

# TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES FOR LITERACY TEACHING AND LEARNING: A COMPLICATED AGENDA FOR LITERACY RESEARCHERS

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## GENERAL ASSEMBLY SPEAKER

**Taffy E. Raphael**

University of Illinois at Chicago & SchoolRise LLC

**Kathryn H. Au**

SchoolRise LLC

**Jacquelynn S. Popp**

University of Illinois at Chicago

### **Abstract**

*Taffy E. Raphael, Ph.D., Professor of Literacy Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and President of SchoolRise LLC, conducts research on literacy and school change. She directed Partnership READ, a nine-year project to improve literacy instruction through professional development, receiving the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education's Best Practices Award for Effective Partnerships. She received International Reading Association's Outstanding Teacher Educator in Reading Award, Distinguished Alumni Awards from both the University of Illinois*



*at Urbana-Champaign and the University of North Carolina - Greensboro, and the Literacy Research Association Oscar Causey Award for Lifetime Contributions to Literacy Research. A member of the Reading Hall of Fame, she served on the Board of Directors of International Reading Association and the Board, Treasurer, and President of Literacy Research Association.*

Lewis-Spector and Jay, in their 2011 Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers white paper on literacy leadership for the 21st century, argue that to achieve high standards for all, literacy leadership needs to extend beyond “designated building or district leaders” to “shared leadership among stakeholders within and outside schools” (Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011, p. 2). Their call to widen the lens of responsibility for literacy leadership combined with the “transformation” theme of this ALER annual meeting led us to examine educational transformation within two spheres of influence—federal policies and schools—on teachers’ practice. We discuss a vision of teachers’ work within these two systems that are attempting reform. The overarching theme we explore is that of *sustainable* versus *episodic* approaches to reform designed to improve students’ literacy achievement.

We define sustainable approaches as those that are long-term and systemic in nature. Sustainable approaches involve simultaneously addressing the needs of multiple constituencies and contextual complexities, seeking to involve participants in developing solutions while steadily building their ownership over improvement efforts. In contrast to sustainable approaches, episodic approaches are more short-lived and narrowly focused in nature. From our perspective, these approaches tend to focus on leverage through specific points of entry, with externally designed solutions emphasizing compliance, to be implemented by participants. We argue for sustainable approaches because of evidence that success in literacy improvement requires continuous, disciplined effort over a period of time (Mosenthal, Lipson, Torncello, Russ, & Mekkelsen, 2004). Next, we will discuss implications from the differences between sustainable and episodic approaches to literacy improvement.

Our nation’s educational system consists of multiple layers of decision-makers from local to federal levels. However, teachers are usually the primary focus in discussions of accountability for student performance. This phenomenon has become even more pronounced with recent discussions about standardizing – and making high stakes – teacher performance evaluations. While policies indicate that all evaluations are designed to improve instruction, we are skeptical about the success of evaluation-driven systemic change when the focus is on one set of players (i.e., teachers). From our own research with over 100 schools, we have found that teachers’ success is limited in schools without key elements in

place, and schools have difficulty sustaining change if they are at odds with state and federal policies. The reverse is also true. At the federal level, when policies designed to effect change are enacted, transformation is unlikely when schools' and teachers' expectations and goals do not align (Dutro, Fisk, Koch, et al., 2002; Cohen, 1990). In our opinion, the current over-emphasis on the role of teachers without looking at the larger contexts surrounding teachers' work is characteristic of an episodic approach to change, one that is unlikely to produce the desired changes in literacy achievement.

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Our country's current shift toward national standards (albeit without labeling them as such) – the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010) – and related new high stakes tests (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2013; Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2013) represents its primary attempt to enact policies that insure our graduates can thrive in a global economy (Schmidt, Houang, & Shakrani, 2009; Tucker, 2011; Zhao, 2012). Concern in the U.S. stems from current international comparisons showing that relative to students and schools across the world, our students are viewed as coming up short (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012; OECD, 2011). Implementing the Common Core (or CCSS) is a major force for school change designed to improve instruction and the quality of students' performance. Success in addressing this issue will require a long-term, sustainable effort; yet, sustainable change occurs only when schools and teachers are on board and have ownership of the change process.

In the past 15 years, the authors along with our colleagues have helped schools engage in long-term, sustainable change initiatives to promote transformations at school and teacher levels using a standards-driven approach called the Standards-Based Change (SBC) Process (Au, 2005; Au & Raphael, 2011; Raphael, Au, & Goldman, 2009; Raphael, 2010). This constructivist approach to professional development (Raphael, Vasquez, Fortune, Gavelek, & Au, in press) emphasizes deep engagement in a universal design process, establishing a clear vision of the graduate, related grade level benchmarks, and evidence systems to inform instructional decisions (Au, Strode, Vasquez, & Raphael, in press). The successes we have seen as our schools developed into cohesive professional learning communities, with rising student engagement and achievement levels, make us optimistic. We believe that, if implemented carefully, the Common Core can provide an opportunity for positive, sustainable change to be initiated in many schools. It has the potential for professional development leading to deep learning, avoiding the potential problem of new policies being ignored or practiced in a way that does not reflect reformers' intentions (Cohen, 1990).

