



Literacy Audit Report

For:

Skokie School District 73.5
2021-2022 School Year



Audit conducted, analyzed, and authored by The Educator Collaborative.

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Introduction

“My mother taught me that you can look at something, and people, and scenarios, endlessly and still find something new.”
- Ocean Vuong (PBS NewsHour, 2022)

At The Educator Collaborative, we see the process and resulting document of an Audit as an invitation—an invitation to see your work through fresh eyes, to step outside of the norms of your community and question, consider, and reflect on them anew. The path you take will be of your own choosing; likely leading to reaffirming some traditions, revising others, and perhaps jettisoning a few.

This invitation is shared recognizing that teaching and leading is a deeply personal vocation, one that we chose as if by calling, believing in our whole hearts that we can guide and shape opportunities for children that lead to rich, literate lives and, in turn, will build a brighter future for us all.

It is a vocation that can inspire us.
It is also a vocation that can pain us.

One that has stretched us as thin as possible over these past years of pandemic teaching. One that, even outside of this impossible time, often finds ways to pinch and prod us—the feeling of never enough time to do all we are asked to do, want to do, need to do. Small heartbreaks and small triumphs mark this field we have chosen.

This report is shared with a keen awareness of where we are in time, how exceedingly abnormal this current normal has been. We have been living in it, teaching in it, raising children in it, trying to survive it, too.

This report is built from the hopes and reflections of District 73.5 staff. To borrow from Katie Wood Ray’s description of her foundational book on writing instruction, *Wondrous Words* (NCTE, 1999): this is a “loud” Audit Report, it is filled with the voices of District 73.5 students, teachers, coaches, media specialists, support services, interventionists, and building and district leaders. It is likely both a challenging and hopeful report. One that builds on the professionalism of the staff and synthesizes hopeful next steps for all children, especially at this critical time in our shared history.

Thank you for the opportunity to join in your journey.

Notes

Note on staff quotes: Throughout this document, district voices are identified in blue. During the Audit visit, all participants were informed that quotes would be attributed to the Focus Group or walkthrough, but not to individuals. Quotes were typed in real time and occasional typos or close paraphrasing may be present. Quotes are pulled to illustrate patterns across the district or divergent points of view. Not every similar quote is presented and not every focus group is included in each set. Multiple quotes from the same group represent either different speakers or comments made at different times.

Note on charts from other sources: A few times in this report we refer to templates, charts, or other figures appearing in sources. Because those figures are property of their respective owners we have not reproduced them herein. We have noted page numbers and provided a brief description or quoted language. We do recommend referencing the identified page(s) of each source, when needed for clarity.

Note on typos: While we have done our best to avoid errors, please excuse any unintended typographical errors. If errors impede understanding, please send requests for correction to the district office which can compile requests and send them to us for review.

Methodology

The Skokie 73.5 Literacy Audit was conducted, in-person, March 15-18, 2022. Prior to this visit, documents were provided electronically for review.

“Living” Audit. Our approach is to conduct a “living” audit, one which involves stakeholders in the process of observation and professional reflection. Conversations are two-way, allowing us to strengthen stakeholders’ observation lenses while they help us gain a better understanding of the district members’ held values, goals, and histories.

Key parts of the audit:

- **Pre-visit document review.** We requested any documents that can help us have a clear snapshot of literacy teaching and learning and student outcomes.
- **In-person scheduled walkthroughs of classrooms, with stakeholders.** Stakeholders were given lenses and protocols to use within classrooms and then engaged in debrief conversations outside of them, honing their observation lenses along the experience. We encourage stakeholders to include cohorts of leaders, coaches, teachers, and other community members as appropriate and schedules allow.
 - **Walkthroughs lenses included:**
 - **Environment assessment.** Observing the story the classroom walls tell about the learners and what is being learned, looking for responsiveness, differentiation, engagement, and so on.
 - **Instructional assessment.** Observing teacher instructional delivery through literacy best practices and informed by professional tools (e.g. Danielson Frameworks).
 - **In-classroom student observations and conversations.** We prefer to talk with students within classrooms, during walkthroughs, instead of in out-of-class focus groups. We find these in-class conversations to be more immediate and authentic to their literacy experiences and mimic the real world opportunities stakeholders have with students.
 - **Student work assessment.** Observing available students process work, including notebooks, digital device files, portfolios, and so on.
- **Teacher focus groups on Curriculum and Literacy Vision.** Key staff provided insights into the district, their curriculum, and strengths and concerns. No administrators were permitted during these teacher focus groups.
- **Literacy Leadership focus group.** Key literacy leadership stakeholders provide valuable insight into the history, growth, goals, and needs of literacy teaching and learning. We also look for any areas of disconnect between leaders’ expectations and observed practices.

See Appendix:

The Audit visit schedule and list of documents provided for review can be found in the appendix.

Executive Summary

Strengths¹

- Highly motivated staff (willing to serve on committees, plan and lead initiatives, etc.)
- Equity Audit impacting new book selections
- Professional learning supported by district (full time instructional coaches, funding offsite learning, examples of scheduled team time)
- Visible culture of independent reading amongst students
- Evidence of past initiatives permeated across grade levels (independent reading, Kagan, Daily 5/CAFE, phonics programs)

Challenges²

- Over-referrals to Special Education for several subgroups, including ELs
- Need for differentiation and UDL in Tier 1 (often same worksheets/digital organizers, highly defined products, etc.)
- Strong surface level work on “instruction,” but now need clearer vision of district literacy best practices
- Unit lessons and materials not clearly recorded, adding challenges for interventionists, specialists, administrators, new staff
- Disjointed grade-to-grade and especially school-to-school roadmap for children, especially Meyer to Middleton³, though articulation needed for all with planned vertical articulation and clearer K-8 unit progressions.
- Lack of trust between staff and administrators⁴

¹ Not an exhaustive list of all strengths, selected to represent some key levers of opportunity

² Not an exhaustive list of all challenges, selected to represent some key obstacles to address

³ Particularly expressed during Kindergarten Focus Group, walkthrough conversations at both schools, other conversations with staff, and observed during document review

⁴ Particularly expressed during McCracken ELA Department Focus Group and other conversations with staff

Recommendations

Umbrella Recommendation: Literacy Instructional Vision

This recommendation should be read as the highest priority, from which all others will follow

- **Define “Literacy Instructional Best Practices”**
 - Unpack the “Skokie 73.5 Literacy Belief Statements” into actionable practices, drawing on research and practice from literacy-centric experts
 - Study and incorporate delivery models that provide research-based methods to support student independence, real time feedback, and instructional differentiation
 - Reduce reliance on one-size-fits-all photocopies and/or digital templates and shift to more authentic use of student work
 - Bring an equity lens to all Tier 1 practices, considering identities, experiences, and language histories
 - Plan for continuous improvement and revision

Literacy Curriculum and Instruction

1. **Build on Strengths of Curriculum Design Process, Revise Template**
 - Incorporate a newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision” in curriculum design
 - Revise unit templates to clearly indicate Tier 1 instruction responsive to the needs of diverse learners
 - Add in a clearer map of units’ teaching progressions
 - Revisit effective practices around “essential questions”
2. **Tier 1 ENL and UDL Supports For All**
 - Examine over identification of ENL students for Special Education at Tier 1
 - Set a vision for Tier 1 ENL and UDL strategies for all classrooms
 - Define Tier 2 and 3 specialists’ and interventionists’ roles, schedules, curriculum
3. **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy For All**
 - Examine over identification of Black and Latinx students for Special Education at Tier 1
 - Bring a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy lens to development of curriculum and instruction
4. **Reexamine Literacy Assessment Practices**
 - Clarify or develop district level benchmark assessments
 - Clarify and strengthen best practices in classroom level formatives and summatives
5. **Maximize Learning Time**
 - Reexamine start of period rituals (CHAMPS, standards talk, etc)
 - Beyond *participating*, analyze and strengthen the active *learning* potential for various structures (Kagan, Daily 5 groups, etc.)

Literacy Supervision

1. **Develop Shared Administrative Vision for Literacy**
 - Build administrative team newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision” expertise
 - Develop internal and external administrative Literacy learning networks
 - Set annual literacy goals at both district and school levels
 - Establish and hold regular Literacy walkthroughs
2. **District and/or Building Literacy “Point Person/People”**
 - Define administrator Literacy content experts at district and/or building level

Literacy Professional Learning

1. **Reexamine Coaching Model**
 - Support a newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision” by building on the strong generalized “instructional” program, with specified “literacy” and “language” coaching
 - Reflect on total choice model, balance with need for alignment
2. **(Re)invest in Coaching Learning**
 - Provide regular, programmed co-planning/learning time
 - Provide literacy and language specific professional learning
3. **More Clearly Define Role of and Provide Learning for Paraprofessionals**
 - Provide paraprofessionals with learning to maximize their impact on small group instruction (and related programs, when applicable)
 - Develop models for best uses of paraprofessional time and expertise

Literacy Instructional Materials

1. **Reexamine Materials through “Literacy Instructional Vision” lens**
 - Define criteria to assess teacher-curated sources (from web, publications, etc.)
 - Define criteria to assess programs (including phonics programs)
2. **Support Classroom and School Library Expansion and Annual Replenishment**
 - Build on teachers’ thoughtfully purchased texts, in response to the Equity Audit
 - Increase classroom book access to support choice across a range of text complexities and interests
 - Build on school library holdings to include native language texts and further develop representation of diverse identities

Literacy Cohesion

1. **Articulation Across Buildings**
 - Using newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision,” articulate student experience across buildings
 - Redesign “Early Childhood” (PreK to 2nd grade) roadmap
 - Plan both “up” and “down,” with readiness and graduation in mind

2. **Articulation Across Grades**

- Using newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision,” articulate student experience from grade to grade to provide vertical alignment
- Consult literacy and language research when reviewing and updating these alignments

Recommendations

Yes, Large Obstacles to Face, But Likely No Match for this Motivated Community

Skokie 73.5 is a district of highly motivated staff, from classroom teachers, to specialists, to administrators, to paraprofessionals, to interventionists, to library media specialists, and more, each person we met during the Audit visit was dedicated, passionate, and motivated.

Inside of this passion was often an intensity, a burning desire to take this beloved District (one several staff attended as children and/or send their own children) and make it even better. Focus Group conversations were often direct, open, and honest. One, in particular, was a bit heated—a staff member later apologized for the tone (“I don’t want you to leave thinking we are just a bunch of angry people”). While no other meeting felt quite as combative as that one in style, in substance all meetings included discussions of clear and well earned strengths as well as directly stated appraisals of shortcomings. All felt heartfelt, wanting to continually improve this shared home.

It brings to mind the James Baldwin line from *Notes of a Native Son*: “I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”

When Focus Group and walkthrough conversations shared critical feedback, it never felt mean-spirited or petty, instead comments always felt grounded in lived experience and each felt as if they were followed by an unspoken: “and I believe we can.”

The strengths are many (see Executive Summary for an accounting of some highlights), chief among them is a repeated refrain from community members that Skokie 73.5 feels unlike many other districts in how professional and dedicated staff are.



“We have really, really dedicated and caring teachers. Willing to do whatever they need.”

- Middleton Leadership Focus Group

“We have passionate and hard-working teachers.”

- Instructional Coach Focus Group

“I have worked in other districts and this is the most professional.”

- District Equity Leadership Team, Teaching & Learning Strand (DELT) Focus Group

There is such palpable pride in this district. This Audit Report synthesizes a number of quite large challenges and that “I believe we can” heartbeat will surely be needed to overcome them.

Every recommendation is drawn from hours of Focus Group conversations and shared-walk observations, raising concerns shared by members of the Skokie 73.5 community, revealed in data, and analysis of documents.

