

Partnerships for Improving Literacy in Urban Schools

Advanced Reading Development Demonstration Project

How many times have researchers and professional developers approached you or your school with “the answer” to improving literacy achievement? How did it work out? If changes occurred during the engagement with these outside partners, what remained after the project ended? Did such efforts lead to lasting change and improvement in student performance? If your experiences are typical and align with our own past experiences, your answers to these questions are probably “Many times,” “OK while it lasted,” “Not much,” and “Not really.” The Advanced Reading Development Demonstration Project (ARDDP) sought to change these answers by redefining school district–university partnerships and thereby making capacity building at the school and district level the explicit goal of these partnerships. Capacity building was seen as the linchpin for sustainable and ongoing performance improvements.

Context and Goals

In Spring 2002, The Chicago Community Trust, Chicago’s local community foundation, created the ARDDP effort by securing district-level commitments for school literacy change from Chicago Public Schools (CPS) that were incorporated into an invitation for proposals issued to the literacy education faculty at several Chicago universities. Four universities (two others were added two years later) were awarded funds to implement their approaches to building capacity in the school district to improve literacy performance. Although each university pursued its unique approach, all four committed to twice-monthly information-sharing meetings and to cooperating with an independent evaluation group external to any of the participating universities that would examine the

overall project. These university partner meetings and the interactions with the evaluation group, as well as continual vigilance and renegotiation with the district, were necessary enabling conditions for the work on capacity building and improving student achievement in literacy.

ARDDP took on the challenge of creating a new kind of partnership model with the third largest public school district in the United States—a district in which 86% of its students represent low-income populations. Rather than solely providing direct services to students or teachers (popular models for involving “external partners” in CPS schools), ARDDP sought to involve university partners in ways that would build capacity within the district, schools, and teachers for sustainable improvement to students’ literacy achievement. Partnership teachers and schools would become professional development resources, leaving the district better able to not only sustain the work in targeted schools but also expand it by having the target schools serve as resources for other schools in the district. The schools targeted for participation in ARDDP were those “stuck” at a low level of reading achievement, typically averaging only about 35% of students performing at or above national norms on the district’s standardized measure of reading. Thus, they were not the lowest performing CPS schools, but they had ample room for improvement in order to be considered as achieving satisfactorily according to district goals.

Each university proposed a plan to build capacity and to implement this plan in partnership with up to 10 schools that volunteered to participate. The plans varied in their details, but all included ways to increase teachers’ knowledge about and practices related to literacy teaching, learning, and assessment. The focus was on assessments that could inform in-

structional decision making and planning and thereby provide guidance on a continual basis. The initial plans of each partnership cluster differentially emphasized the development of teachers as leaders of literacy improvement. They also emphasized the creation of infrastructures for teacher leaders and teacher teams to work on building schoolwide coherence for continual development of students from kindergarten through eighth grade. Support for the work was provided by substantial commitments of CPS resources for positions and for professional development in the form of university-based coursework leading to the Illinois Reading Credential or other advanced degrees in literacy. For example, participating schools were allocated funding for a school-based lead literacy teacher (LLT). The LLT had dual roles: to develop the knowledge and skills to support improved student achievement in literacy and to serve as a school leader to whom other teachers could turn for support in making similar changes.

By the end of its fifth year, the project had yielded better schools, higher student performance, and a cadre of new school literacy leaders. Those of us involved in the project attribute the success that has been achieved to the critical role played by the learning and collaboration that occurred among the university partners in working with the schools and in collaborating with one another to understand the dynamics of the work at teacher, school, and district levels. Indeed, although the university partners maintained their different approaches to the work, they also converged on the centrality of three essential components of capacity building: (1) teacher knowledge of literacy teaching, learning, and assessment; (2) instructional coherence across the grade levels; and (3) infrastructure at district and school levels that enables the creation of collaborative learning communities among teachers and other school staff to support continual examination and reexamination of students' progress in literacy achievement.

The lessons learned from this complicated endeavor of improving urban classrooms, schools, and districts are encouraging and constructive in that there are, indeed, solutions. It will come as no surprise, however, that such solutions require resources, a commitment to long-term change processes, and a willingness to engage in critical self-examination and reflection throughout the work.

Making a Difference

For five years, ARDDP's implementation in and impact on participating Chicago public elementary schools have been tracked and analyzed by an independent, external evaluation group. The evaluation study found that as a result of their sustained professional development support to schools, university partners had substantially strengthened local instructional talent, developed leadership capacity among a broad range of school staff, and improved the coherence of the schools' literacy curricula across all grades. Although individual university partners used different strategies to achieve these outcomes, impact was most evident among project schools that did these three things.

