

COMMENTARY

What Does it Take to Dramatically Increase Literacy among Secondary Students?

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Recent results from the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP) show that seventy-nine percent of eighth graders in large cities in the United States are reading below proficient levels ([National Center of Educational Statistics, 2010](#)). Research provides multiple explanations to account for this trend. Some scholars point to a disjuncture between the school culture and the students' own culture, often impacting educators' beliefs about student capacity. Meanwhile, some contend that schools, even in the midst of instructional improvement efforts, disregard the technical craft of teaching and learning. Furthermore, scholars suggest that adolescents underperform in reading because secondary school educators tend to prioritize students' content knowledge over learners' access to content. While research has heavily documented the many challenges facing urban schools in supporting the reading development of adolescents, few have described how some schools are working to disrupt these trends.

In [this study](#), "Getting at the Core of Literacy Improvement: A Case Study of an Urban Secondary School," I sought to illustrate the factors that led one school to improve literacy instruction and learning. The single-case exploration provides an in-depth portrait into the several components that may have influenced leadership, the professional context, accountability, and student learning. The school, Grant Street Secondary School, was an ideal site not just because of its achievement record: students scoring far below reading level went from 30% to 2.9% in the span of 5 years. Also, students and teachers commonly referred to the school as having a "culture of reading." This study seeks to depict the professional context that enabled achievement situated in a reading culture.

Interviews with various school staff discussed the ways in which Grant Street's professional context shaped schoolwide accountability and teacher agency in reading instruction. First, they viewed the principal as a "literacy practitioner." That is, he attended professional development with teachers to raise his own pedagogical content knowledge in reading and he built a library of young adult literature in his office to model his efforts to prioritize a culture of reading. The principal also visited classrooms regularly to conduct reading conferences with students and to monitor the ways in which teachers implemented new instructional methods into their teaching. Second, teachers mentioned that the way their weekly schedule was designed—to maximize the amount of time they met together to design curriculum—was an opportunity for them to review student work, collaborate on classroom practices, and incorporate new methods into their teaching.

Teachers and school leaders suggested that the principal's efforts, along with the time and space that teachers shared, enabled them to understand shared expectations for reading instruction and learning. It also enabled them to take ownership of the school's direction in literacy instruction. As such, the reading program that teachers designed enabled them to differentiate instruction for a range of students, implement a comprehensive independent reading program, and also explicitly teach reading skills and strategies in fiction and nonfiction.

These findings hold important implications for literacy research and practice. First, it is important to note that Grant Street chose incremental change rather than immediate results—focusing first on developing a critical mass of teachers, for example—a method that may be more amenable to making fundamental changes to teacher practices and beliefs about literacy. Furthermore, the study highlighted that, even in a site where the principal communicated “non-negotiable” expectations about teaching, teachers still asserted sense of responsibility while engaging in improvement efforts. The synergy of schoolwide accountability and teacher agency seemed to have been a critical factor in impacting the core of teaching, learning, and literacy.

The [*full study*](#) can be found in Francois, Chantal, “Getting at the Core of Literacy Improvement: A Case Study of an Urban Secondary School, *Education and Urban Society* (forthcoming)

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