

## THE SIX P'S OF READING:

### UNLOCKING LEARNING THROUGH DISTRICTWIDE LITERACY FOCUS

by

Jane Holmberg

#### A Needed Change

By many accounts, Intermediate School District 287 is a successful educational service agency that serves other successful districts. In partnership with 12 school districts in the suburban Minneapolis, Minnesota area, Intermediate District 287 has grown over 40 years to offer 120 unique services and programs that range from operating schools for special student populations to coordinating high level professional development that brings research to practice. With our track record, up until 2006 we thought we had good reasons for not teaching reading to the low or non-readers in our school programs. The most cognitively impaired students were in their late teens and needed daily living skills more urgently than phonics; the most behaviorally challenged and mentally ill students already had had so much failure that stressing the complex task of reading would more than likely backfire, escalating their bad behavior and taking away from the needed focus of learning social and emotional regulation skills; and the high school students in our alternative learning programs were so far behind in credits that we couldn't take time to explicitly teach reading--besides which we couldn't afford a separate reading teacher when we needed to have so many different academic licensure areas covered for our relatively small programs. Our school district whose mission was to educate those most in need was systematically ignoring the one area of instruction that would unlock learning for every student. Although there were pockets of concern, there wasn't widespread understanding or planning to change the culture, to see how reading IS a daily living skill, if only to read a crosswalk sign; to

see how social and emotional skills can only be strengthened in the context of meaningful work, such as learning to read; and to see how futile it is to march along in the high school curriculum knowing the students can't access the texts to understand the material.

It is sobering to look back and see that this was the circumstances at Intermediate District 287 prior to 2006, and it's discouraging to know this still is the situation in an overwhelming number of school districts across the country. The emphasis on teaching reading before grade three is laudable, but for the students who do not learn to read by then, ongoing, coordinated reading intervention and emphasis on reading across the curriculum is essential. We know this now, but in 2006 we were just beginning.

#### A Plan

Our story actually starts with a space rather than an idea. Our school district provides direct service to students in schools that we run as well as coordinates a host of instructional and administrative services, such as professional learning and curriculum development, which can be done more efficiently and effectively across district lines. One of those services is to run college licensure classes at our conference facility. When the reading licensure cohort program began at the 287 Conference Center in 2004, several district staff members attended classes to gain reading expertise. As they learned more, they began having informal discussions with the administration about how to approach reading more systematically in the district.

Doing anything related to curriculum systematically in an intermediate district is a challenge. The uniqueness of the population and a culture based on individual education plans (IEPs) can defy centralization of any kind. We did have, however, curriculum groups that met across the district and our sister intermediate district, Northeast Metro 916, had also expressed interest in working on the topic with us. With this foundation, a representative group began

meeting in the summer of 2006. This group of qualified and interested staff were charged to make recommendations to the District-wide Curriculum Committee. We used a format for writing a business plan that the two districts together had used successfully to launch other important initiatives. We knew the power and importance of having a roadmap created by those with the most knowledge. Elements of the plan included assessment of current programming, review of research, recommendations, coordination and evaluation.

The group assessed current instruction in programs across the district and compiled relevant research. After synthesizing their findings, they adopted the Principles for Supporting Adolescent Literacy and Growth found in the 1999 *Position Statement for the Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association* (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik) as the foundation for their recommendations. These principles created a reading manifesto for the district:

1. Adolescents deserve access to a wide variety of reading material that they can and want to read.
2. Adolescents deserve instruction that builds both the skill and desire to read increasingly complex materials.
3. Adolescents deserve assessment that shows them their strengths as well as their needs and that guides their teachers to design instruction that will best help them grow as readers.
4. Adolescents deserve expert teachers who model and provide explicit instruction in reading comprehension and study strategies across the curriculum.
5. Adolescents deserve reading specialists who assist individual students having difficulty learning how to read.

6. Adolescents deserve teachers who understand the complexities of individual adolescent readers, respect their differences, and respond to their characteristics.

