Rationale for a Schoolwide Focus on Literacy

School leaders like you are charged with improving student achievement and increasing graduation rates. This, as you know, is a daunting task. As students move through the grades, the task of providing high-quality education at all levels requires multifaceted and systemic decision making that often makes it hard to know where to start and, once started, how to stay on course.

However, we know that schools that specifically embark on a journey to improve literacy and learning have a better chance of graduating greater numbers of students who are active learners, proficient readers, and fluent writers. These schools are willing to prioritize literacy as a central mission of the school and to organize for action around this central theme. And in school after school, it is working. Higher numbers of graduates, more engagement with school by students and teachers, and higher test scores attest to the promise of this route.

During the past ten years, we have observed school leaders who know a great deal about what works in the essential areas of systemic school reform, teacher professional development, leadership coaching, and use of data. The key, however, is to put this body of knowledge to work as part of a schoolwide literacy improvement effort that will directly impact student literacy and achievement. Our work with school leaders throughout the country has shown us how a sustained focus on literacy can be used as a lever for school improvement. The literacy leadership process described in *Taking the Lead on Adolescent Literacy* will support you and your colleagues as you work to ensure students are prepared to meet their future as readers, writers, and thinkers.

WHY FOCUS ON LITERACY?

In multiple studies and policy reports, literacy (or the lack of literacy) has been closely linked to dropout rates, discipline issues, grades, employability, success in higher education, civic participation, and 21st-century skills. Indeed, literacy is essential for success in almost every area of life. Literacy is far more than the ability to read and write basic text. Rather, literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and think in order to learn, communicate, and make meaning of increasingly complex print and online texts. Literacy and content

learning are deeply intertwined. If one struggles as a reader or writer, it is nearly impossible to succeed academically.

Whether your school is large or small, in an urban, suburban, or rural setting, your students will benefit from ongoing instruction and practice that enable them to meet the literacy demands of college, career, and good citizenship. As you think about students in your school, you know that some are performing considerably below grade level. Others, however, may be reading and writing on grade level but continue to struggle with the ever increasingly complex texts they are expected to comprehend and respond to. Some students may excel in the areas of reading and writing and, as a result, need more rigor and challenge to avoid boredom and academic apathy. Others may be unable to transfer literacy skills across all content areas or read strategically, analytically, or fluently when confronted with advanced texts. In all of these instances, it is critical that as a school leader you are able to plan, implement, and troubleshoot a literacy improvement effort that meets the literacy needs of all students in your school.

Ensuring that all students develop high levels of literacy requires schools to make a concerted, coordinated effort to improve students' proficiency as readers, writers, and critical and creative thinkers. This, in turn, makes possible increased student achievement, which leads to higher graduation rates. Our premise is simple—and is borne out by numerous examples: a systemic literacy improvement effort can be a powerful lever for school improvement. This systemic approach to improving literacy in Grades 4 through 12 involves the following synergistic actions:

- The development and communication of a compelling vision
- Ongoing collaboration between administrators and teachers
- Unflinching, data-based assessment
- The setting of clear, measurable goals that address important issues related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and school culture
- The development of a quality literacy action plan
- Active implementation of the plan
- Monitoring of progress toward stated goals

These tasks are challenging and complex. But they are doable. Accomplishing these tasks through a focused, collaborative process can produce dramatic results for improved student literacy and learning.

Support Provided by This Book and the Literacy Leadership Process

This book includes field-tested and practical tools, approaches, rubrics, resources, and strategies that school and district leaders across the country have found helpful as they design, implement, and monitor a literacy initiative. Whether you are a building level administrator, a district or school

literacy coach, a superintendent, supervisor, coordinator, or literacy team leader, this book will give you and your colleagues a process to enact systemic improvement of students' abilities as readers, writers, and thinkers. As you read this section of the book, you may be thinking the following:

- *Where do we start? I've already got more than I can handle. We do not have a literacy team, and I am not sure what the team would do if we had one.*
- *Another new initiative? We already have a school improvement plan. Our goal this year is dropout prevention and raising test scores. How does this conversation about literacy connect to these goals?*
- *Literacy is not my job. The English Department takes care of this.*

You and your colleagues can use this book to guide you through a five-stage, continuous improvement process. The process builds on best practices outlined in the research-and-practice literature as well as the successful literacy improvement efforts of many schools across the country. Using this literacy leadership process, you can work collaboratively with other teacher leaders and administrators to develop a literacy action plan and implement, monitor, and evaluate its success.

