

Rethinking a School District's Literacy Approach

By Jennifer Phillips



Six teachers and a student sit around a small table that has been pulled into the hallway outside a fourth-grade classroom in Blue Springs, Missouri. The teachers gathered here have discussed a common problem and have chosen to tackle it together. Their insights will extend far beyond this child, however. They are exploring new approaches that may well be utilized by their colleagues throughout the district. These teachers work in collaborative groups each year to hone their skills by exploring pressing questions related to literacy learning.

When we think about the best teaching and learning in this country, we can often name superb teachers in a handful of classrooms or a school that has been remarkably successful, but it is rare to hear about districtwide improvements. Change on this scale—change in a district's culture—takes flight because of simultaneous leadership from the central office and classroom teachers. Blue Springs teachers have discovered that collaboration is central to that change.

The teachers gathered in the hallway on this particular morning have asked: “How can we set more meaningful, individual reading goals for students?” They want to improve their skills in pinpointing students' needs as readers and to refine their instruction accordingly. The philosophy that drives teachers in this school and across the district is that two heads, even six, are better than one!

Rewind to the fall of 2005. The Blue Springs School District was in the first year of a Heinemann Residency with Ellin Keene. Each school used an asset mapping process to identify existing strengths in three areas: learning communities, teaching practices, and student learning. The asset mapping process supported honest reflection on existing assets and provided the basis for each school to set its own goals based on a shared framework across the district.

The direction early in the residency was straightforward: Give teachers an opportunity for job-embedded collaboration. Teachers from each building volunteered to be residency members. This

commitment allowed them to attend district workshops with Ellin Keene in which they focused on literacy theory and research as well as the Reader's Workshop model.

This Curriculum Department rolled out an intense literacy focus by describing it as a process, not an event. Over the last six years, that process has been multifaceted, but the following components were critical:

1. Professional reading. The Heinemann consultant recommended books that were purchased for school professional libraries. Those early titles included *Mosaic of Thought* by Keene and Zimmermann, *Reading with Meaning* by Debbie Miller, *Strategies That Work* by Harvey and Goudvis, and *Choice Words* by Peter Johnston. Groups of teachers convened to read and discuss those most relevant to their school's goals.

2. Knowledge building. Every elementary teacher was given job-embedded opportunities to work with consultants such as Ellin Keene, Debbie Miller, and Laura Robb. The support was tailored to each school's asset map goals. In addition, the district provided awareness training for new teachers and advanced workshops for those teachers who were ready to take their instruction to the next level. Importantly, the district did *not* invest in scripted programs—Blue Springs chose to invest in teachers' knowledge of research and best practices rather than programs.

3. Reading is for US! Teachers in each school grew into the new district culture through staff conversation about adult texts. Teachers and principals read fiction and essays, editorials and non-fiction, and discussed their own reading processes. When teachers began to be metacognitive in their own reading, classroom lessons became more focused and authentic for students.

4. Seeing is believing. Missouri is the Show Me State! Throughout each school year, the Heinemann consultant provided demonstration lessons to model key components of the workshop model. Teachers who attended were expected to return to their schools and share new learning with colleagues.

5. Time to reflect. District literacy leaders also found that teachers engaging in a change process need time to reflect. During



half-day, classroom-based collaboration, teachers participated in a pre-lesson conference, observed a demonstration lesson, and engaged in a lesson debrief. They joined the consultant to talk through the demonstration lesson, focusing on what might have gone differently, what teaching moments were missed, and what next steps might look like in their own classrooms.

6. Lab Schools. The district has supported schools that fully embraced the changes from the beginning by providing additional resources to improve classroom environments, purchase books for classroom libraries, and receive additional support from the Heinemann consultant. In return, these Lab Schools accepted visitors from around the district and across the region who came to observe more fully developed classrooms. In Lab Schools, a visitor can walk into nearly every classroom and observe highly successful instruction.

And . . . the results are in! In each of the last five years, Blue Springs' literacy scores on the Missouri . . . have gone up! In addition to statewide assessments, teachers are now working in collaborative groups to develop very precise assessments to track students' progress on specific goals. Whether assessed on statewide tests or more descriptive classroom-based measures, Blue Springs students are showing dramatic improvements each year.

Let's return to the crowded hallway where six adults—four classroom teachers, one district instructional coach, and a school-based literacy coach—met with one student and discussed a common question. I'm reminded of the joke about lightbulbs and how many "what-ever" it takes to change one. How many teachers does it take to teach a student to read? I'm not sure, but in Blue Springs, Missouri, educators collaborate routinely and the changes we have made are woven into every child's daily learning experience.

Heinemann Residency Programs

In-Depth • Customized • Highly Effective

Heinemann Residency Programs deliver custom designed long-range plans to enhance the existing strengths of a school or district and address its specific literacy needs.

A Heinemann author or author-selected consultant will share expertise over time as well as demonstrate, observe, provide feedback, and partner in crafting a plan for continuing professional learning following the residency.

To inquire about a Heinemann Residency Program, go to heinemann.com/pd/residencies 800-541-2086 ext 1402

Jennifer Phillips is an Elementary Instructional Coach in Blue Springs School District in Missouri and a Heinemann Professional Development consultant.

To continue to engage with Jennifer regarding Heinemann Residency Programs go to www.Heinemann.com/pd/journal.

