



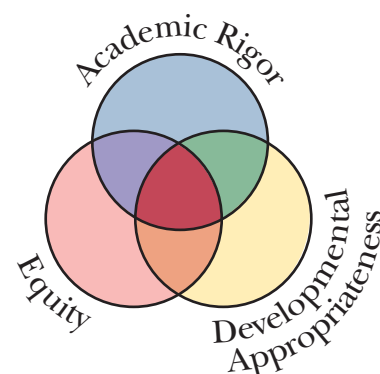
Critical Questions in Curriculum Decision Making

The three key components of academically excellent curricula described in the introduction provide a framework for educators faced with making curriculum decisions. However, it is one thing to talk in the abstract about the important components of an academically excellent curriculum and another to have an image of what such a creature looks like and how teachers make it work in the classroom with 150 students each day. This chapter focuses on what curricula that are academically rigorous, equitable, and developmentally appropriate look like in action. Drawing on interviews with teachers and school leaders around the U.S. who have experience planning and implementing exemplary language arts curricula, this chapter takes you inside classrooms and schools to see how educators design and use these curricula to promote student learning.

Critical Questions

This chapter poses a set of six “critical questions” to ask about middle-grades curriculum. A series of vignettes—stories told in the voices of practitioners—illustrate how the answers to each question emerge from the intersection of excellent curriculum, effective teaching, and support of school and district leadership.

Five of the six critical questions, and the corresponding sections of this chapter, focus on the components of the curricula themselves—academic rigor, equity, and developmental appropriateness. (Rigor accounts for three of the questions, one focusing on how the curriculum achieves coherence, one on how it supports standards for teaching and learning, and the third on how it integrates literature.) A brief introduction to each section explains the particular aspect of curricular excellence that the question highlights.



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The last question focuses on the kinds of professional development teachers need in order to effectively plan and implement excellent curricula. The introduction to this section describes why professional development is so important for teachers striving for a standards-based curriculum, and characterizes strategies for effective professional development.

Vignettes

The critical questions are illustrated by one or more vignettes that focus on the curriculum component or implementation issue addressed. Because the qualities of excellent curricula are intertwined, there is some overlap between the vignettes within each section and across different sections. For example, an exemplary curriculum that is academically rigorous will necessarily take advantage of students' growing cognitive capacities in the middle-grades years—a key aspect of developmental appropriateness.

Vignettes also vary in length, usually depending on the complexity of the curriculum features or aspects of professional development that they illustrate.

The names and locations of the teachers, school leaders, and districts in the vignettes are fictional. However, the kinds of districts (for example, urban, rural, suburban, small, large, relatively resource-rich or -poor) and the areas of the country mentioned do correspond to the types of districts and geographical areas represented by the practitioners interviewed. The practitioners' words have also been edited, and in some cases a particular vignette represents a composite of several people's experiences and perspectives. However, the vignettes do reflect the views represented in the interviews on which they were based.

Teachers who design and implement standards-based curricula use a variety of published materials—some as classroom resources and others to guide their planning and instruction. For the most part, the vignettes do not mention particular resources by name, although they do refer to categories of materials such as literature anthologies, and to particular examples of literature selections. The literature selections mentioned are typical of those used by a number of the teachers interviewed, but by no means represent a comprehensive selection of high-quality middle-grades literature. The final section of vignettes, on professional development, focuses on, and names, an example of a published curriculum program



that offers professional development support. This is one of several such programs that are described briefly in Chapter 4, along with other examples of the kinds of resources teachers can draw on in planning and implementing standards-based curricula. Teachers in several of the vignettes refer to the authors of some of these resources; a list of references at the end of this chapter identifies examples of these authors' works.

A strong language arts curriculum is coherent, with all the parts connected. It has a deliberate design that focuses on promoting the skills and knowledge students need to achieve high standards. A coherent curriculum:

- Integrates language arts concepts, processes, and skills.
- Builds students' understanding of concepts and mastery of skills and processes over time.
- Makes connections among the different language arts—reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
- Links language arts learning to the real world and allows students to explore ideas that help them make sense of human experience.
- Uses assessments both to inform classroom instruction and to evaluate student achievement.
- Provides scoring guides to students that make clear what they need to know and be able to do.

In addition, because young adolescents are “in the middle”—ready to be challenged intellectually, but still developing the knowledge and skills necessary for more complex work—a coherent middle-grades curriculum must do one more thing. It must build on what students have learned in the elementary grades and set the stage for learning language arts in the high school grades.

There are wide variations in the ways that teachers, schools, and districts interpret these aspects of coherence for curriculum development. The two vignettes that follow illustrate different ways to address the challenge of creating a coherent, standards-based curriculum. One approach involves developing an entirely new curriculum, while the other approach uses language arts standards to guide the modification of an existing curriculum. What both approaches have in common is their focus on

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How can we create a coherent language arts curriculum that has a deliberate and integrated design?



“Basically, the vision our school has is of the student as worker, the teacher as coach, and a lot of hands-on, inquiry-based learning. The various subject areas are organized by domain. Language arts is part of the domain of Arts and Humanities. In this domain, the kids need to demonstrate mastery of six skill areas at the end of eighth grade in order to move on to high school level courses.”

important ideas or themes as conceptual organizers for the curriculum. Both approaches also carefully integrate reading, writing, and oral language, and balance attention to concepts, processes, and skills. Both carefully develop students’ knowledge and understanding over time. Both also use assessments of student performance to guide teachers in choosing instructional strategies.

Integrating language arts processes and skills around an interdisciplinary theme

Jerry Miller teaches seventh and eighth graders at the Thorndike School, a public charter school in the Northeast. Jerry describes the communities from which students are drawn as “suburban to rural.” Thorndike is structured around the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, a school reform organization based on the philosophy of educator Theodore Sizer. Jerry explains that “basically, the vision our school has is of the student as worker, the teacher as coach, and a lot of hands-on, inquiry-based learning. The various subject areas are organized by domain. Language arts is part of the domain of Arts and Humanities. In this domain, the kids need to demonstrate mastery of six skill areas at the end of eighth grade in order to move on to high school level courses. So our standards are based on what we expect an eighth grader to master. The six skills in our domain are reading, writing, oral presentation, artistic expression, listening, and research.”

The faculty at Thorndike meet to plan the next year’s curriculum in July, when students are on vacation. The curriculum is designed to be academically rigorous and challenging, and to bring students up to, and even beyond, the state standards. Jerry explains the curriculum planning process: “Each year our entire curriculum is framed by a central question which is used across all disciplines, so it’s a question for the whole school. Then different domains or disciplines approach the question from different angles. We go into our summer planning with only an essential question, and it’s the faculty’s time to create curriculum. The first week and a half we are usually in brainstorming mode. For example, we are a fairly new school, so the first year the essential question was, ‘What is community?’ In the second year the question was, ‘What is change?’”

Jerry describes how teachers at Thorndike create curriculum around their essential question. “During the first year of the school, we chose an essential question about community because



we wanted to establish a sense of community from the get-go. In the spring of that year, we developed a unit that explored how communities respond to differences among the people within them. Our focus, as a school, was the Civil Rights Movement. We read *To Kill A Mockingbird*, while at the same time we were looking at the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, along with the history of the Civil Rights Movement in this country. In visual arts, we studied a series of paintings by Jacob Lawrence called the *Migration* series to learn about the movement of African Americans from the South into urban centers in the North. All of these strands of curriculum were happening simultaneously, so the history was in the service of the language arts, which was also in the service of the visual arts.

“From there, the kids then chose a community that they felt had to face challenges to its unity at some point in the history of this country. Then they chose literature and primary sources that were relevant to their topic. The culminating activity required that students create their own series of paintings that captured the story of their community’s response to the challenge. That’s an example of how we try to make connections.”