As with all effective action planning processes, the literacy leadership process described in this book is cyclical, beginning by assessing, implementing, and monitoring, and ending by reassessing, reviewing, and adjusting for the following year. What makes this process more than a general action planning template is the specificity of the materials. Everything in this process is designed to support the design and implementation of an effective literacy action plan in upper elementary, middle, and high schools.

Relationship of the Literacy Leadership Process to the *Taking Action Literacy Leadership Model*

The literacy leadership process is based on the *Taking Action Literacy Leadership Model* that was developed through a project funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The model was designed to answer the question "What do literacy leaders need to do to successfully improve student literacy and learning in Grades 4 through 12?" The model is based on multiple data sources, including strategies that successful principals use to improve student literacy in their schools, the research and practice literature, feedback from educational leaders throughout the country, and reviews by a national advisory board. The model is fully described in *Taking Action on Adolescent Literacy: An Implementation Guide for School Leaders* (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007). The model incorporates two synergistic components: goal areas (represented in the graphic by a center circle surrounded by two concentric bands) and action points (represented in the graphic by a five-point star).
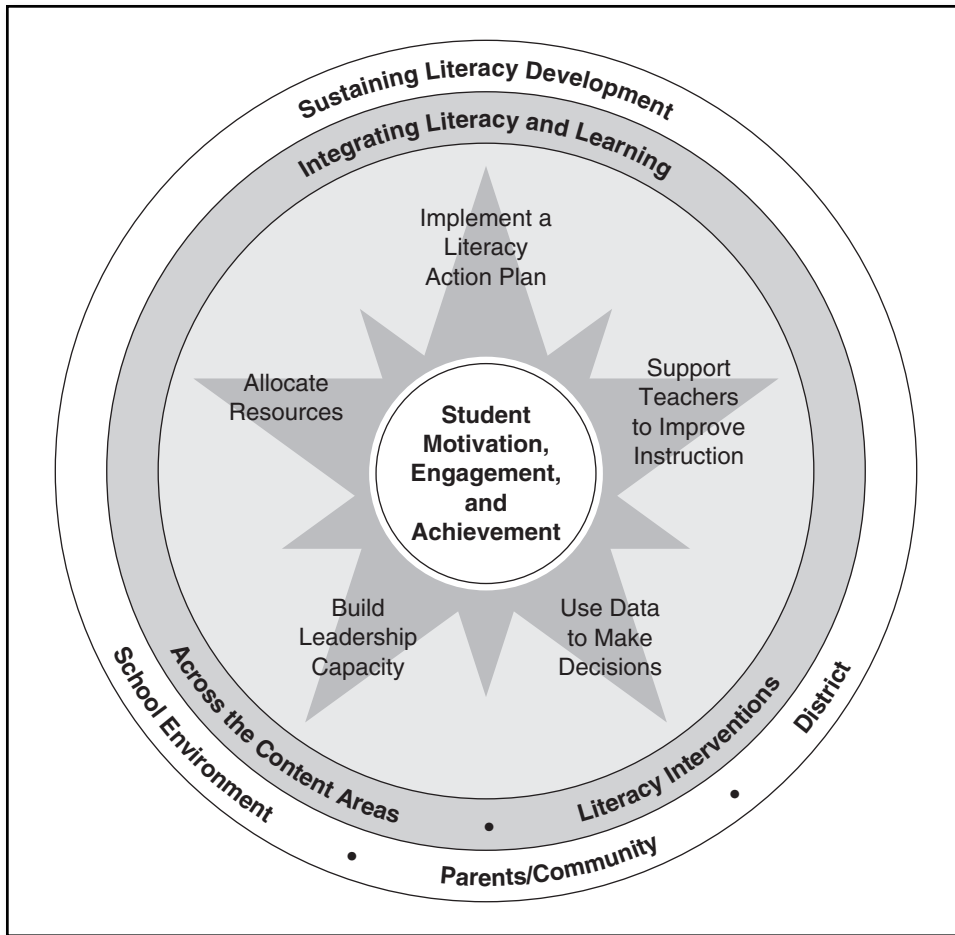
Taking Action Literacy Leadership Model

Understanding the components of the *Taking Action Literacy Leadership Model* helps a literacy team understand the larger picture of school change that leads to a sustainable literacy improvement effort. The set of six literacy action rubrics that are the centerpiece of the literacy leadership process are aligned with this model.

