

Going for Broke: Literacy

Melvina Phillips

Buckhorn High School in New Market, AL, exemplifies what can happen when a school makes 100% literacy its goal and implements the changes that ensure its eventual success.

To fully implement an adolescent literacy program, secondary schools must have several key elements in place: supportive and actively involved school leaders, formal and informal assessments that guide the learning of students and teachers, a research-based professional development program, and highly skilled teachers in every content area who model and provide explicit instruction. Although this appears overwhelming, a collaborative effort among administrators, faculty members, and other key individuals can achieve a successful adolescent literacy program.

A Literacy Savvy School

Administrators of Buckhorn High School credit their effective secondary literacy program for Buckhorn's selection as a Blue Ribbon High School in 1992. Buckhorn is located in the middle of former cotton fields just outside of Huntsville, AL. Ten years ago, the population of the school exploded as new families moved into the community from the larger neighboring city. At that time, 25–30% of the ethnically diverse student population was reading and comprehending below grade level, which prompted administrators and staff members to seek new solutions.

Principal Tommy Ledbetter described his school as being an average school 10 years ago; he stressed that two factors have changed Buckhorn from an average to an award-winning school: Buckhorn's conversion to a block schedule and participation in the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI). ARI is a comprehensive and systemic reading improvement system provided by the Alabama Department of Education. In 1998, Buckhorn students' reading scores on the Stanford 9 were the lowest scores on the school's Stanford 9 test battery. This motivated the staff to apply to become an ARI site in 1999.

Leadership for Literacy

Strong leadership is an essential building block to constructing a successful literacy program. Highly successful instructional leaders are committed to improving classroom instruction, professional learning, student assessment and achievement, and collegial classroom observations to support and improve reflective teaching (Schon, 1988). According to Weller, Buttery, and Bland (1994), a successful principal accentuates well-defined curricula, student achievement, teacher excellence, and is actively involved with developing a school improvement plan.

When questioned about his role in the implementation of the secondary literacy program, Ledbetter said, "I had to become totally involved, and the faculty knew that I was committed 100% to focusing on reading at our school." He stressed that his philosophy related to reading instruction totally changed: "I used to think we assigned reading, but I now firmly believe that we teach reading."

Ledbetter stressed that his role is to provide the teachers with every available resource to achieve the school goal of 100% literacy. This role may lead him to seek financial resources, analyze test data, provide time during the day for ongoing professional learning and planning, and encourage teacher excellence through collegial classroom visits. According to Ledbetter, data must drive professional development and school improvement efforts; therefore, he carefully analyzes data to determine the needs of students and teachers. Reliance on the findings and recommendations of the school reading committee prompts him to explore all avenues of funding to support the literacy program. Indicating that no source of funding has been left unexplored, Ledbetter said donations, grants, general funds, and discretionary funds have been combined to purchase books for the library and classrooms, fund ongoing professional development, and acquire test protocols. He says, "Our number-one priority is reading, and I'll find the money to support it."

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example of the current history teachers, who are all new to the classroom. Their primary need is professional development that encourages them to use reading strategies in their classes. The reading coach works with new teachers and models research-based strategies in the classroom.

Skilled Teachers Improve Literacy

Content-area teachers can provide students with explicit instruction to guide their reading (Abromitis, 1994; Campbell, 1994; Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Bacon, 2000). By modeling the use of graphic organizers, teachers help students find specific strategies to graphically represent the assigned text so they can better develop a picture of what they read. Effective teachers expand the use of the strategies to develop the reading-writing connection. When students write about what they read, they begin to make the connections between the printed text and understanding the printed word (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Tierney & Pearson, 1992; Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000). Highly successful secondary teachers, no matter what content they teach, effectively employ before-, during-, and after-reading strategies.

Changing Attitudes

Administrators and teachers at Buckhorn have articulated that their attitudes toward teaching reading at the secondary level have changed. Fanning said that before adopting the literacy program, teachers saw themselves as individual and isolated, working to achieve goals. That view has been transformed to seeing themselves as part of a collaborative team

Figure 1

Alabama High School Graduation Exam			
	1999–2000	2000–2001	2001–2002
Reading	90%	98%	100%
Language	83%	98%	100%
Math	not tested	not tested	99.39%
Science	not tested	not tested	100%

Buckhorn's senior students have steadily improved on the Alabama High School Graduation Exam since the 1999–2000 school year.

focused on student and teacher needs. "We now realize that we are a team that can achieve if we put our talents together," said Fanning. Part of the process was to dissect the curriculum: "We refocused everything we were doing from an instructional standpoint," Ledbetter said. Administrators and teachers work together to identify common goals, develop action plans, and prescribe needed professional development. Both Fanning and Ledbetter shared how they had changed from monitoring to being actively involved with teams of teachers and committees.

