Literacy, *Always*, the Foundation for School Success

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Abstract

Improving literacy skill achievement is a foundational element in transforming lower performing schools into higher performing schools. On average, the schools in which Literacy & Learning Centers were implemented effectively saw student achievement on national assessments rise between 13-18% in one academic year.

How do you transform a school with low literacy achievement into a high performing school? This prevalent question is always at the forefront for educational leaders. I guide teams of school administrators all over the United States and internationally as they address this exact topic. What I have found is that the potential solution is rarely as complicated as its implementation and sustainability. I argue that it is always about instruction and building capacity in our teachers.

As I implemented the Literacy & Learning Center model in countless schools, the tangible advantages became clear (for more information on the Literacy and Learning Center model see [https://youtu.be/fJAFjARpuqc](https://youtu.be/fJAFjARpuqc) and [https://goo.gl/JDaT1Q](https://goo.gl/JDaT1Q)). The combination of self-directed activities and short, specific tasks lent itself to the natural strengths of middle school students. Quite simply, they tended to be more engaged in their learning when they worked in centers. During self-reflection, the students often reported that it was easier for them to focus and they felt more empowered to ask questions.

Teachers who use the model report that even their most reluctant learners don’t complain of being bored. On the contrary, students claim that time passes quickly as they collaborate with peers, learn content, and reinforce skill development. Teachers agree that discipline problems fade away as the self-directed activities provide the independence the students crave with the guidance they need. Perhaps the most astounding thing of all, teachers discovered that the LLC model enabled them to cover
more content in less time. And in special teacher-led centers, they had an opportunity to provide personalized instruction and individual formative assessment of each student. On average, the schools in which Literacy & Learning Centers were implemented effectively saw student achievement on national assessments (such as PARCC and NAEP) rise between 13-18% in one academic year (see Title 1 presentation). This is a staggering statistic and the success can be attributed to the fact that students learn better when they are doing rather than just passively accepting instruction.

Key Pedagogical Research-based Philosophies Grounding the LLC Model
Balanced Literacy – Substantial literacy research has established the importance of integrating reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, and language in a synergistic instructional approach. In this model, students are provided with ample opportunities to develop their literacy skills in multiple contexts—through integration, not isolation.

Formative Assessment – When teachers get meaningful feedback from, and acquire insight into, their students, they are able to adjust instruction to ensure that each individual is developing skills and content knowledge. This is usually accomplished through conferencing with students and providing on-the-spot descriptive and supportive feedback. In the LLC model, students have the opportunity, through the teacher-led center, to receive this kind of feedback on a regular basis.

Differentiated Instruction – We know that all of our students are not the same. Yet when teachers are faced with large classes, how can we provide individual instruction and choice as the differentiated instructional model promotes? Through Literacy & Learning Centers, teachers can create learning activities that allow for student choice, flexible grouping, and modification of skills.

Multi-Tiered Intervention – As a key component for closing the student achievement gap, multi-tiered interventions are offered in response to testing data or other classroom performance information. When educators are able to target individual students and provide specific interventions to improve skill development, those students are less likely to fall behind. In the LLC model these interventions can be addressed in the teacher-led center as well as in the individual centers.

Gradual Release of Responsibility – The Literacy & Learning Center framework shifts the focus of learning onto the student, while the teacher provides modeling and guidance through structured activities. When Literacy & Learning Centers are aligned with the Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) model, students can work toward developing a greater range of skills in order to increase more independent learning.

Building a Collaborative Classroom Community for All Students
The Literacy & Learning Center model is built on research that indicates the best practices for the development of literacy skills. Its effectiveness has been proven in real classrooms and on students’ standardized assessments performance. Imagine grade 4–8 students developing literacy skills and content knowledge in an engaged classroom setting, as part of a collaborative classroom community. Isn’t this what we want for all of our students?
Linked content: Watch this great video (and download this guide). It’s the Literacy & Learning Center model in action in East St. Louis, IL.
Bibliography


Dr. Katherine McKnight is an award-winning author, professional development consultant, CEO and founder of Engaging Learners, LLC, keynote speaker, champion of the inclusive classroom, and passionate literacy advocate. She served as a Distinguished Professor of Research at National Louis University. With Deanna Gallagher she offers the podcast Two Lit(eracy) Ladies. She frequents K-12 classrooms all over the world. Her latest book is Literacy and Learning Centers for the Big Kids: Building Literacy Skills and Content Knowledge, Grades 4-12 (2017). She can be reached at KatieEngageLearners@gmail.com and her website, EngagingLearners.com.