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1. They committed to substantially strengthening professional knowledge and practices in literacy. Through ARDDP, LLTs and some teachers were provided with the opportunities and resources to enroll in graduate-level coursework in literacy on the campuses of their respective university partners.

2. They established and consistently used schoolwide leadership teams as a vital element of their organizational infrastructure. Effective leadership teams met on a consistent basis, broadly represented the professional diversity of school staff, and were singularly focused on the goal of improving the quality and coherence of the school's literacy program.

3. They enhanced the professional literacy communities among their staff by encouraging teachers to

- (a) discuss with one another new ideas and innovative strategies learned through in-school professional study groups or book clubs
- (b) participate in professional organizations and conferences related to literacy
- (c) engage in school wide activities that opened individual classroom doors to colleagues for the broader good of promoting professional dialogue and improving instructional coherence

horizontally (classroom-to-classroom) and vertically (grade-to-grade)

Specific practices related to these broad areas of school development are discussed in the following sections.

Building Capacity by Strengthening Knowledge and Practice

Across all projects, university partners found that a critical aspect for success was strengthening the knowledge and practice base of school participants. Initial Illinois teacher certification requires only “lean” preparation in literacy, and less than 3% of the district teachers held a reading endorsement or reading specialist certification. Although each partner addressed this goal in slightly different ways, they all shared several important, research-based assumptions:

- Instruction should reflect a sound knowledge base anchored in current research and best practices in literacy (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005).
- Professional development should be directly responsive to school context (Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, & Russ, 2004).
- Assessments that inform instruction and goal setting need to be aligned with instruction and thus sensitive to change related to instruction (Black & Wiliam, 1998).
- Knowledge and practice are synergistic (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).
- Making practice public, including demonstration and collaboration, strengthens and extends capacity and builds learning communities that sustain renewal (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999).

Across projects, there were many challenges to enacting practices aligned to these assumptions: LLTs with no background in working with adults and some who had insufficient understanding of literacy practices to provide support needed by teachers; competing mandates from the district and state, as well as multiple and sometimes inconsistent literacy initiatives within a school; lack of school infrastructures

that provided time for teachers to engage in substantive, sustained discussions within and across grade levels and disciplinary areas. To address these challenges, partners provided sustained professional development through programmatic graduate courses in literacy and leadership; supported schools in creating infrastructures within which staff could collaborate at and across grade levels and subject areas; and provided consistent, in-school professional development that targeted specific problems of practice within the schools.

Developing Capacity Through Professional Development

Professional development occurred at several levels within each of the partnerships: (a) formal graduate coursework; (b) leadership seminars; and (c) on-site, school-based professional development in whole-school and grade-level team settings.

Each university partner offered advance preparation in literacy—most with accredited programs that met the International Reading Association’s guidelines for reading professionals (International Reading Association, 2007). The literacy leaders for each school entered a leadership cohort with coursework and experiences leading to advanced professional licensure. They completed their course assignments and required experiences in the partner schools with other teachers, many of whom were participating in site-based credit and noncredit professional development experiences. Of course, there is nothing new in teachers taking university courses. However, coursework in the ARDDP project bridged the gap between university courses and the realities of K–8 classrooms. While maintaining the rigor of university-level graduate study, the coursework linked the readings and assignments directly to the problems of practice the teachers faced and embedded the work in the broader context of the specific school reform being enacted in their particular school (e.g., Au, Raphael, & Mooney in press; Blachowicz, Bates, Buhle, & Frost, 2007). Course assignments and required experiences completed by teachers in the partner schools substantially enhanced the relevance of the content and ideas they were learning and created continuity of their experiences across the university and their own class-

rooms. Teachers also applied the credits they earned through their graduate coursework toward a master's degree, as well as advanced district and state credentials in reading.

We expected that the literacy leaders would increasingly take over the professional development at their school sites. However, the knowledge base associated with leading the learning of other teachers does not come “for free” in the process of learning literacy content. University partners expanded their course experiences in order to address the literacy content as well as the knowledge and skills necessary to lead others in putting into practice the knowledge, skills, and strategies necessary to improve students' literacy outcomes. The additional focus on leadership enabled the emerging school literacy leaders to take on greater responsibility for site-based professional development. Part of these site-based experiences included planning sessions between the literacy leaders and their university support person as well as on-site, hands-on, modeled teaching in the classrooms.

