



We Are All Leaders of Reading

“You’ve got to hear this! A fifth grader missed his bus stop this afternoon because he was reading a book! Isn’t that great?”

—Dr. Wygal, Principal

A half hour or so after school, I (Laura) was walking down the hall of Daniel Morgan Intermediate School where I had been coaching for a year when I heard Dr. Wygal, the principal, calling my name. I stopped and turned around to see him trotting toward me, an excited expression on his face. “You’ve got to hear this! A fifth grader missed his bus stop this afternoon because he was reading a book! Isn’t that great?”

I burst out laughing, because it was such quirky news

“The bus driver returned the boy to the school, and I drove him home just now.” Dr. Wygal beamed with pride. My amusement turned to joy. *We’d done it*, I thought to myself. The principal and I high-fived like students ourselves.

Getting lost in a book, like this fifth grader had done, is one sign of a healthy school-wide culture of reading.

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The Simplicity of Success

Getting to this bus-stop-missing point was the culmination of a year-long professional journey at this middle school. I had collaborated with the librarian and all the fifth-grade teachers, helping them make the transition to a Reader's Workshop approach. The teachers had done an amazing job shifting from reading aloud four novels a year to embracing independent reading and other workshop pedagogies. Now, fifth-grade students began each day with 15 minutes of independent reading followed by an interactive read-aloud. The teachers devoted the rest of their one-hour reading block to instructional reading. Here's the game changer: During their daily ELA classes, students read for at least 35 minutes.

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In *Schools Full of Readers*, we share doable plans for getting this culture of reading going in grades K–8, in any school, no matter the budget, no matter what. What makes our approach unique is that we weave our professional knowledge as “leader” and “practitioner” into a tight knit, and share information that brings about reading achievement because of collaboration. At the risk of sounding glib, helping all students become avid readers is simpler than we think. We have to stop working in silos, and instead find the will and the tools to collaborate. Students pick up on our vibe, of course, so if we can rally around an effort to inspire everyone to read more often, children will catch this wave.

Listen & Look For Checklists

One of the most powerful tools we have used are checklists to guide the professional learning in school. They are so simple and easy to use, and compel us to name goals and track progress. We have included reading-focused checklists in this book so you can benefit from them too. We call them Listen & Look For Checklists because, after all, listening to students and colleagues is critical. They are designed for administrators, literacy coaches, and teachers to use flexibly. You will find three checklists in each chapter, beginning with chapter two. Here is a brief overview of how they are organized:

Chapter 2: Focus on classroom environment

Chapter 3: Focus on school culture

Chapter 4: Focus on building relationships to affect change

Chapter 5: Focus on interactive read-aloud, instructional and independent reading, and students' self-evaluation

The checklists provide everyone with common language and best reading practices. They will help you get a bead on current routines, support collaborative learning, and celebrate progress. You can use them as jumping-off points for professional growth as well—every item on each checklist is a worthy literacy practice, routine, or behavior worthy of study.

To get you launched, please listen to the two podcasts of vision-setting and getting started. To access them, see think QR (quick response) codes on the back cover.



Use the checklists in each chapter as the basis for starting and sustaining a school-wide initiative focused on developing a culture of reading.

Use for Teacher Self-Evaluation

We also encourage teachers to use these same checklists for self-evaluation and as tools for their professional growth. Consider these checklists road maps that will take teachers to their targeted destination. Rely on them as you transform the vision of school-wide independent reading into a reality.

Prep for a Classroom Observation

Teachers might use the checklists to invite an administrator, literacy coach, or colleague to observe one or more classes. Or, the principal can use the checklists to negotiate observations with teachers, providing valuable focus, transparency, and purpose. In other words, not every item on a checklist has to be observed all at once.

Below are some tips for introducing and using the Listen & Look For Checklists. Whether you are a principal observing a teacher or a teacher supporting a grade-level colleague, professional growth and a collaborative spirit comes about when purposes are clearly stated and everyone is part of the decision-making. Everyone needs to feel on equal footing, and not evaluated, but supported.

