Improving Literacy Achievement in Elementary Schools

The Standards-Based Change Process and the Common Core

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- Sustainable school improvement must be grounded in an effective infrastructure that promotes shared leadership.
- Educators should follow a well-defined, research-based process for constructing their school's own staircase curriculum, assessment, and instruction to improve student achievement through standards.
- A constructivist approach to curriculum should seek to increase teacher and student ownership of literacy and literacy improvement efforts (Au, 1997).

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For over 2 decades, the standards movement has been the driving force behind literacy improvement efforts in the United States. In its current iteration, key elements are the Common Core State Standards (Common Core or CCSS) (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010) and related assessments (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2013; Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2013). Forty-five of the 50 states and three territories have officially adopted the Common Core; the others have aligned with its goals. The Common Core and related assessments reflect educational policies oriented toward college and career readiness, a welcome change from the previous era's policies overrelying on raising scores on large-scale tests. The Common Core documents offer a vision of active, engaged students focused on understanding and enjoying complex works of literature, as well as critical reading of informational text (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). Yet the Common Core gives elementary educators pause because it presents the daunting task of bringing students' literacy to higher levels than ever before.

In this chapter, we answer three questions that successful elementary educators ponder when exploring how to meet ever-rising standards for literacy as reflected in the Common Core:

- How does our school put an effective infrastructure in place to support a multiyear literacy improvement effort?
- What process do we follow to build teachers' ownership and construct our school's staircase curriculum in literacy?
- How does our school enact this curriculum and continue to improve student achievement over time?

Our responses are based on four guiding principles. First, elementary educators must create their schools' infrastructure needed to sustain a multiyear literacy improvement effort. Research shows that schools successful in producing high levels of student literacy achievement year after year followed a consistent plan for a considerable length of time (Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, & Russ, 2004). A school's stable infrastructure supports sustainability, devoted to internal development of teacher expertise and collaboration. This consistent, planful approach may be contrasted with a revolving-door model, moving from one initiative to the next in search of a ready-made, external solution.

Second, elementary schools should follow a constructivist approach to literacy improvement (cf. Taylor, Raphael, & Au, 2011). In this approach, leaders and teachers collaborate to create their school's literacy curriculum, assessment, and instruction. This is detailed later in this chapter, and we refer to these components of literacy improvement in terms of the *staircase curriculum, evidence system*, and *evidence-based teaching*. A constructivist orientation to literacy improvement is especially important with the Common Core's emphasis on students' higher-level thinking with text. Teachers must see themselves as active thinkers and creators in matters of literacy improvement, not passive recipients of packaged programs, if they are to promote their students' active, higher-level engagement.

Third, educators should follow a well-defined, research-based process for constructing their school's own curriculum, assessment, and instruction to improve student achievement through standards. In many elementary schools, teachers have come to rely on packaged programs to teach reading, regarding the program and school literacy curriculum as one and the same. The starting point for change is helping teachers understand that their literacy curriculum should be one they have created for themselves: growing from their vision of the excellent reader, tailored to their students' strengths and weaknesses as literacy learners, and meeting state and national expectations while addressing the interests of the community. One successful approach, based on our research and experience in over 150 schools in three states, is the Standards-Based Change (SBC) Process (Au, 2005; Raphael, 2010; Raphael, Au, & Goldman, 2009). The SBC process provides a systematic approach guiding teachers to build their school's own curriculum, instruction, and assessment (described in detail in the next section). The SBC process uses a combination of leadership strategies that have been found to be useful.

Fourth, elementary schools should seek to increase teacher and student ownership of literacy and literacy improvement efforts (Au, 1997).

Teachers with ownership of the literacy curriculum are positioned to empower their students as motivated literacy learners. Students' ownership of literacy and literacy learning is the ultimate goal of curriculum improvement efforts. Students who have ownership of literacy will have the focus and persistence to benefit from assessment and instruction designed to improve their comprehension of fiction and informational text, their appreciation of literature, and their understanding of the place of literacy in their own lives.

HOW DOES OUR SCHOOL PUT AN EFFECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE IN PLACE TO SUPPORT A MULTIYEAR LITERACY IMPROVEMENT EFFORT?

