at the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (CTP) at the University of Washington School of Education are examining the partnerships of the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) with selected school districts in California and Washington. This publication, the seventh in a series to summarize the research, is based on interim findings by Chrysan Gallucci of CTP and Judy Swanson, Research for Quality Schools, entitled *Balancing Direction and Support—Third Year Scale Up of a System-wide Instructional Reform Initiative*. Except where noted otherwise, quotations can be attributed to the researchers.

BALANCING DIRECTION AND SUPPORT

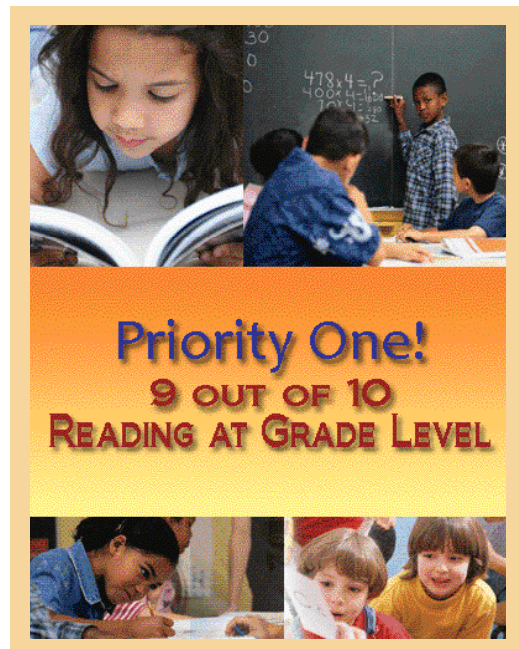
Four years after setting an ambitious target of 9 out of 10 students proficient in reading, the Norwalk-La Mirada (CA) School Board might have scaled back its expectations or tried a different strategy after finding that not 9, but more like 5 to 6 out of 10 students had achieved that goal. Instead, the board acknowledged progress, and in 2007 adopted a policy developed by district leaders and key stakeholders that affirmed the original goal and designated some milestones for the next three years: 7 out of 10 proficient in 2008, 8 out of 10 in 2009, and 9 out of 10 in 2010.

The board also maintained its support for the district's literacy initiative, a comprehensive approach to improving reading instruction that involves central office administrators, principals, literacy coaches, and teachers. Since 2004 Norwalk-La Mirada has partnered with the Center for Educational Leadership to put into place a variety of consulting and coaching services that emanate from CEL's theory of action on improving instruction (See Figure 1), from presentations in academies with a mix of instructional leaders to one-on-one coaching with teachers. Concurrent with this contractual arrangement, researchers at the University of Washington College of Education have been observing the work of the partnership and generating reports on their findings. In the first interim report released in 2006, researchers described the challenge of focusing energies in one direction in a district that had been historically site-based. In the second interim report, they chronicle the district's efforts from 2006-07 to balance support with direction – what some might call carrots and sticks – with continued emphasis on rich opportunities for professional learning (support) and increased accountability (direction). "Our analysis suggests that maintaining a balance between the two and

reducing variability at the school and classroom levels of the system are central tasks for maintaining the reform momentum."

This publication summarizes findings from research on:

- developing procedures and policies to ensure professional accountability,
- maintaining and extending opportunities for professional learning,
- making progress in implementing the literacy initiative, and
- confronting the challenges of implementing instructional reform.



Accountability with teeth: Clear expectations, new tools

As the researchers described in their first report, Norwalk-La Mirada developed a set of accountability guidelines for the literacy initiative in 2005. In January 2007, the superintendent expressed some frustration with the lack of “teeth” to ensure implementation. “I would say everyone [knows] what they are accountable for...it’s all in writing. What I don’t think we’ve done well enough is follow-up on it.” While principals were expected to be monitoring implementation of literacy strategies, central office leaders found it difficult to make school visits “a consistent part of their routine” and vouch for teachers using strategies such as Read Aloud and Shared Reading. Area superintendents did not meet as regularly as they had planned with the literacy coaches and did not formally evaluate them. In some schools, literacy coaches were still doing the lion’s share of planning and presentations that were meant to be assumed by the principal and LIT team members.