Learning about and using more instructionally sensitive and focused assessments—including standards-based assessment—established a dynamic environment for goal setting and professional development. Because of the continual back-and-forth between university and school partners, experiences were customized to the specific context of each school site and were immediately relevant. All of this provided a continuity of knowledge building and practice within each project and across the partnerships while respecting the individual differences and needs of each school. At the same time, school-based participants pushed the university partners into dealing with realities such as district-administered No Child Left Behind assessments and the alignment (or lack thereof) among mandated literacy assessments and the knowledge and skills that would be assessed on the high-stakes accountability tests. This remains an ongoing challenge in the project, although ARDDP evaluation data indicate that students who experience good literacy instruction do well on the district tests (DeStefano, Hanson, Kallemeyn, & O'Dell, 2007).

Building capacity for the ARDDP schools to serve as resources for other district schools proved to be both challenging and gratifying. It was challenging because the culture of schools tends to be antithetical to sharing or opening up one's practice to the eyes and ears of colleagues. However, over the course of

the project, ways of sharing practice became accepted. Some schools took up the “gallery walk”—an opportunity for each grade level to share information about student progress and their instructional decisions with the whole school (see Au, 2005, for more details). Other information-sharing mechanisms that developed included cross-site visitation models, teacher networks and leadership institutes, and specific instructional tools that allowed teachers to spotlight their learning and their developing sense of professionalism. As with other professional development that makes practice public (Sherin & Hans, 2004; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999), teachers found these experiences highly beneficial to their own practices. It is also important to point out that information sharing across university partners was central to the progress of ARDDP overall.

Developing Capacity Through Infrastructure

Extensive research in school reform documents the importance of a culture of collaboration to sustain innovations that improve teachers' practice and students' performance levels (Copeland, 2003; Rowan, 1990). However, most of the participating ARDDP schools faced challenges in this critical component. When the project began, the typical situation was that teachers met as a whole school only in staff meetings. Frequently, these meetings were too short to enable sustained discussion about instructional practice. In fact, most meetings functioned only to convey information through a series of announcements and rarely were used as safe havens for critical conversations about practice. A few schools had established time for grade-level team meetings, but when these did occur, they tended to parallel the format and content of staff meetings. Rarely did teachers meet for purposes of making their practice public, and rarer still did they engage in such conversation across grade levels. In short, the schools needed to develop a functional infrastructure—a safe environment—within which participants could critically analyze the effectiveness of their current practices and begin to implement targeted innovations they had learned through the professional development activities described previously.

A culture of collaboration reflects a shift in conventional thinking from a school as a collection of individuals with responsibility to their own classrooms

to a collective responsibility for the progress of all students in the school over time (Au, 2005). As ARDDP schools committed to a culture of collaboration, they formed working groups to increase communication among administrative staff, curriculum coordinators, and classroom teachers—among teachers within a grade level, among teachers within disciplinary areas, and among teachers across grade levels.

Effective leadership teams emerged as a key component of the infrastructure for building capacity. Leadership teams met regularly (e.g., bimonthly), bringing together representatives from each grade level or grade cluster or department, depending on two factors: (1) whether the school included middle school grade levels and departments and (2) the size of the school and number of teachers per grade level. Grade-level meetings were established, and the university partners provided professional development designed to enable the meetings to focus on improving evidence-based practice (e.g., evaluating student work samples and developing agendas for continuity across meetings). Cross-grade-level meetings helped with vertical alignment of curriculum and assessment by comparing and contrasting end-of-year goals with entering expectations for the subsequent year and by increasing communication about substantive issues within the school. In addition, whole-school opportunities for analysis and evaluation of the school's literacy curriculum were established in many schools. These settings provided the basis for schools to become well-functioning professional learning communities focused on improving literacy teaching and learning.

Developing Capacity Through Professional Literacy Communities

Creating scholarly learning communities focused on literacy was a consistent goal of the university partners. These professional literacy communities provided a venue in which teachers, administrators, and university partners could exchange substantive information about literacy achievement and inquire together about how to improve it. Such interactions increase a sense of professionalism among members of school communities (Fullan, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Many schools were transformed from

settings in which isolated professionals worked behind the doors of their individual classrooms to professional learning communities promoting the idea that students' progress is a shared responsibility for everyone in the school. Although the specific process differed across each university partnership, all shared the same goals. Examples of four of the strategies used for building professional literacy communities in the schools are (1) teacher book clubs, (2) establishment of schoolwide literacy teams, (3) participation in professional conferences, and (4) within-school and interschool visits.