Jerry continues, “We also have to weave in various skills and processes that students need in order to communicate. Writing is the one that gets the most emphasis. We incorporate expository, persuasive, and analytic writing. For example, the students read the play *Fences* by August Wilson. Then they had to choose a particular piece of dialogue or a particular interaction between two characters that they found to be insightful or provocative. The corresponding writing assignment was an analytic piece on the significance of that passage. There’s also a lot of informal writing, which we do in the form of reader response journals. Students write how they feel and think about what they’re reading in these journals. In the earlier grades we give them prompts to respond to on a nightly basis. Then, as they get older, we give them more autonomy with how they use their journals.”

Jerry also describes how oral language is woven into the curriculum. “Oral presentation is a very big part of our curriculum. That first year, when we were looking at Martin Luther King as a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, students closely analyzed the ‘I Have a Dream’ speech. We looked at that speech and identified what aspects of it made an effective piece of oral presentation.



“I was intrigued with [James] Beane’s ideas about building a curriculum around a central theme. As I began to think about my curriculum, I chose an overall theme for the year—tolerance. Then I picked critical issues about tolerance for my students to investigate. . . . The theme was like the glue that joined everything together and made each of the parts of the curriculum make sense.”

Then students took those qualities and tried to apply them to writing and presenting their own ‘Dream’ speeches.”

All the arts and humanities teachers at Thorndike use rubrics (scoring guides) based on criteria for excellence for each of the six skill areas. Jerry says, “From day one that the students are in the school they become familiar with these criteria for all of the skill areas. We assess on a continuum from ‘just beginning,’ to ‘approaches the standards,’ to ‘meets or exceeds the standards.’ Every time a student does a piece of work he or she is assessed on that continuum for the skill, based on the criteria for excellence.”

Jerry notes that the first group of eighth graders in his school did well on the statewide language arts test. But he and the other teachers keep monitoring their curriculum to ensure that it has the appropriate balance of intellectual content and development of language arts processes and skills so that students will continue to achieve high standards.

Moving toward a coherent curriculum that is guided by standards

Susan Barron teaches language arts to 175 eighth graders in an urban middle school in California. While the majority of Susan’s students speak English, they represent diverse ethnic groups and home cultures. Teachers at Susan’s school are committed to preparing all the students in the school for college or university. Susan notes, “We expect that all students are going to be successful. So our push in middle school is to get them prepared for high school so that all students will go to college.”

Susan, who has been teaching eighth grade for 14 years, describes how her curriculum has evolved as she has worked to “keep up” with important trends in the field. A number of years ago she read an article about thematic teaching by middle-grades educator James Beane. “I was intrigued with Beane’s ideas about building a curriculum around a central theme. As I began to think about my curriculum, I chose an overall theme for the year—tolerance. Then I picked critical issues about tolerance for my students to investigate. I wanted them to think about tolerance as it relates to culture, language, and gender. I wanted them to think about tolerance and issues of physical appearance. That’s important for middle-grades students—they’re so concerned with how they look and how other kids look. We thought a lot about tolerance throughout the year. I chose novels and short stories,



planned reading and writing workshops, projects, and field trips—all kinds of opportunities for my students to examine tolerance. The theme was like the glue that joined everything together and made each of the parts of the curriculum make sense.”

Susan talks about how the standards recently adopted by her school district have influenced her to further rethink her curriculum. “Before the big push on standards in our district, I had to make all the decisions about what I was going to teach. Now I have to make certain that I teach everything in the district’s curriculum guide. I also have to be certain that what I am doing fits with the standards. It’s comforting to know exactly what my students should know and be able to do by the end of the year—the kinds of writing and speaking, the skills, the strategies they have to learn, even though this means that I’ve had to make some changes in my curriculum. At first, it really bothered me. But I’m learning how to make all the pieces fit together without losing the big ideas that I want kids to study. In fact, I think my curriculum is stronger than it was before.”

For example, Susan says, “I’ve always done a unit on the Holocaust as part of my tolerance theme. We read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the kids did oral presentations about the characters, theme, and plot. That was fine, but now, because of the standards, we do more. When we study the Holocaust, we still read *Anne Frank*, but we also read *Night* by Elie Wiesel and nonfiction selections about the Holocaust. We learn literary elements and strategies for reading fiction *and* nonfiction. We study different text structures—compare and contrast, cause and effect. Then we learn how to write essays that use those structures.

“I’ve also added a research paper. It’s required by the standards. Students pick a topic of their choice related in some way to the theme of tolerance or intolerance. They can study whatever subject they choose. Some of them have done research on the Armenian genocide or the effects of westward expansion on Native Americans. Others have studied the causes and effects of teenage gangs. It depends on their interests. They learn the entire research process. I teach it step by step. Right at the beginning, I give them a rubric [scoring guide] that spells out exactly how their work will be evaluated. I keep going back to the rubric, checking their work against the rubric. What have they learned to do? Which steps of the research process are problematic?”



Doing a research paper is challenging and it fits well with the content standards. They've done some really creative work for their presentations, but the content is firmly based in their research. Also, I'm more explicit than I used to be about teaching oral presenting skills. I guess you might say that I teach smarter. I integrate the pieces and they fit together well."

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How will the middle-grades language arts curriculum enable students to meet standards?

Language arts standards at the national, state, and local levels vary widely in terms of their level of detail and degree of prescriptiveness. Some standards describe precisely what students should know and be able to do, and include samples of the kinds of work they might do to demonstrate their learning. Some standards identify the genres of literature students should read, and the historical eras and cultures that literature selections should represent. Some even specify the works of literature that should be read at each grade level. Some standards identify specific literary features and devices students should understand, and the particular grammar, spelling, and other language skills that students should master. Other standards simply lay out broad goals for student learning, such as reading a range of genres and being able to write for different audiences and purposes. For standards to be effective, they have to be specific enough to provide focus and guidance.

Well-conceived standards address, with some specificity:

- Reading to comprehend meaning and interpret text.
- Writing to communicate effectively for different purposes, audiences, and contexts.
- Speaking and listening to gather and share information, persuade others, understand and express ideas, and analyze messages.
- Mastering the skills necessary for effective reading, writing, and oral communication.
- Reading, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating different kinds of literature, representing a variety of genres, historical periods, and cultures.

Because of the variability in the standards, the specific demands on teachers for interpreting and meeting standards differ depending on what has been adopted by their states and districts.

However, in any case, focusing on standards will yield benefits as



well as challenges. The benefits of well-conceived and implemented standards include:

- Clearly articulating what all students should learn.
- Setting out challenging norms and high expectations for all students.
- Drawing attention and additional resources to schools with unacceptably low outcomes on standards-based assessments.
- Making school systems and administrators, as well as teachers, accountable for student performance.

The challenges of teaching to standards are closely related to the potential benefits. When the primary focus is on what students must learn instead of on what they should be taught, teachers must organize curricula and instruction around their understanding of students' academic needs. If all students are held to the same high expectations, then those at risk for falling behind need more, and more varied, support.

The two vignettes that follow illustrate how teachers are reexamining their curricula to respond to both the benefits and the challenges of the standards. One vignette, offering the perspective of a literacy consultant, focuses on how teachers can make sense of the standards themselves and use that understanding to reshape their curricula and their teaching. The second vignette focuses on the way that thoughtful curriculum planning can help to ensure that students will be well prepared to meet standards.

Standards trouble our practice

Linda Eldridge, a literacy consultant to middle-grades language arts teachers in a midwestern state, observes that teachers can benefit most from standards when they use them to “trouble their practice.” Linda explains, “Teachers examine the standards carefully. They say, ‘If I’m going to have a wonderful language arts program, it will have to have in it all the elements that the standards call for.’ Teachers evaluate their own curricula and say, ‘I’m really good at addressing this standard, but I don’t even know what this other standard means.’”