Teachers throughout the building provided insight into how they viewed their roles after committing to a reading program. A science teacher said, "I did not go to college to teach reading . . . there has been a big change because I now feel I must find specific strategies to help my students read and comprehend text if I'm really doing my job." An English teacher said, "Everyone participates. The JROTC participates. They have a huge word wall that covers about the size of this room, and they really use character education in reading . . . This teacher has really been a surprise because he was adamant that it was not going to faze him at first, but now he is a leader in our school. So, I think it [the change] is across the curriculum." Another teacher said, "I've come to understand that reading instruction with specific comprehension strategies really makes a difference, especially in high school. It's my job to see that it happens."

Figure 2

2001–2002 Identified Struggling Readers (Grades 9–11)			
Grade	X	Y	Number on Grade Level
9th Grade	53	43	10
10th Grade	62	50	12
11th Grade	47	13	34

X = number of struggling readers in 2000–2001
Y = number still reading below grade level in 2001–2002
Note. The eleventh-grade class of 2001–2002 was the freshman class when Buckhorn became a Literacy Demonstration Site in 1999.

This table indicates the change in the number of struggling readers who moved to grade level reading status during the 2001–2002 school year, according to QRI III results.

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Student Achievement Increases

When assessing student achievement at Buckhorn, data from standardized assessments are not always decisive, but there is evidence that change in student achievement, both measurable and nonmeasurable, is occurring. Ledbetter indicated that the staff eagerly anticipated the return of Stanford 9 results the first year, but they were bitterly disappointed when the results arrived. Evaluation revealed that reading comprehension had not increased significantly, but closer scrutiny revealed that reading vocabulary scores shot up. During the second year, reading comprehension scores began to increase. The greatest improvement is that only 13 of the 114 students who were identified as struggling readers as freshmen were still struggling readers by the end of their junior year (see figure 2).

Ledbetter also said that 80% of the students increased their Stanford 9 scores in one or more areas of each of the subtests they took. "Reading is the universal link. . . . If 8 out of 10 raised their SAT scores, then I attribute that to teachers stressing and teaching reading."

Teachers indicated that students have also increased in areas that may not always be measurable by test scores. An English teacher said one of the biggest changes has been student self-confidence. As one science teacher stressed, "Students are no longer afraid of books. Graphic organizers have helped them to gain confidence with the use of books." Another teacher said that students are better able to put their thoughts together coherently as a result of the new strategies. According to an English teacher, students are reading more and their class grades are improving as a result.

Writing has also improved in all content areas because teachers have stressed strategies that improve the reading-writing connection. As a history teacher said, "I can tell from their writing. Students reveal a lot of their reading ability through their writing." Another teacher indicated that the students are better at writing and expressing their thoughts, and the science teacher said that students interpret expository text better because they are using graphic organizers and writing lab reports.

Students' use of the library has increased tremendously since implementing the literacy program. As the librarian reported, circulation has swelled from

290 items checked out per month in the 1998–1999 school year to 1,024 items per month in the 2001–2002 school year. Because of the increased use of the facility, the collection of books has increased from 6,872 to 9,492 books. She credits participation in the ARI and the strategies as the major influences in library use.

Conclusion

Using formal and informal assessments; regarding every teacher as a teacher of reading; participating in ongoing, job-embedded professional development; and providing strong, supportive leadership into the school culture has made Buckhorn a model of literacy reform. Initially, the administrators and staff members used the statistics that revealed their student body was not at the desired reading level for secondary students as an impetus for finding research-based strategies that could improve student literacy. Their goal of 100% literacy may not have been achieved yet, but the strategies in place appear to be effective. The administrators and faculty members at Buckhorn can certainly serve as a model for other schools that seek ways to improve student literacy.

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About the Author

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