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Transformed by Literacy

When low test scores demanded a hard look at the curriculum, literacy became a focus for improvement.

Schoolwide training for teachers and a rolling implementation model ensured consistency and reinforcement of the skills.

Results came in improved scores and national recognition.

"Is this the best we can be?" Teachers and administrators at Brockton (MA) High School asked themselves that question when they saw the dismal results from the 2001 state high stakes test, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Brockton was then ranked as one of the lowest-scoring schools in the state with a 44% failure rate in English/language arts (ELA) and a 75% failure rate in math. Students must pass the MCAS in ELA and mathematics to earn a diploma, so the results meant that hundreds of students were at risk of not graduating. Brockton, a large urban high school with more than 4,200 students, faced challenging demographics: 73% of students were minorities, 68% received free or reduced-priced lunch, and more than 50% spoke a language other than English in the home. Most were the first in their families to graduate from high school.

Despite the challenges, the teachers' answer to the question was, "No, this is *not* the best we can be!" And they proved it by 2010, when Brockton's results had improved so much that they received several national recognitions for student achievement, including selection as a National Model School by the International Center for Leadership in Education, two bronze medals on the *U.S. News and World Report*'s America's Best High Schools rankings, and acknowledgment by Harvard University's Achievement Gap Institute for closing the gap.

It Began With a Team

The turnaround at Brockton began with a team of educators, including myself, who formed the restructuring committee. The committee had members from nearly every discipline in the school and was committed to high standards and no excuses. Analysis of the MCAS data illustrated that students were struggling in writing, reading, complex problem-solving, and thinking skills and that the struggle was not limited to any one group of students. The data also suggested that students' failure on the tests would not be addressed by implementing a test preparation program. Failure among the students was widespread, and we realized that we could not outguess a test. What Brockton needed was a schoolwide

 Discussion guide available at www.principals.org/pldiscuss1110.

The Professional Development Process

Planning

- The restructuring committee targets a literacy skill on the basis of student performance data.
- A subgroup of the restructuring committee develops the training script.
- A "train the trainer" approach is used to present the training.

Implementation

- Two literacy workshops are planned. The first is interdisciplinary and teachers receive training in groups of approximately 25.
- Two weeks later the workshop is repeated in the content-area departments so that skills are reinforced. The departments plan for implementation within the content areas.
- A calendar of implementation is prescribed so that every few weeks students receive the same literacy lesson using different content. The format of the lesson is the same; the context is different.
- Teachers implement the lesson according to the calendar. No department is exempt. Administrators monitor the implementation in classrooms.

Monitoring

- Teachers assess the literacy skill using the schoolwide rubric.
- Student work is collected, compared, and critiqued by teachers within their departments.
- Administrators review student work to evaluate the consistency of rigor across the school.

initiative to improve students' literacy skills. But there was not a shared sense of responsibility among the staff members for the success of every student.

Literacy for All

Once the literacy focus was determined, the next step was to define literacy. The restructuring committee determined that the four areas of focus would be reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning. Within each of those areas, they detailed a series of objectives, or literacy skills, that identified the school's academic expectations for student learning in specific, measurable ways. Long viewed as the responsibility of a few departments, teaching those literacy skills became the responsibility of all teachers in all departments.

Literacy charts of the specific skills were drafted and presented to faculty members in small interdisciplinary discussion groups, which were facilitated by members of the restructuring committee. The school council, including parents and students, and the local chamber of commerce were asked for input. It was essential that the literacy skills be clearly stated so that all teachers, students, and parents would understand them. It was also important that each of the skills were applicable in every content area so that any teacher, no matter what the class, would believe that students would be more successful in his or her class if they mastered the skills.

Training for Every Teacher

Once the literacy objectives in reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning were established and the literacy charts (see figure 1) were posted in every classroom, teachers received training in how to teach and integrate those skills in their classes. It was difficult to know where to begin. With so many skills detailed in the literacy charts, it would have been overwhelming for the faculty members and the students to try to incorporate them all at once. So the restructuring committee again went back to the data and determined that writing skills, specifically "to write an open response," would cross all disciplinary lines and offer an immediate opportunity for improvement in students' academic performance in their classes and on the MCAS.