Linda describes one teacher who determined that she was meeting her state’s standard requiring “ideas in action” by involving her students in cross-age projects in the community which connected her students’ home and school experiences. “This teacher observed, ‘My kids are going out into the community and doing



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service. But I’m not teaching the craft of writing as well as I should be. My students’ writing is not as good as I want it to be.’ So she has started to engage students in a sequence of writing assignments that document their community service efforts. The assignments begin with personal narratives. Students write about their experiences in the community. Then, they move to descriptive, compare/contrast, and cause and effect essays. All of these are required by our state standards. In the essays, her students make the connection between their experiences and significant issues that affect the community. For example, a student who works in a food pantry might write a cause and effect essay that talks about increasing rents and the effect that has on single-income families’ abilities to feed and clothe their children.”

Linda recalls another teacher who observed, “It really bothers me that oral language skills are missing from my curriculum. I’ve got to do some work on that because if I don’t, my students won’t meet that standard.’ Having realized that, this teacher began integrating oral language skills into classroom activities. So I would say that what I see happening is that the standards trouble these teachers’ practice.”

Linda also describes the tensions created by the simultaneous focus on standards and assessment. “I think the standards call for us to be thoughtful and improve our teaching over a lifetime. But I think the assessments also sometimes leave us running around like chickens with our heads cut off. How do you get teachers to focus on their own learning so that the kids can benefit, when they’re so worried about a test? They start to think it’s the test that they need to focus on, and that’s not entirely the case.”

Linda continues, “For example, take learning how to teach the kinds of writing required by the standards. Until a teacher really engages in writing herself, reflects on her own writing, and tries to figure out the implications for kids, whatever she teaches will be fairly superficial. She can use rubrics [scoring guides] to beat the band and it’s not going to actually help kids understand the skills and concepts called for in the standards unless she thinks about them, really understands them herself, and determines how to apply what she’s learned to her teaching. So there is a tremendous tension, I think, between what the standards are really calling for and the short-term demands of the tests. Right now, I am working on standards-based teaching and learning with a lot of



teachers, and one of the things that I've started to say to them right up front is, 'Hey, this *is* overwhelming at first! Whether you're an experienced or a new teacher, this is overwhelming.'

Nevertheless, Linda concludes that teachers who use the standards to identify the gaps in their curriculum and their students' learning, and then thoughtfully reexamine their curriculum and work to fill those gaps, are improving their teaching. Sometimes this is a matter of making adjustments in an already robust curriculum; often, it involves teachers' questioning and reformulating aspects of their fundamental approach to teaching and learning.

Curriculum planning guided by standards

It takes careful planning for teachers to construct a curriculum that systematically addresses the standards. Larry Carson, an eighth-grade teacher in a suburban district in California, describes the role that standards play in his language arts curriculum planning. "I use a process called 'curriculum mapping.' I sit down in the summer and I look at my district curriculum guide for language arts. I look at the state benchmarks for my grade level, which tell me what the students need to be able to do. I look at the standards. Then I think about the things that I want to accomplish. I ask myself, 'How do they fit in with the standards?'"

"I take a big piece of chart paper, and I draw ten boxes. Each box is a month. In each box, I put the theme that I want to explore with students. At the same time, I choose the literature we'll read to accompany the theme or question. For example, I might want students to explore the theme, 'The Characteristics of an Ideal Society.' So I'll choose *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. Our discussions and writing about this novel will center around the 'ideal society' theme. Then I write my specific objectives—all the things I want students to know and be able to do.

"I think about the literature I've chosen and decide which literary elements to teach. I ask myself, 'Will *The Giver* lend itself best to the study of figurative language, theme, mood, or character development?' Then I identify the reading skills and strategies I want students to learn. For example, 'Reciprocal Teaching' is a method that research has shown to be effective in promoting conscious use of reading strategies for improving comprehension. With reciprocal teaching, students learn how to predict, ask questions, clarify, and summarize as they read. Another example is the 'Question-Answer-Response.' With this strategy, kids learn to



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answer literal and inferential questions. They learn that the answers to some questions are right in the text. Answering other questions requires that they combine information in the text with what they already know. Answering others depends entirely on knowledge they already have.

“Then, depending on the novel, I put in the kind of writing we’ll focus on, like narrative or persuasive essays, along with the writing skills and grammar we’ll study. For example, I know I’m going to work with my students on how to organize their ideas in their writing, using graphic organizers or semantic maps to help them visually lay out the ideas in the novel and draw the connections between them. In narrative, we might focus on vivid descriptions and voice. I might plan mini-lessons on punctuation or dialogue, or have students work on combining sentences. The specifics may change, of course, as I see what kinds of problems actually come up in students’ writing. But as I map out the curriculum this way, I keep checking the standards and benchmarks to make sure that I’ve addressed the ones that I’m responsible for.”

Once he has mapped out the themes and learning objectives, Larry moves on to defining what students will actually do in the classroom. He says, “Then I list the kinds of activities I’ll use, like literature circles, large group instruction, or individualized instruction. The activity I use depends on my objectives. For example, if I want all the kids to learn about character or plot, I teach a lesson to the whole class. If a few of them need to work on punctuation, I work with them separately. I often use literature circles, because they provide a format for discussing literature that includes assigned roles for each student so that everyone is expected to get in on discussion of the book. For example, one student might be in charge of vocabulary. Another might direct the discussion, or be the illustrator. There is lots of structure in literature circles. You don’t just send students off to discuss the book. They have specific things to accomplish.

“I also have to think about how I will address the range of students I teach. How will I challenge all my students? How will I deal with the individual needs of struggling students? What literature is available for outside reading? Of course, once I’ve met students and identified their strengths and weaknesses, I’ll know better, but I want to start planning it all out early.”



A final component of Larry’s planning is consideration of how he will assess students’ work. He says, “Once I have the plan mapped out, I begin to make up rubrics to match my objectives and the standards. I always tell my students in advance exactly what I want them to know and be able to do, and how I will assess their work.

“So I fill in the boxes in my curriculum map all the way up to June. It’s a process that’s ongoing. I know that I have goals and I don’t always achieve them, and sometimes I get sidetracked. But the map is a very valuable tool. And the standards guide my creation of the map.”

A rigorous middle-grades language arts curriculum encourages students to explore novels, poetry, short stories, essays, biographies, and autobiographies. It helps students learn strategies for comprehending and analyzing texts, and gain an understanding that literature can be a vehicle for making sense of human experiences.

What literature should be included in the curriculum? The *Standards for the English Language Arts* recommend that students read contemporary and historical literature that is relevant to their lives. Contemporary selections should reflect the diversity of our society, accurately represent women and minorities, and introduce students to other societies and cultures. The works of artists from past times and cultures should provide students with opportunities to extend their understandings of literary language and devices, and explore the timeless qualities of the human condition.

Experts in developing language arts curriculum suggest that teachers select and organize their literature around important themes—questions and ideas that promote thinking. With regard to the breadth of materials, the quantity should be sufficient to support complex writing and discussion. Too many selections will result in superficial treatment; too few will limit students’ experience of genre, style, and substance.

Some of the challenges teachers encounter in making literature selections that balance depth and breadth include:

- Giving struggling readers access to literature that is age-appropriate but may be too difficult for them to read independently.

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What literature will students read, and how will these literature choices balance depth of exploration with breadth of literary experiences?



Experts in developing language arts curriculum suggest that teachers select and organize their literature around important themes—questions and ideas that promote thinking.

- Providing all students with opportunities to choose and read texts at their independent and instructional reading levels, both for pleasure and to further their reading development, when reading levels of the students in a class may vary widely.
- Integrating literature study with learning of language arts skills and processes.
- Accommodating required texts.
- Coordinating with the content focus of other disciplines (most often social studies).