A high-functioning infrastructure is not simply a necessary pre-existing condition—it is an essential first step in the change process. Our approach to infrastructure is based on three pillars: (1) a principal committed to a multiyear change process, (2) a curriculum leader whose major responsibility is leading literacy improvement efforts, and (3) a vertical leadership team that supports the improvement effort and serves as bridge between school leaders and the teachers.

The Principal

Principals successful in leading their schools through the SBC process are thoughtful about current educational standards, trends, and policies. They see futility in looking for the perfect program or outside consultant to provide their schools with the latest "fix." Instead, they are critical consumers looking for resources to take their team to the next level. For example, a principal in Chicago had her ear to the ground for new literacy research and policies. She sought opportunities for her school to participate in a program for early adopters, ensuring that they had access to current information.

Successful SBC process principals are active participants during school-based professional development. They make literacy improvement a priority in interacting with teachers. At the same time, effective principals are willing to position teachers as experts, privileging their expertise and agency while leading in a collaborative rather than compliance-driven manner.

For example, when a new principal at a K–6 Hawaii school decided to implement the SBC Process, he ran into considerable resistance. While teachers had been accustomed to following packaged programs, the new principal's goal was for them to build their school's own staircase curriculum. To change these attitudes, he and his curriculum leader handpicked a group of teacher leaders (see the discussion of vertical leadership teams below). During a semester of professional development on the SBC process, these teacher leaders asked many pointed questions about the amount of work required, the benefits to students, and the expertise required. The principal consistently expressed his confidence in the teacher leaders while insisting they take responsibility for curriculum development. By the semester's end, the teacher leaders had taken ownership of the process. A successful whole-school launch of the SBC Process followed, and the school made progress that exceeded original projections.

The SBC process requires significant time to collaborate, and successful principals allocate resources to protect and honor that time. In Chicago, a principal created a schedule to ensure time for weekly grade-level and grade-band meetings. She provided after-school and substitute releases for more intensive meetings. At a school in Oregon, the principal took advantage of the district-scheduled weekly 45-minute early release time to support the school's professional learning community. This principal devoted regularly scheduled times for teachers' work with the SBC process.

The Curriculum Leader

The curriculum leader, the principal's right hand, oversees the many details of managing the SBC process that the principal seldom has time to handle. The principal and the curriculum leader should be on the same page at all times, with a shared belief in our second principle, a constructivist approach to literacy improvement.

The curriculum leader's job description should be written (or revised) to give priority to

managing the SBC process, with adequate time to fulfill this responsibility. The description at an Oregon school highlights tasks required, as well as qualities necessary for success in the job. These included:

- Excellent organizational and time management skills
- Tactful and diplomatic; collaborative
- Resilient, able to accept criticism and suggestions

Listing tasks and desired qualities provides clarity about the role and helps select the best candidate for the job.

As external consultants, we usually work with educators at the school site six times during a school year (supplemented by ongoing support through email and phone calls). In between on-site activity, the curriculum leader, supported by the principal and vertical leadership team, is responsible for carrying out tasks to move the school forward through the SBC process. For example, the curriculum leader at a large K–6 elementary school in Hawaii participates actively in grade-level meetings to support teachers' collaboration. The curriculum leader at another Hawaii school posts notes on the bulletin board from the vertical leadership team meetings, which occur once a month, that highlight decisions made and agreements reached. Curriculum leaders also guide teachers in revising their end-of-year outcomes for students' literacy learning, in developing suitable assessment tasks, and in analyzing assessments (Au & Raphael, 2007). In some schools curriculum leaders may provide coaching for new teachers on effective instructional strategies.

The Vertical Leadership Team

Although the principal and curriculum leader are key, the success and sustainability of the SBC process ultimately depend on teachers' engagement and ownership. Thus, the third pillar is the vertical leadership team—teacher leaders representing school constituencies (e.g., grade levels and departments). While the name may vary (e.g., leadership team, curriculum committee), this team brings the voices of the group they represent to whole-school decisionmaking about literacy improvement. They also take schoolwide perspectives back to their group. Vertical leadership supports communication from all, expediting decisionmaking and sustaining the SBC process.