Goal Areas of the Model

The goal areas of the model correspond to the three critical outcomes of a schoolwide literacy improvement effort. At the center of the literacy initiative is *Student Motivation, Engagement, and Achievement.* When students are motivated and engaged to read and write in school, they can improve their abilities as readers, writers, and thinkers. Improved achievement follows, both in content knowledge and in literacy and learning skills. The second goal area is *Integrating Literacy and Learning,* which focuses on the school's instructional offerings and has two components: *Literacy Across the Content Area*s and *Literacy Intervention*s. *Literacy Across the Content Areas* includes the content-focused courses that students take as they move through the grades (e.g., math, science, social studies, English/language arts, art, music, and foreign language). Students grow as

readers and writers when they learn to apply literacy skills (such as activating prior knowledge, summarizing, questioning, and sequencing) to complex content area text. *Literacy Interventions* targets those students whose performance is significantly below their grade placement level. Literacy interventions can be offered in many formats, including an academic literacy class, an English language learners (ELL) teacher team teaching with an English/language arts teacher, or before and after school tutoring sessions. Whatever the format, literacy interventions are intended to provide targeted assistance to under-performing students so that they become more proficient readers and writers. Addressing the literacy and learning needs of all students in a school typically requires a focus on both components (content area and intervention) of *Integrating Literacy and Learning* to meet students' literacy and learning needs.

The goal area represented by the outer band, *Sustaining Literacy Development,* represents three important components necessary to sustain and promote a school-based literacy improvement initiative. First, it is critical to establish a *Literacy-Rich School Environment.* This includes a school climate that actively communicates to students that they are important contributing members of the school community through displays of current student work in hallways and classrooms, evidence of literacy-related student activities, and celebrations of progress. The school environment is also, of course, positively or adversely influenced by the policies, structures, schedule, and practices of the school. When these policies and structures focus on supporting all students to grow as readers, writers, and thinkers, a literacy-rich culture can be developed and maintained.

Parents and Community Members can also provide critical resources for student literacy development. When schools work collaboratively to invite and access the support and opportunities provided by their families and through the community, students get the message that they and their futures are seen as a valuable asset worth investing in.

Finally, *District Support* can mitigate the many roadblocks and pitfalls that often accompany fledgling initiatives. Districts can broker resources across schools, establish literacy improvement as a priority across the district, and facilitate school-based efforts. District leaders can provide schools with resources to support teachers as they embark on a new instructional model where a strict focus on content delivery shifts to an expectation that teachers provide literacy-embedded content instruction. District leadership can also provide direct support to instructional leaders through professional development and to school-based literacy leadership teams as they carry out their literacy action plans.

Action Points of the Model

The five action points located in the center of the model describe the actions that literacy leaders need to take to initiate and sustain a literacy improvement effort successfully: (1) implement a plan, (2) support teachers to improve instruction, (3) use data, (4) build leadership capacity, and (5) allocate resources. These action points are not necessarily sequential. However, our experience with schools has shown us that designing and implementing an effective literacy action plan is critical to achieving results. Without a solid plan, the good

intentions of teachers and leaders may evolve into random activities that lack cohesion and purpose. But developing and implementing a plan to improve literacy can be complicated and time-consuming. Further, many plans get developed that do not ever get implemented. The quality of the plan only matters if it is put into action to improve students' literacy and learning. A guided process for developing and implementing an effective literacy plan is, therefore, the central topic of this book.

Literacy leaders take many different approaches to initiating and sustaining literacy improvement. Some begin with professional development and supporting teachers to improve instruction, some begin with collecting and examining the data, some begin by establishing a literacy team and building leadership capacity, and some begin by locating resources to support the effort. Sooner or later, we found that a successful literacy improvement initiative requires all five of these actions.

These actions correspond to the five action points on the graphic of the *Taking Action Literacy Leadership Model.* You will learn more about these action points in Chapter 4 (Stage 4) when the team uses the action points to troubleshoot issues and challenges that can accompany the plan's implementation. The action points are highlighted again in Chapters 6 and 7 where they are used to show action steps that school and district leaders can take to ensure adequate support of school-based literacy improvement efforts.

A second book, *Meeting the Challenge of Adolescent Literacy: Practical Ideas for Literacy Leaders* (Irvin, Meltzer, Mickler, Phillips, & Dean, 2009), is also aligned to the *Taking Action Literacy Leadership Model.* This book was written to assist literacy leaders as they address common challenges and barriers to literacy improvement from an issues-based perspective. Using the action points of the *Taking Action Literacy Leadership Model,* the book provides ideas and approaches that literacy leaders can use to address sixteen critical issues. The tools included in *Meeting the Challenge of Adolescent Literacy* may be particularly useful to you during the implementation stage of the action planning process (Chapter 4, Stage 4). Resource E at the back of this book contains a matrix showing resources from the first two books, *Taking Action on Adolescent Literacy* and *Meeting the Challenge of Adolescent Literacy,* and how the resources correspond to the five stages of the literacy leadership process.