By fall 2007, there was a noticeable change both in the behaviors of central office leaders and how they described the environment. “We’re getting more focused and deliberate and accountable for what we want to have happen in our schools,” the superintendent said. The behavior changes included:

- The superintendent met with individual principals to examine standard scores and APIs (a measure of progress in California) and to discuss the infusion of the literacy initiative into the school culture.
- There was agreement between the superintendent and area superintendents that principals were to observe in three to five classrooms each day.
- Area superintendents increased their presence in schools— setting up visits to schools to review expectations with principals, conduct walk-throughs, and reflect on next steps. They wrote follow-up messages to school staffs and principals, outlining what they had seen on each walk-through.
- One area superintendent included the literacy coach in his school walk-throughs and discussions with principals, providing an opportunity “to get a sense of her skills.”

Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District
Serving the communities of Norwalk and La Mirada
in Los Angeles County
Enrollment: 24,000

Schools:	Demographics:
1 Head Start school	4.3 African American
18 elementary schools	.04 American Indian
7 middle schools	4.6 Asian
3 comprehensive high schools	2.8 Filipino
1 continuation high school	70 Hispanic
2 adult schools	.8 Pacific Islander
	16.5 White



“We’re getting more focused and deliberate and accountable for what we want to have happen in our schools.”

— SUPERINTENDENT

Center for Educational Leadership

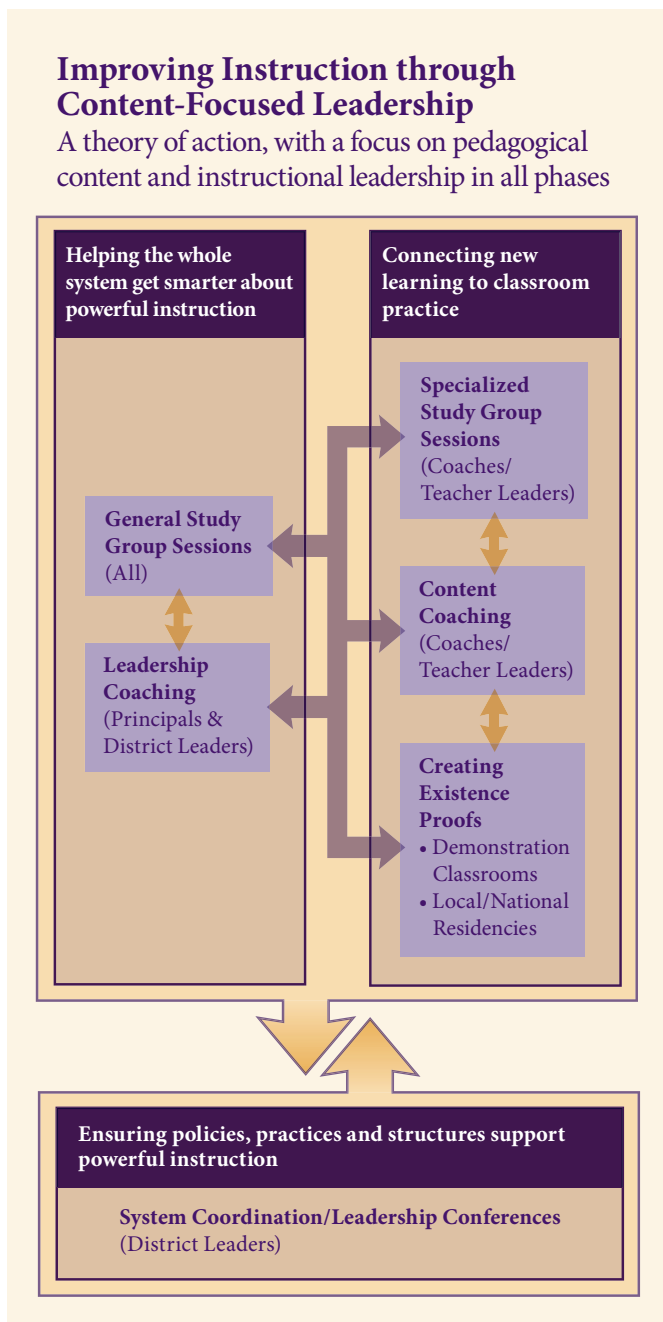
At the classroom level, most of the attention and concomitant resources to date had focused on two groups of teachers: demonstration teachers, whose classrooms were to be places where other teachers could observe and learn, and the members of the LIT team, made up of one or two teachers from each grade level at elementary schools, and of language arts teachers in middle schools. For the 2007-08 school year, all elementary teachers and English Language Arts secondary teachers, according to an area superintendent, “will be held accountable for the classroom environment, the Read Aloud and Shared Reading...So that’s a top priority over everything.” The expectations are spelled out clearly in an agreement with the teachers’ association. (See Setting Clear Expectations)