Understanding the contexts in which effective professional development can occur is a first step towards achieving success and sustainable improvement. We first discuss the federal context within which schools are situated. Then we describe the SBC Process as an example of a professional development model designed to promote sustainable change. We draw on examples from schools in Hawaii, Oregon, Michigan, and Chicago to illustrate key components of school transformation. In our concluding comments, we discuss the value of investing in such models, despite their demands, for long-term, sustainable school reform in literacy that meets the needs of diverse schools, teachers, and learners.

## **TRANSFORMATION AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL: THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**

In interpreting the potential of a major national initiative such the Common Core, it is informative to examine highly effective educational systems in other countries (i.e., those producing students who perform at consistently high levels on PISA, PIRLS, and TIMSS assessments). Evidence from student performance on assessments suggests that such educational systems foster transformative literacy—literacy for understanding, use, and reflection on written texts as well as literacy to achieve individual goals and participate in society. These systems share five features (Schmidt et al., 2009; Tucker, 2011): (a) professionalism, (b) comparable salaries, (c) approach to recruitment, (d) local assessments, and (e) common standards.

With regard to professionalism, highly effective educational systems view teaching as a calling. Teachers and the teaching profession are respected and those who serve as teachers feel valued. Through salaries that are comparable to other professions – law, medicine, engineering – these countries, in the colloquial expression, “put their money where their mouth is,” conveying to teachers and the public that the profession is important in their society. Teachers are recruited from the top performing 10% of the student population, made possible both by the professionalism of the field and the related salary competitiveness. Once recruited, these top students commit to the profession, engaging in a rigorous program of study to become a teacher. A highly visible program in the United States, Teach for America, stands in contrast. While recruitment of high performing students is key, there the similarity ends. These recruits receive a few months of formal teacher education and are asked to make only a two-year commitment. Furthermore, the retention rate is lower than for teachers from mainstream teacher preparation programs (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011) for a variety of reasons (e.g., some participants view the program as a stepping-stone to more lucrative and highly valued careers).

Also in contrast to the United States, countries with highly effective educational systems emphasize local assessments rather than annual high-stakes tests with accompanying externally-developed and mandated ‘benchmark’ tests. Having recruited, educated, and retained highly qualified professionals, they respect the knowledge of teachers and their ability to make instructional decisions based on these local assessments. The teachers know what their students must achieve because of common standards: clear, shared goals that describe where students must be at the end of the year. They know that as professionals, they are responsible for making the decisions to insure that students meet these goals (Darling-Hammond & McCloskey, 2008).

In the U.S., the rationale (by policymakers) for implementing the Common Core is that countries with highly effective educational systems have centralized standards. Given its narrow focus, this rationale can be seen to grow from an episodic approach to improvement. In attempting to improve the curriculum in the U.S., we should acknowledge that we are focusing with the Common Core on only one of the five parts of the puzzle. In national educational policy, without all the other pieces in place (such as emphasis on local assessments rather than standardized tests), it remains an open question whether the U.S. can achieve the same results as other countries considered highly effective. Further, while many aspects of the Common Core are promising, there is unevenness in the research base that would give us confidence in these standards leading to improved student progress (Pearson, in press).

In a document analysis of the Common Core, Pearson identified these five key assumptions that appear to be the basis for the Common Core: (a) we know how learning progresses, (b) literacy development is most likely when taught in service of disciplinary learning, (c) standards make learning goals visible but teachers control how to help students achieve these goals, (d) texts need to be challenging, and (e) comprehension includes knowing what the text *says*, what it *means*, and how texts can be used to meet a broad range of goals.

Pearson examined the strength of the research base underlying each of these assumptions, the clarity with which it is represented within the standards, and from those two factors the likelihood that the Common Core could or would be implemented with fidelity. Some of the assumptions, such as the emphasis on teachers' prerogative, have a fairly strong research base. However, Pearson notes that documents such as the *Publisher's Criteria* (Coleman & Pimentel, 2011) narrow professional choice and may work against the intent of the initiative. Other assumptions are more problematic. For example, the learning progressions themselves have a very weak research base, with relatively low clarity.

Without a compelling research base for the standards, wholehearted adoption leads to frustration, as they are likely to be revised or replaced – based on recent experiences, just as a school has become comfortable with them – undermining the sustainability of the change effort. Any given set of standards does not last long; in many states (e.g., Hawaii, Illinois, Texas), there have been at least three new standards initiatives in the past 15 years. We believe that educators would be wise to use the advent of the Common Core as a prime opportunity for initiating a sustainable approach to change at the school level, viewing the document as an important resource against which the present literacy curricula can be evaluated. This would be in contrast to treating the Common Core as a hard and fast directive for what and how to teach, which is the route typically taken when standards are associated with an episodic approach to change.