The recommendations are not small. They will take the combined efforts of all staff. If any community is up for this task, surely it is this one.

We should note upfront that some of the recommendations may feel challenging to some members of the community, as they invite a critical reexamination of some practices that have become tradition. We have attempted to capture some members’ respect for established practices while also indicating the validity of other members’ concerns. At the same time, some challenges may feel quickly agreed upon, as points everyone sees as needed and easy to address (please see the Executive Summary for a list of some key challenges).

At the Wisconsin Reading Association conference several years back, Gloria Ladson-Billings talked about a lens she brought with her to school visits, to paraphrase, she talked about how she always looked to see who was on the outskirts of the community. Which students—and they varied from place to place—sat off on the edges or did not participate as fully or seemed to be not fully seen. She would then go straight to those children or teens to talk to them and to listen.

Our *recommendation for processing our recommendations* is this: trust that every colleague at Skokie 73.5, regardless of their role, loves this place as much as you and wants it to be its very best it can be. We saw and heard this repeatedly.

Then, with this shared place of care, focus on building on strengths so together you can attend to the experiences and needs of marginalized voices in the district community. As you build for them, you will benefit all.

Umbrella Recommendation: Define “Literacy Instructional Best Practices”

“To increase their instructional expertise and effectiveness, educators need to understand when and how to use high-effect-size teaching strategies, especially those that are associated with students’ ability to ‘master’ the Priority Standards. This is perhaps as important as anything else educators can do to advance student learning” - *Rigorous Curriculum Design, Second Edition*, Larry Ainsworth and Kyra Donovan (2019, p. 181)



Strategic Actions

- Unpack the “Skokie 73.5 Literacy Belief Statements” into actionable practices, drawing on research and practice from literacy-centric experts.
- Study and incorporate delivery models that provide research-based methods to support student independence, real time feedback, and instructional differentiation.
- Reduce reliance on one-size-fits-all photocopies and/or digital templates and shift to more authentic use of student work.
- Bring an equity lens to all Tier 1 practices, considering identities, experiences, and language histories.
- Plan for continuous improvement and revision.

While all staff work hard to plan instruction and many classrooms were full of the hum of children working, movement from school to school and grade to grade often felt like visiting completely new districts. Classroom visits revealed a siloed approach to Literacy teaching and learning in Skokie 73.5. Siloed the most starkly by school, often by grade, and sometimes even by classroom within the same grade. While some of this may be a result of the distance caused by the pandemic, it does point to a larger lack of clarity and alignment around research-based literacy instructional best practices. For example, we observed:

- In one classroom in the district, a students’ stack of subject area folders was full of pages and pages of worksheets from the past weeks; while in another classroom, students were in the midst of authentically drafting one piece of writing that grew across weeks of a writing process.

- In one classroom, the teacher circulated amongst groups and gave feedback while they brainstormed together on chart paper; while in another classroom, the teacher remained at the small group table while children in the “partner reading” corner remained very much off task.
- In one classroom, a paraprofessional worked with a child on his word sorting activity, giving feedback along the way; while in another classroom, a paraprofessional sat with a group of children cutting and gluing an art project that did not appear to need support.
- In classrooms on the same grade: one teacher allowed children to work together while reviewing a worksheet of questions and the related reading passage, another classroom had children work alone with the questions and passage, and in a third classroom, children were not permitted to see the questions until they could prove they finished reading.
- In one classroom, an EL specialist pushed in and worked with one child on the Tier 1 worksheet; in another classroom, the EL specialist pushed in and worked with a group on her own reading task; a third EL specialist met with children in a pull out room to work on language practices using a program she selected.
- In PreK, much of the curriculum is based around play, in Kindergarten play is largely missing (notably, a concern of the Kindergarten team).
- In Meyer, children learn phonics with the *Jolly Phonics* program, in Middleton children use *Foundations*, each with different systems, actions, and progressions.
- In grades K-4 units are skills based, in 5th grade they are thematic.
- In most elementary grades, the delivery model is an adaptation of Daily 5/CAFE, at the middle school the approaches vary greatly from classroom to classroom and many classrooms have no clearly defined model.

These observations are not shared to condemn nor celebrate anyone. Teachers work extremely hard in Skokie 73.5 and take great pride in their work. In many Focus Groups, teachers expressed gratitude for having the latitude to enact instructional practices and design their own units, but in those same Focus Groups many teachers also shared a sense of feeling overwhelmed by the sheer amount of materials they draw from and create on a weekly and even daily basis—everything from drawing from published curricula to downloading resources from the internet.

Instead, these observations on misalignment point to a lack of a shared district vision on what makes for effective literacy instructional practices. Without this vision, teachers are doing their very best to fill in the gaps with what materials they can access, in the time they have. This also leaves a great deal up to individual control, instead of guaranteeing a common and equitable learning path for all children.



“As a parent of kids in the district, there is not a shared philosophy of literacy instruction. My child sees different approaches with different schools, teachers, interventionists.”

- Interventionists Focus Group

“When I started in the district we had five ‘reading ladies’ we called them. We could turn to them for literacy questions. Then, they went down to one. Now, none.”

- Middleton Building Leadership Team Focus Group

“I need a literacy philosophy. I am confident I can lead the staff, but I need to know where I am leading them to.”

“We don’t have curriculum experts in the district. We used to rely on a reading specialist. How do we learn? How do we know what our vision for X is.”

- Middleton Leadership Focus Group

“Our units are our framework.”

- McCracken ELA Department Focus Group

“I have focused a lot on growth in [general] instructional methods and now I am shifting to more literacy specific knowledge. However, I am doing most of that on my own from books.”

- Instructional Coach Focus Group

“We need a more structured approach to phonics and phonemic awareness.”

- Meyer Leadership Focus Group

“We need a philosophy: what is important in early childhood?”

“No one [administrators] in this district has been early childhood focused.”

“I feel we check a lot of boxes, but we don’t talk about why is it appropriate for our grade level.”

- Kindergarten Focus Group

To illustrate this further: consider a child who struggles with writing. There are research-based, well documented practices that most efficiently and effectively increase the development of young writers (Adler-Kassner et al., 2018; Calkins, 2020; Graham & Perin, 2007; Graves, 2019); *and others, the wealth of writing pedagogy scholarship is vast and there is much consensus*). If we can create a path for that child who struggles with writing, from grade to grade, through classrooms using the most effective writing practices, that child can make considerable gains.

Now, consider all of the children whose *independent* writing skills are not yet meeting grade level standards. We cannot only form one pathway of, say, *this fourth grade classroom with strong writing practices to that fifth grade classroom with strong writing practices to that sixth grade classroom with strong writing practices*. We need to guarantee for all children and their

families that all staff in Skokie 73.5 have a common understanding of writing instructional best practices and implement them daily.

Now, take a child learning English. Do we have a guaranteed shared set of practices for supporting ENL students across all classrooms? Currently, no. Though, with strategic actions we can.

What about a child who loves math but hates to read? Do we have a guaranteed shared set of practices to develop a love of reading in all children? Currently, no. Though, with strategic actions we can.

The more Skokie 73.5 can define guidelines for best literacy instructional practices, the stronger pathways of support and growth can be defined for all children.

There is much talent, knowledge, and passion in the district, but individuals excelling in certain areas does not equate to a system excelling.

In (Knight, 2010), Jim Knight provides an analogy for the need to rally together around shared principals, even in a culture that values choice:

“Aren’t there times when an entire school needs to join together to implement practices schoolwide? Is it best if everyone just does what they please at all times? Clearly, complete freedom is not the solution. Total choice, without structure, would likely lead to total, unproductive chaos. Imagine, for example, what would happen if all the signal lights went dead in New York City. Drivers would be free to drive without restriction... the absence of the restriction of light signaling stop and go, however, would actually limit each drivers’ freedom since a snarling traffic jam would likely bring traffic to a stop” (pp.32-33).

The district does attempt to document some shared beliefs around literacy, but we argue this work must go farther. The Skokie 73.5’s “Literacy Belief Statements” (see Appendix for full document or sd735.org/cia/ela for an excerpt) developed by district staff in 2017, states: “A literacy belief statement is intended to provide schools with an overview of where they want to go and what they want in terms of literacy instructional best practice. These statements establish clear expectations and values for the literacy program.”

In analyzing the seven statements on the document, we find that the statements do not meet the stated goal of establishing “clear expectations.” Four categories appear to emerge in which the seven statements can be categorized: two “universal,” aligning with general consensus ideas about literacy found in standards and publications and two a “bit more targeted” to a district vision, on personal and societal goals and around collaboration for building a passion for reading. Of note: we are curious why the passion for reading belief statement is the only one that articulates all stakeholders’ involvement.

<i>Universal</i>	<i>Bit More Targeted</i>
<p>4 Basic Literacy Skills (plus “visualization”)</p> <p>3. We believe that literacy is understanding and clearly communicating ideas through reading, writing, speaking, and visualization.</p> <p>7. Literacy includes development of and application of listening skills.</p>	<p>Personal and Societal Purposes</p> <p>1. The purpose of literacy is to build and share knowledge about the world and self to find answers, solve problems, and equalize opportunity.</p> <p>4. Literacy challenges students to develop their identities and empathize with others whose identities and perspectives differ from their own.</p> <p>5. Literacy is nurturing imagination.</p>
<p>Broad Mission</p> <p>2. We believe that all children can be literate and transfer learning into usable knowledge.</p>	<p>Collaboration for Reading</p> <p>6. Literacy is a collaborative process among all stakeholders (author, students, teachers, specialists, administration and parents in the District 73½ community) to foster a lifelong passion for reading.</p>

These statements are broad, inspirational, and agreeable; part and parcel for the genre of “vision statements.” As Deanna Kuhn writes in (Kuhn, 2005): “Broad visions of the kind of life preparation we would like education to accomplish are familiar and hard to quarrel with... Who could disagree?” Like most vision statements, the Skokie 73.5 “Beliefs” cast a wide net, one that broadly defines literacy, but does not provide “clear expectations” nor a specific enough road map for teachers, specialists, and administrators to design instruction.

Kuhn continues: “Any sense of widespread agreement rapidly evaporates, however, as soon as we get any more specific, seeking to translate the abstract ideas of mission statements into the particulars of what children should spend their time doing in school” (p. 3). This is the challenge set before the district, and one which all other structures and roles hinge: What are the *particulars* of what constitutes “literacy instructional best practices” at Skokie 73.5? Which practices most effectively support “all children” (Belief Statement 2)? In a staff culture that values choice, can we come together to define effective and efficient instruction, based on research and practice? Can we entrust each other to implement, strengthen, and expect these practices? Can coaches support and leaders supervise these shared agreements?

There appears to have been a small start at this work, the second page of the 2017 “Literacy Belief Statements” document, is titled “Suggested Literacy Instructional Practices.” The document is labeled “list in development” with only three statements currently listed.

When beginning this process of defining “literacy instructional best practices,” be sure to include not only “suggested” practices, but to bravely commit to ensured practices as well. Stop lights

are not suggested, but the style of car you stop and start at them is. Expectation and choice need not be mutually exclusive.

Strategic Actions:

Unpack the “Skokie 73.5 Literacy Belief Statements” into actionable practices, drawing on research and practice from literacy-centric experts and publications

One place to begin is to unpack the Belief Statements by questioning the underlying values and assumptions, drawing out requisite competencies, and ultimately defining actionable practices. We specifically recommend drawing from the rich scholarship and practitioner publications of Literacy-centric experts.

For instance, take Belief Statement 2: “We believe that all children can be literate and transfer learning into usable knowledge.”

What do we mean by “literate”?

Literate in English? In other home languages? What does “literate” mean in Kindergarten versus in sixth grade? What would we consider illiterate? What is the role of technology and digital literacies? Social emotional literacies? Whose values are these ideas based on? Whose values are missing in these determinations? Do we value some modes over others (e.g. writing over speaking, etc.)? What research can help us interrogate this further? What do we need to know and be able to do to assess and address this?