Because the SBC process is based on moving the whole school forward, team members monitor their groups' ability to keep pace with the rest of the school. If even one group drops out or lags behind in SBC process activities, it signals a breakdown of whole-school collaboration and portends failure of the literacy improvement effort. Team members bring concerns of their constituencies to school leaders so that issues are addressed before they impede the literacy improvement effort. For example, a 1st-grade teacher leader sought help because she and her peers could not determine the best way to assess their students' reading comprehension. The problem threatened to prevent them from timely administration of an assessment task. The curriculum leader offered suggestions to help the teachers develop a suitable task so that they could participate in sharing results with the rest of the school.

We help the principal and curriculum leader identify the strongest possible combination of teacher leaders, respected and trusted by their peers, to serve on this team and contribute effectively to the schoolwide literacy improvement effort. Such teachers have excellent communication skills, availability, and expertise in the language arts.

We provide professional development to all three pillars—leadership team members, principal, and curriculum leader—in keeping with our second and third principles (taking a constructivist approach, following a well-defined change process). For example, the concept of teachers developing their school's own literacy curriculum can be particularly challenging for teacher leaders. Once teacher leaders have gained an understanding of a constructivist approach, they worry about responding to colleagues' concerns. To address this anxiety, we have teacher leaders generate lists of tough questions they expect to be asked. They then engage in creating and rehearsing responses. Teacher leaders may believe they have little influence over their peers. During a discussion of steps in building a staircase curriculum, a teacher leader told Kathy, "My grade

level will do it if you ask them, but why would they listen to me? I'm just another teacher!" Thus, we provide teacher leaders with facilitation skills training, especially as needed for peer-to-peer influence and collaboration.

Before conducting a whole-school SBC process workshop, we meet with the vertical leadership team to plan the event collaboratively. Team members bring an insider perspective, with suggestions that make workshops we conduct as external consultants directly relevant to the teachers. For instance, team members at a K–6 school in Hawaii requested a detailed presentation distinguishing reading comprehension and reading response so that grade-level teams could develop operational definitions for these two curriculum strands. The subsequent workshop was successful because it met school-specific needs.

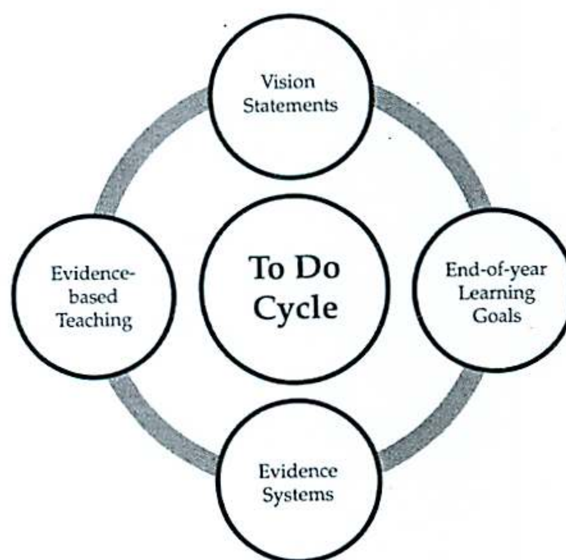
In our experience, most elementary schools require a semester to put all three pillars in place and provide these key leaders with the necessary professional development.

WHAT PROCESS DO WE FOLLOW TO BUILD TEACHERS' OWNERSHIP AND CONSTRUCT OUR SCHOOL'S STAIRCASE CURRICULUM IN LITERACY?

With the three pillars in place, an elementary school is positioned to sustain a multiyear literacy improvement effort. At this point, leaders and teachers are eager to get into the specific steps for upgrading their school's literacy curriculum, assessment, and instruction. We help the school begin the SBC process To Do Cycle (see Figure 5.1). Principles two through four (taking a constructivist approach, following a well-defined change process, and building ownership) all come into play as schools work on the To Do Cycle.

