

HOW TO USE THIS POLICY BRIEF

As literacy educators, we're quite attuned to the importance of comprehensive literacy. Until recently, though, we may not have had the opportunity to work together with our colleagues across disciplines to help our students gain a deep knowledge of literacy in the ways unique to each subject area. Yet with the Common Core State Standards rolling out in 46 states and the District of Columbia, teachers of English language arts, history/social studies, science, and technical subjects are jointly charged with literacy instruction that helps their students "read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas" and become college- and career-ready.

Helping students become literate across the curriculum is the job of all educators, from grade and subject area teachers to administrators and support staff. Students in schools that provide the opportunities for staff

to work together on comprehensive literacy instruction, and that support educators in their inquiries into what works best, will lead rich, literate lives at school and beyond while realizing the goals of the standards.

Use this policy brief to start the conversation among you and your colleagues, so you can learn, share, and plan together the kinds of literacy instruction described in the standards. This collaboration will enable you to help students deepen their literacy knowledge and understanding as well as their literacy performance.

You don't need to take this journey alone. The National Center for Literacy Education and its Literacy in Learning Exchange provide you with a wide variety of resources and models for educator inquiry, collaboration, and support on improving student literacy. The following resources will get you started.

LOG
ON

Explore the Literacy in Learning Exchange: <http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/>

Read "Building Insider Knowledge: Teaching Students to Read, Write and Think within ELA and across the Disciplines"

<http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/building-insider-knowledge-teaching-students-read-write-and-think-within-ela-and-across-disciplines>

Consult a variety of resources on content area literacies:

http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/fs_resource_case/results/taxonomy%3A221

Discover the importance of "Building Capacity to Transform Literacy Learning":

<http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/sites/default/files/ncleshortlitreview.pdf>

Learn about shared agreements for changes in literacy instruction:

<http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/blog/shared-agreements-changes-practice>

Find out more about the National Center for Literacy Education: <http://www.ncte.org/ncle>

Read the *Principles for Learning*, which declare that "Being literate is at the heart of learning in every subject area":

https://www.acteonline.org/uploadedFiles/About_ACTE/files/Principles_for_Learning.pdf

Contribute reflections about the meaning of literacy:

<http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/defining-literacy>

Comprehensive Literacy

A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English

IN THIS ISSUE

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- Instructional Implementation
- Assessment
- Policy Implications

Perspectives on Comprehensive Literacy

Teaching reading in high school? Requiring writing in science class? Yes. Comprehensive literacy means emphasizing literacy development across disciplines *and* across grade levels. But what do we mean by literacy? We hear terms like digital literacy, scientific literacy, technology literacy, scientific literacy, and visual literacy regularly, and, of course there is the plural form: literacies. *Literacy* has taken on many meanings and is now understood to mean more than the ability to read and write. It also involves the ability to acquire and use specific knowledge, in specific ways, in specific contexts. In schools, disciplines create many of these specific contexts, and require students to use language effectively as they learn and produce knowledge within a given discipline. So comprehensive literacy can be described, in part, in terms of the language used to learn and produce knowledge in specific disciplines.¹

Still, comprehensive literacy is more than that, and it remains difficult to define, even in disciplinary terms, for several reasons:

- The rapidly evolving world of technology continually reshapes what constitutes “reading,” “writing” and “texts.”
- Instructional materials often overlook or underconceptualize differing disciplinary conceptions of literacy.
- Students’ increasing use of digital literacies for their own purposes outside of school complicates school definitions.
- Literacy practices vary across disciplines, but some disciplines use the same approaches to literacy in different ways.²

Comprehensive literacy also means extending curriculum-wide literacy practices across the developmental spectrum. That is, a commitment to comprehensive literacy requires a long-term commitment to the establishment and maintenance of effective K–12 disciplinary literacy systems that will benefit students’ learning. Short-term, episodic, piecemeal efforts cannot enact comprehensive literacy. In part the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) demand a shift toward the long-term mandates of comprehensive literacy because they require that students independently transfer learning across contexts: content areas, courses, grades, audiences and purposes; they also require teachers to become aware of how literacy expectations build on previous learning and set the stage for future learning. But the CCSS do not fully delineate how literacy



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practices may be enacted for different disciplinary purposes, even though they acknowledge these distinctions.³

When school districts think about comprehensive literacy, then, they need to consider both *breadth* across the curriculum and *depth* that extends from pre-kindergartners to seniors in high school. Comprehensive literacy cannot be developed by a single teacher or even a group of teachers; it requires a system-wide and long-term commitment to address the literacy development of students of all ages and in all subjects.