HOW THE LITERACY LEADERSHIP PROCESS WAS DEVELOPED

The four authors of this book have spent many years working in schools and districts helping educators develop, implement, and monitor schoolwide literacy action plans. In our work with literacy leadership teams, we have noticed that well-meaning team members often want a quick solution to their literacy challenges. As a result, administrators or teacher leaders tend to identify a need and then procure a new program or add an additional course to meet that need. This fragmented approach, while well intended, often becomes narrow in focus and fails to put in place the structures and policies that make meaningful changes sustainable.

Over the past decade, we have developed a process that helps literacy leaders build a comprehensive, sustainable literacy improvement effort. This literacy leadership process is based on six literacy action rubrics that are aligned to the goal areas of the *Taking Action Literacy Leadership Model.* These rubrics have been field-tested over the past several years with school-based literacy teams in several states across the United States.

The next section of this book, Introduction to the Literacy Action Rubrics, introduces you to the first five literacy action rubrics that are school-based (the sixth rubric describes the district's role in supporting school-based literacy improvement efforts and is discussed in detail in Chapter 7). The components of each rubric are summarized so you can get an overview of the elements that are critical to a schoolwide literacy improvement effort. Descriptions of what these components look like in action at the upper elementary, middle, and high school levels can be found in Resource C. Literacy leadership teams that are charged with developing and implementing a literacy improvement plan will use the literacy action rubrics in both Stage 2 (Chapter 2) and Stage 5 (Chapter 5) of the literacy leadership process. Team members will find it helpful to refer back to the rubrics frequently to identify further needs, troubleshoot implementation, monitor progress, and refine action steps. School and district administrators can use the literacy action rubrics to come quickly up to speed with what needs to be addressed as part of a systemic focus on improving literacy. District administrators can use Literacy Action Rubric 6 to develop a districtwide literacy action plan that supports ongoing, school-based literacy improvement efforts.

THE FIVE-STAGE LITERACY LEADERSHIP PROCESS

You may have read school improvement plans that are well written and speak to the many needs of a school. We have found, however, that many improvement plans fail to specifically target literacy improvement as central to the school's mission even when literacy has been identified as an area that needs to be addressed. We find that many improvement plans also prescribe changes unrelated to the specific strengths and needs of the school or that the changes that are planned, while well-meaning, will not lead to the desired increases in student achievement. We suspect that in many cases those charged with improving student literacy and learning are not certain which steps would be most helpful to take.

The literacy leadership process outlined in this book is quite different from prescriptive approaches. We do not define your school's literacy needs, nor do we dictate which components your school literacy plan should include. Instead, the literacy leadership team assesses the literacy strengths and needs of the school using the literacy action rubrics that focus the team's attention on important components of literacy improvement. As the team proceeds through the five-stage process to develop and implement a customized plan, they address the needs of students and build on the existing capacity of the school. The five stages of the continuous improvement process described in this book represent the cyclical nature of assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring, review, and revision.
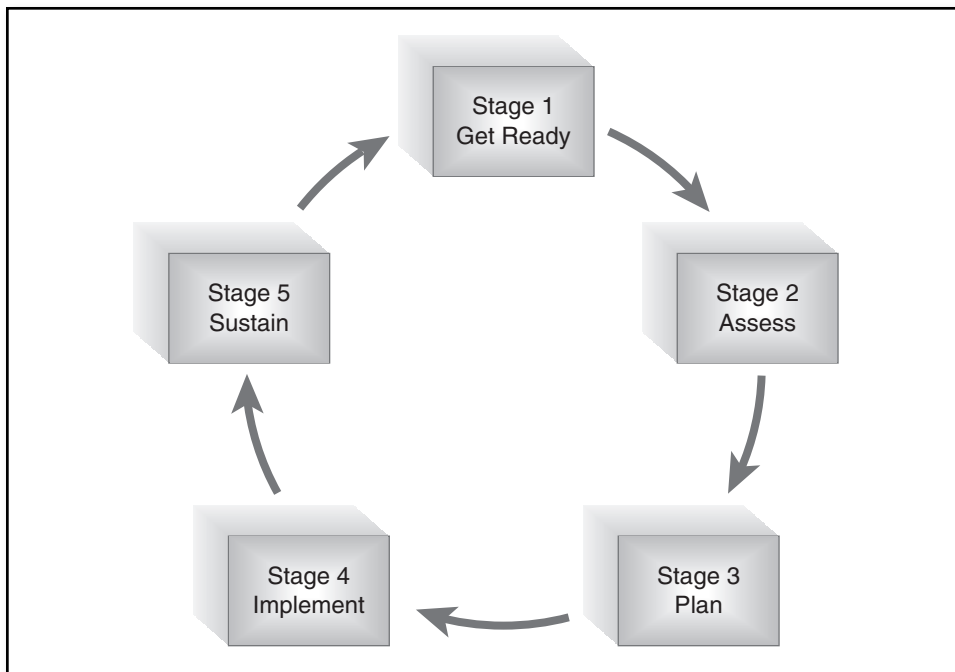
The Literacy Leadership Process