A second caution stems from the potential danger of modeling curriculum in the U.S. after highly effective educational systems in other countries, when these countries do not rely on student achievement on standardized tests as their sole measure of effectiveness. Zhao (2012) warns that countries that have traditionally scored high on standardized assessments are actually not the same countries that flourish economically. Ironically, economically successful countries (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Australia) historically have had neither a centralized curriculum nor national standards. Zhao asserts that standardized testing diminishes thinking and creativity. Our country is moving to more standardization and a more centralized system, based primarily on the importance of higher test scores. In contrast, Zhao (2012) calls for a system that enhances

creativity and curiosity, supports risk taking, and encourages an entrepreneurial spirit. He maintains that the goal of education should not be to create good test-takers, but productive and progressive thinkers as represented in the U.S. by entrepreneurs and creative leaders such as Steve Jobs, Maya Angelou, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thomas Edison. To Zhao's arguments, we would add that an over-reliance on raising test scores is likely to foster change of an episodic rather than sustainable nature. Test scores are not the only or even most highly prized outcome for many students, families, and educators, given that many colleges value students' well-rounded interests and passion for learning as much as their academic performance (Strauss, 2009).

Even with these cautions in mind, the Common Core initiative offers some reasons for celebration. First, the standards bring much needed attention to high levels of student thinking, representing a marked shift away from overemphasis on basic skills. Second, the Common Core is efficient in providing a vision of student outcomes while placing the responsibility for making curricular decisions in the hands of the teachers. In contrast to the recent past with many state standards listing hundreds of specific learning goals, the Common Core standards are streamlined and the document provides a limited number of samples. Instead of a detailed list of what students need to accomplish at each grade level, the sample standards give educators a picture of learning goals at each grade level. Thus, teachers are ultimately held responsible for determining how the domains are substantiated for students in their schools at their grade level. Giving teachers this level of autonomy more closely approximates the professionalism credited to educators in effective systems in other countries. If teachers are simultaneously provided professional development experiences to hone their ability to align instruction and student performance for each learning goal, the Common Core has the potential to become a powerful resource for educators and the occasion for stimulating sustainable improvement efforts. The degree to which such potential is realized will be influenced by the school context in which the change process is embedded.

## **TRANSFORMATION AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL: LESSONS FROM RESEARCH**

While the global and national policy contexts set the stage for improving literacy education in a broad conceptual way, the school context is where the action occurs and where a change effort is enacted and made sustainable. The considerable research base on school change provides the basis for how to approach the change process in a way that makes the investment of time and energy worthwhile (i.e., so that it is sustainable).

Just as it is useful to learn from comparative studies of effective educational systems in other countries, research on what distinguishes more and less successful schools (measured by test scores, teacher satisfaction, curriculum coherence, etc.) can be used to inform the school change process. In their review of research on school change, Taylor, Raphael, & Au (2011) summarize attributes of schools identified as successful. These attributes include strong leaders, a culture of professionalism where teachers had local control and choices about what instructional approaches and assessments to use, and an emphasis on student self-efficacy. This research on effective schools provides a solid foundation for identifying what works. However, Taylor and her colleagues note that knowing what is effective in some schools doesn't mean struggling schools can simply reorganize and enact similar practices to make the desired change. As Purkey and Smith (1983) stated several decades ago, "it is one thing to demand that all schools be effective; it is an entirely different matter to assume . . . that what has positive effects in one setting will invariably have the same effects in another" (p. 493).

School change in literacy initially was driven by curriculum-based reform. These reforms tended to be programmatic (e.g. America's Choice; Success For All), and research detailing the strengths and challenges of these reforms further informed understandings of the change process (Taylor et al., 2011). The curriculum-based programs were straightforward and designed to be relatively easy for schools to implement, with built-in accountability through assessments, curriculum, and instructional pacing guides. However, even in schools showing gains in students' local test scores, in national comparisons achievement tended to remain below national norms. Furthermore, even schools initially strong in implementing a particular reform program often proved unable to sustain change. Darling-Hammond (2007) hypothesizes that schools implementing such externally developed programs may not sustain progress because of a lack of teacher ownership over the curriculum. The lack of flexibility in reform programs minimizes opportunities for teachers to adapt the curriculum to fit the particular needs of students. Furthermore, a dependency on externally constructed curriculum tends to "de-professionalize and disempower teachers" (Raphael & Au, 2012, p. 24).

Research in effective schools and curriculum reform has led to studies focusing on what is needed to help unsuccessful schools become effective sites for sustaining innovations leading to improved literacy teaching and learning. In this work, professional development (for teachers, curriculum leaders, administrators) is at the core. The effective schools and curriculum reform research provided pieces of the puzzle, while current research examines how these various pieces of the puzzle come together for successful school transformation.



The review by Taylor et al. (2011) identified six features shared by successful school change projects across the world. Each successful project:

- Involved an external partner
- Emphasized one whole school community (versus a number of different internal communities) collaborating on a common initiative and emphasizing mutual problem solving
- Emphasized reflection on practice tied to the concept of changing instruction (e.g., not simply looking at student data, but using that data to inform teaching)
- Involved learning that was tailored to the schools' unique needs, and
- Included ongoing learning for leaders, notably principal leadership.

## **A RESEARCH-BASED APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL CHANGE: THE SBC PROCESS**

The Standards Based Change (SBC) Process, developed by Au and Raphael, is one of these successful school change projects, consistent with these six features just stated. The SBC Process grew from a desire to understand what it took to customize reform for individual schools across a wide variety of settings and serving an array of learners. The initial research focused on Hawaii, the 10th largest district in the United States (Au, 2005) and Chicago, the 3rd largest (Raphael, 2010).