The following vignette illustrates how one teacher uses a theme to guide literature selections that allow her to integrate exploration of important human issues, independent reading and student choice, study of the structure and language of literature, building of vocabulary and other skills, and preparation for standards-based assessment.

Selecting and organizing literature around themes

Joanne Long has been teaching language arts for 31 years in an urban district in the Northeast. She has learned that taking a thematic approach helps her organize a standards-driven curriculum using appropriate literature selections for students who come into her classroom reading at a range of different levels. Using this approach, she is able to integrate district-required books into her curriculum without leaving some students behind or holding others back. Joanne observes, “I have 129 seventh graders. All of them take the state test in the spring. We have heterogeneous grouping in our classes, and the kids’ reading levels are all over the place. The district gives us a list of required novels. For example, all the seventh graders are required to read Mildred Taylor’s *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*. That’s a wonderful book, but not all my students can just pick it up and read it. So I have to deal with that. I used to just read *Circle* aloud in class, chapter by chapter. I think we spent three months on that novel. The kids lost interest in it long before we were finished.”

Influenced by a professional development experience, Joanne has changed how she deals with the wide range of reading levels in her diverse classroom. As she describes it, “A couple of years ago, we had a literacy consultant who came to our school once a week and ran workshops for the whole faculty on strategies for meeting the different needs of students in heterogeneous classrooms. She coached us in our classrooms and encouraged us to try new



approaches that would make the ideas in the literature we teach accessible to all the kids, yet also focus on building their language skills.

“One of the approaches the consultant encouraged us to try is theme-based instruction. I selected themes that I thought were important and that also would accommodate the novels my district requires for seventh grade. One of the themes I chose was ‘connections.’ What is it that connects people and families? Why do they stay connected? Why are connections between people important? *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* fits with that theme. I also chose short stories, plays, poems, and nonfiction selections to go with that theme. Our district has a new literature anthology, which has a lot of good selections. I chose ‘A Crush’ by Cynthia Rylant, the story of a developmentally delayed man who has a crush on a tattooed woman who works in a hardware store. I also chose O. Henry’s story ‘A Retrieved Reformation,’ along with a selection from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I know that some teachers don’t like reading excerpts from complete works, but I don’t have the time to read the whole book with my kids, so at least they’re having an experience with this writing.

“In addition to exploring the theme, I also teach plot, character, setting, and figurative language. We study these in the context of the required reading. First we read the short selections. Then we read *Circle*. That’s a pretty difficult novel and not everyone can read it independently. In the past, my objective was just to get them through the novel. Now I really want them to know how to read and analyze literature. So I do a lot of prereading activities to build vocabulary and background knowledge, and connect with what kids already know. Then I begin to read the story to them so I can explain the historical background and get them interested. I let them read in class so I can identify the kids who are having a hard time with the book. I use books on tape, buddy reading (where kids read to each other), and summaries of some of the chapters. I make individual decisions about what sections of the book students are responsible for. We do a lot of discussion and writing about the theme. We look at how it unfolds in *Circle*. The kids compare and contrast relationships and characters in their writing. They work on open-ended responses, like the ones on the state test.”

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Joanne has also devised an outside reading program that supports and extends classroom instruction. “It’s really critical for my students to do outside reading, but I don’t want them to read just anything. I want them to read for pleasure, but at the same time, there’s so much for them to learn. I have to make the most of every assignment. So they read novels outside of class, but we use them in class to study theme and literary devices, and as the basis for writing and literature discussions, along with the required reading.” To guide students’ independent reading, Joanne uses a resource guide that classifies book titles by theme and reading level. She notes that this enables her to “suggest novels to students that are at a comfortable reading level and are related to the class theme. I give students choices. Some students choose the same novels and work in groups. Others work alone. All of them can read and analyze literature, and discuss and write about the theme.

“When my students took the state test last year, they told me that they were happy when they saw a question about themes. They felt prepared and they did much better on these open-ended questions than students in other years had. They also improved as readers, writers, and thinkers. They may not all be at grade level yet, but they’re getting there. I know from the standardized test results that they’ve made progress. Next year’s teachers will have to build on that. Without the common theme, and the reading, writing, and discussions built around it, I couldn’t make it work.”

EQUITY

How will the curriculum both challenge and support students with diverse social and academic experiences to become skilled, thoughtful readers and communicators?

The current education reform movement seeks to hold all students to high standards of knowledge and performance, and to hold districts, schools, administrators, and teachers accountable for student success. Achieving high standards for all students in our diverse classrooms requires that schools provide students who are vulnerable to falling behind with the kinds of intellectually challenging instruction and learning experiences that are often reserved for the most academically proficient students. In language arts, this means ensuring that all students have access to the intellectual content of contemporary and historical literature of different genres and from different cultures; understand literary language and structures; and develop their skills in reading, writing, and oral language.



Achieving these goals requires that schools transform themselves into cultures in which high expectations for all students are the norm. It also requires that teachers carefully assess student work as they make decisions about learning experiences that will move their students toward fulfilling these expectations. Within this context, language arts curriculum development should begin with standards and assessment, focus on developing students' understanding, and ensure that students are supported by excellent teaching. Teaching should be guided by careful assessment rather than habit or ideology. Teachers should ask: What evidence do we have that students are acquiring critical language arts knowledge and processes? What instructional strategies are available to support individual students who are not progressing toward the standards?

The two vignettes that follow illustrate how two teachers and their school districts combine a challenging curriculum with the kind of ongoing assessment, flexibility in instruction, devotion of extra time and resources, and willingness to be accountable that are required to address the difficult challenge of achieving high standards for all their students.

Those who need more time and resources to meet high standards have them

Joyce Soto teaches English and social studies to a very diverse group of seventh and eighth graders in a large urban district in the Northeast. Her school was created by dividing a large middle school into three smaller schools. Although the three schools are housed in the same large building, each one functions independently.

In Joyce's school, all students are expected to meet the standards for their city, *New Standards™ Student Performance Standards*.¹ According to Joyce, among these standards is the requirement that all students read 25 books each year. By the end of eighth grade, students are also required to create portfolios that provide evidence they can compose a persuasive essay and other essays that demonstrate their ability to interpret, analyze, and evaluate literature. Joyce describes these portfolios as "quite rigorous and kind of daunting. In the sixth and seventh grades we really practice

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¹ Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy and the University of Pittsburgh, 1997. (See Chapter 4 for a brief description of these standards.)



“We always have the standards in front of kids so that they know what they have to do to meet them. Then, if they fall below or are approaching a particular standard, we give them specific instruction and work with them so they can meet that standard.”

doing the portfolio, so that by eighth grade they will all be able to put it together.”

Joyce sees that her challenge is to get all students to meet the standards by the end of eighth grade. She uses a scoring system for student work that is tied to the standards and that helps her to focus her teaching. She explains, “A score of one is exceeding the standard, a two is passing, a three is approaching the standard, and a four is falling below the standard. I expect every student to get at least a two. We always have the standards in front of kids so that they know what they have to do to meet them. Then, if they fall below or are approaching a particular standard, we give them specific instruction and work with them so they can meet that standard, but a two, that’s the end and everyone has to get there.”

Getting all students “there” requires careful planning and hard work. Joyce says, “First of all, I look at what the kids need to know. I look at the standards and say, ‘They need to have these five things. And when do we want to do this?’ So I map out the whole year by the month. For example, I know that in May we’re going to do an ‘I-search’ [a research process that details the student’s search for information, along with the specific information gathered]. I know that we’re going to do poetry and really focus on writing our own poetry anthologies in March. I know that we’re going to read Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*. It’s important for the kids to read well-written literature by authors like these who are ‘insiders’—who really know and can write about their cultures. So, I have an idea of where the year is going to go. Then I look at what I want to teach the kids and what they already know. Knowing my kids and what they bring to the classroom really determines what I’m going to teach them. What do they need to know? How can I get them to that point?”