What do we mean by “all children”?

Which children are matching our beliefs about being “literate”? Which are not? Are our measures and supports equitable? Whose values are these ideas based on? Whose values are missing in these determinations? What research can help us look further? What do we need to know and be able to do to assess and address this?

What do we mean by “usable knowledge”?

What is considered usable knowledge? How will we assess the transfer of learning? Is this knowledge ascertained from across content areas? What research can help us interrogate this further? What do we need to know and be able to do to assess and address this?

And so on.

As this unpacking takes place, keep literacy and language scholarship present. For instance, as you unpack ideas around “being literate,” you could turn to scholarship on language practices and linguistic repertoires; to the developmental milestones of early

literacy; to the characteristics of increasing levels of text; and so on. This unpacking and siphoning through literacy research may include both research you know and need to find. The process will lead to further clarity and likely to new questions. It may also include revising the “Literacy Belief Statements” document.

Study and incorporate delivery models that provide research-based methods to support student independence, real time feedback, and instructional differentiation

Developing “Literacy Instructional Best Practices” should include investigating and defining a shared delivery model or models.

“RCDC” is a backwards planning template and process, it is not a delivery model. Just as the state standards define end of grade level performance expectations, so, too, do the current Skokie 73.5 RCDC plans define end of unit learning outcomes, but neither document indicates *how*. It is not appropriate to define the current RCDCs as a framework for instruction, they are more clearly a framework for defining outcomes.

There are already some delivery models in use across some classrooms and grades at Skokie 73.5, such as an adaptation of Daily 5/CAFE, newer work in an embedded model of Guided Reading, and some models based on curriculum or programs: an intervention model based around a computer program (ReadingPlus), other models defined by particular phonics curricula (Jolly Phonics, Foundations, Wordly Wise).

Being clear on a research-based, shared delivery model or models has several benefits:

- It can provide ensured pathways for students, bringing knowledge of routines, expectations, and opportunities from one grade to the next furthering a smooth transition between grade levels with shared structures and experiences that build year after year.
- It can better align the experience for students receiving services across grade levels and across buildings..
- It can open professional learning paths around a well studied structure. For example, the “workshop model,” the “inquiry model,” “project-based learning” and others, all have rich professional reading, networks of practitioners, conferences, workshops, and more. This may allow for structured professional learning and collaborative conversations with shared understanding.
- Well documented models carry with them key structures, methods, and philosophies, which incorporate scholarship on student achievement, allowing opportunities for assessment of student learning in literacy areas.
- Models define structures and methods, while providing flexibility for responsive planning and teacher creativity based on student need; as opposed to a scripted curriculum and textbook products which tend to overprescribe instruction while often not adhering to a clear model and philosophy.

- It allows for essential cross-classroom and cross-grade collaboration that goes deeper than surface level topics (such as “engagement”) into literacy-specific practices (such as “engagement during interactive read alouds”) providing observers/administrators a lens into specific practices that elevate literacy instruction and highlight student response
- A shared model provides for building and district level goal setting, that support and supervision can align with, allowing for greater clarity for staff.



“We take pieces from programs, but it’s not a true, structured approach.”

“Picking and choosing is happening across the entire district.”

- Meyer Leadership Focus Group

“We have asked for years what to do with ‘acceleration’ time (used to be called ‘intervention’). It is not consistent across classes.”

- Middleton Building Leadership Team Focus Group

“Teachers are asking great questions like, ‘what does guided reading look like versus small group’? We need more professional learning on the workshop model in general.”

“We [the district] haven’t articulated a delivery model. What is the ‘loose, tight’ [expectations]?”

- Middleton Leadership Focus Group

“We see a lot more direct instruction than maybe we should, partly the pandemic is to blame. Prior to that we had more centers.”

- McCracken Leadership Focus Group

“Curriculum and methods vary by grade and we work with so many.”

- EL Focus Group

“There isn’t a shared schedule [we all follow], like, everyone doesn’t start with ‘grammar’ and then move on to the ‘lesson,’ that isn’t good teaching [to define the schedule for everyone].”

“It’s not good practice to have a daily lesson plan.”

“We have always been trusted as professionals to teach the children in front of us.”

- McCracken ELA Department Focus Group

“You can see in the data, big differences from classroom to classroom on how different implementation of curriculum [and practices] are impacting kids.”

- MTSS Focus Group

“One of the things I am the most proud of in our [PreK] curriculum is flexibility and incorporating play.”

“Our dramatic play center is one of the best places to incorporate literacy.”

- PreK Focus Group

When evaluating delivery models, we recommend three main criteria:

- **Independence:** does this model structure around students having the greatest amount of independent practice and choice?
- **Real time feedback:** does this model provide the greatest amount of real time feedback?
- **Differentiation:** does this model inherently include differentiated materials, products, and applications?

Additionally, while some delivery models are shared across some classrooms and grades, it is equally important to go back and reevaluate existing models. For instance, the current adaptation of Daily 5/CAFE has students working in choice centers (evidence of independence), however as most teachers appear to remain at the small group table during the period, children are not receiving real time feedback while in those centers and so therefore teachers are not getting valuable real time feedback to aid in future planning and differentiation.

We recommend the workshop model, also referred to as writing workshop and reading workshop. “Workshop model” was referred to directly or indirectly as a goal across multiple Focus Groups, however we only observed a few classrooms implementing the philosophy, methods, and structures with fidelity. The workshop model has the kind of clear guidelines with responsive flexibility that overlap with values expressed here.

The structure and philosophy of the workshop model allows for the flexibility needed to layer in other models and methods, such as flipped classroom, inquiry and project-based learning practices.

Reduce reliance on one-size-fits-all photocopies and/or digital templates and shift to more authentic use of student work

Work on defining “Literacy Instructional Best Practices” should include an effort to reduce reliance on worksheets, digital templates, and other one-size-fits-all activities. Across schools, many lessons involved all students completing the same worksheet or digital guide.

We recommend a shift to the “workshop model,” or a related model or models, in which students work across time on their own writing and in their own books. This eliminates the need for daily worksheets and activities, provides an authentic place for students to practice new strategies, and cuts down on the amount of daily collecting and grading teachers do because formative assessments happen in real time and across time.

Not all photocopies and digital organizers are created equal. This is not to say one would never have sheets or digital documents. However, when worksheets and digital documents define one way all students should work, we often see more student compliance over student skill-building, there are not multiple points of entry for a wide

range of learning needs, and students are not encouraged to extend and expand beyond the set activity.

For example: older students answering the same set of text-dependent questions requires a lower level of skill (and sometimes copying from peers) than students taught to devise their own high level questions in response to reading. Or another example, young writers cutting and pasting the same jumbled sentence onto a worksheet provides a lower level of feedback to the teacher than children working on their own writing booklets to demonstrate their strengths and needs in sentence structure.

Bring an equity lens to all Tier 1 practices, considering identities, experiences, and language histories

When working to define “Literacy Instructional Best Practices,” ensure an equity lens is brought to any agreements around Tier 1 practices (as well as Tier 2 and 3).

It is essential that this work starts from an asset approach, not a deficit approach. In (España & Herrera, 2020) (2020), Caral España and Luz Yadira Herrera note: “Too often, bilingual students are viewed as ‘lacking,’ as needing to ‘develop Academic vocabulary,’ as ‘English Language Learners,’ and not as sophisticated speakers and interpreters of complex language practices” (p. 8). We need to define practices that bring children’s assets into good use not just for them, but for the entire classroom community and reject practices that too narrowly define success or worse, alienate students’ identities, cultures, and histories.

In her seminal work, *The DreamKeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (2009), Gloria Ladson-Billings defines tenets of culturally relevant literacy programs (pp.126-128):

- Students whose educational, economic, social, political, and cultural features are more tenuous are helped to become intellectual leaders in the classroom.
- Students are apprenticed in a learning community rather than taught in an isolated and unrelated way.
- Students' real life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the “official” curriculum.
- Teachers and students participate in a broad conception of literacy that incorporates both literature and oratory.
- Teachers and students engage in a collective struggle against the status quo.
- Teachers are cognizant of themselves as political beings.

The Skokie 73.5 Equity Audit (2020) and resulting work has already shown traction in examining instructional book choice. A critical next step is to now review and define literacy instructional best practices for “all children” (Skokie 73.5 Literacy Belief Statement).

Plan for continuous improvement and revision

The district already holds a philosophy and has historical systems for curriculum review and improvement cycles. Defining “Literacy Instructional Best Practices” should have this same continual improvement lens.

Another reason we recommend the “workshop model” as a guiding delivery model, is that while decades of research have defined core philosophies and structures, the body of literature and practice continues to grow, improve, and shift with changing demographics, new scientific breakthroughs, and the unpacking of societal values and norms.

We list this strategic action as a reminder that even once set, it is key to foster a districtwide philosophy of inquiry and open learning, not a culture of compliance for compliance sake.

Literacy Curriculum and Instruction

“The hardest culture to examine is often our own, because it shapes our actions in ways that seem invisible and normal.”

- Zaretta Hammond, *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain* (2014), p. 55(2014)

Build on Strengths of Curriculum Design Process, Revise Template



Strategic Actions

- Incorporate a newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision” in curriculum design
- Revise unit templates to clearly indicate Tier 1 instruction responsive to the needs of diverse learners
- Add in a clearer map of units’ teaching progressions
- Revisit effective practices around “essential questions”

The district ELA curriculum was presented as a scope and sequence, by grade, of unit overviews, referred to internally as “RCDCs.” These backwards design templates, adapted from “Rigorous Curriculum Design” by Larry Ainsworth, are teacher-developed. Across time these units have gone through redesign cycles by staff.

When the Audit visit was paused in November, teachers asked for time to update their units to ensure they reflected current instruction. The units presented for the rescheduled March visit are assumed to be improved efforts of capturing the living curriculum.

How the templates are used varies widely by grade. All provided somewhat differ from the most current templates in *Rigorous Curriculum Design, Second Edition* (Ainsworth and Donovan, 2019).

Across the Audit visit, curriculum design was one topic repeated across multiple Focus Groups. Some staff, particularly some of the more veteran staff, expressed great pride in the “RCDCs,” where other staff valued the ability to design curriculum but were less enthusiastic about the state of their units.



“We have worked on many RCDCs over the years, our curriculum currently is excellent. It is the most articulated it has ever been.”

“We are really proud of it [the RCDC units] and want the district to know.”

- McCracken ELA Focus Group

“RCDC is teacher driven, we create our own units and have autonomy.”

“But, many of us feel our day is so fragmented. Our Literacy Block is choppy.”

“[Another reason for ‘fragmented’ feeling:] And we have so many programs and resources [to draw from] ...but we also like that. It’s a strength and a need, I guess.”

“We need a shared philosophy of what is important in early childhood.”

“I feel we check a lot of boxes [in unit planning], but we don’t talk about why is it appropriate for our grade level?”

- Kindergarten Focus Group

“I think RCDC started out with good intentions. It didn’t work for everyone. Then teams started tweaking their own and it grew.”

“If a whole team left I don’t know if anyone can pick it up and do it.”

“If teacher X and Y left, what would we do?! It’s all in their head.”

- Interventionist Focus Group

“Staff 15 years ago were trained in “RCD,” and they are using a document that looks like backwards planning.”

“I wonder if teachers own the purpose behind RCDC?”

“What percentage [of staff] have turned over since that training?”

“I have worked in several districts and am familiar with backwards design, I never heard of ‘RCDC’ until here.”

- Middleton Leadership Focus Group

“[A strength is] Realizing *Journeys* [a curriculum product] wasn’t working for us, so we wrote our own curriculum. We were given latitude to change it.”