7. Adolescents deserve homes, communities, and a nation that will support their efforts to achieve advanced levels of literacy and provide the support necessary for them to succeed.

Several related research reports confirmed these principles and suggested the overall goal for the district should be to develop a comprehensive approach to reading across the district. We should be talking about a reading *program*, not only reading instruction or reading intervention. The reading program could include reading in the content areas, staff development, and developing a culture of reading in addition to addressing explicit reading instruction as its own subject area.

These points created a moral foundation for the change we were seeking--a truly adaptive change that would transform how we would approach literacy. Examining the seven principles, the group made a series of recommendations that served as important guideposts:

- The instructional framework needs to address individual differences and motivation, not “one size fits all.” Therefore the program should include a variety of genres (including electronic) and access academic content, life skills and leisure reading.
- Programs and buildings need to develop a culture of reading.
- The instructional framework should include initial assessment to determine each student’s needs and learner characteristics in reading, as well as ongoing assessment to monitor growth and adjust instruction as needed.
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- Quality reading instruction is offered to every student every day. Instruction by all staff should address specific reading skills and strategies that include explicit instruction modeling and opportunities for students to practice new skills.
- Professional development and ongoing support should be provided to ensure staff members (including content-area teachers, educational assistants, volunteers and administrators) develop the expertise necessary to implement the instructional framework.
- Individualized assessment and an intervention plan for additional instruction is provided by a licensed reading specialist for students whose reading instruction needs are beyond the scope of what the regular classroom teacher can provide.
- There must be ongoing professional development and support for teachers that is research-based and aligned with effective practices for reading instruction that respect the individual characteristics and complexities of students.
- Enlist the involvement of families, administration, higher education and the broader community in addressing the reading needs of our unique population of students.

For each recommendation, the group included actions for the district, program, school, and classroom levels. When the report and recommendations were adopted in the fall of 2006, we had a glimpse of the future and the districtwide resolve to make that vision a reality. In the intervening years, we learned how each point was critical to achieving literacy gains. Having started with the first essential “P,” the Plan, there have been other Ps critical to our success: People, Protocols, PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) and other Processes, and Persistence.

## *People*

All plans depend on the people carrying them out, and this was certainly the case with this reading plan. The recommendations were broad in scope and included ideas such as “reculturing.” Of course something as far-reaching as affecting culture can only happen when leaders and specialists who have the resolve and talent to begin carrying out the plan with the staff at the sites who also have resolve and talent. The district began by establishing a Reading Subgroup of the District Curriculum Committee. This subgroup was a natural offshoot of the group that had formed to write the initial plan. They had a keen interest in putting the plan into action by gathering data, facilitating collaboration and decision-making, and communicating findings.

While the reading group began, the administrative staff and the staff development committee also became involved as key players in carrying out the recommendations. The administrative representative on the reading committee, the Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, facilitated administrative considerations related to the recommendations, especially with regard to staffing, budgeting, and goal setting. Reading group members, several of whom were also members of the Staff Development Committee, brought forward recommendations related to staff development to assure coordination.

One of the most visible and successful efforts of the reading committee has been their presentations at all curriculum meetings. We adopted the practice--that still continues--of presenting common information on teaching literacy within the content areas to all teachers in their respective curriculum groups. The reading committee works on a common presentation about some aspect of literacy that can be enhanced in all classrooms. Then on the three days throughout the school year in which teachers meet districtwide in their content-area groups, a

reading specialist joins each group and facilitates a 20 minute session that focuses attention on literacy. The main messages began as high leverage instructional strategies that would enhance literacy and have since expanded to include broader instructional topics such as using formative assessment or determining literacy levels. The presenters use examples from the content area and provide time for the teachers to share ideas about how they might use the information. Over the years this has proven to be a very powerful strategy. The reading committee has established important relationships, there is a districtwide common vocabulary and set of expectations for such things as word walls, the importance of using precise and ever-expanding vocabulary, and the “power” words that translate most to academic success.