Using the Listen & Look For Checklists: Tips for Success

Form a team of school administrators and literacy coaches who will take their school's reading temperature to assess what's working and to pinpoint needs.	Consider the amount of time each observer will spend in a class as well as the number of days. Observe an entire class or plan 15-minute visits on different days at the start, in the middle, and near the end of a class.	Decide with the team which teachers will be observed and discuss the purpose of observations.	Develop a shared list of who will observe specific teachers. Avoid overlap unless this is intentional.	Let teachers know the observation schedule.	Circulate and support the teacher in addition to watching.	Take notes after you leave each observation.	Schedule a follow-up conversation with the teacher and open by sharing positives noticed.	Choose one or two items you see as potential professional growth needs, and frame them as questions to encourage reflection and discussion.	Take notes on the conversation, and share with the teacher and your team.	Meet with the teacher to decide on next steps.	Share and discuss with your team the Listen & Look For Checklist results and your conversation with the teacher.	Use reflection and raising questions to determine next steps.
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Collaborative Shared Leadership

Tools like the checklists need people to use them well. Let's turn now to ideas for building a great team. Principals, teachers, the librarian, and literacy coaches can create a culture of reading when they commit to these three actions: share leadership, collaborate, and communicate.

Effective schools succeed in different ways, and yet they all engage in some form of shared leadership. Studies show when schools embrace shared leadership teachers improve through meaningful interactions, and the end result is students also progress (Quintero, 2017). Implicit in that statement is that teachers are helping to shape the change, and are equal partners in the collaboration.

We have seen impressive schools that thrive because the principal is an instructional leader who sees himself as a leader among leaders and a learner among learners. The teachers and other staff are included from the get-go in developing an instructional vision. This scenario builds astounding momentum toward a common goal.

In other successful schools, however, the principal may not happen to be an instructional expert, yet she or he empowers others in the school to develop that vision. The principal may be a brilliant outside ambassador instead, clearing roadblocks for staff and students to achieve their goals. The most important thing is that everyone has clarity about one's role, so there are no weak or broken links in the system due to a lack of transparency.



The beauty of collaborative shared leadership is that it's not essential for the principal to be an instructional leader. Someone else can be. But everyone needs to support teachers.

Why Before What

Simon Sinek is a well-known spokesperson for transformational leadership. In his book *Start with the Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, Sinek makes the point that instead of starting the process of change with a conversation about the what, we start with understanding the why. The why comes first because it reveals information that can inspire all school members to embrace the vision of building a culture of reading. Writes Sinek:

"There are leaders and there are those who lead. Leaders hold a position of power or influence. Those who lead inspire us. Whether individuals or organizations, we follow those who lead not because we have to but because we want to. We follow those who lead not for them, but for ourselves. And it's those who start with 'why' that have the ability to inspire those around them."

Instead of starting the process of change with a conversation about the what, we start with understanding the why.

So, what is the why behind having schools full of readers? To explore this, we've set up a chart (see next page) with two categories: the why behind reading and language development and the why behind reading and personal development.

As you meet with your leadership team, you will adjust some of your thoughts as well as have ideas to add. Once you determine your why for creating a culture of reading in your school, the moment is ripe for the principal and his team to invite staff to come on board.

The Why of Reading

Reading and Language Development	Reading and Personal Development
Makes world literature available to all socioeconomic levels. Students can learn about diverse cultures and develop the skills needed to live in a global world, including analytical and critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity.	Validates students' lives and struggles as they read about characters and people with similar problems and observe multiple ways of coping and overcoming challenges.
Provides knowledge and enlarges life experiences through informational and fictional texts.	Offers enjoyment and entertainment as students read series, discover favorite authors and genres, and develop literary tastes.
Supports meaningful talk when students pose questions and discuss them with a partner, a small group, or the entire class. Students learn to mentally refine their ideas in order to communicate them accurately to peers.	Fosters self-confidence as students see themselves in books, discover who they are as people and as readers, and relate to others over books.
Develops stamina and the ability to focus and concentrate on reading for at least 30 minutes.	Opens worlds of the past, present, and future, always expanding readers' knowledge and experiences while developing empathy and compassion.
Expands vocabulary as students meet the same words used in different contexts and learn new words.	Cultivates independence as learners when students read widely and improve their skill and expertise to the point that a teacher/mentor is a nice-to-have but not a need-to-have.
Strengthens writing as students read with a writer's eye, learn about authors' craft, and transfer this knowledge to their writing.	Nurtures imagination when students develop their own pictures while reading and step into the shoes of characters and people to think and feel like they do.
Improves memory of plot, interactions of multiple characters, and detailed information as students read longer and more complex texts.	Provides individuals with a peaceful, contemplative, and reflective experience that students can use to be inspired, informed, calmed, entertained, and recharged throughout their lives.