Joyce assesses students’ progress toward the standards through ongoing classroom activities including journals, written and oral responses to literature, and “literary letters” in which students write to each other about their reading. She notes that the written responses are “a way that we really assess comprehension. If students write, ‘I’m reading this book. It’s really good. What are you reading?’ I have a pretty good idea that they really don’t know what they’re reading. I want them to be getting into some deeper issues, looking at characters, plot, and author’s craft.



With responses to literature, as you're assessing their reading you're also assessing their writing."

Joyce describes her students as "mostly struggling with their reading, kids who are really in need of specific skills and strategies in order to become better readers and meet the standards. Students who have fallen below the 50th percentile in reading scores are enrolled in an after-school, extended-day literacy program, which is six extra hours of reading a week for kids."

In this after-school program, Joyce explains, "I basically do a reading workshop. I do a lot of conferring with individual kids. I have about eleven kids in the class; usually about eight show up. They come for an hour before school and two hours after school, two days a week. I give them one-on-one instruction and one-on-one attention and more time to process, more time to read. We do responses. Kids read and write or discuss the ideas and emotions the literature evokes for them. We do a lot of shared reading. I read to the kids while they follow along. I model reading strategies as I read. Kids also read independently at least a half-hour each day. I have sets of books at their reading levels—books that are interesting but that they can manage on their own. I try to reinforce what we do in the classroom with the rest of the kids. But I also give them a chance to read to me one on one and work individually on the decoding and comprehension strategies that they need."

When asked about the impact of standards on her diverse student population, Joyce responded, "One of the nice things about standards and one of the not-so-nice things is that there *is* a standard. We can't say, 'This is really good work for John because he's never in school. And you know, golly, he's really trying.' Either he meets the standard or he doesn't meet the standard. And so, in a way, our hands are tied. He's so far below. But then we know what work we have to do to try to catch him up. So I think the ways that we assess the kids have to be the same according to *New Standards*."

Joyce designs her curriculum around *New Standards* and works hard to assure that all her students meet them. She is supported by a school culture that holds high expectations for all. Within this context, student work and assessment are at the center of teaching and learning. For Joyce, equity does not mean that all students are treated in the same way. Instruction and resources

"Students who have fallen below the 50th percentile in reading scores are enrolled in an after-school, extended-day literacy program, which is six extra hours of reading a week for kids."



“The motto of our school is ‘All kids can learn, but on different days at different rates.’”

differ; pacing varies as well. Joyce’s description of the after-school workshop for struggling readers suggests the kinds of demands on teachers’ time and school resources that such a commitment to equity can entail. However, since the goals are the same for all students, those who need more time and resources to meet high standards have them.

All kids can learn, but on different days at different rates

Abby Stevens is a seventh-grade teacher at Diego Rivera Middle School, which is located in a medium-sized, southwestern city. The majority of her students are Latino/a or African American, and most qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. As in many other communities, Abby’s district has placed a high priority on students’ meeting academic standards. Student progress is measured each year with the state test which, Abby says, “addresses all of the skills that students must have to pass a particular grade level. If they don’t pass the test on those skills, they are not allowed to pass that grade level. There is no such thing as social promotion.” Teachers in this middle school feel accountable for student learning. Abby notes that “the motto of our school is ‘All kids can learn, but on different days at different rates.’ We don’t believe that if we give a quiz today everybody has to make 100 on it and then we just move onto the next one, and okay, that’s finished. And if you made a 50 percent, too bad, you just didn’t listen! That ‘only one chance’ approach is totally against what we believe.”

Abby explains that her students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate that they have met a particular standard. “If for some reason a student doesn’t work well within the classroom setting, then we have a ‘Standards Lab.’ Students are allowed to go to the lab after school and try to complete that standard with a different teacher. Perhaps the student is just not on the same wavelength as the classroom teacher. So now she or he gets to work with a different teacher, and still try to accomplish that standard before the school year is over. Our job is to teach students whatever they need to meet the standards.”

In 1995, Abby reports, the district was ready to “shut the school down for failing test scores. Students at Rivera had failed state tests for three years in a row in all subjects.” Since that time, a number of changes have taken place and, according to Abby,



Rivera “is now a recognized school, which means that 70 percent of all the students are scoring at least 80 percent on the assessments.” These changes include block scheduling—which gives teachers longer class periods with students—and the “creation of ‘houses’ in which students have one teacher for language arts and social studies, and one teacher for math and science.” Abby believes that the block scheduling and house system enable teachers to get to know students better. “In this environment,” she says, “it’s easier to provide ongoing assessment of student progress.”

In her classroom, Abby focuses on bringing all students to high standards, regardless of their previous levels of achievement or cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The learning objectives and expectations for students are clear, Abby reports. “We have a learning map in the classroom, which is a road map of where we are going, what we will learn. This map tells the students exactly what we expect to accomplish. Every week, we review this map to be sure that students know where we are headed.” To make the expectations even more explicit, Abby gives students rubrics—scoring guides that articulate the components of successful performance on particular tasks.

If an individual student doesn’t meet these expectations, Abby believes that it is her responsibility “to reassess a student’s needs, and try to address those needs better, because whatever we did just didn’t work the first time. If we taught something orally and a student doesn’t pass, we’ll teach it a different way. Then we’ll reassess.”

Because students must demonstrate their knowledge on the state test through reading and writing tasks, Abby provides numerous opportunities for students to practice test-taking skills. She says, “This allows them to really demonstrate what they have learned in language arts. I give written tests that consist of several different formats, like multiple choice, short essay, fill in the blanks, or true and false. It could be any of those things, but it’s always at least three different formats within one test.”

While she knows that raising student achievement on the state test is critical, Abby worries that the emphasis on assessment in the district may limit her curriculum. “We spend so much time getting the kids ready for the state test. That’s important, but we don’t seem to have enough time for other important things like

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reading novels and plays and poetry. I want my students to love literature. I want them to be able to put their ideas and feelings down on paper. I want them to use reading and writing to help them understand themselves. But I always have to be thinking about the test. When I go to meetings with other language arts teachers in my district, we talk about this a lot. It's a real dilemma."

Within the constraints of the state test, Abby does find some room to focus on other aspects of learning that she believes are important. For example, in addition to ongoing assessment of students' reading and writing, Abby also builds in opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning with hands-on activities. "I think that it's the best of both worlds, because in the written test, I am testing the knowledge that I said you had to have. The hands-on activity allows students the opportunity to show me what they learned that they found interesting, in addition to what I required from them. So, if you are that wonderful artist, or if you are that wonderful musician, or if you are that wonderful actor, then you get to perform in your strength. I think everybody becomes a winner in that situation."

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROPRIATENESS

How will the curriculum ensure that the study of language arts is engaging, motivating, and suitably challenging for middle-grades students?

Making the language arts curriculum developmentally appropriate for middle-grades students requires a general understanding of ways to engage learners and knowledge of the particular developmental characteristics of young adolescents. A developmentally appropriate curriculum:

- Builds on students' existing knowledge and current levels of understanding.
- Connects with everyday issues of interest to middle-grades students.
- Engages students in literacy activities that have a genuine communicative purpose.
- Offers opportunities for peer discussion and collaboration through activities that capitalize on the social nature of middle-grades students.

These aspects of the curriculum should combine to promote students' intellectual and skills development. That is, it is not sufficient for students to be engaged in personally meaningful activities; these activities need to be carefully designed to foster students'



growth in the reading, writing, and oral language competencies as laid out in the academic standards.

