

# Inspiring Literacy Achievement Through Standards

by **KATHRYN H. AU, SHARYN Y. HIRATA, & TAFFY E. RAPHAEL**

**A** veteran teacher, successful in a traditional classroom, told the gathering of school leadership teams that she was considering retirement because of her struggles with standards-based education. This teacher voiced the frustrations experienced by many educators attempting to work with standards. While some may point to teacher resistance as an explanation for the slowness of change, we think a more likely explanation is the sheer difficulty of the challenge faced when teachers must address rigorous new standards. “We need to be cognizant of the fact that it’s a huge change,” observed the assistant superintendent who encouraged the veteran teacher to express her feelings.

We count ourselves among the educators convinced of the potential of standards to improve students’ literacy achievement. Making standards visible and holding schools accountable continue to be important steps toward promoting access to high-quality literacy education, especially for students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. To date, however, standards-based reform has not served to close the literacy achievement gap. Darling-Hammond (2003) presents evidence that standards, when equated mainly with high-stakes testing, can lead to greater failure for the most vulnerable students, including an increased rate of high school dropouts.

What can schools do to improve students' literacy achievement through standards? This is an urgent question, especially for schools that serve high proportions of students of diverse backgrounds. The Standards-Based Change Process (SBCP) offers a possible solution. The goal of the SBCP is to institutionalize an ongoing conversation about what teachers within a school are doing to improve student achievement through standards (Au, in press). The SBCP leads to the development of a school-wide professional learning community (DuFour, 2004), with clear goals for student learning, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results.

Schools in the SBCP work their way through the nine-item To Do List, as shown in Figure 1. Teachers analyze the situation in their grade level or department, identifying the To Do List items they already have in place, need to revise, or have yet to develop. Teachers are quick to note that nothing on the To Do List is completely new to them, although they always observe that their school and grade levels lack several items.

Like Schmoker (2004), we find it works best to go for small wins rather than taking on too much. In Hawaii, we have elementary schools choose whether they want to start the To Do List with reading or writing, and we ask teachers to work on only one or two benchmarks (end-of-year student outcomes) during the first year. Secondary schools usually focus on literacy in the content areas. In Chicago, we recommend that teachers work with a single benchmark within each of the four areas (comprehension, fluency, word study, writing) of the Chicago Reading Initiative. Once teachers have learned how the SBCP works, they can easily add more benchmarks and extend the approach to other content areas, such as math.

A strength of the SBCP is that it does not matter what philosophy or program the school is following for reading or writing. The SBCP has been successful in schools using everything from home-grown literature-based curricula to scripted basic skills programs. Rather than requiring teachers to start over again, the SBCP allows a school to

build upon strengths already in place, while correcting weaknesses detected. Here is a typical response from teachers:

Before the SBCP we were working so hard but not getting anywhere. It's such a relief to know that we can follow these steps to build a system.

The SBCP addresses four problems of practice typically encountered by schools working with literacy standards. We explore these problems by contrasting the characteristics of struggling schools with those of schools successful in implementing the SBCP and improving students' literacy learning. Our observations come from elementary and secondary schools in Hawaii, where the SBCP began eight years ago, and in Chicago, where the approach has recently been introduced.

### **From One-Time Event to Recursive Process**

The first problem of practice is that there is no quick fix for improving students' literacy achievement. For this

reason, schools must move from viewing change as a one-time event to seeing it as a recursive process. They must set a direction for change and stay the course for three years or more in order to make the improvements necessary to show substantial gains in student's literacy learning.

Schools with a history of poor test results typically respond to pressures to improve achievement by trying one quick fix after another, such as purchasing a new reading program every three years. When the SBCP is introduced,

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teachers see it as another passing fad. They move through the To Do List mechanically, without thinking about how the items need to be connected (for example, about how the evidence must match the benchmark). Work with the SBCP stops after a year because the approach is regarded as too slow and demanding, and the school returns to searching for another instant remedy.