Instructional Implementation

Researchers have found that implementing comprehensive literacy instruction in a school district faces several challenges. These include:

- Teachers of content areas outside of English are often reluctant to consider disciplinary literacy because they do not have sufficient background in what constitutes literacy practices in their own disciplines and/or because they do not view literacy as part of their content area.
- The meaning of comprehensive literacy continues to shift as “reading,” “writing” and “texts” are continually redefined.
- It is especially difficult to engage math teachers in the cross-disciplinary conversations that are necessary to establish a comprehensive literacy program.⁴

Ultimately, of course, any program of comprehensive literacy depends upon its adoption by individual teachers. Research-based understandings of comprehensive literacy suggest a number of effective strategies that can be used by teachers in their classrooms:

- Engage students in understanding the distinct reading and writing practices of specialty fields, especially as students move into more specialized classes in high school. This approach might include the reading of maps in a geography or history course or following the steps in a science lab procedure.
- Foster expertise in the specific academic vocabulary, grammar, or even symbols of a given content area to allow students to become authentically conversant in that field.
- Connect texts used in the classroom with the types of texts students encounter in their lives outside of school (magazines, newspapers, or videos, for example) to enhance and support deeper content learning.

- Create explicitly defined opportunities and spaces for students to discuss the transfer of literacy skills from one discipline to another. For example, unpacking the generic features of a website or an essay can help students read such texts in all subject areas.
- Use a variety of text types (essays, textbooks, fiction, scientific articles, online texts) in all disciplines in order to broaden literacy skills and show genre overlap between disciplines.
- Create literacy tasks at a variety of difficulty levels. Since not all students read, write, and speak at grade level, teachers (including those in non-English language arts classrooms) should consider how they might best introduce discipline-specific literacy to all their students.
- Use authentic texts from the disciplines to promote the relevance of literacy tasks outside the school. For example, instead of finding facts in a science textbook or writing short answer questions, students might read the science section of a newspaper or write lab reports.
- Promote inquiry- and research-based classroom projects that offer real-life contexts for students to process and produce texts related to content area exploration.⁵

Assessment

Assessing student achievement poses another challenge for implementation of a comprehensive literacy program. As schools leave behind the “inoculation model” of stressing literacy skills in grades K–3, because of the mistaken idea that it will prevent later literacy problems, and move toward comprehensive plans that include literacy instruction in all grades and across disciplines, new models of assessment will have to be devised. Guidelines for these new assessments include:

- Align assessment to instruction that centers on comprehensive literacy because teachers, who want their students to succeed, will be more likely to implement a literacy-rich curriculum.
- Adapt assessment to changing conceptions of literacy and changing goals of the curriculum so that continuity between instruction and assessment remains.
- Employ formative assessment, which can keep students progressing toward common literacy goals, help them track and improve their own growth, and

inform teachers' efforts to adjust instruction accordingly. This is especially true when learning has a relatively heavy cognitive load, as measured by the balance between drawing on students' prior educational experiences and how much new information they are expected to absorb.⁶

Policy Implications

To establish comprehensive literacy programs, schools and districts need to commit to long-term changes that go well beyond adopting a particular curriculum or professional development model. They need to create a school culture where students can develop strategic reading and writing for authentic purposes and audiences as well as long-term professional learning networks that support teachers' literacy instruction. They need to acknowledge that students' literacy learning evolves in response to increasingly complex texts and tasks. They need to develop comprehensive frameworks that integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening instruction into all subject-areas across all grade levels. They need to support the following elements:

- **Prioritizing instructional practice and interaction**—Research tells us that a focus on teaching and literacy practices within an adopted framework can positively influence students' disciplinary learning. Comprehensive literacy systems that help teachers focus on and adjust their interactions with students also make a difference in student achievement. Where teachers, principals, and district administrators share the responsibility for all students' learning, student performance and achievement improves.
- **Planning lessons and curricula that are responsive both to students' local needs and relevant experiences and to evolving literacies**—Comprehensive literacy systems encourage teachers and building instructional leaders to plan locally and culturally relevant instruction based on a shared framework that includes opportunities to adjust instruction based on formative assessment and observational feedback but always in relation to clear objectives informed by standards. Since literacy demands evolve not only in response to disciplinary distinctions but also over time as writing and reading purposes respond to increasing multimodal texts and technologies, teachers plan and adjust lessons often; and instructional choices are informed by teachers' own practices as expert readers and writers of their discipline(s).

- **Investing in job-embedded, ongoing, sustained collaborative structures for professional learning**—Professional learning communities or teams that are collaborative are structures that can sustain teachers' literacy learning and instruction over time. Such structures create space for shared inquiry, review of lessons/instruction, and analysis of student work that informs future instruction. Districts and schools that adopt such structures set clear expectations for teacher participants, but they also provide necessary support and freedom so that teachers and building leaders can best meet local assets and needs within the framework's shared vision; in so doing, these districts and schools build capacity for long-term sustainable comprehensive literacy learning and instruction.⁷

Endnotes

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