“Our RCDC has totally changed. Whatever new formats might come, I hope it would work for us and not be filling in boxes just to fill in boxes.”

“I am sure there are holes [in our curriculum]. I feel uneasy about our [X] grade curriculum.”

“I would be totally open to changing the name [‘RCDC’], I don’t think that is important.”

- Middleton Building Leadership Team (BLT) Focus Group

“RCDC work is not where it should be, it was getting there, but not yet.”

- Instructional Coaches Focus Group

One reflection that seemed to have buy-in from across schools was an openness to revisit the Skokie 73.5 adaption of Rigorous Curriculum Design and revise the template, approach, and even the name if adaptations can better serve student learning and teacher planning.

Strategic Actions:

Incorporate newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision” in curriculum design

The umbrella goal of “Define a ‘Literacy Instructional Vision’” should meaningfully impact the other strategic actions outlined below.

Revise the unit template to include Tier 1 instruction responsive to the needs of diverse learners

- ***Perhaps, then, removing “RCD” from the title and instead list Rigorous Curriculum Design as one of the contributing frameworks.***

Tier 1 instruction should be more explicitly planned for diverse identities, languages, and learning needs. Inclusion of sections on the unit template can support this. The Skokie 73.5 DELT Teaching and Learning Strand is also working on recommendations to the template and should be included in any conversations on such.

Gholdy Muhammad’s Historically Responsive Literacy Framework (2019), p.57 suggests units and lessons account for four pursuits, which she argues align with decades of culture-centered theories and the work of Black literacy communities. Additionally, after the publication of her book, Muhammad has recently extended the framework to include fifth pursuit, “Joy” (G. E. Muhammad, pp. 195-204). Her framework includes:

- Identity: How will my instruction help students to learn something about themselves and/or about others?
- Skills: How will my instruction build students’ skills for the content area?
- Intellect: How will my instruction build students’ knowledge and mental powers?
- Criticality: How will my instruction engage students’ thinking about power and equity and the disruption of oppression?
- Joy: How will this instruction advance happiness by elevating truthful and beautiful images and representations of themselves and others?

A number of scholars and practitioners write about the use of Language Objectives to explicitly plan for Tier 1 instruction that supports English as a new language learners, in so doing, even native English speakers have greater support.

- (Escamilla et al., 2014)(Escamilla, et. al., 2014) is a very detailed dive into planning a rich biliteracy program. While Skokie 73.5 does not have a dual-language program, the examples and discussion of planning for “Oracy

Objectives, Dialogue, Language Structures, and Vocabulary” may be instructive in this work.

- Using (Heineke & McTighe, 2018) (Heineke and McTighe, 2018) discusses a range of considerations during unit and lesson planning, their “WHERE TO Elements with a Language Lens” chart (p. 190) is a rich set of critical reflection questions on planning to draw from.
- WIDA, a member organization of over 41 states, has established language standards for multilingual students that may provide ways for students to communicate standards across content areas.

Ainsworth and Donovan’s RCD template (2019, p.288) includes a section on planning for what they term “Specialized Instructional Strategies”:

- Differentiation Strategies
- Intervention Strategies
- Specially Designed Instruction for Special Education Students
- Strategies for English Language Learners

Zaretta Hammond’s *Ready for Rigor Framework* (Hammond, 2014) suggests four practice areas that “operationalize culturally responsive teaching” and “when the tools and strategies for each area are blended together, they create the social, emotional, and cognitive conditions that allow students to more actively engage and take ownership of their learning process”(pp. 17-18):

- Awareness
- Learning Partnerships
- Information Processing
- Community of Learners and Learning Environment

Among other sources to draw examples for consideration.

Add in a clear map of units’ teaching progressions.

Currently there is no specific section detailing the teaching of a unit. Within current unit overviews, some grades have added links to graphic organizers, others to texts, while others do not explicitly list any teaching progression.

The reasons for clearly articulating a roadmap of instruction are many:

- specialists can more accurately plan to support Tier 2 and 3 learners,
- “new to the grade” teachers, mid-year replacements, and long-term subs have a clearer sense of instruction to plan from,
- reduce school-year planning time, by having milestone lessons and key activities prepared in advance which can be revised as needs arise,

- allow more advanced time for thoughtful consideration of activities, texts, and materials and ongoing reflection to revisit them,
- allow teachers of students transitioning from more restrictive to less restrictive environments to preview and prepare students for the move,
- coaches and administrators can design more specific and strategic support,
- cross-classroom planning and cross-grade articulation and planning can be more nuanced,
- in general, the teaching becomes archived in a systematic way, instead of reliant on a person or people to be present to explain



“We work with so many teachers and grade levels, it’s hard to collaborate.”

- EL Focus Group

“As someone who came in last year, the [Google] Drives [of curriculum resources] are so overwhelming. ...When you are brand new, you don’t know how to ask for help.”

“We need to better curate our resources so it’s clear to us and others as well.”

- District Equity Leadership Team, Teaching & Learning Strand (DELT) Focus Group

“I don’t think we need a Tier 1 curriculum or textbook, but teachers are looking for more cohesive ways to pull resources. Right now, we are constantly pulling from so many different places. It gets overwhelming.”

- Middleton Building Leadership Team Focus Group

This does not imply creating a lockstep script nor making a plan so rigid that it would become unresponsive to shifting student data. Instead, following best practices in curriculum design, school leadership, and school reform, and taking into account that more than just the individual classroom teacher benefits from this plan, we recommend adding a section or sections which provides a clear listing of the unit’s instructional path.

As mentioned previously, Ainsworth and Donovan’s RCD template (2019, p.288) includes several sections detailing teaching during a unit, which are not currently universally included in the Skokie 73.5 unit plans:

- High-Effect-Size Instructional Strategies
- Specialized Instructional Strategies
 - Differentiation Strategies
 - Intervention Strategies
 - Specially Designed Instruction for Special Education Students
 - Strategies for English Language Learners

- Unit Vocabulary Terms
- Suggested Instructional Resources and Materials

Another example, and one we recommend as striking a good balance between being explicit enough to be clear while not being over prescriptive, is Heineke and McTighe’s Understanding by Design (“UbD”) template’s final section (2018, p.67) called “Learning Plan,” the “Learning Events” section and exemplars may be particularly useful:

- Pre-assessment
- Learning Events, which details out the main teaching of the unit, some examples:
 - “Modeling and application of nonfiction article about immigrant border crossing: Text annotation using Think Marks and summarization using the 5W+1H graphic organizer (bilingual)”
 - “Ongoing reading minilessons: Prior to each literature circle, give a minilesson on reading strategy to make meaning (e.g., self-monitoring, making inferences, visualizing, analyzing events) using related graphic organizers (e.g., characterization chart, bridge graphic organizer, say/mean T-chart, pictures).”
- Formative Assessment

Gholdy Muhammad (2019, p. 147) recommends planning to clearly “layer texts,” building instruction from a variety of overlapping texts to support the goals of the Historically Responsive Literacy Framework (described earlier in this report). More clearly describing texts and their purposes within Skokie 73.5 unit plans would allow other stakeholders to layer in other texts as well.

Revisit effective practices around “essential questions”

Wording, structure, and number of EQs varied across grade level units. Revisit effective practices around developing and using essential questions and share strong examples already in place in the district.

Ainsworth and Donovan (2019, p. 122) recommend the following criteria for EQs:

- Cannot be answered with a yes or no
- Have no single obvious right answer
- Cannot be answered from rote memory (simple recall facts)
- Match the rigor of the ‘unwrapped’ Priority Standards
- Go beyond who, what, when, and where to how and why

Though written for Social Studies, (Swan et al., 2018) (Swan et. al, 2018) has an instructive chapter on building “compelling questions” for EQs. They recommend EQs must have both “rigor” and “relevance,” questions need to lead to critical content knowledge and also feel interesting and authentic to students (p. 20). They provide a helpful list of question types (such

as “case-study,” “analytic,” “comparative,” “ironic”), with examples and a deep dive into creating each in Chapter 2 (pp. 29-46).

Tier 1 ENL and UDL Supports For All



Strategic Actions

- Examine overidentification of ENL students for Special Education at Tier 1
- Set a vision for Tier 1 ENL and UDL strategies for all classrooms
- Define Tier 2 and 3 specialists’ and interventionists’ roles, schedules, curriculum

In *Teaching Advanced Literacy Skills: A Guide for Leaders in Linguistically Diverse Schools* (Lesaux et al., 2016), Lesaux, Galloway and Marietta examine the ever-expanding language backgrounds of students and ultimately argue that intervention, alone, is not equipped to fully support language learning. They argue, instead, that every classroom, all instruction, the entire school needs to be reimagined to address the development of academic literacy (what they refer to as “advanced literacy skills”). They note: “reimagining classrooms, including content-area classrooms, as sites for development of advanced literacies for a sizable—and rapidly growing—population of linguistically diverse students, including ELs and students who have had fewer opportunities to be exposed to the academic English used at school, will demand significant time, effort, and change” (p. 27).

Skokie 73.5 staff appear equipped to take on the challenge of time and effort, already offering their professional hours to a number of committees and using school provided planning periods to co-plan. The staff is extremely dedicated and mission driven, there is a lot of potential here for thinking in innovative ways about teaching and learning. This work will also be challenging, requiring a critically conscious examination of unacknowledged biases, learning and dedication to universally shared instructional practices, and clearer partnering

Strategic Actions:

Examine overidentification of ENL students for Special Education at Tier 1

This recommendation aligns with the Skokie 73.5 Equity Audit Report (2020) finding: “District should evaluate biases into the identification of Special Education and develop a process to regularly review” (p.83).

Throughout the Audit visit, Focus Groups were presented with the fact that district data shows ENL students are overidentified for special education: “Students who are

identified as multilingual are twice as likely to also be identified as needing special education services” (BOE Fall Data Review, September 2021).

When asked about this, an interesting pattern emerged:

Most administrators and most Tier 1 general education teachers gave reasons outside of classroom control, while some were unaware of the issue:

- a lack of EL staff
- issues with EL staff schedules.



“I wasn’t aware [ENL students] were performing that way.”

“We have something like 52 languages. There is a large population of kids who speak a different language at home, including many newcomers.”

- Instructional Coaching focus group

“We didn’t have a full time EL teacher here at McCracken, kids got services only sometimes.”

“It’s key we have EL positions, not all of our staff are EL endorsed.”

“It doesn’t start here at McCracken, this happens across the entire district. The goal should be that we do not see the issues at middle school.”

- McCracken Leadership focus group

Tier 2 and 3 staff and supervisors, however, and some administrators pointed to reasons both within and beyond classroom control:

- lack of differentiation in Tier 1 instruction,
- lack of ENL methods being employed in Tier 1 instruction (despite several staff having EL endorsements),
- difficulty for Tier 2 and 3 teachers to access/understand Tier 1 curriculum in a timely manner,
- unexamined biases,
- lack of clarity of ENL Tier 2 and 3 structures, curriculum,
- a lack of EL staff,
- issues with EL staff schedules,



“There is a feeling of *‘if students are meeting expectations, they are my [general education teacher] students; but if students are not, they are your [EL teacher] students.’*”

“It feels like there is only one way you can be as a student, especially in higher grades.”
- EL focus group

“There is a ‘*my kids*’ vs ‘*your kids*’ mentality.”
- MTSS focus group

Despite staff reporting many teachers have an EL endorsement, Tier 1 classroom observations revealed limited evidence of ENL techniques or structures in use. Tier 2 and 3 observations showed an inconsistent vision of the role of EL teachers and a varied knowledge base by the practitioners.

