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Literacy is a PROCESS, not a PRODUCT

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Superintendent Insight: Literacy Matters

Paula Maeker, a skilled literacy expert, made this declaration as she and I spoke passionately about empowering teachers at a conference last summer. Her statement, “Literacy is a process not a product,” is spot on. So often the pressures to increase student performance on standardized assessments pressures educators to gravitate toward programs that promise student literacy gains. These programs are expensive and gobble up precious dollars – and they frequently do it in schools that already struggle with limited resources. Many of these reading programs overwhelm instruction rather than enhance it. If we want to witness real results, the solution is improving instruction.

In their March 2012 Educational Leadership article, “Every Child, Every Day,” Richard Allington and Rachael Gabriel identify six common factors that lead to school success and student growth, all of which are grounded in literacy instruction rather than a specific licensed or purchased program. Allington and Gabriel claim that, in order to increase student achievement and literacy skill development, the focus should be on the following:

1. Every child reads something he or she chooses.
2. Every child reads accurately.
3. Every child reads something he or she understands.
4. Every child writes about something personally meaningful.
5. Every child talks with peers about reading and writing.
6. Every child listens to a fluent adult read aloud.

According to Allington and Gabriel’s research, these experiences, which are the foundation of balanced literacy, are critical for the academic success of learners from every age group including middle school and high school students.

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A Johns Hopkins University study (synthesized by Slavin, Cheung, Groff and Lake, 2008)\(^2\) adds
to the argument that reading programs can be suspect and oftentimes fail to deliver on promises
of tremendous student growth. In a study of the most popular reading programs for middle
school and high school, the researchers asked, “What reading programs have been proven to help
middle and high school students to succeed?”

Their review summarized evidence on four types of programs designed to improve the reading
achievement of students in grades 6-12. The reading programs were divided into the following
categories:

• Reading Curricula (Curr), such as LANGUAGE!, McDougal Littel, and other standard
  and alternative textbooks.
• Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI), such as Jostens/Compass Learning, and Accelerated Reader.
• Instructional Process Programs (IP), such as cooperative learning, strategy instruction,
  and other approaches primarily intended to change teachers’ instructional methods rather
  than curriculum or textbooks.
• Combined CAI and Instructional Process Models (CAI + IP) such as READ 180 and Voyager Passport.

No studies of reading curricula met the inclusion criterion, but there were eight studies of CAI,
sixteen of instructional process programs, ten of combined CAI and instructional process
programs, and two of combined curriculum and instructional process programs. (To read more
about the study methodology, go to: http://www.adlit.org/article/28285/ .)

The results are staggering. None of the programs were found to exhibit “strong evidence of
effectiveness”. Four programs were identified as demonstrating “moderate evidence of
effectiveness” and seven programs were identified as demonstrating “limited evidence of
effectiveness.” Another five programs were identified as demonstrating “insufficient evidence of
effectiveness.” Over 50 programs that were included in this study were put in an additional
category as “no qualifying studies”.

Developing literacy and reading skills is the key to student growth and achievement in all subject
areas, including mathematics. Programs, as a panacea or triage, don’t work. As educators we are
under tremendous pressure to produce results. Yet, if were as simple as purchasing a program
and directing teachers to use it, there wouldn’t be a need to even have a conversation about
student achievement. It’s complicated to produce sustainable results but the answer is actually
simpler than we might think. Instruction, based on the six principles of balanced literacy and
combined with investment in the professional development of teachers who are supported by
their districts and buildings, is the key.

When we invest in the professional development of our teachers (And yes, they probably
should’ve received the training in their licensure programs, but many didn’t.) magic happens.
Creating a school and district culture that is based on Allington and Gabriel’s identified elements
create long lasting, sustainable results. Programs don’t change instructional culture. Professional
knowledge does.