Classroom teachers now have three new tools to help them assess and monitor student progress: two new measurements and a web-based system for tracking progress and maintaining student records. Benchmark tests in English Language Arts—the measuring tool for determining progress in achieving the district’s literacy goals—are given four times a year, while mathematics tests are administered three times each year. A Developmental Reading Assessment is used by teachers of students in kindergarten through second grade to measure four areas of reading: re-telling, fluency, accuracy, and phrasing. During the first round of use in fall 2006, literacy coaches helped train teachers in the use of assessment to ensure accurate scoring practices. Using the web-based system Data Director, teachers can go on-line from school or home to track individual student performance on the benchmark tests and the California State Test. “Teachers can save ‘pre-built’ reports and then tailor them to meet their own instructional needs.”

Setting Clear Expectations

- K-5th grade language arts teachers are expected to incorporate purposeful and well-planned approaches of Read Aloud and Shared Reading into their daily instruction (part of the evaluation).
- 6-9th grade language arts teachers are expected to incorporate purposeful and well-planned approaches of Read Aloud and Shared Reading into their units of study (part of the evaluation).
- K-9th grade language arts teachers are expected to continue to provide a learning environment that supports the work, is print-rich, provides a meeting area, co-constructed charts, and classroom library (part of the evaluation).
- K-11th grade teachers will use data to inform instruction (part of the evaluation).
- K-9th grade language arts teachers will be expected to practice small group instruction, guided reading (K-5 only), and independent reading with conferring/assessment (non-evaluative).
- 10th grade language arts teachers are expected to practice using Read Aloud and Shared Reading in their units of study (non-evaluative).

Figure 1. CEL Theory of Action



Maintaining and extending opportunities for professional learning

Norwalk-La Mirada continued to support the literacy initiative with the same structures for delivery of professional development, but during this reporting period, extended the opportunity to participate to more classroom teachers. For example, all English language arts teachers in secondary schools began attending the monthly “Good to Great” Leadership Academies, and the LIT teams in elementary and middle schools expanded to bring in more teachers. The structure, composition, frequency, and content focus of these opportunities are charted in Table 1.

Expansion of the LIT teams began in 2006-07. With increased pressure to demonstrate results, principals and coaches acted to increase the level of exposure to initiative ideas, realizing that demonstration teachers and the six or so members of the LIT teams had multiple opportunities to learn about Balanced Literacy while “the rest of their staff were only exposed to the initiative ideas at a two-hour ‘roll-out’ staff meeting one time per month.” One school now has three LIT teams in place, with all but two teachers on a team. Some elementary school principals created “mini-LIT” sessions that were facilitated by the literacy coach and included grade level teams. One principal paid for release days for the whole staff to work with her and the literacy coach. Some principals also “upped the ante” for LIT team members, recommending that they invite colleagues to observe a demonstration in their classrooms.