Some university partners provided professional development to the LLTs and other teachers about book clubs (Raphael, Pardo, & Highfield, 2002). The LLTs then incorporated these clubs into their own classroom practices with children's literature, primarily in third through eighth grades. This activity helped learning communities to incubate a collaborative and trusting environment among staff and students. The next step in developing professional literacy communities was the establishment of book clubs for teachers. At first LLTs or university partners' staff selected books for the book clubs, but over time classroom teachers and literacy teams assumed the selection process. Book clubs provided the means by which teachers established sustainable vehicles for keeping current with literacy knowledge and practices.

In addition to the targeted work in their schools, each project emphasized continued learning through connections to other professional communities such as organizations and conferences. To accomplish these goals, university partners encouraged LLTs and classroom teachers to contribute what they were learning through presentations at professional conferences, to connect within academic settings as they worked toward achieving endorsements and certifications in reading, and to actively participate in local professional organizations.

Pragmatic teachers want to see effective literacy instruction. The university partners initiated and supported the development of demonstration sites. Classrooms in these demonstration sites modeled effective practices and generated productive literacy discussions among visiting external and internal teachers, thus empowering teachers, which, in turn, led to increased teacher efficacy.

Professional learning communities are essential to school improvement. They create bridges among

administrators, LLTs, and classroom teachers while they promote the expansion of individual and communal knowledge. The key to creating effective professional literacy communities is reliable LLTs (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). As evidenced in the ARDDP effort, LLTs hold the process together and keep their members focused while advocating new literacy goals. The LLTs also inject knowledge that enables schools to grow so that professional literacy communities can be the valves that help schools regulate the incorporation of new knowledge while refining current knowledge.

Throughout the ARDDP project, university partners and the local community foundation have conducted ongoing conversations with the district leadership, including those in the literacy office, about mechanisms seen to work in ARDDP sites and ways in which these might be expanded or incorporated into the larger district activities and initiatives in literacy. These conversations have at times been rewarding and at other times frustrating because the district, like many urban districts, feels the pressure to bring “good practice” to as many schools as possible as quickly as possible. Many of us among the university partners understand the temptation to go for seemingly “quick” purported “fixes” for lagging achievement. However, an important lesson of the ARDDP is that real change in the instructional work of schools is complex and takes time. And yet districts—especially urban districts—do not have the luxury of time. Whatever time is spent in professional development efforts must be used productively to build the knowledge, skills, and strategies that define infrastructures capable of supporting evidence-based instruction and assessment that, in turn, lead to enhanced learning. The ARDDP is showing evidence that improvements do occur, but that they do not come easily and they are dependent upon capacities developed at the organizational, as well as the individual school, level.

A Gradual Improvement Process

Analysis of data obtained from the state’s reading test (Illinois Standards Achievement Test; ISAT) shows that performance of third-, fifth-, and eighth-grade students (the only grades at which student performance has been assessed by the ISAT since 1999) in ARDDP

schools that have been with the project since its inception have continued to increase substantially. By the end of the fifth year of the project (2007), the percentage of third- and fifth-grade students meeting or exceeding state reading standards increased to approximately 60%—over a 20% increase from pre-ARDDP levels. In eighth grade, over 80% of students in these ARDDP schools met or exceeded state standards in reading, also representing an increase of 20%. These performance levels and gains were higher than those of CPS elementary schools that did not participate in the program.

The legacy of ARDDP lives on in two significant and self-sustaining ways. First, university partners identified schools that showed excellent trajectories of improvement over the course of the project and thus held promise for serving as demonstration sites or resources for other CPS schools. As site-based resources, they exemplify classroom, leadership, and organizational practices that can be shared, observed, and discussed. They function as working prototypes on which other schools can build. This site-based “demonstration” model, therefore, represents an important outcome of the ARDDP. Second, members of key ARDDP participant groups, including university partners, district officials, and evaluators, are currently collaborating on a set of developmental “indicators” that identify areas of emphasis across time as schools develop the infrastructure to support their school improvement activities. The members of ARDDP share the goal that once the model is completed, it can be used in Chicago and elsewhere as a basis for continual monitoring, guiding, and evaluating the progress of their own efforts to improve instructional practices and, ultimately, student achievement in literacy.

Members of the Advanced Reading Development Demonstration Project include The Chicago Community Trust; Chicago Public Schools; the evaluation team at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and the literacy faculty, staff, and graduate students from six Chicago-based universities: National-Louis University, Northeastern Illinois University, Roosevelt University, The University of Chicago, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Chicago State University. Funding for the project has been provided by The Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust as well as by the Chicago Public Schools. For further information about the contents of

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