

LEADING LITERACY

for Learning

The following excerpt from *Time To Act* is a hypothetical example of an ideal schooling experience for adolescent learners. Riverside Middle School is a typical middle school, grades 6-8, with rates of poverty and mobility that are higher than its district's average. Nonetheless, the school consistently outperforms the other schools in the district on measures of student achievement, teacher retention, attendance (for both students and faculty), on-target for graduation rates, and discipline referrals.

Riverside is led by a dynamic principal named Mr. Jackson who has convinced his staff that students' literacy skills are the key to their success across all content areas. He has consistently made literacy achievement the highest priority within the school. Literacy is not "added on to" the list of goals for the year – it is the foundation upon which all the educational goals of the school are achieved.

To drive and oversee all literacy work in Riverside, Mr. Jackson has formed a Literacy Leadership Team, which he also chairs. This team is made up of eight members of the faculty and a counselor. The team meets at least every two weeks to review progress on the implementation of specific aspects of their overall literacy plan for the year. Through the Literacy Leadership Team Mr. Jackson has, in effect, distributed responsibility for leadership of the school's literacy work to key members of his faculty and staff.

Mr. Jackson knows his struggling students by name, and knows who their teachers are also. He knows which teachers are struggling or inexperienced and thus need more support. This knowledge depends on systematic use of up-to-date assessment information.

Students are screened prior to the school year (using performance on state assessments or other available data) and placed in classes designed to meet individual needs. Those students who do not respond to enriched or intensified instruction are given a diagnostic test to pinpoint their specific reading deficiencies and then are provided with more specific and targeted interventions. Mr. Jackson is actively involved in the system of ongoing formative assessments in place at his school.

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He meets regularly with teachers about student data, and he uses faculty meetings as forums for discussing ways to increase student achievement while addressing most strictly administrative issues through e-mail.

Professional development for Riverside Middle School teachers is needs-based and carefully targeted. Each teacher has a professional development plan created together with the principal and tied to his or her end-of-year evaluation, thereby holding both the principal and the teacher accountable. Mr. Jackson is also actively involved in setting the master schedule. He uses the reading needs of his students (as shown by the data) to drive scheduling, instead of relying on tradition, convenience, or teacher preferences. He makes sure that the schedule offers abundant common planning periods for both grade-level and content-area specific team meetings, and due to the ready availability of formative assessment data such meetings are always focused on raising student achievement.

A large number of students at Riverside Middle School struggle with fluency, and a smaller number of students have decoding issues. Those students may receive full-year intensive reading course (in some cases, a double block of time in addition to language arts), taught by the strongest teachers who have special expertise in teaching struggling readers. These courses are text rich, with an emphasis on reading and writing practice, and the content is taken from core subjects (math, language arts, science and social studies.) To motivate students further, these courses count as credit toward graduation.

Mr. Jackson's prioritizing of literacy is reflected by his investment in a full-time literacy coach who serves as a site-based professional development resource for all teachers. The literacy coach coordinates school wide assessments, placement of students into intervention classes, and professional development of the faculty, and also coordinates the mentoring of new faculty members. In addition, the literacy coach provides content-area teachers content-specific training and support. The literacy coach models lessons for teachers, provides formal and informal professional development, attends grade-level and content-area

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team meetings, and discusses student data. Mr. Jackson realized that merely hiring a literacy coach was not enough. The literacy coach at Riverside MS works closely with teachers and the principal to help make sure that all students receive the quality literacy instruction they need.

Riverside Middle School's prioritization of literacy, combined with its commitment of resources to support that priority, has created a highly coherent school culture. Teachers at the school understand that they are responsible for student learning. Each content-area teacher has undergone carefully designed professional development relevant to his or her own discipline's specific literacy challenges. New teachers arriving at Riverside are quickly socialized into this culture and brought into intensive professional development activities (peer observations, sessions of examining student achievement data) that provide them with needed guidance from more experienced teachers.

Riverside exemplifies a school culture dedicated to academic achievement. Riverside's leadership is wholeheartedly committed to building strong literacy *and* learning skills in its students. This strong academic and literacy focus is fueled by excellent content-area based literacy instruction plus targeted literacy instruction (for students who need extra help), and all instruction is informed by continual, up-to-date assessment of students' needs and progress. Riverside's leadership allocates precious resources to support the school's number one priority: learning.

As a result, of these efforts, Riverside consistently produces:

- Faculty and administrators focused on their own learning as a means to higher student achievement
- Teachers and administrators focused on student learning
- Cross-year continuity in the faculty
- Core subject courses steeped in vocabulary and writing
- Increasing numbers of students reading on grade level or higher, and decreasing numbers of students reading below grade level
- Students who have and use a variety of readily available texts – both in classrooms and the media center

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- Students who are on-target to be college and workplace ready, because of their ability to deal with a variety of texts including fiction, non-fiction, scientific, and technical
- Students who are capable of doing high school-level work who do not need remedial courses upon enrollment in high school

Summary

It is worth noting how different Riverside Middle School is from ‘business as usual’ in U.S. secondary education. In very few secondary schools is student assessment data used as a basis for assignment to classes -- sometimes because such data is not available, but more often because convenience-based scheduling defeats the effort. Many schools that do use assessment data as a basis for assigning classes simply assign students to lower and higher tracks, rather than offering targeted instruction to meet struggling students’ needs while making sure that all students receive the same instruction in core academic areas.

The professional development agenda at Riverside is exceptional. Much of the professional development in U.S. schools is of the one-off variety—popular speakers are invited to provide motivational jolts, or publishers are invited to provide curriculum overviews. Taking student data as the basis for professional work, linking the achievement data to proposed instructional activities, discussing ways to provide instruction across content areas and across years in a manner that is coherent and leads to cumulative results, and engaging in peer observation and evaluation of instruction (as are all done at Riverside MS) are relatively rare activities in the nation’s schools, yet these activities constitute the most effective approach to instructional improvement.

Finally, Riverside Middle School’s commitment to follow-through is unusual in educational institutions. Mr. Jackson recognizes that literacy instruction has not been an inherent part of secondary education and so is subject to inevitable slippage. Therefore, he commissions a yearly audit of professional development and instructional activities to evaluate the timeliness of access to student data, the use of data in planning instruction, the levels of teacher participation in professional development, and so on.