



Adolescent Literacy: School-Wide Planning

Joan Sedita, 2025

There is growing interest in adolescent literacy as educators and the general public become increasingly concerned about the number of middle and high school students who lack grade-level reading and writing skills and the potential negative effect this has on the nation's economic and civic health. Literacy skills are more essential than ever for success in college and the workplace, as well as for managing the everyday demands of an increasingly complex society and global economy.

More middle and high schools are beginning to acknowledge the need for a school-wide approach to teaching literacy that includes multiple tiers of instruction. Tier 1 instruction consists of content-area literacy instruction for all students, delivered in regular classes such as history, science, math, and English language arts. Tiers 2 and 3 instruction provide supplemental and intervention support to struggling readers and writers, delivered partly in regular content classes and partly in intervention settings (including extended English/language arts blocks and individual or small-group instruction).

A school-wide approach to literacy must involve all educators in the delivery of reading and writing instruction, including content-area teachers, literacy coaches, and intervention educators. A successful model for addressing adolescent literacy also requires committed literacy leadership—individuals who are knowledgeable and able to provide ongoing support by creating and facilitating the structures and processes needed for an effective, school-wide model.

A Literacy Planning Model

I have worked with numerous schools and districts to develop literacy plans using a planning model that addresses six components:

1. Establishment of a literacy planning team
2. A screening, diagnostic, and progress-monitoring assessment plan to identify students' needs and guide instructional decisions
3. A content literacy curriculum that addresses reading, writing, speaking, and listening in all subjects
4. Interventions for struggling students that address all components of reading and writing based on individual student needs
5. Flexible scheduling that allows for grouping based on instructional needs
6. Professional development planning

A key first step is assembling a literacy planning team that represents the major stakeholders responsible for implementing the plan. Team members should include teachers from all subject areas, intervention educators, literacy coaches and specialists, administrators, and parents. It is important to recognize that literacy planning is a process, not a single event. As with most school-wide initiatives, developing and executing a literacy plan requires time and sustained effort. Planning teams should

expect to spend at least a year developing the plan, followed by another year or two for full implementation.

Once the planning team is assembled, the first task is to take stock of what is already in place in relation to the six components. This includes gathering information to answer questions such as:

- What assessments are currently used to identify proficient and struggling readers and writers?
- What assessments are used to determine the specific needs of individual students?
- What effective literacy instruction is already taking place in content classrooms and what is missing?
- What professional development do content teachers and others need in order to address all components of reading and writing effectively?
- What interventions and supplemental literacy programs are currently offered for struggling students?
- What effective professional development is already being provided to content and intervention educators and to building leaders, and what is missing?
- Is the scheduling process flexible enough to accommodate various grouping patterns for intervention instruction?

After gathering this information, the planning team can set and prioritize goals and action steps for each of the six components. Some action steps may be “low-hanging fruit”—easy to accomplish quickly and with minimal cost. Others will require more time and resources. A concrete plan for addressing these action steps over the next one to two years is essential for sustaining progress.

A literacy assessment plan is central to successfully implementing a school-wide literacy initiative. Screening assessments identify which students are struggling; diagnostic assessments determine why they struggle; and progress-monitoring assessments measure whether instruction is effective in both Tier 1 content classrooms and Tier 2 and 3 supplemental instruction.

The six planning components are interrelated. Action steps for one component should align with action steps for others. For example, decisions about all tiers of instruction should be based on assessment data, as should decisions about how to group students and schedule supplemental instruction. Plans for professional development should reflect the needs of teachers who will embed literacy into content instruction and the intervention goals addressed by specialists.

Literacy Leadership

Middle and high school administrators must make the acquisition of literacy skills a priority and provide sufficient time in the school schedule for reading and writing instruction. They must also be willing to use flexible grouping patterns when scheduling students to support a multi-tiered model of literacy instruction across both content classes and intervention settings. Professional development for both content-area teachers and literacy specialists is essential.

The time, effort, and expertise required to develop a school-wide literacy plan present challenges for many middle and high schools. However, the challenge is well worth the effort—there is an urgent need to improve the literacy skills of adolescent learners.

Joan Sedita is the founder of Keys to Literacy, an organization that provides comprehensive literacy solutions, including professional development, coaching, and literacy leadership consulting.

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Note: This is an updated version of an article originally written in 2012.

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