Transformational Leaders Inspire

Once the principal and the leadership team have shared their why for a culture of reading with staff, it's important for staff to weigh in. Set aside a few meetings for discussions and to adjust and refine your why. For a reading culture to develop, the principal and his or her team should attend all meetings, not only to learn but also to listen to staff's concerns and questions and be responsive.

Next, begin the process of collaborating with teachers to transform the why and its resulting vision into reality. Based on our experience, the principal and literacy coaches play starring roles in helping staff move from the why to the goals of the what. Keep in mind that the transfer from knowing your why to building your what can take reflection and time.

Moving from the Why to the What

Once the whys are named, invest in the power of threes. That is, narrow the school-wide goals you take on to a palm-size amount. As Mike Schmoker writes in his book *Focus* (2011), the underperformance of schools can be directly attributable to a failure to implement three simple, well-known elements: a common curriculum, sound lessons, and authentic literacy. We know what to do to succeed. It's all simpler than we think.



Ask yourself: Do you have healthy collaboration in your workplace? If not, what first step might you take to improve the situation so every faculty member feels empowered?

Getting Clear on the Can-Dos

Discuss and name the conditions and resources it takes to reach the goals in concrete, actionable, and measurable steps, rather than generally worded educational ideals. Often these steps help create the scope of the work, name the players, and set a collaborative premise. For example, creating schools full of readers is our vision. However, to reach that goal requires a set of agreements and actions, such as:

- Staff and administrators agree that a culture of reading is a common goal.
- To create a culture of reading, we must include all subjects, even physical education and the arts, in the initiative.
- Classroom libraries will be in all classes.
- Teachers' professional learning will begin with exploratory discussions among administrators and staff and then include observations of classes with a culture of reading both inside and outside the district.

The actionable steps schools identify will vary and depend on where a school is with creating a culture of reading and the available funds.

- *Agree that our goal is to develop a culture of reading.*
- *Include all subjects, even physical education and the arts.*
- *Curate diverse classroom libraries in all subjects and create an inviting media center.*
- *Involve teachers, administrators, and staff in exploratory discussions and observe classes with a culture of reading in place.*

The Principal's Perspective

As a principal, I (Evan) prioritize my budget. My goal is to use money for key school-wide initiatives recognizing I have a limited amount to spend. Because I believe in a culture of reading, I allocate money every year (not once in a while) for classroom libraries and for our school's media center. Now, if reading is a priority for the principal and staff, then it's beneficial to review class schedules and decide whether teachers need additional time for language arts as well as for support/enrichment classes. As with any initiative, teacher input and a collaborative spirit is always the best path forward. My goal is teacher agency. I always seek opportunities for staff to learn at team, department, and full faculty meetings and continually refine their skill and expertise. And remember, the principal and other administrators need to attend professional learning sessions.



Evan Robb in the media center. "I allocate money every year for classroom libraries and for the school's media center."

5 Routines for School-wide Collaboration

The following five routines work to ensure seamless collaboration and communication between school leaders and teachers.

1. Schedule meetings during team and/or department common planning times and note them on the school calendar. Use full faculty meetings to bring groups together and keep everyone in the know.
2. Summarize key points by having a teacher take notes on essential ideas, then email them to staff.
3. Call for volunteers by asking teachers from each grade to volunteer to gather noteworthy information about creating a school-wide culture of reading from videos and articles.
4. Follow up to share at a scheduled meeting. Have teachers share what they've learned and provide copies of articles for others to read.
5. Create a work-in-progress plan wherein the principal, another school administrator, the literacy coach, and three teachers collaborate to develop it. Next, email the plan to everyone and ask for feedback. Then, the small group revises the plan and resends it. This back-and-forth inclusive process builds teacher advocacy and a commitment to the initiative.



Develop a work-in-progress plan, get feedback, and refine it. Great collaborative energy develops when everyone's voice is included.

The Role of Literacy Coaches

The best literacy coaches offer instructional and emotional support for teachers. When doubts creep into teachers' hearts and minds, coaches name progress, encourage teachers to take a deep breath, slow down, reflect, and try again.