The three pillars help us determine teacher readiness to create vision statements and a staircase curriculum consistent with current literacy policies, standards, and research. Some schools (e.g., those that have relied on packaged programs) may need considerable professional development to bring teachers up-to-date. Teachers require a solid literacy background to create strong vision statements and a rigorous staircase curriculum (Au & Raphael, 2011) aligned to challenging external standards.

Figure 5.1. SBC Process To Do Cycle



Vision of the Graduate

The first step in the To Do Cycle (Figure 5.1's top circle) requires that a school gain clarity about what it intends to accomplish with its students. We guide teachers to reach consensus on two vision statements. The first lays out the school's vision of the graduate. The second, a subset of the first, describes the excellent graduating reader, writer, or literate thinker (depending on curricular focus).

Most schools have a vision on paper, though often without teacher commitment to it—perhaps it is dated or filled with platitudes. Kathy recalls conducting a workshop where teachers indicated no knowledge of the school's vision, but the librarian remembered seeing one. She rummaged in a storeroom, emerging with a dusty chart. It was 7 years old.

In place of a dusty chart, we emphasize a living, breathing vision that pulls faculty together and allows everyone's efforts to culminate in desired outcomes. We begin to widen the circle of educators who feel ownership over literacy improvement efforts, from the three pillars to the faculty as

a whole. We guide the principal, curriculum leader, and vertical leadership team to work with faculty to construct a clear vision of the graduate, tied to metrics to track their progress toward achieving this vision. The vision of the graduate always includes dimensions beyond literacy. For example, a Hawaii elementary school highlights students' development as leaders, measured by participation in leadership programs and activities.

We then support leaders and teachers as they create a vision of their school's excellent reader, writer, or literate thinker, consistent with the vision of the graduate. At Waikele, they focused their vision on the graduating writer:

> Waikele Elementary School students will become proficient, passionate, reflective writers who author purposeful, personal, authentic text. Our students will be challenged with high expectations in a safe, nurturing learning environment. They will engage in a writing process that is scaffolded and differentiated. We believe ALL Waikele Elementary School students are authors!

Working on the two vision statements brings teachers together as a schoolwide professional learning community (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008).

Staircase Curriculum

With their two vision statements in place, the school is ready to construct end-of-year goals for student learning that make up the staircase curriculum (Figure 5.1's right circle). The end-of-year goals at each grade level (each step) build on steps from the previous ones and lead to steps at the following grade levels (Au & Raphael, 2011). The importance of teachers building their school's own staircase curriculum is supported in research by Newmann and colleagues (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). They demonstrated that curriculum coherence does not result automatically from adopting a packaged program but must be built through teacher discussion and collaboration.

Teachers need a clear framework for building the staircase curriculum, guided by knowing the staircase must lead to the vision of the excellent reader, writer, or literate thinker. Their work is further structured when we help the vertical leadership team propose strands or domains that cut across all grades. For example, with a reading focus, teams typically arrive at strands for comprehension, response, vocabulary and word identification, and habits and attitudes. Team members draft a definition of each strand so that teachers know where various content, strategies, and skills (e.g., story elements, comprehension monitoring) fit in the staircase. Team members take proposed strands and definitions to their grade levels for discussion, ultimately forging whole-school agreements.

Teachers then create their grade level's step in the staircase, drafting one or two end-of-year goals for students' literacy learning for each strand. When grade-level teams first draft their goals, we ask them to draw on their own professional knowledge and experience with students. Once teachers have their first drafts, we have them turn to external documents (e.g., Common Core) to check alignment. Teachers make sure that their end-of-year goals address necessary content, skills, and strategies and are at least as rigorous as any external ones.

At many schools, drafting their own end-of-year goals for students' literacy learning can be the most daunting SBC process task for teachers. This is intellectually demanding, and some teachers suggest simply using goals from external standards documents. We discourage this because of dangers it introduces. Copying others' goals runs counter to a constructivist approach and fails to establish a good foundation for later teaching. The teachers who do so never gain a deep understanding of the nature of learning represented by those standards, and therefore are less able to teach and assess them effectively. Drafting student learning goals represents an important step in taking ownership of the curriculum, which is key to sustainability.

