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Collaboration: Advocacy for School Change

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The Challenge

Adolescent literacy is a looming issue in secondary schools. Being able to read, comprehend, and write is imperative for students to understand the content of their classes and textbooks. According to Michael Kamil, professor of psychological studies in education and learning at Stanford University, "we almost need a trauma center to take care of this problem, it's that serious for kids that can't read...It's the number-one factor standing in the way of their graduating" (Manzo-Kennedy).

The principal at my high school, aware of the problem and responding to a push from district personnel, appointed me the Project Manager of the Literacy Project Team. His charge to me, in the spring of 2005, was to develop a comprehensive, all-inclusive literacy plan for the school, to be completed by Spring 2006. He assigned me the task of producing a literacy "product," which would be presented to the faculty in May 2006. While I had an idea of what the word "literacy" meant (reading, comprehension, writing, etc.), I had no idea what developing a literacy *plan* for a school with 2,100 students might entail. With fear and trepidation well hidden, I assured the principal that the project team would charge ahead.

As a relatively new media specialist, I felt as if I were in over my head. I knew this task would consume much of my time but, fortunately, our high school had two media specialists. With my stalwart colleague performing the bulk of the administrative media center duties and extremely able media assistants keeping tabs on the collection, I was able to spend the time needed to focus on this issue. Despite feeling overwhelmed, I knew this assignment afforded an invaluable opportunity for getting to know the faculty of the school in a deeper way. It provided a marvelous opportunity to work collaboratively with a number of teachers in the school to develop a document, which would ultimately help students achieve success in school. Little did I know how I would be stretched professionally and intellectually as I forged new relationships with dedicated staff, not only within the school, but also within the broader high school cluster community, and ultimately be involved in developing a literacy plan for students from K-12.

Developing the Team

Before school finished in 2005, I lined up a team of people to be a part of the Literacy Project Team. Since this was a voluntary project team, I was able to hand pick team members. I knew from the start that it would be important to have representation from as many academic departments as possible. I knew that having a broad representation would come in handy when it came to "sell" the literacy plan to the faculty. Convincing faculty members to join the committee

was not easy, given the gargantuan nature of the task and the lengthy time commitment. The team assembled consisted of several teachers from the English department, the Foreign Language resource teacher, the reading specialist, an ESOL teacher, a Special Education teacher, the lead literacy teacher for the cluster, and the director of the regional public library. While the team did not represent all departments, the members were very aware of the importance of the undertaking and eager to work.

I spent late spring and the early part of the summer of 2005 scouring the University of Maryland databases and the ProQuest Education Journals database for information, studies, and reports on secondary literacy. I took copious notes while reading and must have killed a few trees printing out the voluminous number of articles on adolescent literacy. I also spent a lot of money at Amazon.com, ordering books that could offer helpful insights and direction on what secondary literacy plans look like and how to go about developing a plan to tackle such a large issue.

After my foray into the research on literacy, I identified a few key articles and documents that I felt were essential for educating the Literacy Project Team and the principal as to the task that lay ahead of us. Over the summer, I supplied these articles to the team members and the principal.(For a list of the reading materials, see Literacy Resources.)

Examining the Data

During the fall of 2005, the Literacy Project Team met once a month after school to eat, share, discuss texts, hammer out a definition of literacy, and determine what our next steps were going to be. Early on, it became clear that we needed to acquire data on our school. We knew that, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education in their recent report, *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy,*" seventy percent of older readers require some form of remediation." We also knew that, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education, twenty-five percent of all high school students read below grade level.

I wondered: Would our school data reflect this national trend? Acquiring such information from a large school district was no easy feat. There was a paucity of readily-accessible, detailed information on individual student performance at the high school level in our county. After many phone calls, emails, and persistent digging to acquire the data, we found that, according to the state mandated English test, forty percent of the tenth grade class in our high school was not able to read on grade level. We had our work cut out for us.

As fall progressed, the team examined literacy plans from another Montgomery County high school and J.E.B. Stuart High School in Virginia, where literacy had been a focus for nine years. The lead literacy teacher and I attended a conference on secondary literacy in Washington, DC, and carefully considered what would be our next steps in the structuring of a literacy plan. By late November, after piles of reading and discussion, the Literacy Team hammered out a rough draft. It was at this point that two team members requested to leave the team after realizing exactly how much work was involved with developing a literacy plan. As people of integrity, they felt that they did not have the time to devote to such an important issue.

A Plan Emerges

Despite the loss of these team members, we forged ahead with our plan.

After numerous discussions with the principal, bringing him up to speed on where the Literacy Project Team was in the process of developing a literacy plan, we decided it was time to confer with the staff development teacher as to how to work this plan into the larger school improvement plan. Working with the staff development teacher was key to the broader success of the plan. With the staff developer's intimate knowledge of the school culture and her keen ability to quickly assess the big picture , we started to fine tune the literacy plan. We worked for hours on end. I squeezed meetings in between teaching research classes, maintaining the media center web page and other media specialist duties. The staff development teacher and I took the work done by the Literacy Project Team and shaped it into a viable plan with professional development and organizational support. Ultimately, the plan was vetted by staff at the local and district level and approved by the principal.

During one of our meetings, it was suggested that members of the Literacy Project Team and I join a literacy initiative, which was setting about to determine the literacy needs of the entire cluster of schools from K-12. Being a part of this talented and insightful group of elementary, middle, and high school reading specialists, staff development teachers, the literacy coach from the high school, and the English Resource teacher from the high school, proved exciting and stretching. Working collaboratively at this level to determine the vertical articulation needs of an entire cluster of schools was one of the most rewarding professional experiences I have ever experienced. Collaborating with teachers beyond the media center and working together to determine how to help students be successful in school was an exhilarating experience. The cluster meetings were invaluable for making connections outside of the school building and established the importance of media specialists as members of any literacy leadership team.

By May, our plan was complete and ready for presentation to the faculty. Working collaboratively with the staff development teacher, the literacy team and the principal, we devised a strategy to get faculty buy-in. For the most part, the faculty meeting was a success. Before school let out for the year, the staff development teacher used the literacy plan as a basis for writing a year-long staff development plan focusing on vocabulary instruction. Throughout the 2006-2007 school year, the literacy coach and staff development teacher worked to plan faculty meetings focused on strategies for vocabulary instruction, conduct walk-throughs, and develop a whole host of best practices. At the last faculty meeting, a celebration was held highlighting a successful year of focusing on literacy instruction.

Perspective

The overarching lesson learned from this significant experience as the Project Manager for the Literacy Project Team, is that media specialists need to move beyond being "keepers of things" to join the broader school community in finding ways to help students be successful in their academic pursuits. It is imperative that we reach out to the staff developers, resource teachers, reading specialists, and literacy coaches in our buildings to let them know that we want to be part of the team that is working to find ways to be help students be successful.

Literacy Resources

[Draft of Literacy Plan](#)

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