In contrast, teachers at successful schools understand that the SBCP involves an ongoing, recursive process. At first, the approach requires extensive effort, as teachers develop and test benchmarks, procedures for collecting evidence, and rubrics. As time goes on, the teachers have all the pieces in place but continue to refine To Do List items, especially rubrics. Successful schools stay the course long enough to see the pay-off for their efforts. In Hawaii, the first school to begin work with the SBCP, Kipapa Elementary School, has been in the process since 1997. The second, Holomua Elementary School, started with the

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SBCP in 1999. Teachers at these schools have developed their own curriculum guides in reading and writing and are moving into math.

### **From External to Internal Accountability**

The second problem of practice involves the move from external to internal accountability. Many teachers see accountability for improved literacy achievement as externally imposed, for example, by the federal government. Teachers want their students to perform well on high-stakes tests. However, they often resent the time spent on assessment because they see this as time taken away from instruction.

Teachers at the typical school have not set end-of-year targets for students' literacy performance, in the form of benchmarks, and are not regularly collecting evidence to show students' progress toward meeting benchmarks. On the infrequent occasions when they do collect evidence, teachers remain unsure about how to score the evidence or analyze it for ideas about improving instruction.

Schools successful with the SBCP collect evidence showing students' progress toward meeting literacy benchmarks at three points during the year: pretest, mid-year, and posttest. Teachers meet by grade levels or departments to score the evidence according to rubrics. They examine the evidence for patterns of strengths and weaknesses in students' performance, and they discuss the instruction they will provide to address weaknesses.

Teachers in each grade level or department then prepare a presentation of their findings and decisions, to be shared with the whole school. These presentations – in the form of PowerPoint slides, overhead transparencies, poster board displays, or documents – include bar graphs of results, as well as the instructional improvements teachers plan to make. In the presentations teachers also highlight any significant changes or additions in their To Do List items, such as revised rubrics. As each group presents, the other teachers gain a detailed understanding of how literacy assessment and instruction are (or should be) flowing across the whole school. Over time, teachers in all grade levels and departments acquire the knowledge they need to align their benchmarks, assessment, and instruction with one another, as well as with state or district standards.

## **From Artificial to Actual Curriculum Coherence**

The third problem of practice addressed by the SBCP is the need for a coherent curriculum across grade levels and departments (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). The typical school has a fragmented rather than spiraling curriculum, with little continuity of instruction from one grade level or course to the next. This fragmentation leads to uneven academic progress by

they created it themselves, with their students as well as standards in mind.

Through their work with the To Do List, teachers have all the elements needed to develop their own literacy curriculum guides. Teachers at eight schools in Hawaii have created curriculum guides for reading and writing through the SBCP. The process of putting together their own literacy curriculum guides gives teachers a deep understanding of instruction and assessment in their grade

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students. The usual response to this problem is to adopt a packaged program. In many cases, however, a packaged program fails to lend any real coherence to the curriculum. The reason is that curriculum coherence depends on teachers having a shared understanding of goals for student learning, instruction, and assessment. These shared understandings usually do not develop through packaged programs alone, because teachers tend to be treated – and to see themselves — as recipients rather than creators of curriculum.

Teachers in schools successful with the SBCP go through the process of developing their own literacy curricula. By the time teachers have completed several rounds with the To Do List, usually at the end of the second year, the school has in place a system for improving student achievement through standards in the target curriculum area. Teachers understand the system because

levels and departments. Teachers initiate communication across grades and departments as they work on their guides, because they recognize the need for consistency in content, instruction, and assessment. Teachers have the chance to review the guides created by teachers at all other grades and departments. This sharing, in addition to the schedule of reporting three times a year, reinforces teachers' knowledge of the literacy curriculum across the entire school.

In schools in Hawaii, the results of curriculum coherence from work with the SBCP are noticeable after 2-3 years. The evidence collected by teachers shows them that students are arriving better prepared as readers and writers as they begin each new grade or course. This leads teachers to develop more challenging benchmarks and rubrics, because they know they can move students farther along by the end of the year. It is this process of rising expectations that leads to improvements in students' literacy achievement.

## **From Haphazard to Focused Professional Development**

The fourth problem of practice is the need for focused professional development. At the typical school, days set aside for professional development are devoted to a potpourri of one-shot workshops on topics ranging from behavior management to spelling. While worthwhile in itself, each topic is addressed superficially and teachers receive no follow-up support to help them implement the new approaches.

