

Links to Literacy, a feature column



Johna Faulconer, East Carolina University

### Literacy Leadership: What Principals Need to Know

In the fall 2001, the [National Middle School Association](#) and the [International Reading Association](#) presented a [joint position statement](#) supporting young adolescents' literacy learning. This position statement advocated a focus of continued and systematic instruction in reading. The document noted that during the middle school years most students refined their reading preferences and laid the ground work for lifelong reading habits that they will use throughout their lives.

Since that time, there has been a shift in what defines literacy and literacy learning. Literacy is more than reading. Today literacy is defined much more broadly. [The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\)](#) defines literacy as "...the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society." In future columns, we will explore the new direction of literacy and how middle schools can help students become savvy literacy learners.

While the definition of literacy may have shifted, the struggles of middle schools to engage students in literacy activities have remained constant. Through time, young adolescents have found pursuits that they consider more engaging than reading. Schools today must show students that reading and writing are purposeful activities and are necessary components of successful citizenship. As leaders in the middle school, principals should understand the need to establish a culture of literacy in the middle school. Principals should support literacy staff development for teachers, print-rich classrooms, focused

instruction in visual and critical literacies and should oversee the growth of literacy learning for their faculty and for their students.

Often principals are asked to be literacy leaders without literacy training. In 2001 the Children's Literacy Initiative designed a [Blueprint for Literacy Leadership](#). This blueprint defined nine categories of content knowledge essential to principals in providing successful literacy instructional leadership ("Children's Literacy Initiative: A Blueprint for Literacy Leadership," 2000). The nine categories essential for literacy leadership are as follows:

**School Culture-** Principals need to understand the significance of entrenched philosophical and instructional habits that constitute a culture in a school -- and his or her own power to change that culture.

**Craft Leaders-** Principals need to know the thinkers and practitioners in the field of literacy instruction who provide fresh ideas and useful models.

**Children's Literature-** In order to create a community of readers, principals must actively read not only professional literature, but also quality children's literature.

**Instructional Models-** As the primary filter for new programs, principals must be familiar with a wide range of current instructional models.

**Curricular-** The challenge for the principal is to know his or her district's mandated curriculum and make sure teachers are able to deliver it.

**Options for Organizing Time and Space-**As the key decision-maker for the use of time and space, principals must be aware of how the use of time and space affects instruction.

**Assessment/Content Standards-**Principals need to know how best to use assessment data based on relevant content standards with teachers, school communities, and parents.

**Special Interventions-** Principals need to take a close look at how support is delivered to struggling students and how this support is organized.

**Knowledge and Research-** Principals need to know where to find models, data, and organizations that do useful research and that can serve as allies to answer questions of what works and why. ("Children's Literacy Initiative: A Blueprint for Literacy Leadership," 2000).

For middle schools to be successful in creating a culture of literacy learning, principals must become literacy leaders. Middle schools that have clear literacy leadership will best serve the needs of tomorrow's adults. I challenge each school leader to review their knowledge of literacy, their school literacy plan and renew the commitment for literacy leadership.

## References

- Children's literacy initiative: a blueprint for literacy leadership. (2000). Philadelphia, PA: Children's Literacy Initiative. Retrieved July 14, 2007, from [http://www.cliontheweb.org/principals\\_blueprint.html](http://www.cliontheweb.org/principals_blueprint.html)

The United Nations educational, scientific and cultural organization. (Retrieved July 14, 2007, from [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=29008&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=29008&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html))

**About the author** - Johna Faulconer is an assistant professor in the College of Education at East Carolina University, Greenville, NC.