As the reading committee began its work, we also recognized that to have a districtwide instructional framework for reading that would be sophisticated and flexible enough to span our diverse student population, we needed to spend more time doing an assessment of student needs and the state of our reading program. By hiring a part-time reading specialist in 2007, we were able to learn more about the district. This specialist also began increasing the visibility of the reading commitment by her presence in the buildings. Some of the most important things we learned were:

- Ninety percent of our students were three to 10 years behind their same-aged peers in reading.
- Five to eight percent of our students were non-readers.
- Sixty percent of our students had language-based reading issues.
- Motivational issues and “time on task” contributed to poor reading progress.
- Methods used to assess reading were varied and inconsistent.
- Reading interventions had been limited or lacked efficacy.

- Time spent reading each day was limited.
- Staff had access to limited resources and training.

These findings were somewhat expected given that the largest part of our student population was comprised of special education students with the very highest level of disabilities.

Intermediate District 287 also serves students enrolled in Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs) who qualify for services based on several factors that put them at risk of not graduating from high school. Taking a hard look at this dismal assessment gave the district even more resolve to put resources into literacy.

The ongoing review suggested that reading specialists would be needed at the building level. Up to that point hiring any type of specialist had been a de-centralized process in the district, with the principals having the largest say in how staffing dollars would be allocated. To assure the success of the literacy plan, however, it was essential to centralize the hiring and funding of reading specialists. Through this action the district was able to carry out more uniformly the growing expectations for literacy coordination and instruction. We began with just a few specialists spread across many sites and now have 10 full time specialists. These are important teacher leaders who leverage many district systems to assure focus on literacy.

### *Protocols*

While the people were being put into place, we also secured the first major element in the instructional program. After extensive comparison among many programs, we chose Scholastic's READ 180 because it would provide high interest content and structure to our reading efforts. READ 180 is a blended instructional model, using computer-based individual reading, small group instruction, and independent reading. With READ 180, students receive an intensive 90 minutes of literacy instruction each day.

Before making a districtwide investment into materials and training, we began with a pilot of READ 180 for our middle level students with Emotional Behavioral Disorders (EBD). According to prior research, we could expect that students in this type of program would make about a half a year's reading growth using READ 180 for one school year. Because this was substantially more annual gain than these students had made previously, we were excited to begin implementation. What we found at the end of the year was that our students had averaged more than a year of growth. This level of success cemented our resolve to increase our capacity to teach READ 180 for all students who were two or more years behind in their reading.

READ 180 is used in many school districts; however, in most instances, only a few students are enrolled for this intensive program. Because of the low reading levels determined by initial needs assessment and because of the success of the pilot, the READ 180 program became the standard literacy instruction in many sites. Where the students reading levels were lower than 4th grade, which was the case with many of our cognitively delayed students, we also implemented System 44, Scholastic's program to teach the foundations of literacy. The district English Language Coordinator, who was also a reading and assessment specialist, took on the job of supporting READ 180 instruction, and over the next several years coordinated training and implementation among what is now over 40 teachers at the sites. We found this level of coordination to be critical to assure the highest reading gains with our students. Our own experience supports Scholastic's research that it is essential to use the program with fidelity. We also attributed the success of the program to the expertise of the staff. Even though many of them were not literacy specialists or had not taught in a blended online program, their expertise in helping students see the benefit of reading and in sustaining motivation were evident in all corners of the district.

With people now in place and instructional resources available, we were able to codify our expectations across the district. We had centralized our hiring of specialists and purchasing of READ 180 and now felt the need to make a statement about the protocols for literacy at all sites. During the 2010-2011 school year we clarified the specific expectations and instruments for assessing student literacy levels and progress, including:

- the expectation that all instructional staff would know the reading level of their students and the reading level of the materials used in their classrooms,
- the expectation that all instructional staff would take into account their students' reading levels in the design and implementation of instruction,
- the expectation that instructional staff would obtain and analyze student-specific assessment data to guide their instructional decisions about student learning in the area of literacy, and
- the expectation that all students whose reading scores were below grade level would participate in research-based explicit reading instruction daily using specific curriculum.