At schools successful with the SBCP, leaders have a multi-year plan for teachers' professional development, tied to specific goals for curriculum development to improve student achievement. Every professional development session fits into this plan. Principals and curriculum coordinators at successful schools report that they set aside eight days for teachers to devote to curriculum development through the SBCP. The key feature of these days is time

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when teachers work with others in their own grade level or department. In evaluations teachers repeatedly write about how much they value this collaboration time and how vital it is to the success of their efforts.

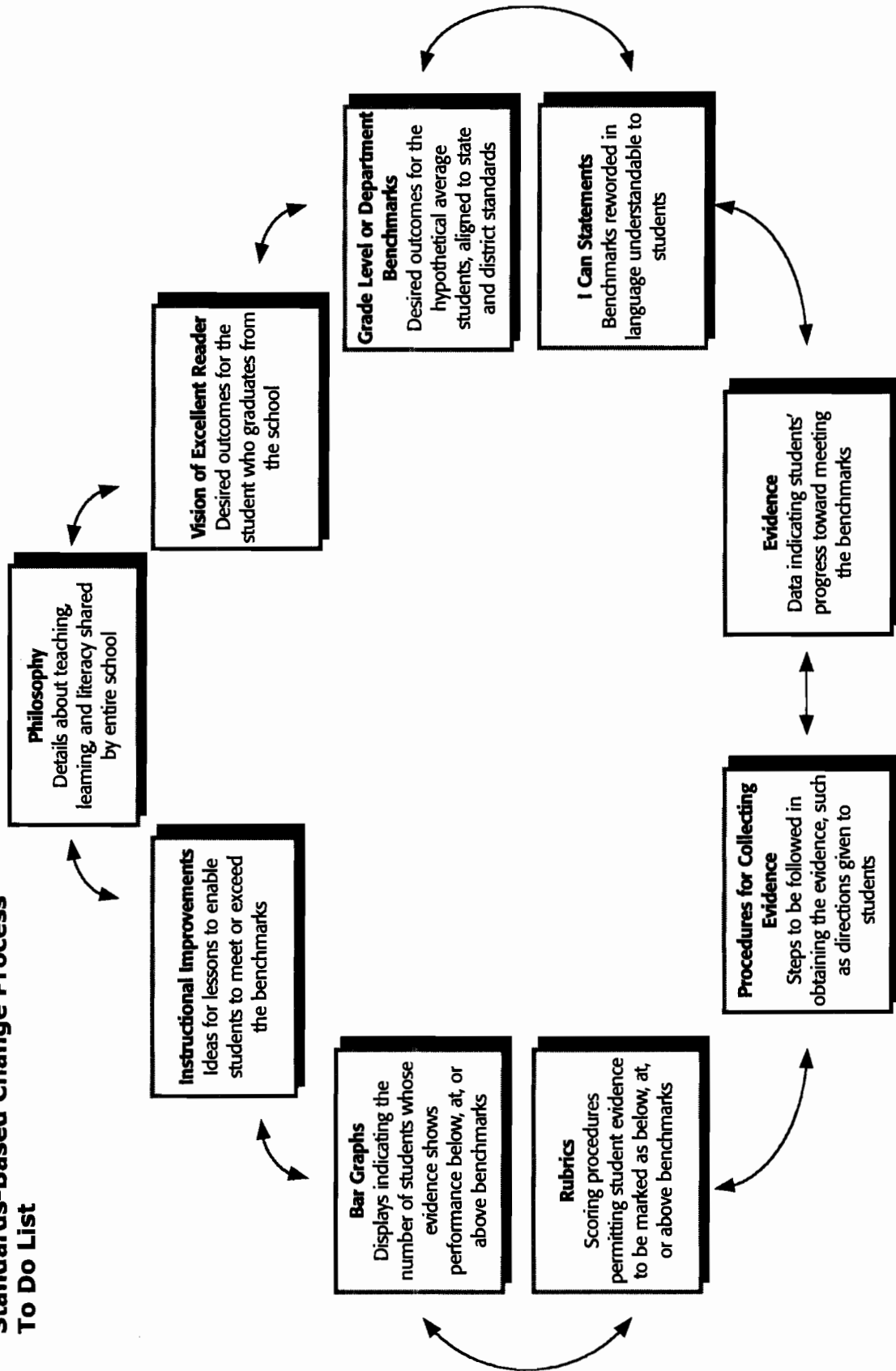
## **Results for Students**

The goal of the SBCP is to improve students' literacy achievement through professional development that empowers teachers to develop their own curricula. This aim goes far beyond raising reading test scores to include a concern for students' ownership of literacy and appreciation for literature. However, because of pressing concerns for accountability, it is important to be confident that the SBCP also leads to improvements on the high-stakes tests so important to how schools are perceived. We describe recent results at two schools, suggesting that educators can implement the SBCP with confidence.

Fifty percent of students at Kipapa Elementary School in Mililani, Hawaii, are from low-income families, and many are of Native Hawaiian or Filipino ancestry. In spring 2002, the state of Hawaii introduced rigorous new reading tests at grades 3 and 5. For two years, Kipapa's scores remained at a level below the state average. During this time Kipapa gained a new principal and new curriculum coordinator, who