Set a vision for Tier 1 ENL and UDL strategies for all classrooms

Lesaux, Galloway, Marietta (2016), suggest a shift from relying heavily on serving diverse learners through interventions to focusing on strengthening Tier 1 instruction: “It can be appealing to address the needs of struggling readers through interventions that sit outside of the core of instruction; by creating an elaborate menu of interventions, it can feel as if we are meeting the needs of each individual student at our school site. There’s a sense of satisfaction in seeing the individualized attention intervention provides, but it is quite misplaced. The reality is that it simply does not work in today’s schools” (p. 49). They note the role of intervention is to provide short term, very targeted support and that “these additional supports should still always take place against the backdrop of a strong instructional core, serving to reinforce what students are learning each day and to help them to better access the core curriculum” (p. 33).

A number of Skokie 73.5 staff are reported to have EL endorsements in their licensing; however, infusion of ENL methodologies into Tier 1 instruction was not generally visible during the Audit visits. Practices that are known to benefit EL learners, benefit all learners. Incorporating ENL strategies into regular Tier 1 practice, and embedding these practices in units will therefore strengthen core instruction.



“The reality is, EL techniques help everyone, all students are learning the language.”
- Meyer Walkthrough conversation

“Naturally, PreK can be a place for ELs: everything is labeled, pictures, lots of language support.”
- PreK Focus Group

“We are not clearly using a UDL process in unit and lesson building.”
- Middleton Leadership Focus Group

“Our kids are not grasping as much as you guys [general education teachers] are describing.”

“When our students move from us to GenEd, the leap is huge.”

- McCracken ELA Focus Group

Strengthening Tier 1 instruction so it better meets the needs of diverse learners also involved particular attention to Universal Design for Learning (“UDL”) guidelines. “UDL aims to change the design of the environment rather than to change the learner. When environments are intentionally designed to reduce barriers, all learners can engage in rigorous, meaningful learning” (*The UDL Guidelines*, 2021).

The most recent update of the UDL Guidelines provide recommendations for enhancing instruction within a matrix of deepening understanding:

- accessing information,
- building understanding,
- and internalizing learning

In comparison to three brain regions which relate to:

- Engagement - the “why” of learning
- Representation - the “what” of learning
- And Action & Expression - the “how” of learning

We recommend explicit, shared professional learning on Tier 1 ENL techniques and UDL guidelines.

Define Tier 2 and 3 specialists’ and interventionists’ roles, schedules, curriculum



“Our schedules are all over the place, there is not a clear vision of how we should be used. Some of us mostly pull-out, some push-in, some do both.”

- EL focus group

“The EL schedule needs to be looked at.”

- District focus group

There was shared consensus across EL specialists and administrators that specialists’ roles, schedules, and curricula need to be revisited and clarified.

Due to multiple factors—including large caseloads, unclear and varied structures, limited time to collaborate with multiple Tier 1 teachers, sometimes opaque curriculum, and lack of Tier 1 differentiation of texts and tasks—several specialists find themselves repeating Tier 1 activities with students, instead of addressing targeted language learning needs.

This recommendation serves as a reminder to act, as it is a clearly defined area of need for most stakeholders.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy For All



Strategic Actions

- Examine over identification of Black and Latinx students for Special Education at Tier 1
- Bring a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy lens to development of curriculum and instruction

The District is already making notable progress on a portion of the Equity Audit's Teaching and Learning Section 2.3 "District should evaluate and regularly review its curriculum and resources for intentional inclusion and diverse representation in its efforts to embed culturally responsive pedagogy and practices"(p. 84). In particular, evidence of teacher selected texts having more thoughtful representation of diversity identities in characters, plots, and with consideration to the experiences and identities of authors and illustrators.

With that work moving forward (and further supported later in this report), attention should be given to other areas in the Teaching and Learning strand of the Equity Audit as they apply directly to many of the recommendations in this Literacy Audit.

Strategic Actions:

Examine over identification of Black and Latinx students for Special Education at Tier 1

We recommend first returning to the findings in the Equity Audit's Teaching and Learning strand (pp. 83-84) and reviewing for next steps. For instance, while instructional book choices are increasingly more thoughtful, 2.3 recommends also evaluating curriculum, pedagogy and practices.

2.1 and 2.2 detail institutional biases in over-identification of Black and Latinx students for Special Education and under-identification of these populations for the Extended Learning Program.

District data reveals that while Black students make up 8% of the total student population, they make up 21% (2.5 times more likely) of all the students below the 25th percentile in reading. This is significant as the 25th percentile is a step in qualifying for special education in Skokie 73.5.

Further, while about 35% of all district students qualify for free or reduced lunch, 55% of students below the 25th percentile qualify (BOE Fall Data Review, September 2021).

Bring a Culturally Responsive Pedagogical lens to development of curriculum and instruction

As the Equity Audit indicates, a culturally responsive lens needs to be brought to not only book selection, but also to curriculum, pedagogy, and practices.

Throughout this Literacy Audit Report, we are strategically indicating recommendations and sources to support this work. It is key that culturally responsive practices are not an add-on, but a central factor in reflection and design from the start.

Reexamine Literacy Assessment Practices



Strategic Actions

- Clarify or develop district level benchmark assessments
- Clarify and strengthen best practices in classroom level formatives and summatives

One strength of Skokie 73.5's unit design process is a firm belief in using formative and summative assessments to guide instruction and monitor student learning. Equally, there are a number of screeners in use, especially in early grades, to identify students in need of support.

While both classroom and district assessment systems are in place, a critical question arises as to why assessment practices are not leading to adequate instructional shifts to promote higher student achievement levels, to lessen overrepresentation of certain populations in intervention, and to increase representation in extended learning opportunities.

In *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement* (Calkins et al., 2012), Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman suggest the design of common assessments must be as carefully considered as the actual questions and tasks, otherwise, resulting data may not match the intended purpose. For instance, a student's demonstration of a skill with reading is as dependent on their ability as it is in the level of text complexity, "if you assess a skill on only one level of text, and the student doesn't demonstrate the skill, you still won't know if the child can actually do that skill. It could be that he can do the skill, but not yet on that level of text. If you ask a student to perform the skill on a few text levels or on a level of

text that you know the reader can handle, you will find out that he can do the skill (and if he can, you will find out at what level it breaks down)”(pp.194-196).

We recommend a review of literacy assessment practices.



“Data conversations with teachers can feel very difficult and sometimes not productive. Folks with ‘good data’ are happy to talk about it, while teachers with ‘bad’ often are not.”

- Interventionist Focus Group

“We feel we do a really good job of getting to know our students [strengths and needs] well.”

“We use the district FastBridge screener.”

“Beyond that, we keep checklists of the standards, we keep these during small groups and instructional times.”

- PreK Focus Group

Strategic Actions:

Clarify or develop district level benchmark assessments

We recommend creating and setting district level benchmark assessments and a method of reporting out data to support all stakeholders in tracking curriculum implementation and student achievement.

Grade level formative and summative assessments are a valued part of curriculum planning for Skokie 73.5 staff. However, current practices described in Focus Groups often include teachers changing assessments to match covered content and skills and deleting or changing question items and tasks that were not covered. While likely appropriate for producing student grades—it feels fair to not grade students on skills and content not taught—these changes do not help to track how well the *enacted* curriculum is matching the *planned* curriculum. This can lead to holes in children’s experience and more importantly can manifest in deficits in some children’s skill development.

District benchmark assessments, when well designed, can help all teachers, coaches, and administrators track and plan for student strengths and needs, design tailored professional learning, and further support grade level articulation.

We recommend these district benchmarks:

- Are developed by stakeholders: teachers, coaches, specialists, and administrators
- Reflect newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision”
- Align to priority and supporting standards planned in grade level units

- Demonstrate student skill in one or more of the state standard's writing types (Argument, Informational, Narrative), one or both reading types (Literature and Informational), and selected Foundational Reading skills (where applicable).
- Are culturally responsive
- Are equitable and, when applicable, differentiated
- Are likely not used for student grading, instead to provide systematic snapshots

Further, the district should publish clear, research-based policies around benchmark assessments for early childhood, new arrival English Learners, and any other populations. Ensuring benchmark assessments are developmentally appropriate and/or determining if other data collection tools are considered sufficient to replace these benchmarks for some students and grades.

Benchmarks assessments created by stakeholders will need to go through a piloting and norming process before full implementation and will likely require release time for grading.

Clarify and strengthen best practices in classroom level formatives and summatives

Formative and summative assessments are key components of Skokie 73.5 unit planning, however the number, design, and implementation of those assessments is quite varied across unit plans. There is no doubt that well designed formative and summative assessments provide teachers with key data to make critical decisions. If these assessments are driving instruction, then we need to ensure best practices in assessment are enacted.

A place to start may be reviewing how other grade levels are scheduling and designing assessments. This could be done through collaborative articulation or even studied by a subgroup, such as coaches, or administrators, or one grade level, to then report out to others.

Then, review practices and exemplars of literacy formative and summative assessments to develop a common understanding.

For instance, Ainsworth and Donovan (2019, pp. 126-153) provide a chapter on designing assessments within the RCD model.

Lucy Calkins et. al's *Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions* (Calkins et al., 2015) contains authentic and easy to administer performance assessment prompts and rubrics for the three writing types outlined in the state standards.

Lesaux, Galloway and Marietta (2016, pp, 70-88) provide guidance in designing an overall battery of assessments, both key action steps and pitfalls to avoid.

Maximize Learning Time



Strategic Actions

- Reexamine start of period rituals (CHAMPS, standards talk, etc)
- Beyond *participating*, analyze and strengthen the active *learning* potential for various structures (Kagan, Daily 5 groups, etc.)

Time is our most valuable resource and it always feels as if it is in shortest supply. While we cannot typically add more time, we can be strategic with how we use it.

While reflecting on Literacy Instruction through an instructional best practice lens, promoting planning that maximizes learning time is essential. This learning time allows for student practice, teacher observations and feedback, and differentiation. The less time students spend on independent reading, writing, and other literacy-rich activities, the less time teachers can respond to the diverse needs and strengths in the room.

Strategic Actions:

Reexamine start of period rituals (CHAMPS, standards talk, etc)

Audit visit observations revealed a varied range of how different schools and classrooms began their instructional periods. Most notably at McCracken, though worth reflecting on across schools, were a number of routines and rituals at the start of the class period that while taking instructional time did not appear to exchange an equal amount of enhanced learning.

For instance, at McCracken, several teachers started the class period by reading through a list of prioritized state standards for that lesson, verbatim. Then, before or after the lesson, teachers gave an explanation of each component of the CHAMPS approach, by *Safe & Civil Schools*, listing that day's criteria for each of the letters:

- Conversation - noise level
- Help - how to get help
- Activity - defining the activity
- Movement - movement required or allowed
- Participation - expectations
- Success - criteria

Additionally, as several of the observed lessons were activity based, the particular day's structure of the work period required time to be explained so students knew not just what they were doing but how they would be doing it on that day. In total, a great deal of time is currently lost to routines and explanations that may not be necessary year round.



“I saw students go to their ‘happy place’ during the reading of the standards. Several didn’t look up until it was over, it was like they were just waiting for the teaching to start.”

“I think our teachers are rule followers, they want to do what is expected of them, so if they are told by administrators to do certain routines they will. If they are told they can stop, they’ll stop.”
- Walkthrough conversations

We recommend reexamining these and any other start of the period rituals, asking:

- What is the cost/benefit? How much time is taken and does it have net positive gains for student learning? Will the loss to student independent practice time be traded off by other valuable learning gains?
- Does it raise student engagement in relation to the day’s learning target?
- When in the school year is this taking place? Is it early in the year where more explanation might be needed or is it later when students should be more independent?
- Is this essential for student learning or is this more for teacher planning?
- *Specific to standards:* If standards are end of grade level expectations, is it necessary to address the entire standard with students or are unpacked skills more relevant to the day’s work?