The committee then developed an open-response process that was taught to all teachers, who used their own content area as the context for teaching the process to their students. Open-response writing was the first of Brockton's literacy workshops, which have evolved into the centerpiece of the school's overall change process. To accomplish the training, we planned workshops to fit within the one-hour faculty-meeting format.

The first step was to write a script for the training to model how teachers should teach

open-response writing to their students. The teachers were assigned to interdisciplinary groups of approximately 25 for an interactive presentation that defined what open-response writing was, taught every teacher the step-by-step process to teach to the students, and provided a rubric to assess students' open-response writing—all within a one-hour time frame. The script enabled all groups to receive the same training. The initial workshop presented 10 steps that every teacher would teach to the students. Two weeks later, each department held another training to reinforce the first and planned implementation in that content area.

The key to success was that that the same skills would be taught and applied schoolwide to ensure consistency. Every teacher in every discipline could teach students how to write open responses and assess them using the same rubric. After those two workshops, the implementation of the schoolwide literacy initiative began.

Highly Structured Implementation

The implementation was not left to chance. The restructuring committee maintained a tenacious, unwavering focus on implementing the initiative in every classroom, no exceptions. The committee proposed a calendar for implementation that benefited the students and allowed for close administrative oversight. Specifically, each department was assigned a separate week during which every teacher in that department would teach the open-response writing lesson using the appropriate content for that day. By following this prescribed calendar of implementation, students practiced their open-response writing skills over and over again every few weeks throughout the year. The ongoing practice was a key to students' mastery of those literacy skills. After teachers completed the open-response writing lesson during their assigned week, they assessed the students' writing using the rubric and turned the students' work in to their department heads so that they could review the consistency of the process. We have used this format for teaching all of our literacy skills.

Close Monitoring

To ensure fidelity to the initiative, it was necessary to monitor students' work, teachers' implementation and assessment, and the rigor within departments and across the school. Students' work was always assessed using a standardized rubric, which was essential to raising the standards and ensuring consistency of rigor. Training on using the assessment rubric was an important part of all the literacy workshops. By giving the faculty the rubrics in advance of the classroom implementation, the standards were clear to the teachers and to the students.

The implementation schedule enabled teachers to include a literacy lesson in their lesson plans, so administrators could visit classrooms when the literacy skill was being taught. These informal observations provided valuable feedback on the process.

Another essential monitoring component was the collection and review of student work to ensure that the state curriculum standards were reflected in the teachers' assignments and that students were being assessed according to our rubrics. Faculty groups were structured to discuss and review student writing. Only by actually comparing student work were we able to see the inconsistent expectations we had for the students in our school.

10 Steps for Writing an Open Response

1. Read the question carefully.
2. Circle or underline key words.
3. Restate the question as a thesis (leaving blanks).
4. Read the passage carefully.
5. Take notes that respond to the question. Brainstorm and map out your answer.
6. Complete your thesis.
7. Write your response carefully, using your map as a guide.
8. Strategically repeat key words from the thesis in the body and in the end sentence.
9. Paragraph your response.
10. Reread and edit your response.

Brockton (MA) High School

Grades: 9–12

Enrollment: 4,229

Demographics: 56% African American, including Black, Cape Verdean, Haitian, and Jamaican; 27% White; 12% Hispanic; 2% Asian; 2% other; 1% Native American; 68%; free and reduced-price lunch; 54% first language not English, 14% limited English proficient; 10% special education

Administrative team: 1 principal, 1 associate principal for curriculum and instruction, 4 housemasters, 4 assistant housemasters. *Note:* students are randomly assigned to four houses to create schools within the school.

Faculty: 270

What About Buy-In?