#### *PLCs and other processes*

The reading protocols created expectations for use of data to inform literacy instruction for all students. This clear statement for all programs dovetailed with the district's work in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Each year the PLC efforts had become increasingly refined. PLCs in our district were understood as a system of setting academic goals for a group of students and then working collaboratively on the instruction that would help students attain the goal. Over the years we had gone from setting SMART (Specific and strategic, Measurable of student progress, Attainable, Results oriented, and Time-bound) goals that used a variety of measures of attainment to using standardized assessment measures. The reading protocols

provided a further structure for the PLC work and allowed us to set districtwide direction for the academic goals. By 2010-2011 we had a sufficient foundation for all of the goals districtwide to focus on literacy. The positive results were convincing that we were on the right path:

- Seventy-five percent of students enrolled in READ 180 at an Area Learning Center (ALC) program increased their reading level by a year or more, which is expected annual growth for a typical regular education high school setting. At one of the ALC programs where students historically had made little or no progress in reading, 71% of the students increased their reading comprehension by one or more grade levels.
- Seventy-five percent of our secondary students enrolled in READ 180 at our Special Education Centers demonstrated a half-year's growth or more, which is expected annual growth for students in any special education program, not only those with the most severe disabilities such as those at 287.
- In our itinerant Deaf/Hard of Hearing programs 100% of the students increased their word identification skills.
- At one of our Care and Treatment Centers 75% of the students increased their reading comprehension by one month's growth or more for every one month enrolled.

By the following year, 2011-2012, we appreciated the extent to which the reading specialists were a major resource to PLC teams, and we increased their ability to act as data coaches. Reading specialists attended an administrative planning retreat to guide the goal and assessment choices at their sites. We began incorporating formative assessments (frequent progress monitoring check-ins) to ensure students understood what was taught. Formative assessments monitored reading progress; summative assessments gave us our reading growth results. This work was strengthened through continued uniform presentations by the reading

committee at all curriculum group meetings and ongoing communication about expectations with administration. With such a firm foundation, it has been possible in subsequent years, to expand the literacy focus to include writing as well as to incorporate new national and state expectations related to the Common Core Curriculum Standards (CCCS) and standards-based Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

The general timeline shows the step-by-step progression of literacy focus in the district, building on the PLC and curriculum group structures.

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| 2006-2007 | Reading committee established and prepares staff development opportunities  |
| 2007-2008 | High leverage reading strategies across the curriculum are presented to curriculum groups   |
| 2008-2009 | Literacy goals are set at the site level to guide PLCs<br>Reading specialists begin to be hired for sites                                     |
| 2009-2010 | Literacy goals are set at the district level to guide PLCs  |
| 2010-2011 | Districtwide reading protocols are adopted, providing standardized measures for summative assessment of PLC goals                             |
| 2011-2012 | Formative assessments are introduced through curriculum groups and are used in PLCs for more frequent student monitoring to guide instruction |
| 2012-2013 | Expectations of Common Core State Standards and standards-based IEPS considered in PLCs   |

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| 2013-2014 | Literacy definition expanded to include writing and the expectation all students will write every day is introduced through curriculum groups. |
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*Persistence*

The central office administrators, including especially the superintendent and the three executive directors of instructional programs, performed their role in the culture shift by staying consistently on message and also by integrating district processes to aim toward increased literacy. The reading plan called for a culture shift that changed our expectations for students and teachers: Our job was to make readers of everyone. It was no longer acceptable to hide behind the students’ disabilities or poor past performance and not teach literacy. This came through increasing refinements to current systems as well as our commitment to incorporate new national and statewide expectations into our plan.