Clearly, principals understood the expectation to bring more teachers into the initiative, but researchers’ data indicate “teachers were widely variable in their willingness to come on board.”

Table 1. Support Structures: Year Three and Four

Learning Environment	Participants	Frequency	Content
“Good to Great” Academy	District leaders Principals Literacy coaches Demonstration teachers Teachers’ association leadership CEL consultant CEL project director	One day per month Separate days for elementary, middle, and high school levels	Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Teaching to standards Instructional leadership
Coaches Academy	Literacy coaches Area superintendents (sometimes) CEL consultant	One day per month	Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Instructional coaching
Principal Cadres	Area superintendents Principals CEL consultant	Six times per year for each “family” of schools	Instructional leadership [e.g., classroom observations, giving feedback to teachers, establishing leadership voice]
Summer School	Literacy coaches Classroom teachers CEL consultants	Four weeks	Use of components of Balanced Literacy in classroom teaching (focus on specific levels such as high school teaching, K-1 teaching, or ELL teaching)
LIT Team	Principal 6-12 teachers District literacy coach	One day per month	Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Classroom environment
Expanded LIT Teams	District literacy coach Classroom teachers Principal (sometimes)	Year Three: Variable by school Year Four: Expanding in most schools to include more teachers	Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Classroom environment
Roll-out Days	Principal District literacy coach Classroom teachers	Two hours per month	Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Classroom environment

The researchers describe the depth of support for professional learning as “unique. Not only is the support deep, it is likewise well coordinated. The pieces fit together, and to the degree that leaders stay clear about the goals and purposes of the reform, the focus of professional development sessions across the district is consistent.”

They provide vignettes and verbatim transcriptions of the conversations that occurred in the Principal Cadres and the Coaches Academy to demonstrate how these learning opportunities are designed, the nature of the exchanges that occur, and the perceived benefit to the participants.

Observing the principal cadres

In observing cadres for elementary principals, they note different approaches that reflect the needs and interests of the group. One cadre was intent on how to confer with teachers and use leadership voice; another was focused on similar content, but the host principal, new to her position, asked for and received help on debriefing the teacher. In a third cadre, the activities focused on breadth rather than depth, for example, hearing stories of success from each school, and reading an entire book on instructional strategies. Asked to reflect on their experiences in the cadres, the elementary principals were uniformly “positive about the cadre work and the skills of the CEL consultant.” One described their learning this way:

We are sharpening our tools to be better at giving feedback to teachers and coaching them on their next steps...If we have ten minutes to give them feedback and to move them further, how can we best use that ten minutes? And we're looking at our staff development Wednesdays...how we're creating them. Are they around good staff development theory?

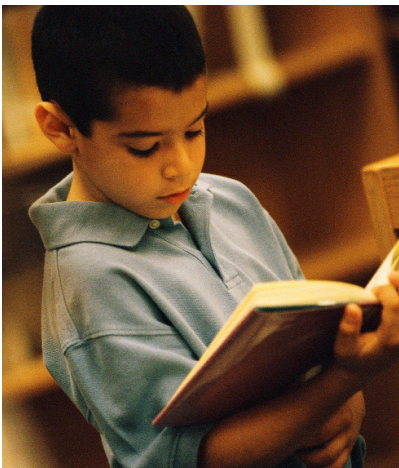
In middle school cadres, principals were learning how to utilize available resources to target professional development to teachers' needs, to provide feedback to teachers, and how to question students about their learning. In 2006-07, classroom visits were less common. Though principals viewed their meetings as a valuable opportunity to meet and share ideas and a resource they want to keep, over half of those interviewed agreed that the cadres would be more productive if they had a clearer focus.