### **Seven Levels to Success**

Au and Raphael's research on the SBC Process led to the Seven Levels to Success, a developmental model of school change, with incremental markers for schools working toward sustainable improvement (Raphael, Au, & Goldman, 2009) (see Table 1).

The theory of action underlying this model begins with making visible the school's collective identity (Weber & Raphael, 2013) and constructing the infrastructure consistent with helping the school achieve that identity. This infrastructure supports the design process for creating a coherent curriculum (Newmann, Smith, Allenworth, & Bryk, 2001) guiding assessment and instruction and the identification and organization of resources to support teaching and learning (i.e., classroom practices). With high quality classroom practices

TABLE 1 Seven Levels to Success

Level	Major Task	School Activity
<b>1 Recognizing a Need</b>	School leaders gain knowledge of the SBC Process and learn the steps leaders must take to support progress	Leaders and teachers participate in the Needs Assessment. Leaders attend leadership seminars to build their knowledge of literacy, leadership, and the SBC Process.
<b>2 Organizing for Change</b>	School leaders build their infrastructure to support school improvement with the SBC Process	Leaders strengthen the school's infrastructure (e.g., time to meet, committee structures). Grade level or department liaisons strengthen their knowledge of literacy, leadership, and the SBC Process. Norms are established.
<b>3 Working on the Building Blocks</b>	Introduce the SBC Process components to the whole school	PLC articulates the school's literacy philosophy and vision of the graduate. Grade level and disciplinary teams discuss their contributions to ensuring students' progress toward that vision.
<b>4 Pulling the Whole School Together</b>	Complete all the components of the SBC Process	Grade level and disciplinary teams in collaborative work groups create and align benchmarks within key strands, align with external standards as needed, and construct their evidence systems for tracking and sharing school-wide student progress and instructional adjustments for progress up the staircase.
<b>5 Sharing Results</b>	Regular intervals of whole-school sharing student results	Whole-school sharing and analysis of student progress occurs regularly (beginning of school year for planning, mid-year checks and adjustments, end-of-year for analysis and reflection for sustainable improvement.
<b>6 Implementing the Staircase Curriculum</b>	Create grade level or department guides to document the staircase curriculum	Teachers organize their work into curriculum guides before moving to next school subject area. Guides are organized in terms of: (a) Overview with whole-school philosophy, vision, norms, (b) Grade level benchmarks, (c) evidence system, (d) instructional and learning strategies, and (e) resources.
<b>7 Engaging Students and Families</b>	Formal involvement of students, families, and community members in student progress	Portfolios for student progress, student-led parent-teacher conferences.

[Updated from Raphael, Au, & Goldman (2009) and reprinted from Raphael & Au (2012)]

in place, teachers focus on improving students' engagement, achievement, and ultimately, their ownership of the learning process. Driven by this theory of action and the Seven Level model, the SBC Process provides support for schools to build teacher knowledge and develop a "content rich curriculum, aligned with high expectations" through an "infrastructure that supports collaborative work groups with a common vision of the high quality graduate each and every staff member commits to attaining" (Raphael & Au, 2012 p. 20).

Just as a roadmap is used to plan a trip, the Seven Level model is used to guide schools on each leg of their journey as they construct their staircase curriculum in a designated area (e.g., comprehension, writing, literate thinking). At each level, schools have specific tasks they are expected to complete, such as those related to establishing a strong infrastructure or sharing assessment results. The exact means that participants use to accomplish these tasks may differ, depending on the resources and circumstances at any given school, but the tasks to be completed remain the same and are clear and consistent.

The overarching, long-term goal of sustainable reform represents the final destination of the journey. With this goal in mind, like a long-distance trip, indicators along the way mark the degree to which one is staying on track. The long-term goal for schools engaging with the SBC Process is to create a professional learning community able to engage in ongoing, continual improvement in all core subject areas, although the process usually starts with literacy. The following sections provide a closer look at how schools progress through the Seven Levels, as they work toward sustainable improvement.

## **School Transformation through the Seven Levels**

**Needs assessment.** When we begin a professional development partnership with a school, we start by determining the school's present standing on the Seven Levels to Success and the school's needs relative to their standing. We determine a school's needs based on three clusters of dimensions identified in the research literature as key contributors to improving teaching and learning, and doing so in a sustainable way. The first cluster consists of four dimensions related to school identity and infrastructure. These dimensions include *school leadership* (Mitchell & Sackney, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001), *literacy leadership* (Wampole & Blamey, 2008), *professional learning community* (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006), and *professional development* for the school as a community (Dillon, O'Brien, Sato, & Kelly, 2011; Fisher & Frey, 2007). The second cluster consists of three dimensions related to classroom practices. These dimensions include: 1) *assessment systems*, 2) *instructional strategies and* 3) *tools*, and *curricular resources* (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Kamil, Mosenthal,

Pearson, & Barr, 2000). The third cluster consists of two dimensions related to student outcomes: 1) *engagement* and 2) *achievement* (Guthrie, Klauda, & Ho, 2013).