Activities to strengthen internal alignment begin when teachers at all grade levels have drafted their end-of-year goals. Teachers engage in discussions with adjacent grade levels to make sure that learning goals build consistently across grades. Whole-school gallery walks, featuring analysis of charts displaying each grade level's goals, begin. At a gallery walk in a Hawaii school, 2nd-grade teachers were surprised to see the rigor of the 3rd-grade reading goals. Once aware of these high

expectations, the 2nd-grade teachers drafted a more ambitious set of goals.

The Evidence System and Evidence-Based Teaching

With the staircase curriculum in place, the teachers at each grade level next create an evidence system including tasks, texts, and scoring tools (i.e., a formative assessment system) tied to end-of-year goals for students' literacy learning. The evidence system serves two purposes: (1) monitoring student progress three times a year (beginning, middle, and end) and (2) obtaining information needed to differentiate instruction (evidence-based teaching) (Figure 5.1's left circle). We ask teachers to consider evidence they would need to determine student progress toward major end-of-year goals. A 3rd-grade end-of-year comprehension goal was that students summarize a story, arrive at a theme, and provide a justification for the theme. Teachers determined evidence needed to include a written story summary with a stated theme and justification for the theme citing text ideas.

Having identified the necessary evidence, teachers develop performance tasks, including the instructions they will give to students, text students will read, time to be allotted, and so on. As with the learning goals, performance tasks are aligned with external documents. For example, because their state is a member of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), teachers in Hawaii align their performance tasks with the sample tasks available on the SBAC website at http://www.smarterbalanced.org/sample-items-and-performance-tasks/.

Teachers draft rubrics or scoring procedures. It can take several tries for teachers to eliminate all flaws in the performance task and rubrics. For example, one teacher team found that the text they had selected did not have enough depth to warrant the close reading they wanted students to do. They continued piloting texts until they identified a "worthy" one.

The standards movement has important implications for the way administrators and curriculum leaders ask teachers to conceptualize instruction. The focus on end-of-year learning goals and assessment evidence allows instruction to be clearly defined as the means teachers use to improve student achievement. Once grade-level teams have established clear goals for student learning and collected evidence about students' progress toward these goals, their next step is to examine the evidence for what it can tell them about how to improve instruction—about how to bring students closer to the goals set for their learning.

As teachers analyze students' evidence, they look for patterns that convey areas of strengths and needs. They may see trends demonstrated by the whole class or by subsets. From these patterns, teachers collaborate within grade levels to craft instructional plans for the whole class, small groups, and individuals. As Jaime and Liz have seen in two Chicago schools, assessment evidence often pointed teachers to refinements needed in learning goals, performance tasks, and instructional strategies. Teachers from both schools realized the iterative nature of the To Do Cycle in their 2nd year of work with the SBC Process. Teachers across grade levels recognized the need to rethink the purpose of specific performance tasks. Others saw the necessity of differentiating literacy instruction and assignments to meet the needs of all students.

HOW DOES OUR SCHOOL ENACT THE CURRICULUM AND CONTINUE TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT OVER TIME?

Once teachers have worked on all parts of the To Do Cycle, the school's basic system is in place for improving students' literacy achievement through standards. To sustain the work, the three pillars must balance institutionalizing the To Do Cycle work with encouraging teachers to improve literacy curriculum, assessment, and instruction at regular intervals. The way we achieve this balance is by (1) engaging teachers in three-times-per-year sharing of their assessment evidence results and (2) guiding them to document their curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Principles three and four are especially important at this juncture (following a well-defined system for literacy improvement, building teacher ownership).

Sharing of Results

Teachers administer the performance tasks tied to their goals for student learning at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. At these three junctures, teachers meet as grade-level data teams to score the evidence with rubrics, create bar graphs of the results, and discuss how they will differentiate instruction for students showing different patterns of literacy strengths and weaknesses (cf. McNulty & Besser, 2011). In doing so, teachers often notice ways to improve their evidence system (e.g., adjusting performance task instructions for students, clarifying rubric descriptors).