Being more strategic with start of the period rituals can gain back valuable learning time.

Beyond *participating*, analyze and strengthen the active *learning* potential for various in-class structures (Kagan, Daily 5 groups, etc.)

Similar to the discussion above, not all class time activities yield equal learning gains.

In *Engaging Children: Igniting a Drive for Deeper Learning* (Keene, 2018), Ellin Oliver Keene takes a deep dive into research and practice around student engagement and aims to separate out practices that truly engage learners with learning and those that simply make kids look busy. One way she approaches this is to distinguish between four behaviors (pp. 9-17):

- **Compliance** - when children look like they are learning but are mentally just completing tasks
- **Participation** - when children work toward an external reward, like a tally mark, or doing an assigned job in a group project, but are not really engaged in deep learning or collaboration
- **Intrinsic motivation** - Keene argues that, though driven by a feeling of self-satisfaction, intrinsic motivation is often created in relation to someone else, a motivation to please a teacher or hearing a friend likes a book so you want to catch up and read it, too
- **Engagement** - “leads to more memorable learning and the propensity to reuse information,” it is something you feel that makes you want to remember and learn more

If we use these categories to consider work time activities, we can be more careful in what we define as “student engagement.” Are students just being compliant? Are they simply participating because it is fun? Or are they truly engaged because they are learning and want to learn more?

During walkthrough observations, several conversations returned to the question of: is this an activity or is this learning? While perhaps not the intention of its developers, in some Skokie 73.5 adaptations of Kagan methods, children participated in routines that, while active, were not obviously aligned to developing engagement with the learning target.

For instance, if students are standing and doing hand signals to each other to repeat back rote memorization, then they are doing hand signals to a DOK 1 level quiz. Simply filling in bubbles would have had the same effect and been accomplished much faster. If, however, students are doing a movement routine that connects to them collaborating on a question that does not have only one right answer, then students are more engaged in higher level thinking while also following a protocol. Imagine, further, if the Kagan protocol was removed altogether and children were engaged in collaborating on a question that does not have only one right answer *and* they are given the option to freely move around the room as needed (instead of made to participate in assigned movements) they would be engaged in higher level thinking and engaging their bodies as they see fit.

This is not to broad brush the Kagan methods, or any other protocols, they can be useful. Instead, our recommendation is to bring a critical eye to how much time activities take, if they are clearly aligned to learning outcomes, and if they are leading to true engagement or simply compliance.

We recommended bringing this same critical lens to other work period activities. For instance, Daily 5/CAFE rotations:

- Are they being implemented with the most current thinking on this model?

- Do they engage students in deep learning or are they going through motions that appear busy?
- Are teachers able to gather observations and give real time feedback to further engage students in learning at their stations?
- How do we know all children are learning?

Literacy Supervision

“It’s lonely in the principal’s office... It’s even lonelier if you’re the only principal at your own level or if your district has a highly competitive culture among its schools. ...One of the ancient secrets of leadership and learning is to surround yourself with others with whom you can learn.”

-Tom Marshall, *Reclaiming The Principalship* (2018, p. 3)

Develop Shared Administrative Vision for Literacy



Strategic Actions

- Build administrative team newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision” expertise
- Develop internal and external administrative Literacy learning networks
- Set annual literacy goals at both system and school levels
- Establish and hold regular Literacy walkthroughs

In *A School Leader’s Guide to Excellence* (Fariña & Kotch, 2014), Carmen Fariña, former Chancellor of New York City Public Schools, career educator, building and district leader; and Laura Kotch, career educator and leader; state their first and most critical priority as “formulating a vision and communicating it clearly and understandably” in order to provide “a framework for making commonsense decisions, large and small”(p.3). They recommend leaders get clear—not cliché, be willing to take unpopular stands when necessary, and rally the support of stakeholders while celebrating their efforts and development.

Whether a result of the lack of district clarity around literacy instructional best practices or one of the causes of it, the administrative team did not show evidence of sharing a system wide vision for literacy pedagogy. This means that both supervision of literacy (including formal and informal observations) and support for professional growth (goal setting, recommendations, and providing PD offerings) is not aligned across the team.

While this is a critical deficit that needs to be addressed, the skills and knowledge needed to build an administrative literacy best practices vision already exists within the team and should be tapped into.

During the Audit visit, all leadership teams were asked to describe their expectations for literacy classrooms and most, but not all, of each teams' members took part in the walkthrough visits within their buildings.

From this data collection, we note:

- In terms of Literacy pedagogy:
 - The leadership team at Middleton was the most specific regarding literacy practices, able to describe with specificity research-based methods, structures, and content. They also provided the most clear and actionable literacy feedback after classroom visits.
 - The leadership team at McCracken's comments and feedback were the least specific to literacy or at times delved into math pedagogy; with the exception of one administrator with a language arts background who, during walkthroughs, provided specific, literacy-based observations and actionable feedback.
 - The leadership at Meyer fell somewhere in between, with the most specific comments related to recent professional learning, showing the impact of that work (a book study on phonics instruction).
 - Representatives from District leadership also fell somewhere in between, with varied literacy specificity and the greatest clarity around observations and actionable feedback related to their area of focus (e.g. MTSS; curriculum and instruction; supervision; etc.).

These observations should not be interpreted as placing blame or praise on any team, instead it reveals there is no systematic method within Skokie 73.5 that ensures administrators are regularly trained as literacy instructional leaders.

- In terms of vision setting:
 - All three buildings showed evidence of the outcomes of vision setting and supervision. Putting the specific content aside, as some of the approaches were critiqued earlier in this report, the leadership skills necessary to enact and support a vision were evident and can be built upon.
 - For example, McCracken leaders valued CHAMPs protocols and those were evident in many classrooms;
 - Middleton leaders were supporting Guided Reading practices which came up in several Focus Group discussions and the early signs of this were seen in a few rooms;
 - Meyer put effort into using a phonic program with fidelity and this was observed across several rooms.
 - District administrators disseminated three priorities, the language of which was heard across several conversations, in particular "Welcoming Environment," and "Acceleration."

This indicates that if leaders can develop a system wide vision for literacy instructional best practices, there are strengths amongst the team that can be drawn on to nurture and support those visions. This should be seen as a high priority.

Strategic Actions:

Build administrative team newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision” expertise

In her book *Transforming Schools for Excellence: Closing the Achievement Gap* (Anderson, 2012), Tiffany C. Anderson, award-winning superintendent, notes:

“Perhaps the most important characteristic of effective schools is instructional leadership. This means that schools not only have great teachers who improve students academic achievements but also great leaders who support those teachers and students. To close the achievement gap, schools must hire, train, and retain quality teachers as well as exceptional leaders”(p.56).

She goes on to explain that all the elements of school transformation come down to the effectiveness of the teachers and leaders. Skokie 73.5 should support and systematize administrator literacy instructional leadership and the development of a shared vision of literacy instructional best practices. This can be accomplished through the following strategic actions.

Develop internal and external administrative Literacy learning networks

The District should nurture both internal and external networks focused on literacy instructional leadership. As part of or in addition to regularly scheduled administrative meetings, time should be devoted to the team deepening knowledge of content and pedagogy specifically related to literacy.

We also recommend developing literacy leadership networks beyond Skokie 73.5. In *Reclaiming the Principalship*, Tom Marshall (2018) describes a multi-district collaborative of New Jersey administrators he founded that regularly meet to visit one another’s schools and classrooms, attend professional learning, engage in book studies, and become support networks: “When leaders come together to study good teaching, they form their thinking together. When they co-author a vision that they can carry together across time and across district lines, they find safety in numbers and a new depth of thinking and a learning community”(p.3).

Fariña and Kotch recommend intervisitations as one of many methods to promote a culture of sustainable professional learning: “Successful intervisitation may trigger mentoring or coaching relationships and ongoing collaboration within and across schools”(p. 116).

Nurturing external instructional leadership networks has the added benefit of helping you see beyond the bubble of your day-to-day norms. It can help you bring fresh eyes back to your routines, more greatly appreciating strengths and more critically questioning challenges.

Set annual literacy goals at both district and school levels

Setting clear, literacy focused goals help staff members to make strategic choices on where to focus their time and attention. For example, as “Guiding Reading” is a named area of focus at Middleton, teachers and coaches mentioned practices, readings, and learning they were engaged with. If the goal is specific, clear, and frequently repeated, colleagues have work to rally around.

Goal clarity also supports supervision. If everyone is aware of priorities and support opportunities, supervision and feedback can be better aligned. Instead of teachers feeling unsure of what a visiting administrator may be looking for, everyone is clear on an annual goal or goals and is working toward similar ends.



“While in a classroom, I can see the need for differentiation, but I don’t feel as a fellow teacher, I can go to a colleague and say, ‘you are not doing this.’”

- EL Focus Group

“There might be an expectation around ‘differentiation,’ but there is no follow through on holding folks accountable to this.”

- MTSS Focus Group

Goals can come from a variety of sources, including data review, action items arising from this Audit report, staff committees, and the team’s own leadership professional learning.

Establish and hold regular Literacy walkthroughs

Borrowing from the Audit visit protocols, we suggest the administrative team organize a regular and frequent routine of classroom walkthroughs, including stakeholders (administrators, coaches, specialists, teachers, and paraprofessionals) to observe classroom environment, instruction, student learning, and student artifacts.

The walkthrough should be conducted to support a dialogic feedback loop, one that both impacts the observed and the observers. Several Focus Group comments noted a lack of administrator presence in their rooms and asked for more.



“The admin walking in our rooms, this is the first time they have walked into our rooms.”

“We have asked for visits. We want feedback.”

“They look to us as the experts in early childhood. When we provide feedback, they don’t hear it. They don’t often understand why.”

- Kindergarten Focus Group

“To be frank, those people walking around today with you, they have not been in our rooms all year and it is March. They need to see what we do.”

- McCracken Focus Group

Engaged educators typically want feedback, they want to know how their supervisors view their work, they want to know from fresh eyes what is working and what could be improved. Engaged educators also, typically, want to feel their administrators are *in it* with them, shoulder-to-shoulder, on their daily struggles and triumphs.

We infer that some of the fears, anxiety, and negativity surrounding this Audit visit may have been lessened had administrators already had a regular routine of visiting classrooms and conducting collaborative walkthroughs. It is key that walkthroughs are understood to be valuable and get to a point that they are routine so authentic, usual instruction can be seen, true feedback can be gathered, and non-threatening, collaborative conversations can take place. These should not be so infrequent as to feel like a special event to prepare for.

For instance, at the start of the Tuesday Audit visit, the McCracken leadership proposed the classroom walkthroughs scheduled for that morning be postponed until later in the week as an older version of the schedule had indicated, “the teachers prepared lessons for you for Friday.” The auditor clarified with the leadership that the intent of the audit walkthroughs was to see how teachers prepare for *students*, not for visitors, and if students were present and the visit schedule was shared in advance (it had been, shared the week prior), then the visits should continue. It is key that administrators also share and support the philosophy that visiting classrooms frequently and talking about instruction is ultimately helpful, not harmful, to increasing student achievement and supporting professional growth.

Frequent walkthroughs, used as collaborative learning tools, help administrators and staff see patterns of strength and need, find misalignments and needed adjustments, ask critical questions, and celebrate shared successes.

It should be noted that the professionalism and curiosity of Skokie 73.5 staff lends itself well to collaborative walkthroughs. Staff that joined the Audit walks provided engaged insights, thoughtful observations and feedback, and critical questions. (Focus groups revealed the same level of engagement and thought, and clearly other staff joining walkthroughs would have added to them.)