Results of needs assessments conducted at over 100 schools show that no two schools are exactly alike; each school shows a unique pattern of strengths and weaknesses. A thorough understanding of a school's starting point—its present standing as on the Seven Levels—helps us determine specific steps the school can take to progress to the next level and allows us to avoid wasting precious time because we have over- or underestimated a school's capacity for sustainable change. Thus, the needs assessment provides the basis for customizing professional development to fit each school's specific circumstances (from redesigning their school improvement plan to knowledge-building activities designed for administrators, curriculum leaders, and teachers), in keeping with the purpose of helping the school advance on the Seven Levels to Success. Our goal is help the school advance to Levels 6 and 7, the levels at which there can be sustained gains in student achievement.

We collect a combination of self-report, artifacts, and testing data, and then analyze these data using time-tested qualitative and quantitative approaches to determine the school's entering level. After we have analyzed the evidence and prepared a comprehensive report, we meet with the school's leaders to debrief about the findings and present our recommendations about the tasks that need to be accomplished to advance the school through the Seven Levels. We work collaboratively with the school's leaders to develop a plan for accomplishing specific tasks over the next year and then sketch out a multi-year plan. The focus of planning is how professional development will proceed from year to year, with the purpose of building capacity for carrying out literacy improvement efforts at the school level. We follow a capacity building approach to promote sustainability of improvement efforts, knowing that ongoing dependency on an external partner is typical of episodic rather than sustainable approaches.

***Levels 1 and 2: Creating or tweaking infrastructure.*** Almost all schools start their journey with the SBC Process at Level 1 or 2, according to their results on the needs assessment. This means that our initial work, as external partners, involves helping the school create the strong infrastructure required to sustain a multi-year literacy improvement effort. Our approach to infrastructure development is based on our research, which indicates that Three Pillars are key to sustainable change (Au, Strode, Vasquez, & Raphael, in press). The Three Pillars are: (1) a strong principal who is an instructional leader, (2) a trusted, knowledgeable, and effective curriculum leader, and (3) a vertical leadership team consisting of teacher leaders representing every major constituency in the school. In

elementary schools, these constituencies are usually grade levels plus the special education department. In secondary schools, the constituencies are often departments but they might be career pathways, academies, or similar groups.

We begin by making sure the principal understands the importance of focusing the school's resources on SBC Process work. Typically, principals have been accustomed to dividing resources across so many initiatives that it has not been possible for the school to do a good job in any particular curriculum area. We ask principals to break this counterproductive pattern by providing teachers with the time and resources, such as professional development, needed to implement literacy improvements at a high level of quality.

We spend considerable time coaching the key curriculum leader, because this person has the responsibility for overseeing the details of the school's work with the SBC Process. While the support of the principal is obviously important, the principal usually does not have the time to attend to all the particulars of SBC Process implementation, such as making sure that all grade levels have completed drafts of their benchmarks. As external partners, we maintain ongoing email and phone communication with the key curriculum leader. However, at a typical school, we are only present on-site 4 – 8 days per year; this schedule is deliberately designed to build the school's capacity and prevent over-reliance on an external partner. The key curriculum leader oversees the school's progress during the times between our visits, and as this individual's ability to lead the SBC Process work at the school level grows an important component of sustainability falls into place.

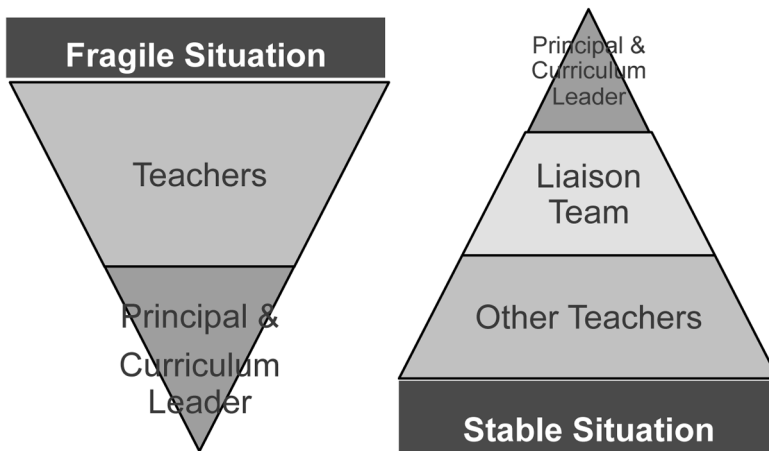
As a sustainable approach to literacy improvement, the SBC Process requires the active involvement of all teachers in the school-wide professional learning community. We begin the work of reaching out to all teachers by providing extensive professional development to the vertical leadership team, consisting of teacher leaders as mentioned above. These teacher leaders serve as the main group assisting the key curriculum leader in advancing the SBC Process and bringing all teachers into the school-wide professional learning community. At almost all schools, teachers have not worked together across all grade levels to develop their own curriculum. To prepare teachers for this venture, we work with the vertical leadership team to help the school establish the norms that will insure high functioning collaborative work groups (usually grade levels or departments). The norms established by the teachers at a K-5 school in Oregon capture their commitment to respect one another, focus, and engage with the process:

- Being open minded, supportive, positive and flexible
- Addressing concerns with the whole group respectfully & above board

- Respecting individual participation styles through active and meaningful work
- Staying focused on our needs
- Being an engaged participant

Our experience working with many schools on the SBC Process has convinced us of the critical importance of spending ample time on the first two levels in the Seven Level model, to establish a solid foundation for improvement. Contrary to our advice, some schools have attempted to reach higher levels without taking the time to establish the infrastructure needed to support a sustainable literacy improvement effort. For example, we have seen schools try to “jump” to more advanced levels, such as working on changes to their curriculum and instruction (levels 4 and 5) before they were ready. In some cases these schools were able to produce short-term achievement gains over the course of year. However, their efforts collapsed the following year because they lacked the strong leadership and organizational structure needed to keep improved practices in place. In essence, by taking shortcuts, these schools reverted from a sustainable approach to an episodic approach, with predictably poor long-term results.

The images in Figure 1 represent two very different school infrastructures. The image on the left represents the typical school structure. The principal and key curriculum leader drives the curriculum and professional development and direct teachers to follow their recommendations. In this fragile system, a change



**Figure 1**

Fragile Versus Stable School Situations

in one of the key players (principal or key curriculum leader) all too readily leads to the collapse of the entire effort. As shown in the image on the right, the SBC Process moves schools toward the more stable and sustainable situation. In schools with a strong infrastructure, all players have a voice and are actively involved in the literacy improvement effort to upgrade teaching and learning in the school. The vertical leadership team works closely with teachers and the key curriculum leader, and the key curriculum leader is in constant communication with the principal, so all members are represented in discussions of literacy improvement and kept informed of the school's directions. A consistent, open flow of communication reflects the professionalism that is characteristic of highly effective educational systems. It increases teachers' buy-in and promotes timely decision-making, factors critical to the sustainability of improvement efforts.

**Levels 3, 4, and 5: Constructing and enacting the vision and curriculum.** Once the school's infrastructure is in place, it allows teachers to engage in meaningful conversations about a collective vision for their graduating student. Teachers articulate their description of a graduate from their school that reflects the school's collective identity. In Hawaii, teachers at a suburban elementary school created the following vision of their graduates:

*Manana Elementary School is a place where students, families, staff and community come together as an 'ohana (family) to actively participate and support one another in pursuit of success. We offer rigorous curricular and extra-curricular opportunities to develop technologically competent individuals, who will apply their knowledge now and in the future. Our students are passionate forward thinkers who take initiative of their learning and exercise socially responsible behavior while striving for intellectual, emotional, and physical excellence.*

Once this overall vision of the graduate is in place, we work with teachers on a literacy-specific subset of this vision, based on the school's chosen focus of reading, writing, or literate thinking. This literacy-specific vision of the excellent student aligns with the school's vision of the graduate. For example, here is the same school's vision of the excellent writer:

*Manana Elementary School graduates are experienced in the writing process and strive to perfect the writer's craft. They express their individuality while writing meaningfully across genres for a variety of purposes and audiences.*

To take another example, the vision of the excellent graduating writer developed by teachers at a Chicago K-8 school stated that students would possess “the necessary skills and strategies to communicate effectively in all realms of literacy for the purpose of being a critical thinker, problem solver, and advocate in a continuously changing world.” This vision is consistent with the goals represented in the Common Core (e.g., college and career readiness) but was customized by teachers to address their aspirations for their students, most of whom are Latino and speak Spanish as their primary language. Like teachers working in highly effective educational systems around the world, establishing a clear vision provides the school with a visible outcome and guides subsequent work detailing what it will take to achieve this outcome.

Guided by these vision statements, schools functioning at the middle sections of the Seven Levels to Success (Levels 3 - 5) use their collaborative work groups to build the components in the SBC Process To Do Cycle: (1) a staircase curriculum, consisting of grade by grade end-of-year benchmarks, (2) an evidence (assessment) system to track students’ progress toward these benchmarks, and (3) evidence-based instruction in keeping with teachers’ analyses of student performance. To promote sustainability, it is important for teachers to take an active role in constructing these three components and customizing them for their students and their school. In episodic approaches to literacy improvement, teachers are generally asked to take externally developed components and implement them, without adjustments, in their school. This is described as implementing an externally developed program with fidelity. We have found the constructivist orientation of the SBC Process to be better at promoting sustainable improvement for a number of reasons.

One way that the SBC Process contributes to sustainability is by allowing teachers to gain a deep understanding of curriculum, assessment, and instruction. For example, in terms of the staircase curriculum, we ask teachers to determine the benchmarks or end-of-year outcomes for their grade levels. We involve teachers in a step-by-step process of drafting benchmarks, based on their students’ needs, that are consistent with relevant external standards, such as the Common Core. We then have teachers engage in a process of internal alignment. Teachers work across grade levels within the school to make sure that benchmarks at each grade build on those that come before and lead up to those that follow. By the time external and internal alignment activities have been completed, teachers have a deep understanding of the benchmarks for their grade level, as well as a good working understanding of the benchmarks for all grades in their school.