Coaching the coaches

In all-day sessions once each month, district literacy coaches worked with a CEL consultant to learn how to help principals and teachers implement the reading strategies introduced through the Leadership Academy. Describing one of these sessions in detail, the researchers offer some of the narrative from the discussion, and conclude:

The session continued over the course of the day with content around (for example) what to focus on when observing a lesson and how to teach others to observe lessons. The coaches spent some time getting clear on their terms—for example, when “observing” for student engagement, what does “engagement” actually mean? Throughout the day, [the CEL consultant] continued to answer questions and offer bits of advice from her wealth of experience. She was clearly pushing the coaches in this session to do two things that had not been typical for most of them up to that point: (1) moving away from just coaching the demonstration teachers and (2) making sure that they are working with more than one teacher at a time (i.e., that other teachers are observing the sessions).

“Not only is the support deep, it is likewise well coordinated. The pieces fit together, and to the degree that leaders stay clear about the goals and purposes of the reform, the focus of professional development sessions across the district is consistent.”



In 2006-07, the literacy coaches also had the opportunity to design their own coaching session with the consultant—identifying what they wanted help with and who would attend the session. While the participants in these one-on-one sessions differed, the format for the coaching was

constant: a pre-conference with the literacy coach, observation or demonstrations in classroom, and a debriefing session.

Assessing progress

Using interviews and extensive observations at a few schools, the researchers draw a picture of progress at some elementary schools in exposing more teachers to the ideas of the initiative, with less success at the middle level in convincing teachers to participate. (The research design did not include high school observations or interviews.)

Elementary principals feel the pressure to “get everyone on board” and know that they bear the responsibility for helping to implement the initiative. Middle school principals feel the pressure to raise test scores and make Adequate Yearly Progress, but “only mentioned after prompting that they were expected to implement the literacy initiative.”

Noting that the size of their sample is not large enough to draw conclusions about elementary or middle school success

overall, they report “promising signs that teachers are learning a variety of instructional strategies,” but also find that some teachers understand the technical aspects of the reform without understanding “at a deeper level how to help students make meaning as they participate in a Shared Reading.”

Implementation of the initiative at the middle school level is “as varied as the schools are from one another,” with teacher participation ranging from three to four language arts teachers to 80% of the entire school. Middle school principals find it challenging to help content teachers (teachers of science or social studies, for example) understand why they should learn more about reading instruction. These teachers had difficulty connecting the instructional approaches to what they taught. Of the six principals interviewed, four indicated that 15-25 percent of their staff was invested in the initiative.

The researchers offer a detailed example of how one middle school was successful in using its resources to bring more of its staff into the work. The administrative team and literacy coach took steps to develop clear expectations, build teacher leadership, support team planning with additional time, create curriculum maps for consistency across classrooms, provide extra support for language arts and math teachers, and use substitutes to expand one-on-one coaching. The visible outcomes:

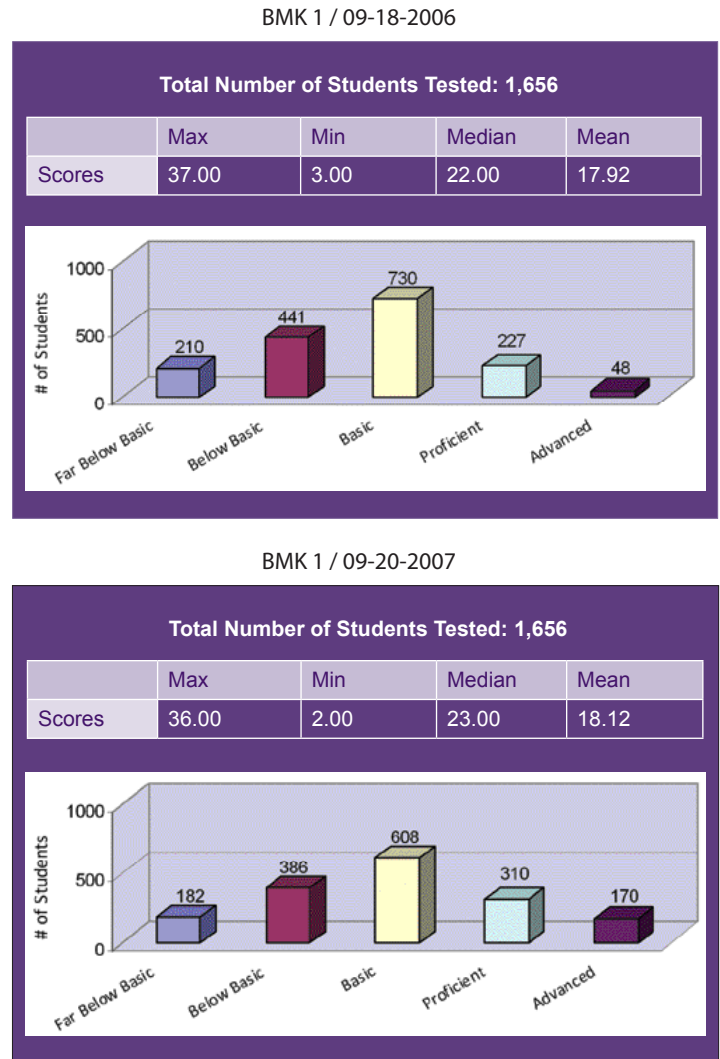
- Grade level teams were more cohesive.
- Veteran teachers took the initiative to help new teachers.
- All teachers used curriculum maps to guide lesson planning and monitoring progress.
- The administrative team’s high expectations translated to high expectations teachers hold for themselves.