Simultaneously, we work with the three pillars to determine which of three options for whole-school sharing is a good fit for their school. In option one, teachers prepare PowerPoint presentations following a template approved by the three pillars. Many schools begin with this option because it gives all grade levels a convenient common format for organizing their information. In option two, teachers create display boards for a gallery walk. This fosters cross-grade conversations as teachers view and discuss the displays. Option three creates small faculty groups consisting of a teacher from each grade level. As each teacher shares his or her grade level's results, other teachers raise questions or comments, fostering lively and thoughtful discussion—a useful format for a large school.

Sharing results usually occurs during a schoolwide data team meeting. The first purpose is for teachers to determine how well their school as a whole is doing in improving students' literacy performance. Having prepared for the sharing session, teachers know what their own grade level has accomplished and now can learn about the work of the other grades. Gaining a schoolwide perspective counters tunnel vision that can develop when teachers are isolated by grade or classroom.

The second purpose is for grade levels to identify changes to their curriculum, assessment, and instruction that could strengthen the school's staircase. For example, grade 6 teachers at a suburban Hawaii school realized that their performance task was at the same level of difficulty as the one used in 5th grade. They declared they would need to "bump things up." Such comments indicate that teachers have ownership of the literacy curriculum, understand how the staircase should flow across the grades, and recognize their own efficacy in bringing students to high levels of literacy.

Reinforcing our third principle (schools need to follow a well-defined system for literacy improvement), we remind the three pillars to make the three-times-a-year sharing of assessment results a regular feature of the school's schedule. They allocate time for three evidence windows (2-week periods when all teachers administer performance tasks to collect their assessment evidence). They establish dates for three faculty meetings when assessment results will be shared schoolwide.

Three-times-a-year sharing of assessment results each year must remain in place to ensure that students continue to experience the benefits of ongoing literacy improvement efforts. The sharing calls teachers' attention to their effectiveness, and the effectiveness of other teachers, in bringing their students to high levels of literacy. Regular sharing allows the school to keep reaping dividends from the considerable time, hard work, and good thinking invested by the three pillars and teachers in the SBC process. Keeping the three-times-a-year sharing in place prevents schools from falling into the revolving-door model of curriculum improvement, jumping to a new curriculum focus each year. The revolving-door model fails to provide sufficient time to develop and implement curriculum, assessment, and instruction of the rigor and coherence demanded by standards documents such as the Common Core.

Curriculum Documentation

A successful elementary school strives with the SBC process to sustain its literacy improvement efforts, always moving forward. The goal is to create a curriculum that can be sustained yet appropriately adapted in response to changes in students, teachers, and literacy policies and standards. Curriculum documentation is key to sustainability.

Once the school has established regular, three-times-a-year sharing sessions, teachers have a good picture of literacy improvement efforts across the whole school. This knowledge allows each grade level to fine-tune its end-of-year learning goals, evidence system, and evidence-based teaching,

thereby strengthening the school's staircase curriculum and helping students reach the vision of the excellent reader, writer, or literate thinker. Teachers are now ready to document their improved learning goals, evidence system, and evidence-based teaching. At this point we hear comments such as:

- I didn't get it before, but now I see how everything fits together.
- My students did well this year but I know I can move them even farther next year.

Curriculum documentation serves three purposes. First, teachers at each grade level create a handy reference to keep their improved literacy practices in place in the classroom. Second, as teachers within grade levels document their literacy curriculum, they iron out differences, clarify confusing points, and generally deepen their understanding of literacy curriculum, assessment, and instruction. This documentation leads teachers within grade levels to report that they have "gotten on the same page" or "pulled together as a team" to a greater degree than ever before. Third, the documentation provides entrée to help orient teachers new to the grade level.

Curriculum documentation can take different physical forms, but follows a consistent four-section structure based on Tyler's (1950) time-tested views of curriculum: (1) learning goals, (2) evidence system, (3) evidence-based teaching strategies and lessons, and (4) texts to be read by students. Most often, teachers use thick three-ring binders, with key documents in sheet protectors. We see the binders open on teachers' desks, and we observe teachers pulling pages out of the binders as they teach and assess. Some teachers include in their binders references to useful lessons within packaged programs. In Hawaii, the Common Core's emphasis on reading informational text has fostered interest in integrated thematic units, leading some schools to organize the four sections within thematic units.