In the next steps in the SBC Process to Do Cycle, we guide teachers in a similar, step-by-step fashion to construct their own evidence system and



evidence-based teaching. Teachers first develop an evidence system including performance tasks and rubrics. As with the benchmarks, these performance tasks are aligned to relevant external sources. For example, Hawaii is a member of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), so teachers align their own performance tasks with samples available on the SBAC website. Needless to say, teachers find it challenging to develop suitable performance tasks and rubrics, especially for benchmarks in areas of higher level thinking, such as reading comprehension and critical response. However, teachers persist with this work because they established the benchmarks and want to know how well students are progressing in meeting these targets. Once the evidence system is in place and performance task results can be obtained, teachers can see whether students are making satisfactory progress toward meeting the benchmarks. The third component, evidence-based teaching is a logical next step, because it enables teachers to address the literacy learning of students at all levels of performance - whether working on, meeting, or exceeding benchmarks, according to the rubric. This professionalism that is emphasized as teachers construct systems to support educational decision-making is characteristic of those highly effective educational systems described earlier and, in schools that have enacted this model, not surprisingly lead to stronger outcomes for students.

With evidence-based teaching in place, one advantage to the SBC Process comes into play: teachers attribute gains in student outcomes to their own efforts. As teachers work to develop their school's own curriculum, assessment, and instruction components, they see how these three components relate to one another. This gives teachers the ability to use the three components to promote their students' literacy learning. At the end of their school's first year with the SBC Process, teachers often approach us with comments such as, "I now understand how everything fits together, and I know I can help my students get farther next year." When we work in schools that have tried one external program after another without success, we see that teachers feel powerless and skeptical about their own ability to promote students' learning. When they see the results they can obtain with the SBC Process, using components they developed themselves, they regain their professional confidence. As they start to see gains in students' literacy learning, they know that they are on the right track and become committed to continuing the work. Sustainability becomes more likely when teachers see that their students are benefiting from the SBC Process.

A second advantage to engaging in the SBC Process is that everyone in the school-wide professional learning community strives toward the same vision, which further supports sustainability. Guided by the SBC Process, teachers work closely together within grade levels and departments. They also engage in regular

opportunities to learn about student performance results within grade levels and departments other than their own, and to see how literacy curriculum, assessment, and instruction are functioning across the whole school.

In an SBC Process evidence system, the performance tasks are administered three times a year, with school-wide sharing of these pretest, mid-year, and posttest results. In the fall, teachers use the results to plan for the immediate future and lay out general plans for the year. They determine areas in which students may need extra support and enlist relevant resources (e.g., special education teacher, bilingual or ELL support, peer tutors). They select and organize instructional resources. Midyear, when the system is administered a second time, teachers use the results to check on progress and make those mid-year corrections necessary to ensure all students have the best opportunity to achieve the end-of-year benchmarks. Sharing of results of the post-test or year-end administration is an occasion for celebrating student progress as well as for identifying improvements to curriculum, assessment, and instruction for the following year.

What sets this evidence system apart from typical benchmark tests is that it emphasizes local assessments characteristic of highly effective educational systems, accompanied by public conversations designed to inspire critical analysis within grade level teams and across the school as they examine the effectiveness of their system. Following administration of each assessment, there is a whole-school session in which grade levels share with one another what their students have accomplished to date and the specific instructional plans they are planning to enact for students at different achievement levels, particularly for students not on track for attainment of the end-of-year benchmarks.

For example, the grade 6 teachers at a suburban school in Hawaii discovered during a sharing session that their performance task was at the same level of difficulty as that for grade 5. The grade 6 teachers told their colleagues that they would be developing a new, more challenging performance task for implementation in the new school year. The other teachers were encouraged by the fact that the grade 6 teachers were reaching for a higher level of achievement, building on the foundation put in place by earlier grades.

This example illustrates a third advantage of the SBC Process in terms of sustainability. The grade 6 teachers benefitted from the school-wide sharing session by seeing that they could raise their expectations for students' performance. Had these teachers not been participating in and receiving the support of a school-wide professional learning community, they would not have known how they could contribute to their students' growth as literacy learners and to the elevation of their school's expectations. Knowing that their school is moving

forward together gives teachers a positive attitude toward the literacy improvement effort and thus improves the chances for a sustained effort.

**Levels 6 and 7: Documenting the curriculum and building ownership.** As schools enter the advanced levels of the Seven Levels to Success (Levels 6 and 7), the emphasis is on giving teachers the time and support needed to document the many improvements they have made to their curriculum, assessment, and instruction through the SBC Process. As they were working their way through Levels 3 - 5, teachers created many products, such as vision statements, benchmarks, performance tasks, and rubrics. Typically, they have collected these in a thick binder. As the school enters Level 6, we guide teachers to organize these products following Tyler's (1950) time-tested categories of goals for student learning (vision statements, benchmarks), assessment (evidence system, including performance task and rubrics), instructional strategies (evidence-based teaching), and instructional materials (such as novels that students read). Teachers and schools have the option of organizing their products online (through a website or wiki or using mapping software) or in hard copy (in three-ring binders).