Using benchmark data

When the Norwalk-La Mirada school board reaffirmed its commitment to the literacy initiative, the board policy identified a new tool to measure student proficiency: a benchmark testing system. As indicated above, teachers are administering these tests four times a year—September, November, March, and June—to monitor their students' progress. The fourth administration in June provides the results the district will use to measure progress in achieving the 9 out of 10 goal. The researchers included reports from the district to demonstrate "how the district is making sense of the scores and reporting them to the school board."

Figure 2 shows Benchmark One scores for English Language Arts administered to 4th grade students in the fall of 2006 and then in the fall of 2007 (note that these are different groups of students). The figure shows that the raw number of students who received scores in the proficient and/or advanced range on this test increased from one year to the next (that is, the number went from 275 in 2006 to 480 in 2007). It is important to keep in mind that because these are different groups of students, one year of such data is difficult to interpret. However, if such trends were to continue over time, one might conclude that students' performance in the English Language Arts is improving (and that the Literacy Initiative may be a contributor to that improvement).

Figure 2.



Confronting the challenges of implementing instructional reform

Any school district trying to implement new procedures and change professional practice will encounter challenges along the way. The researchers identified five themes that they characterized as implementation challenges:

Variation in implementation: There is inconsistency among principals in their use of leadership voice and variability in the frequency of their classroom visits, a key strategy for assessing teachers' learning needs; "stark variability between schools," with data that speaks most clearly to differences in implementation at middle schools; and variation within schools, with differences in classroom practices even among teachers on the same school LIT team.

Consistent support from central office leaders: To plan appropriate and useful learning experiences for the principals they supervise, central office leaders must know their principals well and be able to assess their learning needs.

On-going support for literacy coaches: Although some are creative in finding ways to support each other, the district literacy coaches could benefit from more time together and differentiated (or individualized) coaching support from an external expert—especially new coaches who missed the first few years of training.

Disseminating reform ideas: Norwalk-La Mirada is disseminating ideas on improving literacy instruction through the presence of central office administrators in schools, through the use of literacy coaches, and through the use of programs such as Data Director. The researchers encourage district leaders to consider what other communication tools and strategies might be

used—clearly and consistently—to spread "ideas and artifacts that relate to the aims of the literacy initiative."

Communicating expectations and association agreements: Norwalk-La Mirada has a strong teachers' association (TANLA) and has worked with it to gain approval of the instructional reform strategies of the literacy initiative. Some principals and teachers are less certain that the associations' stance is positive, and need "strong, consistent and well-publicized" information that describes the district/TANLA agreements and how they translate in schools and classrooms.

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