In Stage 1, you and your colleagues build the literacy leadership team and establish the need for a literacy improvement effort. You create, reestablish, or affirm the literacy leadership team and build a data-driven vision for a culture of literacy that will inspire the entire school to join forces in the literacy improvement initiative.

In Stage 2, the literacy team identifies the strengths of your school, examines your school data, uses the literacy action rubrics to assess your school's capacity to support systemic literacy development, and converts the self-assessment into measurable literacy action goals. This step-by-step process will help you and the other members of your literacy leadership team determine the scope of your literacy improvement effort and establish appropriate literacy action goals for your school.

In Stage 3, the literacy team develops implementation maps for each of the literacy action goals using the literacy action rubrics as a guide. We provide you with an implementation map development protocol so that you have a step-by-step process for developing your more formal literacy action plan. We also provide you with a sample implementation map to give you an idea of how action planning links to the goal areas and literacy action rubrics of the *Taking Action Literacy Leadership Model.* We suggest ways of soliciting feedback on your goals and your action plan from the entire school community and a process for finalizing your plan.

In Stage 4, you begin implementing your literacy action plan. The book provides support as you monitor and troubleshoot the implementation of the plan and assess the progress you have made toward your goals during the year. Since your plan has been designed by your literacy leadership team based on data and the team's collective understanding of your school, chances are it will not end up on a shelf gathering dust. Just to make sure,

however, we provide you with processes and tools to keep your plan's action steps front and center in the minds (and actions) of teachers and staff. We suggest strategies that the team can use to organize for action and generate more active participation in the initiative by students, teachers, and administrators. We provide you with strategies to troubleshoot implementation when the data suggest that progress is slow toward one or more of the action goals. We also remind you of the importance of celebrating progress, and we provide some ideas on how you might involve the school community in these celebrations.

In Stage 5, the literacy leadership team reviews summative data as outlined by the literacy action plan to determine if the goals have been met. Based on the data, the team decides whether to keep a specific goal and revise the action steps as needed, discard the goal, select a new goal, or perhaps to move to another goal area from the *Taking Action Literacy Leadership Model.* You will revisit the literacy action rubrics and will complete new implementation maps for new and revised goals. In this stage, we also provide strategies for evaluating the efficacy of the team and for sustaining momentum as you move forward with the literacy initiative into the next school year.

HOW TO USE THE LITERACY LEADERSHIP PROCESS

Taking the Lead on Adolescent Literacy is designed as a comprehensive support for developing, implementing, and monitoring a literacy action plan for your school. If you are at the very beginning of this effort, you will probably want to follow each of the steps sequentially. If you already have a literacy plan, you may wish to scan Stage 1 and see if you want to conduct any of these activities before moving on to Stages 2 and 3. If you proceed to Stage 2, you may wish to choose one or two rubrics, conduct a schoolwide assessment, and use this information to revise, refine, or update your current literacy improvement goals. If your school has been engaged in a literacy improvement effort for two to four years, you might scan the information in Stages 1, 2, and 3 to determine if you want to engage in any of these activities but may wish to focus your efforts on Stages 4 and 5.

We have field-tested the components of the process extensively to be sure that the process is both efficient and effective in supporting literacy improvement. Although you may begin at different stages of the process, it is essential that you carefully consider where to begin and what to include. Often, the omission of steps in the process will make more work in the long run. For example, taking the time to build consensus on important issues and sharing ownership of the literacy action plan facilitates implementation and ensures that there is greater participation by members of the school community.

Good luck! We hope *Taking the Lead on Adolescent Literacy* will provide the ongoing guidance you need to establish or sustain a robust literacy improvement effort in your school or district.