Simply stated, the committee did not have "buy-in" when we began. What we did have was widespread failure of the students on a high-stakes state exam and a need to do something fast. During the initial interdisciplinary faculty discussions such comments as, "I was hired to teach art; I am *not* a reading teacher," "What can we expect from students with their backgrounds?" and "Yet another plan! Don't worry—it won't last" were not uncommon. The restructuring committee listened to the skepticism of the faculty but had the strength to stay the course. In every discussion group, we reiterated the need for the reform by presenting student achievement statistics and asking the key question, "Is this the best we can be?"

In the end, most teachers were cautiously cooperative, although they weren't at all happy. But they also did not want their students to fail and ultimately be denied a diploma. The restructuring committee weathered the storm of negativity by continuing to push forward with the literacy initiative. If we had waited for everyone to buy in, we would never have proceeded.

True buy-in comes only with positive results, and our school results were immediately impressive. After implementing our open-response writing initiative in 2002–03, we cut our failure rate in half and received recognition as a Massachusetts Compass School in 2003 for being the most improved high school in the commonwealth—then we had buy in.

The Story Continues

After the success of the writing initiative, we continued the schoolwide literacy trainings. The data suggested that the next initiative should be in reading, so using the same format, we trained faculty members to use active reading strategies. After the writing success, there was a change in the culture of the school, and teachers believed that their hard work was having a direct impact on their students' achievement.

Each year, we continue to implement those literacy skills already taught and introduce new literacy skills schoolwide. Some additional trainings we have introduced include, for example, Using Active Reading Strategies; Analyzing Difficult Reading; Analyzing Graphs and Charts; Developing Speaking Skills; Assessment Strategies: Checking for Understanding; Problem Solving Strategies; Helping English Language Learners Achieve; and Teaching Vocabulary in Context.

The Results

The story of Brockton and how it evolved from a traditional high school that celebrated athletics and performing arts to one that celebrates the academic achievements of its students is truly a narrative of change. Perhaps the most significant change of all is a belief in high expectations for all students. The literacy initiative has provided the framework for success—and the results speak for themselves. From a starting point of 44%, the failure rate in ELA has decreased to only 5%. And from only 22% proficiency in ELA, Brockton now matches the state with 78% proficiency. In math, the failure rate has plummeted from 75% to 15%. Brockton has a 3.5% drop-out rate and a 93% daily attendance rate. Most importantly, the students believe they can achieve, and our college acceptance rates have soared. Brockton has become a national model for student achievement and will work hard to continue its success. **PL**

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Figure 1

Literacy Charts

Photo courtesy of author

Reading

For content, both literal and inferential

- To apply pre-reading, during reading, and postreading strategies to all reading assignments, including determining purpose and pre-learning vocabulary
- To research a topic
- To gather information
- To comprehend an argument
- To determine the main idea of a passage
- To understand a concept and construct meaning
- To expand one's experience

Speaking

- To convey one's thinking in complete sentences
- To interpret a passage orally
- To debate an issue
- To participate in class discussion or a public forum
- To make an oral presentation to one's class, one's peers, one's community
- To present one's portfolio
- To respond to what one has read, viewed, or heard
- To communicate in a manner that allows one to be both heard and understood

Brockton's oral presentation rubric is available at www.principals.org/pl1110szachowicz-presentation

Reasoning

- To create, interpret, and explain a table, chart, or graph
- To compute, interpret, and explain numbers
- To read, break down, and solve a word problem
- To interpret and present statistics that support an argument or hypothesis
- To identify a pattern, explain a pattern, and/or make a prediction based on a pattern
- To detect the fallacy in an argument or a proof
- To explain the logic of an argument or solution
- To use analogies and/or evidence to support one's thinking
- To explain and/or interpret relationships of space and time

Writing

- To take notes
- To explain one's thinking
- To argue a thesis and support one's thinking
- To compare and contrast
- To write an open response
- To describe an experiment, report one's finding, and report one's conclusion
- To generate a response to what one has read, viewed, or heard
- To convey one's thinking in complete sentences
- To develop an expository essay with a formal structure

Brockton's oral presentation rubric is available at www.principals.org/pl1110szachowicz-openresponse