The following two vignettes illustrate different approaches to making the curriculum both rigorous and developmentally appropriate. In one approach, students participate in a series of experiences that give them access to a historical text through reading, writing, listening, research, drama, art, and oral presentations. In the other approach, students use material from their own lives as the focus for an equally carefully organized set of literacy experiences. While these two approaches differ markedly in some respects, both take advantage of students' interests, experiences, and growing cognitive and social capacities to engage them in learning that challenges them intellectually and builds their skills. Both use what teachers know about their students to carefully structure the curriculum so that students develop the literacy knowledge and skills required by the standards and engage in increasingly sophisticated forms of reading, writing, and use of oral language. In fact, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive; that is, a high-quality language arts curriculum might combine elements of both.

Using art and drama to open doors to the intellectual content of the curriculum

Susan Olsen and Barry Holman teach sixth-grade language arts in a middle school in the Northeast. The two work closely together in planning and implementing the sixth-grade language arts curriculum, with its combination of contemporary and historical literature. Over the course of the school year, students study the characters in the novels *Call It Courage*, *Julie of the Wolves*, and *A Christmas Carol* to understand how individuals develop and change over time as a result of their experiences.

According to Susan and Barry, each year some of their students have great difficulty reading Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, a book that is required reading for sixth grade in their district. Susan reports, "In past years, it didn't seem that all the kids were getting it. It was too difficult for them to read the original Dickens version. And it didn't seem relevant to them at all." The two teachers met with Martha Wright, a literacy consultant with whom they had been working for several years. Their goal was to identify ways they could help these modern American students



“Three of the other stops were scenes from the novel that we weren’t sure that the kids would completely understand. So we had teachers and seventh-grade volunteers help us by acting out some of the major scenes from the novel.”

understand the Victorian language and setting of the novel and connect with its characters, issues, and themes.

Susan describes how she and Barry changed the study of *A Christmas Carol*. “From our work with Martha, we knew that we had to do a lot with building students’ background knowledge. So we spent quite a bit of time talking about Dickens and what life was like in Victorian England. Then we got the kids involved in a wonderful project. Barry and I did this together, with all our students. We created a walking tour of Dickens’s London. Sixth graders love hands-on projects. Several of the kids volunteered to come after school for many, many hours, to construct a life-sized set of Victorian London. They painted what the streets of London would have looked like—narrow, cobblestoned, dark, cold, foggy—all of the terms Dickens used in the story. We consulted the book very carefully for that. We also did some research about Dickens, Victorian London, and how his books were social commentaries.

“Once the set was built, we did the walking tour. There were five stops on the tour. The volunteers who constructed the sets became tour guides, and they dressed in costumes and acted as if they were in that time period. Each of them would lead a small group of kids from one stop to the next. At each of these stops there were different activities going on. At one stop, there was a teacher dressed up as Charles Dickens. He talked about his background, his family life, and working at the blacking factory as a child. The kids were able to ask him questions. Then they would move to another stop where a teacher, dressed in a period costume, acted the part of Mrs. Cratchett and explained some of the traditions of a poor Victorian family. She made a Christmas pudding and the kids tasted it. The kids loved that.

“Three of the other stops were scenes from the novel that we weren’t sure that the kids would completely understand. So we had teachers and seventh-grade volunteers help us by acting out some of the major scenes from the novel. Then each of the actors explained, ‘This is who I was. This is what Dickens was trying to say through my character.’ And the kids could ask questions of the actors.

“The logistics weren’t easy. It was a very tricky schedule. Half of the group, about 100 kids, were going through the stations. We had the other 100 kids learning period dancing and acting out



the Feziwig ballroom dancing scene in the gym. With sixth graders, it's important to give them lots of opportunities to move around. The dancing was a little silly, but they enjoyed it." Susan acknowledges that planning and orchestrating the walking tour was "a major effort," but she believes "it was worthwhile to give students access to the language, setting, and characters in the novel."

With the tour as a jumping-off point, the teachers found ways to immerse students in the language of the novel and take advantage of their eagerness to dramatize the characters and events in order to develop their understanding of character, narrative structure, and theme. As Susan explains, "One of the reasons we have to read *A Christmas Carol* is so that kids can study language and see how different the English language was in the Victorian period. But you don't have to read all of *A Christmas Carol* to do that. We showed the movie and did a plot chart, so that all students understood the setting, rising action, falling action, and climax. Our theme for the year is 'Journey of Change.' Scrooge is a great example of a character who makes that journey, so we placed a particular emphasis on character development. Whether the kids were ready to read the book on their own or not, they all learned the literary elements.

"We also had students doing work in groups. We divided the book into sections, and each group had to do a 'scene study' of one of these sections. They had to become the characters. They had to understand Dickens's language well enough to turn the prose into a script, and then they acted out their parts, calling on their oral presentation skills. We have been working hard to integrate oral presentation into our curriculum, since it's part of the state standards. We spent several classes discussing body language, movement, voice, and projection. Ultimately, each group acted out their scene in front of both classes.

"Next, students wrote an analysis of their character and how that character contributed to Scrooge's journey of change. So, again, they were looking carefully at character development, not just of the protagonist, but of all the characters who influenced Scrooge."

Susan adds that she and Barry work hard to develop strategies that will enable even students who struggle to read the novel to participate fully in the study of the novel's characters and theme. But she stresses that they also continue to work with these students to improve their reading skills. At the same time, she and

"We divided the book into sections, and each group had to do a 'scene study' of one of these sections. They had to become the characters. They had to understand Dickens's language well enough to turn the prose into a script, and then they acted out their parts, calling on their oral presentation skills."



“The idea was to have kids use reading and writing to make a positive difference in their community. Kids identify a health-related problem in their community or in their lives, and then they use their reading and writing skills to change that.”

Barry believe that efforts to help these students to read fluently at grade level should not preclude opportunities for the students’ intellectual engagement and growth.

Susan and Barry both conclude that the additional time and effort they put into planning and implementing the study of *A Christmas Carol* “was well worth it.” Their concern about meeting the developmental needs of their sixth graders led to the creation of a unit that integrated the language, performing, and visual arts, and gave all of their students access to the intellectual content of the novel. Through activities and explorations that intrigued and engaged students as well as challenged them intellectually, the curriculum unit developed students’ literacy skills, including analytic writing, dramatic writing, and oral presentation. The unit also built students’ knowledge of literary concepts, including narrative structure, character development, and theme.

Making students’ lives the material for literacy learning

Therese Connor is a 26-year veteran teacher in an economically depressed city in the Midwest. She is an active member of the National Council of Teachers of English, and has participated in the National Writing Project for many years. She has published articles about language arts education, and has collaborated with language arts educators at the national, state, and local levels.

Therese believes strongly that middle-grades language arts instruction must be directly connected to the lives of her students, whose out-of-school literacy experiences can vary greatly from those in school. She uses the skills, knowledge, and experiences that students bring to the classroom as the starting points for teaching and learning.

Through her involvement with the National Writing Project and experience working with several university researchers, Therese participated in a grant-funded project that allowed her to make her language arts curriculum more relevant and meaningful to her middle-grades students. Therese describes this collaborative curriculum effort. “The idea was to have kids use reading and writing to make a positive difference in their community. Kids identify a health-related problem in their community or in their lives, and then they use their reading and writing skills to change that. We had teachers in three different states working on this. So teachers had a network of other teachers interested in helping kids to see the connection between their writing and their reading,



and to see themselves as important members of their communities. What we realized early on was that just about everything is a health issue. If it isn't a physical health issue, it's an emotional health issue. That was something that was kind of a jolt to all of us. Everything emerged as a health issue for the urban students we teach."

Therese describes how the focus on health-related community concerns influenced her own curriculum. "Each of the teachers who've participated in this project has implemented the idea in somewhat different ways. With my seventh graders, I looked for readings that focused on issues about growing up. Some of the books we're reading are *Dragon's Gate*, *The House on Mango Street*, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. I also did a read-aloud of *The Outsiders* this fall. I start out just trying to get the kids doing their own reading and their own writing. They write letters to each other, back and forth, about what they're reading.