Regular walkthroughs have a number of benefits:

- Norming expectations and understandings
- Dismantling silos (seeing how other classrooms, grades, schools, and interventions approach literacy)
- Sharing practices
- Building content and pedagogy knowledge
- Defining patterns of strength and need
- Supervising and supporting initiatives
- Observing case studies (e.g. visiting one child's school day program staff or the typical grade to grade pathway of a child across the district, such as "what would a special education child experience K-8?")

The walkthroughs should have a predetermined focus and protocol, though these can and should shift as data and observations deem necessary. See the Methodology section for notes on the Audit visit's foci as an example.

District and/or Building Literacy "Point Person/People"



Strategic Actions

- Define administrator Literacy content experts at district and/or building level

A number of Focus Groups noted a need for "point people" on questions regarding literacy. While the district has a number of committees in place, including on academics, and there are instructional coaches, there is still a need to define a person or persons at the administrative level to be subject specialists.

Committees are an essential facet of Skokie 73.5 decision making, they also are slow moving as most committees are. Teachers' and specialists' charges are full time instruction, not full time supervision. Even the administrative team as a collective body can only guarantee occasional time to meet together to develop consensus. Committees

are a good place to send topics that should be carefully deliberated, but they are not bodies for quick questions. An administrative Literacy point person or persons can both handle time sensitive issues as well as evaluate when some topics are better suited for team or committee review.

This should be systematized, having a long term plan for regularly distinguishing a subject specialist or specialists within the administrative team.

Strategic Actions:

Define administrator Literacy content experts at district and/or building level

This point person or people could be a formal hire role, as some districts have a “Literacy Supervisor;” some have more than one person as K-5, 6-8, or K-2, 3-5, 6-8; others include this formal role within a multi-subject supervision, such as a “Humanities Director” who supervises Literacy, Language, and Social Studies.

Alternatively, instead of a formal hire, this point person or people could be systematized within the current leadership team as a charge added to their formal appointment.

Either by appointment or by charge, this person or people can serve a variety of functions:

- fielding literacy questions and determining which to answer quickly and which should go to the administrative team or district committees
- investigate professional learning opportunities aligned with district goals and initiatives
- help to curate administrative team learning (e.g. suggesting texts to study, walkthrough lenses, etc.)
- And so on.

While the entire administrative team should continually engage in deepening their knowledge and crafting a shared “Literacy Instructional Vision,” this person or people would especially commit to this learning and should be provided with the additional time and resources to do so.

Literacy Professional Learning

“We sometimes forget the research-established fact that when teachers, principals, and coaches work together to create a climate of intentional, ongoing professional learning, the likelihood of student literacy growth increases”

- Susan K. L’Allier, No More Random Acts of Coaching (Brown & L’Allier, 2020), p. 3)

Reexamine Coaching Model



Strategic Actions

- Support a newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision” by building on the strong generalized “instructional” program, with specified “literacy” and “language” coaching
- Reflect on total choice model, balance with need for alignment

Skokie 73.5 invests in a full time instructional coaching staff as one facet of professional learning in the district. District coaches, like other district staff, are driven, professional, and proud of their work. The coaching model is an adaptation of Jim Knight’s “Impact Cycles” approach to instructional coaching.

Coaches provide support through varying structures:

- coaching one-on-one in classrooms
- coaching one-on-one or with groups in planning
- providing resources (such rubrics)
- Leading workshops during staff professional learning days
- Leading multi-session “cohorts” (could include book studies)

The coaches rely on and appreciate district support for securing resources for teachers, such as books for book studies.

The Skokie 73.5 instructional coaching model is fully opt-in, for all offerings including one-on-one support and attending workshops or cohorts. Staff choose to work with instructional coaches via an online form, in person request, or by administrative suggestion, not requirement.

The Skokie 73.5 instructional coaching model is also by design, it was explained, focused on general instructional strategies, not typically on specific Literacy or Language content and pedagogy.



“First, we should be clear: we are not ‘Literacy Coaches,’ we are ‘Instructional Coaches,’ and we do not work with teachers specifically on literacy pedagogy, so I am not sure if this is the right conversation for us.”

“We have very passionate and hard-working teachers.”

- Instructional Coach Focus Group

“Kudos to the coaches.”

- McCracken Leadership Focus Group

“Interesting to see the progression over the years, how the instructional coaching program has helped grow the work in this building.”

- Middleton Leadership Focus Group

Examples of recent coaching topics include examples of general instructional strategies (such as “engaging students in learning”) as well as some recent literacy-specific topics, particularly requests for Guided Reading support as that is a newer initiative at Middleton. The recent coaching topic list included:

- Classroom structures for purposes of engaging students in learning
- Students knowing what they are learning and why
- Student writing progress as measured by rubrics
- 4th grade writing standards
- Guided Reading structure
- Writing Guided Reading Lessons and finding books for them
- Working with math intervention
- Increasing student engagement
- Elaboration
- Goal setting with individual students
- Transition times
- Student-led classrooms
- Metacognitive strategies in math

Strategic Actions:

Support a newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision” by building on the strong generalized “instructional” program, with specified “literacy” and “language” coaching

The instructional coaches are proud, committed, and driven. They have worked hard to develop their program and methods within the current vision of the district’s approach to coaching.

It is essential, now, to either expand or redefine the coaches’ charge to include more specific support for teachers on “Literacy Instructional Best Practices,” including coaching on language acquisition pedagogy in Tier 1 as well as in Tier 2 and 3.

In *No More Random Acts of Coaching*, Susan K. L’Allier (2020) describes that out of all of the activities coaches may be involved in, “research indicates that it is the work with teachers that leads to growth in students’ literacy learning”(p.18). She goes on to define examples of teacher-focused coaching responsibilities that she suggests should influence a district’s coaching job description:

- “Strengthen teacher’s knowledge of standards-aligned research supported practices through a variety of professional learning opportunities such as large- and small-group workshops and book studies.
- Strengthen core instruction by working with grade-level teams and individual teachers to co-plan, model, co-teach, observe, and reflect on research-supported literacy practices.
- Support teachers in the administration and analysis of both formal and informal literacy assessments to plan needs-based instruction.
- Foster teachers’ reflection about their instruction and student learning to build teachers’ use of evidence-based decision-making” (p. 19).

Some of these research-aligned responsibilities already are clearly infused in the training and practices of Skokie 73.5 coaches, such as a focus on supporting teacher reflection, varying professional learning opportunities, and responding to student work. Those are clear strengths to build on with this dedicated coaching staff.

Other aspects of the Skokie 73.5 coaching model do not align as clearly to these responsibilities. While there are many individual instances, there is not a universal vision of clear alignment to literacy standards nor definitive focus on

research-supported literacy practices. There is not a clearly set expectation (for both coaches *and* teachers) that grade-level and individual teachers will have cycles of co-planning, modeling, co-teaching, observation, and reflection in those research-supported literacy practices. There are certainly case-by-case examples of deep focus in this manner on core instruction, but there is not a universal sense that working with a coach almost always entails in-class work in this way. The coaches are capable and eager to learn, but the Skokie 73.5 model in its current form does not provide clear enough expectations on supporting literacy and language core instruction in a unified, rigorous way.

This recommendation may mean redefining existing coach roles into specialties or expanding the program to include more coaching roles. For example, some districts have content specified coaches, such as a “Math Coach,” “Literacy Coach,” “Technology Coach,” and “ENL Coach.” Some districts define coaches by both content and grade level, such as a “K-2 Literacy Coach” and a “3-8 Literacy Coach.”

However this recommendation is accomplished, it is clear that while the current support model has helped the implementation of some practices, much more specified support is key to develop the research-based instructional practices needed to support “all children” in literacy and language development.

Reflect on total choice model, balance with need for alignment

A key aspect of the current Skokie 73.5 coaching model is “total choice.” Coaches only work with teachers who choose to work with them, no teacher is assigned to coaching. Professional learning goals are set by the teacher but not by the coach using her own expertise, unless the relationship allows for collaboration on goals. Further, there is no set expectation for what working with a coach should and should not entail. Coaches described work that includes everything from close collaboration, live, inside of classrooms to making photocopies of resources but not being able to support their implementation: “I asked to see if I could come see how it is going and I was told no.”

In their research on coaching models, Walpole and McKenna (2013) describe one aspect of Jim Knight’s model as: “instructional coaches rely on relationships and persuasion rather than formal position to leverage instructional change... they must actually recruit teachers in the school into coaching relationships”(20). This aligns with how Skokie 73.5 coaches described their work.



“Teachers choose to work with us through an online form or coming to us.”

“Teachers also may not choose to work with us.”

“As Jim Knight says, ‘When we insist, they resist.’”

“An administrator can suggest [a teacher] works with a coach, but it is not required.”

“I like that it’s voluntary, when teachers want to learn.”

“I do think it’s effective, job embedded choice professional development.”

“I am not able to see what the students or teachers are doing [if not invited].”

- Instructional Coach Focus Group

This total choice structure is built on several assumptions, both stated and unstated.

Underlying assumptions to interrogate may include:

- assigned coaching will automatically fail
- staff not choosing coaching would not benefit from coaching
- self-assessment is always the most accurate
- staff resistant to coaching will never become comfortable with it
- coaches are not skilled in building relationships and making breakthroughs to move staff past resistance
- coaches’ expertise and time is only as valuable as individual staff members decide
- any activity, from distributing photocopies to in-classroom modeling, has equal impact on teacher practice and student achievement

Clearly these assumptions are untrue.

As an aside, the tensions created in the current total choice model of professional learning were brought up outside of coaching, as well. During Focus Group conversations an upcoming professional development day was discussed. The EL specialists were asked to design workshops for the staff. After doing initial planning EL specialists shared that some staff insisted that they “already have an EL endorsement” and so should not need to attend these workshops, they should be provided with alternative learning. So, the EL specialists then were working on curating self-guided links for those who felt learning from their colleagues was not beneficial. While differentiation in adult learning is important sometimes, refusing to learn from peers who specialize in these techniques with the district’s own students, under the assumption techniques were already mastered in outside course work, feels problematic.

Jim Knight writes in *The Definitive Guide to Instructional Coaching* (Knight, 2021):

“Research suggests that choice is essential, but that’s not the same as saying “anything goes.” ...Choice also does not mean that teachers can choose to ignore district initiatives, skip over nonnegotiables, or stop learning. Choice need not lead to incoherence, either. Indeed, true coherence requires commitment, and commitment requires choice. There will be better implementation and deeper commitment to coherence when teachers have an authentic voice in making the decisions that matter most to them”(p. 24).

We recommend rethinking the total choice model, to find a more effective balance between choice and alignment. Many coaching models and methods exist, however not all lead to substantive change. In their review of research on coaching models and methods, Walpole and McKenna (Walpole & McKenna, 2012) note: “coaching does not always work. The devil is in the details”(p. 19).

When comparing coaching models to student achievement, they conclude that only “up-front models” are “likely to result in substantive achievement gains”(p. 19). These are models that set coaching goals in advance that are aligned to reform efforts; meaning a particular goal is set—say “implement guided reading groups”—and coaches align their efforts and design professional learning to support this goal. Some well researched models of this nature include reform-oriented coaching, Content-Focused Coaching, Literacy Collaborative coaching, and Reading First coaching (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011; Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2011; Matsumura et al., 2010); Carlisle & Berebitsky 2011; Atteberry & Bryk, 2011).

Walpole and McKenna note the other end of the spectrum are “softer” models, with more individualized goal setting, which include new teacher mentoring programs, cognitive coaching, and Jim Knight’s Instructional Coaching model.

In *The Art of Coaching* (Aguilar, 2013), Elena Aguilar, argues transformational coaches draw on both “facilitative” and “directive” coaching methods, sometimes guiding and supporting, while other times directing and showing, and often shifting between the two (p. 165). Ippolito (Ippolito, 2010) suggests a similar balance between “responsive coaching” for teacher self-reflection and “directive coaching” for “the implementation of particular practices”(p.164). Elish-Piper and L’Allier (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2014) describe another balance of approaches in three stances: facilitating, collaborating, and consulting, choosing the approach based on the teacher’s demonstrated knowledge of the topic or issue, notably not on their self-assessment alone.