Successful coaches are highly skilled, experienced, empathetic. We urge coaches to teach one class and maintain a strong connection to students as well as stepping themselves in issues teachers face daily. We advise that coaches don't send reports to administrators about teachers' progress. For the coach-teacher relationship to flourish, it takes building trust and developing a confidential relationship. If you are a teacher working with a coach, invite administrators to observe classes when you both feel the timing is right. This doesn't mean we are suggesting keeping administrators out of the loop. Instead it's about timing for the teacher who is trying to grow. After the first observation, teacher, coach, and administrator discuss and decide on next steps. Will there be one more teacher invite? Can the principal drop in unannounced? Decisions depend on the teacher's confidence in his/her growth. When the principal understands where the teacher is, knows the coach is there nudging, modeling, supporting, he/she will give the teacher space and time to learn, try, sometimes fail, but always grow.

Teacher Wish List

Teachers are amazing with their openness. It's not every professional who would welcome someone into their workspace. To help the teacher-coach relationship thrive, here are insights from teachers on what works:

- "We want to feel a personal connection with you. Our classrooms are emotional places where we teach what we deeply value. If we feel connected with you, we are more inclined to rethink our practices."
- "I like to have choices when I learn with a coach. I want you to know what I would like to work on, and hear your perspective on possible focus points."
- "Sharing what you value most about professional study, and then sticking by those values, means a lot. Invite our input and our values too."
- "One of the most pivotal moments when she referred to our work as a partnership. That meant she recognized that we were learning from each other."



As a principal, Evan helps cultivate a school full of readers by being an ally to students rather than an authority.

10 Ways the Principal and Leadership Team Foster a Reading Culture

1. Fund class and school libraries. We know many initiatives compete for a place in a school's budget. However, if creating a culture of reading is a priority, funding should be ongoing. Coaches and teachers can also apply for grants.
2. Become a role model. Conversations the principal and other administrators have with teachers, students, the school librarian, and parents should promote the school's commitment to creating a culture of reading.
3. Share the research at team, department, and full faculty meetings. You might start with leadership team members suggesting articles and videos, and then ...
4. Extend the invitation to all teachers. The more background knowledge on topics like independent and instructional reading and a student-centered approach teachers have, the faster they'll invest in building a school filled with readers.
5. Read aloud to ELA classes a favorite book from your childhood. Encourage other staff to read aloud to students. Elementary school administrators and teachers can create read-aloud videos and post these on the school's website for families to use.
6. Discuss reading at team, department, and faculty meetings. We suggest the principal initiate this discussion, but then invite members of his leadership team and teachers to share reading snapshots, successes, and their personal feelings about reading.
7. Drop into classes during independent reading. Catch students enjoying reading and celebrate with positive feedback.
8. Feature short book talks and reviews. Morning announcements are a great time for the principal, students, or teachers to pitch a favorite book. You can also include student book reviews in a monthly e-newsletter.
9. Ask teachers to post what they're reading on their classroom door and update the list each time they complete a book. Extend this invitation to administrators and staff, reserve a bulletin board in the library to post books, and show students how much the adults at school value reading.
10. Commend exemplary reading teachers in an email or written note and always use specific praise. Taking the time to do this shows how much you appreciate what they do.

Outside Consultants

Sometimes the principal has enough funds to bring in an outside consultant for several visits. This professional development is in addition to the ongoing self-directed and collaborative learning that's in place. This works best if the principal invites staff to express learning needs first, and be a part of the scheduling and debriefing process. Being inclusive supports teacher buy-in.

The best literacy coaches offer instructional and emotional support for teachers.

Intensive collaboration and communication improves everyone's morale, and dare we say it, brings joy back into teaching and learning. A staff's focus on developing a culture of reading can also inspire teachers to feel more confident in sharing books they enjoy and love with students and in turn, students share with another. When students read widely at school and home, they develop analytical and critical thinking as well as enlarge their reading, speaking, and writing vocabularies (Atwell, 2014; Keene, 2018; Miller, 2009).

Concluding Thoughts

Developing a culture of reading, like any school reform initiative, takes commitment and leadership. Early in this chapter we asserted that it's easier than we think, and we stand by that statement. It's easier because it's a focused goal involving one of humanity's most rewarding habits: reading. In the next chapter, we turn to what we need in place in terms of books and classroom libraries.