"Now we're about halfway through the year, and we're reading *The House on Mango Street* which is composed of a series of vignettes. The students are very involved in it right now, and they're writing vignettes of their own. They've written four vignettes so far and revised two of them for final drafts. This week they started work on a fifth one. We read one of the vignettes from the novel—a conversation between two girls written entirely in dialogue. The two girls start talking about benign things, like different names for clouds and for snow. Then all of a sudden they start taking digs at each other, and before you know it, they're exchanging insults and threatening not to be friends anymore. I love it because it's so typical of what can happen to pre-adolescent and adolescent kids. One moment someone's your best friend and the next moment you can't stand her.

"After we'd done some prereading activities, and I read the vignette and we discussed it, I said to them, 'Think back to a conversation that you had with a friend when something that was said was misunderstood by one of you, and the conversation took a bad turn, so that by the end of the conversation you really didn't feel the same about each other.' Most of them said, 'Yes, yes,' they'd had this experience. They could picture it in their heads. My goal was to try to get them to put some dialogue down on paper, because they haven't tried this so far. So I did a mini-lesson teaching everybody about how to write dialogue."



“They were really motivated to write well and correct the spelling and the mechanics because they wanted other girls to get the information they were communicating.”

Therese explains that she had two objectives in this assignment: “to introduce the conventions of dialogue as far as indenting and so forth, and to focus on writing dialogue that’s real. I thought that if they could imagine something that really happened, and if they could put that down on paper, that would be a good start for writing real dialogue.” Therese also thought that this writing assignment would get students interested in analyzing why the vignette from *The House on Mango Street* seemed so real.

She reports that students “had a hard time telling the story all in dialogue. They wanted to say things like, ‘Once upon a time,’ or ‘One day my friend and I were talking.’ So my student teacher and I spent about half an hour conferencing with individual kids. We did that in class and got a good start. And then I asked them to take the draft home and work on it. We’ll come back to the writing in the next class.”

Therese continues, “That’s an example of how we use the literature as a springboard to get students thinking and writing about issues they’re facing in their lives; in this case, conflict with friends, which can sometimes escalate into violence. We’ve also used these issues as the material for research projects. Doing a research paper is required in our state standards.” When her students write about their lives, Therese reads their work and helps them learn to identify themes that seem to emerge. She says, “Some kids talk about sibling rivalry. Others talk about parents who have cancer. There’s asthma. I had so many kids with inhalers one year, I couldn’t believe it. We also learned that our community has the highest number of AIDS cases in the state, and several kids had been directly affected—had friends, a cousin, a father who had died of AIDS. It is very real to them.”

Therese notes that her curriculum helps her students connect their mastery of literacy skills to efforts to improve the health of their community. One of the issues that comes up frequently, she notes, is that of teen pregnancy—“older sisters and friends who had babies, for example. Two years ago one group of girls did some research on the rate of teen pregnancy in our area. They interviewed people in the community; they did research on the Internet. And they did a lot of writing about teen pregnancy because it’s something that they cared about. They ended up publishing a booklet for other teenage girls based on their research. They were really motivated to write well and correct the



spelling and the mechanics because they wanted other girls to get the information they were communicating.”

Planning and implementing a rigorous, equitable, and developmentally appropriate language arts curriculum is challenging. Teachers need significant support in learning to meet this challenge. Ongoing professional development must provide educators with:

- Experience in the kinds of intellectually demanding literacy activities their students will engage in.
- A broad and deep knowledge of literature.
- An understanding of how young adolescents develop language arts concepts, skills, and processes.
- Knowledge of teaching strategies that will foster high achievement and facility in using them.
- Familiarity with the kinds of assessments that will help them match instruction to students’ needs.
- Access to teaching and learning materials and resources that can help them support all students in meeting the language arts standards.

Districts can support teachers in the following ways:

- Providing workshops and courses that address teachers’ needs.
- Allowing time for collaborative planning and for study groups to share and reflect on their experiences and learn from one another.
- Supplying resources including professional literature, videotapes, instructional materials and their accompanying teacher’s guides, and a wide range of fiction and nonfiction books.
- Encouraging and providing resources for teachers to take advantage of professional development opportunities beyond the district, such as those offered by the National Writing Project, colleges and universities, and professional organizations.

Teachers and teacher leaders experienced in planning and implementing standards-based curricula highlight several elements they look for in effective professional development. These fall into two

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What will enable educators to plan and implement standards-based language arts curricula, and how can districts support professional development?



If teachers are going to engage students in “curricular conversations” about important ideas, they need to experience such conversations themselves and have the opportunity to reflect on how these experiences can translate into instructional practice.

main categories: formal professional development opportunities and ongoing support.

Formal professional development introduces teachers to new ideas about teaching and learning and new curriculum approaches, and gives them time to explore and reflect on these ideas and approaches. Formal professional development experiences are effective when they:

- Engage teachers in the same kind of work they expect of students in language arts classes (e.g., active reading, discussing, and writing about literature; developing and communicating ideas through reflection, discussion, writing, revision, and editing; integrating the learning and practice of language skills with meaningful communication). If teachers are going to engage students in “curricular conversations” about important ideas, they need to experience such conversations themselves and have the opportunity to reflect on how these experiences can translate into instructional practice.
- Support teachers in making the significant shift from the traditional instructional approach of conveying information (e.g., the theme of a story or the rules for grammar and syntax) to engaging students in active interpretation, discussion, and effective and accurate communication of their ideas.
- Bring teachers who have successfully used standards-based curriculum approaches and materials together with teachers learning to use them.
- Introduce teachers to high-quality materials that can support standards-based teaching and learning and reduce the need for teachers to “reinvent the wheel.”

Ongoing support is a second essential component of effective professional development. Teachers using new curriculum approaches benefit from opportunities to learn from those experienced with these approaches, as well as those who, like them, are learning to use the approaches. Such support, whether through visiting coaches, online or telephone conversations, peer consultation, or regular meetings of study groups, offers teachers help in solving problems as they come up. Effective ongoing support provides opportunities for teachers to:

- Access others who are experienced in using the curriculum approaches and materials.



- Share challenges and successes with other colleagues who are using the curriculum approaches and materials.
- Learn to develop and use rubrics (scoring guides), evaluate examples of student work, and use assessments to guide teaching and learning.

Professional development for planning and implementing standards-based curricula is multifaceted. The following two vignettes show how teachers benefit from a coordinated approach to professional development and illustrate a number of different facets of effective professional development. Both vignettes provide examples of how teachers and districts can take advantage of national professional development resources to create local programs that exemplify the features of effective professional development described above. Nationally available programs such as *Junior Great Books*, *Reading for Real*, and *6 + 1 Traits™ of Writing* are widely recognized for their success in promoting students' reading, writing, and thinking. *Reading for Real* is highlighted in the first vignette as an example of such programs, several of which are described briefly in Chapter 4 of this guide. The second vignette focuses on the National Writing Project, which has influenced the teaching of writing at all levels over the past quarter century. Many local and regional organizations, including colleges and universities and professional associations, also offer professional development and networking opportunities similar to those provided by the National Writing Project.

A coordinated approach to curriculum and professional development

Angela Santos is a curriculum specialist in a small southeastern city. Her district has adopted Yale University educator James Comer's School Development Program as a vehicle for school improvement. Santos explains, "One of the Comer advisors introduced *Reading for Real* to our district. We were able to fund both the purchase of materials and professional development training through Title VI, which supports innovative programs. We consider *Reading for Real* a very innovative program."