Curriculum documentation serves the important function of giving teachers a product to show for the considerable time and thought they have invested in working through the SBC Process. It is at this point that teachers can look back and see all that they have accomplished. Furthermore, by organizing their products, identifying gaps in their work, and so forth, teachers improve their understanding of the details of their curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Because they have the opportunity to review the curriculum documentation of the other grades and departments, they gain a better picture than ever before of teaching and learning across the whole school. In terms of sustainability, a fourth advantage of the SBC Process becomes evident at this juncture: the ownership teachers feel over their school's improved literacy curriculum. They find satisfaction as well in seeing consistent gains in student achievement that can now be sustained year after year. And they have the resources organized for ease of use over time.

In our experience, consistent with the research literature on effective professional development (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000), teachers with voice and ownership over the improvement process are more open to active engagement during professional development activities and seek out opportunities for advanced study. For example, an optional Fellows Program for masters level work in literacy instruction, offered as part of the work in Chicago for six years, attracted 15 to 30 teachers a year, with over 35% going on to complete their masters degrees and to obtain certification as a reading specialist.

Once teachers have taken ownership of the curriculum, they can see that the logical next steps center on building their students' ownership of literacy and literacy learning. We guide teachers to make sure that students understand the benchmarks for their grade level as well as the rubrics for performance tasks, which should be presented in student-friendly language. Student portfolios are implemented in coordination with the three-times-per-year administration of performance tasks. Schools have the option of scheduling three-way conferences during which students go over the contents of their portfolios and discuss their progress with their parents. Students take ownership, as they understand what they need to learn, evaluate their own performance, share their progress with others, and set goals for future learning.

Gradually, teachers are able to make the curriculum transparent not only to students but to their parents as well. At a meeting at a K-6 school in Hawaii, one of the mothers, a high school math teacher, commented on her children's achievement as writers. Her older child had been in the school when it had just started to use the SBC Process to improve its writing curriculum. However, her younger child had experienced the improved curriculum from grades K – 4. This mother commended the teachers because she could see continuity in instruction from grade to grade, resulting in a high level of writing proficiency for her younger child. This illustrates a fifth benefit to sustainability of the SBC Process: it can potentially lead to student and parent ownership of the curriculum, extending the learning community beyond the teachers.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Through our research and work as external partners, we have come to appreciate the difference between sustainable and episodic approaches to change. Our nation, in a familiar refrain, is calling for action to lead to school improvement. Yet, as Payne (2008, p. 47) has written, "...most of what we call school reform has not had the depth nor the intensity to cut into the deeper tangle of problems," leading to (reflected in the title of his book) "so much reform, so little change." Episodic solutions have yet to lead our country's schools, teachers, and students to ongoing improvements in literacy achievement. They have yet to close the persistent gap in achievement between students from linguistically, economically, and culturally diverse families and those from mainstream homes. We believe in the promise of sustainable change initiatives, particularly when enacted to move students to high levels of thinking, college and career readiness, and long-term personal satisfaction. While Common Core can set the types of goals we want for our student it will take teacher ownership and commitment as they address the needs of their specific students for our country to move in the directions we

desire. Based on our research with quite a diverse set of schools, we have learned three powerful lessons for supporting the type of work that moves beyond episodic initiatives to those that lead to sustainable change.

First, we believe that it is critical to absolutely trust the process. When we've made exceptions, such as assuming schools can move to more advanced developmental stages without a strong infrastructure, we've failed every time. However, when schools trust the process and do the necessary work at each stage of development, we continually observe steady growth in schools. What this indicates to us very strongly is that in trusting the process, trusting the research findings on which it is based, we provide the basis for a school to engage in a sustainable change process.

Second, transformation at any level cannot occur without high functioning, collaborative work groups. These collaborative groups may benefit from the work of others (e.g., federal support and national committees that helped to create a set of common standards; examples of successful professional development from other schools). But, sustainability requires ownership, and ownership cannot occur without the opportunity and active engagement with our immediate colleagues. It is not sufficient for schools to be organized 'on paper.' Groups must actually function well together. If tension exists between two grade levels, making vertical meetings challenging, it must be addressed since a school is only as strong as its weakest link. And, we owe all students, but especially those who depend on school for learning, high quality, coherent instruction throughout their school career.

The third lesson from our work with schools is that when schools reach advanced levels of development and are able to sustain change initiatives (i.e., use their system for continual improvement), our role as an external partner changes, but does not end. We help schools develop their capacity to identify their own needs and seek out ways to improve, and find that as schools face new challenges (e.g., new sets of standards come out, new assessments are required, a curricular area is to be developed or refined), we are often called on once again. Our relationship with the school provides them with help should they need it. As Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011) have suggested, what's critical is shared leadership. And to that we would add, a deep understanding of how to support these multiple layers as they seek to improve in an ever-changing context.

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# Literacy is Transformative



Editors:

Susan Szabo

Linda Martin

Timothy Morrison

Leslie Haas

Lizabeth Garza-Garcia



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### Co-Editors

**Susan Szabo**

Texas A&M University-Commerce

**Linda Martin**

Ball State University

**Timothy Morrison**

Brigham Young University

**Leslie Haas**

Dallas Christian College

**Lizabeth Garza-Garcia**

Editorial Assistant

Texas A&M University-Commerce

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