- When Minnesota instituted *Read Well by Grade 3* in 2012-2013, we were able to meet this mandate and create the required plan for Grades K-3 with only minor additions to our current practice.
- When the CSSS became understood as the national direction, we trained reading specialists to help instructors focus on cross-disciplinary “Power Words” that aligned to the academic requirements of the standards.
- When the Minnesota Department of Education promoted the need to make Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) for special education students based in academic standards, the district task force chose reading as the first area to address.

District leaders also clarified for the School Board and other stakeholders that the accountability system for the district should rest on these important and well researched goals

and assessments, not the statewide tests that were designed for a general population. The annual presentation to the School Board on literacy efforts included reports on the extent to which goals at each site were met as well as reflections on how to improve for the following year.

## Results

Over the years since the district reading plan was enacted, we have started to think of our work as closer to making a soufflé instead of a casserole. The success of a soufflé comes from slowly folding in new ingredients. In order to incorporate new flavors, you cannot dump them in all at once as you would when making a casserole. In our reading efforts, we deliberately and carefully folded in new resources, skills, and parameters. As a result of our People, Protocols, PLCs and Other Processes, and, above all, Persistence, we measured remarkable student learning gains each year. These gains culminated in highlights from 2013-2014:

- The over 300 students in our READ 180 and System 44 reading intervention programs increased their reading levels at an average of slightly more than 1.5 years.
- Eighty-two percent of students in a high school Care and Treatment program showed an average reading comprehension growth of more than three years.
- Eighty-one percent of one site's Transition students who were already readers showed at least one year's increase in skills in one literacy area; 79% of non-readers improved in at least two pre-reading skills by one level.

One area that has received special recognition is our Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) program for transition-age students. This program created and piloted an adult-based college prep reading intervention program for their DHH students who had a desire to attend college but were not able to meet the reading requirements. Typically, DHH students' reading levels do not surpass the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade level due to their hearing loss. Through restructuring the time

commitment and curriculum for these students, the program realized unprecedented gains. Using this new college prep reading intervention, the majority of students increased two to six years in their academic reading growth. This program's work has received national attention and publication in the High Expectations for All issue of *Odyssey* (Palmberg & Rask, 2014), Gallaudet University's annual publication focusing on education issues related to deaf and hard of hearing children.

### Lessons Learned for ESAs and Districts Unlocking Learning through Reading

As we look back at the last several years, there are a few lessons we have learned. While any school district adopting a reading focus would benefit from these points, they are crucial guideposts for educational service agencies.

1. Create districtwide protocols and expectations

In a district dedicated to serving students with special educational needs, it is critical to state explicitly that a broad definition of literacy will include even those most cognitively challenged. With that in mind, protocols and expectations can be realistic and supported.

2. Leverage other systems

Reading should not be considered one more thing. It should be THE thing because without literacy, individuals do not have the ability to integrate new knowledge. Making literacy the focus of any instructional improvement system already in place in the district--curriculum groups, PLCs, annual goals, etc.--gives purpose and clarity to those structures as well.

3. Dedicate resources

Hiring a districtwide reading specialist and then adding specialists at the building level were key to the success of our reading efforts. They provided the professional learning for all staff and helped in the ongoing selection and implementation of reading curriculum resources. In many

special districts, resources that have gone previously into behavior management can be repurposed to instructional support that positively affects behavior as students do better.

4. Declare every student a reader through a systematic approach

Intermediate District 287 has been systematically emphasizing reading improvement for the past seven years for every one of our students. The recommendations we made after adopting the principles of what adolescents deserve from the International Reading Association (Moore et al., 1999) as our guide have served our students well. We have moved our district to address the first six of the principles and now hope that by sharing our story we have taken a step to our collectively achieving the last of the principles. We believe that not only do adolescents deserve what schools can provide (as reflected in the first six principles), they also “deserve homes, communities, and a nation that will support their efforts to achieve advanced levels of literacy and provide the support necessary for them to succeed.”

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*Dr. Jane Holmberg is the recently-retired Executive Director of Teaching and Learning for Intermediate District 287. She can be reached at 612-799-9018 or at jholmberg@hotmail.com.*