Reading for Real is a literature-based language arts and professional development program aimed at building literacy skills and promoting the academic, social, and emotional development of students in grades 4-8. It is structured around literature that addresses important questions likely to promote complex writing



“The training was very good, and it was intensive. We went eight hours a day and had homework every night. We read the books and did the activities and writing ourselves. Then we got to think and talk about how to use them in our classrooms.”

and discussion. (For example, the teacher’s guide that accompanies Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* focuses on questions such as “What is an ideal society?” and “What does it mean for a person or institution to have authority?”) The program includes shared reading (the teacher reads to students), partner reading (students work in pairs), and a family involvement component. Support includes teacher’s guides that suggest activities for oral language, reading, and writing. Additionally, extensive professional development opportunities are available, including weeklong courses, videotapes, and on-site consultation.

Angela explains that *Reading for Real* reflects what research shows about effective strategies for improving students’ reading and writing. “I have to say that when I first heard about this program, I was skeptical. I hate guides; they’re so structured. But *Reading for Real* does just enough. There are no mobiles, no dioramas for students to make. It teaches what real readers do. After you read a book, what do you do? You recommend it to a friend. So *Reading for Real* focuses on the really important things: talking about the books, exploring their themes, learning about new words and new ideas, writing to respond and to understand, making connections and experiencing different perspectives. All the research shows that reading more helps spelling and helps improve vocabulary. The more you read, the better writer you become. The program really lets kids enjoy good books. But it also does give you tools, such as Venn diagrams, to help students organize their thoughts. And the professional development gave us experience in using these tools.”

Angela describes the initial phase of professional development for the first group of six teachers in her district who used *Reading for Real* and were then trained to become teacher leaders in their schools. “Over the course of the first couple of years, staff from the Developmental Studies Center [the developers of *Reading for Real*] came to our system several times and did professional development sessions with teachers. In addition to this in-district training, we had access to videotapes that Developmental Studies produced. The videotapes have great examples of teachers implementing strategies for reading, questioning, and writing. That was very helpful. Then in the summer six of us went out to Developmental Studies in California for a week to receive training. The training was very good, and it was intensive. We went eight hours a day and had homework every night. We read the



books and did the activities and writing ourselves. Then we got to think and talk about how to use them in our classrooms. We also talked about the videotapes and learned a lot about the questioning process and effective questioning techniques. We also learned how to build learning communities and help students discuss with each other, rather than talking to the teacher all the time.

“When we were out in California, the developers also gave us a very good manual to guide us in working with other teachers. We went through the manual and practiced ways to introduce the program to new teachers and to support continuing teachers. When we came back to the district, we did several professional development sessions with new teachers. We ended up with two teacher leaders in each school who are in charge of the program, and help the other teachers. All of us are now experienced with *Reading for Real* and are able to help other teachers who are struggling with some aspects of the program.”

Angela also reports that the teachers who are using the program continue to meet to discuss reading selections, strategies for teaching, and effective ways to integrate the program into the whole middle-grades curriculum. “We have a really diverse population of kids, and *Reading for Real* has a wide range of selections. We take a lot of time to make our selections. We read and discuss them before we actually make a commitment to use them, and eventually the whole grade level decides which books to use. Also, we look for ways to connect the reading selections to other components of the middle-grades curriculum. In fact, we’ve added nonfiction books so that we can relate the readings more easily to the social studies curriculum, while we are teaching kids about nonfiction as a genre. For example, there’s one book we use when students are studying presidential politics. We look for those kinds of connections.

“Also, if a book doesn’t work, we try to analyze why. We may decide not to use it again, or we might change the grade level when we use it. We also look at the kids’ writing, and share scoring guides and strategies for working with kids on their writing.”

Looking back on the district’s experience with *Reading for Real*, Angela notes that the schools that initially elected to use the program were schools that had a high percentage of low-achieving students. “We were really in search of something to assist us. And



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our scores have increased—those schools are not low-achieving schools any more. I can’t say that *Reading for Real* is the only reason for that, because there are other things going on in these schools, but I feel pretty sure it’s a factor. And the professional development and support that went along with the curriculum have had a big impact.”

Professional communities and ongoing learning opportunities

“The biggest influence on how I teach is my being a part of the National Writing Project. I think that has had the greatest impact on how I shape my classroom and how I address student learning,” says Lois Allen Wills, who has taught fourth through eighth grade language arts for over 20 years in a small rural district in the South. Lois is currently spending a year working with teachers across the district as part of a National Writing Project secondary literacy initiative based at a nearby state university, but will then return to her middle-grades classroom.

The National Writing Project, which was founded in 1974, endures in over 150 sites across the country. It has two key elements: (1) bringing teachers together to write themselves and learn to improve their teaching of writing, and (2) building local capacity to replicate this model.

Lois’s experience, of being first a participant in National Writing Project institutes and then a teacher leader herself, is typical. She credits her 15-year involvement in the National Writing Project for inspiring her both as a writer and a teacher. “I started to see myself as a writer, and started reading and hearing writer-educators like Don Graves and Don Murray. Through the mentoring I received, I realized that the way to bring my students into the world of writers is for me to be a writer and to model writing. Five years ago, I was a Fellow for the National Writing Project at the state university. That experience was encouraging. I came to understand that I am responsible for my own professional development. If I become a better reader and writer, and model this for my students, they are likely to do the same. I have to understand and use the writing process myself if I’m ever going to be able to teach it to my students.”

Lois reports that her National Writing Project experiences have also encouraged her to create an ongoing study group in her own school. In keeping with the National Writing Project philosophy,



members of this group participate together in reading, writing, and discussion, and also consider how to improve the teaching of language arts in their school. Lois talks about the evolution of the group, and how it prompted an initiative to increase parents' involvement in their children's literacy education.

“One of the things that I did in my own school during the first year of this research project was that I got permission from my principal to have an after-school gathering for professional development; I called it ‘Professional Conversations.’ I did that every week after school, once a week, and just had an open door, served snacks, and invited people to come and talk. We read a shared text, and we had a discussion. We read selections by authors like Lucy Calkins, Don Graves, Nancie Atwell, and Lisa Delpit. What emerged from those conversations was that we really need to focus on doing a better job of teaching writing. We need to teach revision. We need to teach skills explicitly and give students opportunities to practice them in the context of their writing. We also decided that parents are very important, because we only have the kids for six hours a day. The kids are with their families and their own communities for hundreds of hours every year. So we need to make better connections with parents to help them find ways to further support their kids' writing. It's not easy to do this in middle school. Kids don't usually want parents around. So we had to find creative ways to get parents involved.

“As a result of those discussions, I've started doing some things to connect better with parents, and I have better relationships with parents now than I have ever had in all of the years that I've taught. One thing I've done is to videotape what's happening in my classroom and send it home with a journal in which parents respond to what they see happening in my classroom. That has increased the trust level from parents. It's also allowed parents to have input and to help me understand their kids better. Sometimes they see things on the videos that I don't see, and they ask me questions that help me to see new ways to approach students. Or they'll write a response in the journal about their child that will help me to understand something about what the child may or may not have done in their writing or their oral presentation. Students also get to see their parents in new ways—as collaborators, writers, partners with teachers. Through the National Writing Project, I'm also learning about other parent involvement

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efforts. The National Writing Project has over 40 programs to create partnerships with parents to benefit their kids.”

The parent involvement resources are just one example of the way the National Writing Project connects teachers to sources of information and colleagues around the country that can supplement local professional development resources. Lois notes, “The National Writing Project gives you access to all kinds of resources you wouldn’t necessarily have just from your own school or district. This year I’m on a National Writing Project online mailing list that identifies promising websites, and the teachers I’m working with are trying some of these out with their kids. I just keep growing and learning as a writer and a teacher, and I see that happening for other teachers as well, and for the kids with their writing.”

Authors Mentioned

The following books are examples of works by the authors that are mentioned by teachers in the vignettes in this chapter.

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