Teachers in some schools choose to document their literacy curriculum online, common where teachers are accustomed to uploading documents to a website with pages for every grade level. Advantages of the online version include: revisions are easily entered, the website version always has the current version, each grade level has an online file cabinet, SBC process documents are always accessible, and grade levels have ready access to the latest version of other grade levels' products (e.g., new performance tasks) when they want to check for internal alignment. Seeking the best of both worlds, some Hawaii schools maintain both electronic and hard-copy versions.

The process of curriculum documentation underscores for teachers the difference between their school's literacy curriculum and packaged programs that are tools for supporting curriculum implementation. This tends to increase teachers' ownership of the literacy curriculum. Norman Pang, principal at Holomua Elementary School in Hawaii, made the decision when opening the school that teachers would develop the curriculum. He saw teachers' commitment to curriculum development as crucial: "You have the people believing in what they're doing and it becomes more powerful because the teachers start taking ownership. They started with their beliefs and they made the curriculum" (Hokutan, 2005, p. 20).

CONCLUSION

Elementary school leaders face the continuing challenge of responding to rigorous standards (e.g., Common Core) to improve literacy achievement. The SBC process, a research-based, constructivist approach for schoolwide literacy improvement, can help support a school through (1) establishing the necessary infrastructure to sustain a multiyear literacy improvement effort, (2) having teachers work through the To Do Cycle to build the school's own staircase curriculum and system for improving student achievement through standards, and (3) assuring sustainability through regular schoolwide sharing of assessment results and curriculum documentation, to build student and teacher ownership of literacy and literacy learning.

While our recommendations at times seem to run counter to conventional wisdom, the research base (Au, 2005; Raphael, 2010) underscores their importance. For example, our emphasis on infrastructure and the importance of the vertical team of teacher leaders is neither glamorous nor a quick fix. Yet our work indicates that the absence of a

strong infrastructure is the number one reason that schools fail in their attempts to improve student achievement through standards. Further, our commitment to a constructivist approach emphasizing teacher and student ownership is counter to dominant models of program-driven reform (Taylor et al., 2011). Yet our research indicates that when teachers construct their own end-of-year learning goals, evidence system, and evidence-based teaching, they arrive at a deep understanding of these components and can effectively use them to boost students' literacy performance. Finally, our emphasis on teacher and student ownership goes against the conventional wisdom and common practice of compliance-oriented approaches where teachers implement an externally developed program with fidelity (Dillon, 2003). Our research indicates the importance of curriculum transparency so that teachers not only own the curriculum, but can make it visible to their students through student-friendly rubrics and portfolios. As students gain clarity about expectations for their learning and engage in self-assessment and goal-setting, their ownership of literacy and literacy learning grows (Au, 2005; Raphael, 2010). The benefits outweigh the additional investments of time and energy if our profession is to take seriously the importance of sustainable school literacy improvements. As one of the principals leading the SBC process in his school noted, "Using the SBC Process, we were able to develop a common, coherent, and challenging curriculum. We are using it to enhance teaching and to raise student achievement."

Reflection Questions

1. How does the infrastructure in your school support literacy improvement efforts? What changes might be necessary to ensure sustained change?
2. What steps has your school taken to ensure teacher ownership over the curriculum? How well aligned are expectations across classrooms and grade levels?
3. How does your school balance institutionalizing new curriculum efforts with a continuous cycle of reflection and improvement?

Project Assignment

An administrator has invited you to provide support to a [choose type] school because they want their literacy curriculum to align with the new district initiative rolling out the Common Core State Standards. While the school administrators are quite welcoming and excited about your support, you know very little about the school as a whole. As a first step in planning the ongoing professional development you have asked the administrators for permission to meet with some of the school staff to increase your knowledge of the current school culture. Prior to your meeting with the administrator, determine: (a) the people (i.e., their roles) you would request talking with prior to planning the PD, (b) what information you will ask the administrator to provide to you in advance, and (c) the questions you will use to guide your preplanning of the support.

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