

# It Takes Us All

Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Douglas Williams

*School-wide instructional strategies that work in every class result in literacy gains that weren't realized with traditional reforms.*

Despite increases in literacy achievement gains for elementary school students and increased attention to the literacy-related behaviors of adolescents, achievement in reading and writing for students ages 12–18 has not increased dramatically in the United States. Further, despite decades of research on the best instructional methods for content-area literacy, teachers often pick and choose the instructional strategies that they believe fit with their style, content, or lesson plans. Thus, a student may be required to take notes one way in social studies and a different way in science. A math teacher may read newspaper stories and other interesting math-related texts aloud during class whereas a science teacher may require all reading to be completed at home. As a result, students spend a great deal of time focused on the teachers' expectations and instructional strategies and less time focused on the content (e.g., Fisher, Frey, & Williams, 2002).

## The Instructional Program

At Hoover High School in San Diego, CA, we have created school-wide approaches to literacy to provide every teacher with a core set of strategies that are transportable and transparent to students across their classes. At Hoover, the teachers selected seven instructional strategies to serve as the basis of their instruction. Of course, teachers can use more than these seven strategies, but they all agreed to implement these seven:

- Anticipatory activities
- Graphic organizers
- Notetaking
- Read-alouds and shared readings
- Reciprocal teaching
- Vocabulary instruction
- Writing to learn

(Figure 1 contains a sample lesson that demonstrates how these instructional strategies can be used in a content-area class.)

Hoover is an urban school of 2,200 students, all of who qualify for free lunch and 76% of who speak one of 39 languages in addition to English at home. Over the past several years, the state accountability measures indicate that Hoover has the highest percentage of growth of all high schools in San Diego. In 1999, the average Hoover student read at a Grade 5.9 level whereas today the average Hoover student reads at a Grade 8.2 level. We believe that these changes are significant, and we attribute them to our instruction and the structures put in place to support literacy learning for students.

We are not proposing that these seven strategies become an instructional program for middle level and high schools across the country. We don't believe that these specific instructional strategies are magic nor do we think that the number seven is sacred. When the teachers at Hoover identified which strategies they would use, they used two criteria: the strategies must be research-based and implemented across content areas.

Once the instructional strategies were selected, a multiyear professional development plan was implemented. These strategies were not selected one year and then abandoned the next like so many other reforms. These strategies and the monthly professional development that supports them have been ongoing for four years now. Each month, teachers receive professional development during their prep period. The school operates on a 4 x 4 block schedule, and each teacher has a daily 90-minute prep period. At least once per month, teachers use their prep period to attend a seminar on one of the seven instructional strategies. These seminars range from make-it, take-it sessions to demonstration lessons by teachers from the school to collegial coaching sessions in which teachers share their experiences with peers and are questioned about successes and challenges.

In addition to focusing on instructional strategies, we have implemented a daily independent reading time for all students. We knew that we needed to provide students an opportunity to practice their literacy skills

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with self-selected texts. We wanted to ensure that our students learned to enjoy reading in addition to acquiring reading skills. We call this time the 3-R period because it immediately precedes third period. It is a daily 20-minute period in which all students, teachers, staff members, and administrators read texts that they have selected. We modeled our program after the work of Janice Pilgreen (2000) and the eight research-based factors of success she describes: staff training, book appeal, follow-up activities, environment, direct access to texts, nonaccountability, distributed time for reading, and encouragement. The 3-R period has become cherished time. Students and

teachers alike report that the daily 3-R period is something they look forward to—a time away from the stress of the school day.

### The Administrator's Role

Naturally the administrator has a role in every aspect of improving adolescent literacy—from the teachers who are hired and tenured to the professional development plans to the instructional materials that are used. However, the work at Hoover suggests that there is another important role that the administrator can assume: instructional leader and coach. Following the

Figure 1

#### Using Instructional Strategies in a Content-Area Class

As the administrator enters the room, he notes that this 10th-grade biology classroom is a model of active learning. The walls are covered with diagrams of cells, a taxonomy chart of species, and abundant examples of student work—a print-rich environment. The 38 students are comfortably seated in groups of four around laboratory tables. Their teacher, Christianna Antonello, introduces a new unit of study with an anticipation guide. "Take a look at each of the statements on the paper and decide whether you believe it is true or false. You'll get a chance to review it again at the end of the unit." After responding to such statements as "DNA is contained in the nucleus of the cell," she informs the students that "the code of life" will be the subject of study for the next few weeks.

Ms. Antonello smoothly transitions to a lecture that she has prepared using PowerPoint software. "Get out your notebooks; you'll want to take notes on this. Be sure to set up your page for Cornell notes." Students quickly format their page and jot down the vocabulary and concepts pertinent to the lecture, which have been underlined in her presentation to facilitate notetaking. The teacher occasionally prompts them by saying, "Be sure to write this down!" At the end of the lecture, she reminds them to review the contents for homework and shows them slides and directions for the lab they will complete.

The lab is the centerpiece for this morning's class and she reminds them that this is connected to the lecture: "Remember, 'hands on' doesn't mean 'minds off!'" Students construct a DNA sequence of nucleotides using colored marshmallows and long wooden toothpicks to

create a double helix. "I'll be visiting each of your groups when you're finished. Each member of the group will need to explain how these link in complementary pairs of nitrogen bases," Ms. Antonello tells the class. By moving rapidly from introducing definitional meanings to linking these works to concepts and then requiring them to use it themselves, Ms. Antonello is making students comfortable with the technical vocabulary of biology.

When the lab is completed, she moves into the last phase of the lesson. To review, she uses a graphic organizer of the concepts presented during the day. She then asks her students to take a few minutes and write a summary of the lecture at the bottom of their Cornell notes page. Finally, Ms. Antonello invites them to write "Today's News," a writing-to-learn activity that summarizes the key points of the lecture and lab. When she collects these as a "ticket out the door" at the end of class, she will be able to review them quickly to assess student learning. As the bell rings, students complete Today's News and file out the door for the next class. Ms. Antonello looks at the clock and sighs—this entire observation took 45 minutes of class time. "I'd never have been able to do this if they didn't already know these strategies," she remarks to the administrator. "Because they know how to take notes, how to use graphic organizers and anticipation guides, I can get down to the business of teaching." For more information about planning lessons with these seven strategies, see *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Strategies at Work* by Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey (Merrill Prentice Hall, forthcoming).

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professional development that was provided to all the teachers at Hoover, the administrative team wanted to observe teachers and provide them with feedback on their instructional repertoires.

At first, the Hoover administrators used blank sheets of paper to record their observations. However, in an effort to support the use of the specifically adopted instructional strategies, Assistant Principal Lois Chappell proposed using a form with the focus strategies already identified. Over the years, this form has evolved to include 40 specific instructional strategies in three categories along with written feedback and has become a more comprehensive look at the instruction that is occurring in Hoover classrooms.

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As we have noted, the significant improvement in literacy achievement at Hoover high school has been the result of a significant investment by everyone. The Hoover teachers had to agree on specific instructional strategies that would become transparent for students. The professional development committee had to develop a comprehensive plan to ensure that every teacher had access to information about the strategies. The school schedule had to change to accommodate independent reading time. And the administrators had to develop ways of providing mentoring and coaching—instructional leadership—to ensure that this new knowledge was put into place.

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