could have taken the school in a different direction. However, these leaders expressed confidence in the SBCP and the school's teacher-developed reading curriculum and maintained a steady course. Teachers worked hard to make the adjustments to instruction necessary to meet the demands of the new test. In spring 2004 the school saw a 13% increase for third graders meeting or exceeding the state standards and a 19% increase for fifth graders, rises of a magnitude not mirrored across the state.

At South Loop Elementary School in Chicago, over 70% of the students are from low-income families and most are African American. This school's results for spring 2004, at the end of their second year in SBCP activities, showed a jump from 19% to 63% of third graders meeting the standards in reading and an overall rise in scores across the grades. While the gentrification of the neighborhood and the energies of a new principal no doubt had a positive effect on scores, the most impressive gains were shown by

**Figure 1**  
**Standards-Based Change Process**  
**To Do List**



students who had been enrolled at the school for years, those from low-income families.

Of course, not every school in the SBCP sees such substantial improvement in its literacy achievement results. Furthermore, the SBCP is not the answer for a school that prefers to rely on outsiders for answers about how to improve student achievement. The SBCP is best seen as a possible avenue to success for schools with an absolute commitment to improving students' literacy learning, the discipline to stay focused, and the belief that the answer lies within its own teachers and leaders.

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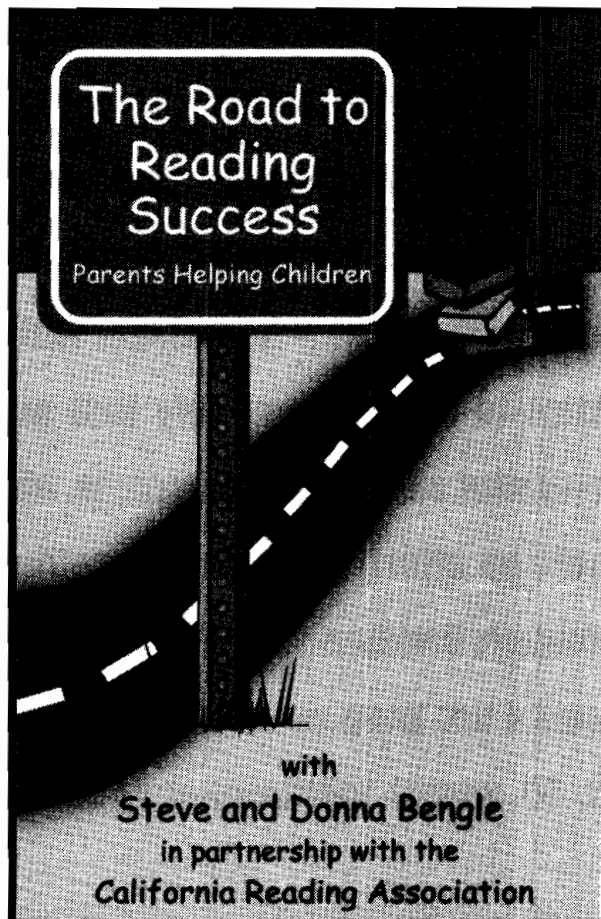
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