Not all districts invest in coaches, the coaching budget is one that School Boards often cut back or cut entirely to their own detriment. Skokie 73.5 has placed a clear, and necessary, value on hiring and training coaches to support rich staff learning. To allow staff to opt-out is a misuse of this valuable resource.

This is not to say that talented coaches forgo the idea of choice altogether. The art of balancing expectation and choice is a key component for all learners, children and adults. Similar to how a writing workshop teacher, for example, may design a unit of study where students “write an argument essay,” and have clear expectations on including a claim, reasoning, and evidence, that same teacher will allow students choice of topic, choice of strategies, choice of format.

Many districts implement assigned coaching cycles, where the entire staff eventually works with a coach. While certainly not without challenges, it helps to break down silos, support collaboration, and have a myriad of other benefits. Equally important, students deserve access to highly proficient literacy instruction and teachers and specialists deserve support in getting there.

(Re)invest in Coaching Learning



Strategic Actions

- Provide regular, programmed co-planning/learning time
- Provide literacy and language specific professional learning

The instructional coaches shared both their gratitude for the district’s continual support of their own professional learning, as well as a desire to return to pre-pandemic norms for their own learning.



“Any PD [Professional Development] we want, the district supports.”

“We are given lots of opportunities for PD and we seek it.”

“If we need a book to share with teachers, [we can ask for it and] those resources help.”

“We used to meet as coaches about twice per month to learn together, but this year that has not been the case.”

“Teachers often say, ‘I don’t have time [to do all that is asked],’ and coaches need time, too.”

- Instructional Coach Focus Group

The *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals* (I. L. Association & Others, 2018), see *appendix A: Specialized Literacy Professionals*) provide a clear matrix for the

competencies required for effective literacy coaching professionals to advance student achievement:

- Foundational Knowledge (of literacy and language and the ways in which they interrelate)
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Assessment and Evaluation
- Diversity and Equity
- Learners and the Literacy Environment
- Professional Learning and Leadership
- Practical Experience

While literacy and language coaches should be hired in relation to these areas, even the most seasoned coaches require continual professional learning to deepen their competencies and stay current in the field.

The Skokie 73.5 highly value their own learning and find their collaborative time invaluable. The district should continue to invest and reinvest in their professional learning.

Strategic Actions:

Provide regular, programmed co-planning/learning time

Erin Brown writes in *No More Random Acts of Literacy Coaching* (2020), “So much can compete for a coach’s time. It is easy to set goals for continuous learning, but—in the rush of daily work and—find the journal articles getting dusty on the desk as we unintentionally put our needs last. Dr. Nell K. Duke reminds us that education should be more like the medical field. Would we go to a doctor who is out of touch with the current science of her field? As with medicine, it’s detrimental to our students if we ignore the growing body of literacy research when making decisions in our work” (p. 86). As so much vies for a coach’s time, it is critical that there is a systematized approach for supporting coach learning.

Coaches described a pre-pandemic schedule of regular coach meetings which they hope to return to. This should be programmed for coaches to ensure ongoing learning and to help coaches distribute their time.

While the agendas of meetings can shift as needs arise, include a balance of coaches learning together and learning from one another around the competencies listed in the previous section, aligned to the a clarified Skokie 73.5 Literacy Instructional Vision, and working together to devise solutions for problems of practice.

Provide literacy and language specific professional learning to coaches

In *Literacy Coaching* (Affinito, 2018), Stephanie Affinito states that “our literacy coaching practices must be clear and consistent models for literacy instruction” (p.8). Ensure that professional learning for coaches is not only on methods of adult learning, of which the Skokie 73.5 coaches have focused a lot of their professional growth, but is also more targeted to include research-based literacy and language content, methods, and structures.

More Clearly Define Role of and Provide Learning for Paraprofessionals



Strategic Actions

- Provide paraprofessionals with learning to maximize their impact on small group instruction (and related programs, when applicable)
- Develop models for best uses of paraprofessional time and expertise

Across classroom visits, paraprofessionals held a number of roles, ranging from sitting alongside students to coach them in practices directed by the teacher to independently leading small group interventions.



“If we need three stations of word work, then all three people need training, including paraprofessionals.”

“[In early childhood] paras could learn to extend children's talk in addition to supporting activities.”

- Walkthrough conversations

Paraprofessionals play a key role in ensuring students make progress toward literacy standards. They, too, require and deserve intensive support on new programs, initiatives and on “Literacy instructional best practices” as they relate to their role and assigned tasks.

Strategic Actions:

Provide paraprofessionals with learning to maximize their impact on small group instruction (and related programs, when applicable)

Many Skokie 73.5 paraprofessionals were observed working with small groups of students on word study, other literacy tasks, or on occasion other activities. The district should plan to provide paraprofessionals with literacy instructional best practices on small group instruction, on word study content, and any related programs.

As appropriate for their role, this could include targeted professional learning led by coaches, inclusion in staff training, and/or access to offsite learning, including online courses. At the very basic level this training should include how to properly implement programs, but more importantly this professional learning should include a grounding in literacy pedagogical philosophy and research, and Universal Design for Learning guidelines (*The UDL Guidelines*, 2021) as they relate to paraprofessional's roles.

For instance, as Jan Burkins and Kari Yates explain in *Shifting the Balance* (Burkins & Yates, 2021), "reading comprehension is fundamentally the same as listening comprehension"(p. 16) and therefore "reading comprehension actually begins long before children begin to decode. It begins as they learn to understand and use spoken language"(p. 12). Equipping paraprofessionals with this knowledge can help them be mindful of engaging students in meaningful talk and listening comprehension, even if a program's "teacher directions" do not explicitly call for this.

Develop models for best uses of paraprofessional time and expertise

Skokie 73.5 should develop models for maximizing paraprofessional's time and expertise in classrooms and disseminate these models to administrators and staff. Classroom staff can then collaborate with paraprofessionals to make more informed choices and administrators can better supervise paraprofessional's work and provide appropriate feedback and support.

This is work that can begin through observation of current structures to identify strengths and opportunities.

Literacy Instructional Materials

“As we collect resources that we trust, we need to be mindful of the overall effect of the resources we choose. It could be that our favorite resources tend to be teacher centered, giving students little time for independent practice. Or we might find that the resources we use year after year focus on introducing concepts, but that we have few supports for remediation or for mastery.”

- Towanda Harris, *The Right Tools* (Harris, 2019), p. 28)

Reexamine materials through “Literacy Best Practices” lens



Strategic Actions

- Define criteria to assess teacher-curated sources (from web, publications, etc.)
- Define criteria to assess programs (including phonics programs)

From classroom teachers to specialists and instructional coaches, everyone is pouring hours upon hours into finding materials, creating new activities for each day, designing and grading frequent formative assessments. For much of the staff, this is a weekly or even daily ordeal of recreating and recreating. While there was general consensus that staff appreciate the ability to design their own curriculum, there was an equally large chorus noting how overwhelming it can be to be left to pull from multiple resources—including the entire internet!

During the Audit walkthroughs, we observed that in some instances, curated materials lead to thoughtful, engaging, and rigorous instruction, however we also observed materials that felt quite the opposite. Some students engaged with overly simplistic worksheets, while others spent a great deal of instructional time cutting apart manipulatives they would only glue down once, while others attempted to work through a very challenging digital organizer and texts that were too complex to work from independently.

Other concerns arose from Focus Groups, especially when staff felt that too few resources were available to go around and they needed to fill in gaps, either by using the same materials as colleagues or filling in gaps with lower quality reproducibles.



“Students are doing a lot of activities, but what is *the learning*?”

- Walkthrough conversation

“First grade needs a phonic program, vertically aligned, and well defined.”

“We struggle with double-dipping, interventionists sometimes use the same resources we do and we need to more clearly define what is used when and where.”

- Middleton Building Leadership Team

“We loosely use Lucy Calkins Units of Study in writing, but it is hard to find where the units are, we had to dig into drawers... we don’t use them with fidelity, we don’t use the rubrics.”

- Meyer Leadership Team

“Guided Reading is a real ‘Frankenstein collection,’ we often have to print from Raz-kids[.com] to supplement... Nonfiction is particularly sad.”

- Kindergarten Focus Group

There were certainly examples of thoughtful and effective curation as well, such as a teacher combining new picture books with flexible graphic organizers to give students choice and show their independence.

Defining criteria for effective sources, and perhaps even identifying particularly useful resources and websites, can help streamline teacher planning while better supporting student practice.

Strategic Actions:

Define criteria to assess teacher-curated sources (from web, publications, etc.)

In *The Right Tools: A Guide to Selecting, Evaluating, and Implementing Classroom Resources and Practices* (2019), Towanda Harris introduces a “Resource Inventory Checklist” with criteria to assess if a resource truly fills a specific need in the classroom. Her inventory includes (pp. 29-30):

- What stage of learning does this resource need to address: I do, We do, You do?
- What unpacked skills do my students need support with?
- In what grouping will this be used? Whole group, Small group, One on One, Independent work?
- What is the expected outcome? Exposure, Remediation, Mastery, Practice?

- What Depth of Knowledge?

Whether using this inventory as is, or adapting criteria from it, the most important distinction is how clearly the focus is on *student outcomes* not *activities*. Instead of thinking, what activity can my students do, then planning instruction to match. The leading consideration is about student experience and outcomes, then seeing if a resource is a good fit.

The devised Literacy instructional best practices vision should help to inform this work.

Define criteria to assess programs (including phonics programs)

Similar thinking can be applied to assessing programs, such as phonics programs.

Several Focus Groups discussed concern over having a clearly articulated approach to phonics. As Burkins and Yates (2021) caution, a common misunderstanding is the “intentional phonemic awareness instruction takes a lot of time or fancy resources” (p. 42). They also warn that just because you follow a phonics program does not mean children are guaranteed to develop those skills, especially if the goal is to adhere to pacing instead of being responsive to student practice (p. 72).

During walkthroughs we saw staff making use of a few clearly articulated programs, it is not that programs do not exist. We did, however, notice some instances of the latter warning, where teachers continued on with the prompts of the day’s lesson despite clear feedback from student interactions that the day’s work was either too easy or that the previous day’s work still was not mastered.

As you define criteria for assessing programs, do not lose sight of literacy instructional best practices, including responding to student work. Evaluate programs for their ability to flexibly respond to changing needs.

Support Classroom and School Library Expansion and Annual Replenishment



Strategic Actions

- Build on teachers’ thoughtfully purchased texts, in response to the Equity Audit
- Increase classroom book access to support choice across a range of text complexities and interests
- Build on school library holdings to include native language texts and further develop representation of diverse identities

A strength of Skokie 73.5 is a vision to develop a culture of readers, in many classrooms students can be found engaged in choice reading either in Daily 5/CAFE centers or during in-class rituals like beginning the class period with silent reading. Additionally, very evident strides have been made by teachers to bring greater representation to the “face out” books in their classrooms, those often found face out on shelves or used in instruction.

Skokie 73.5 teachers have responded with urgency to the Equity Audit findings as well as conversations in the literacy and children’s publishing communities about the need for more diverse representation, from organizations such as *We Need Diverse Books* and *DisruptTexts*, among others, building on the critical pedagogy of Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (Bishop, 2012), p. 9) who coined the phrase “windows and mirrors” to describe the need for books that both provide a mirror for your own identities as well as windows into the lives of others historically missing—or worse degraded—by children’s literature.



“We need more diversity in titles and so are often buying our own.”

“Too often at this level we see, ‘the cat is feeling sad,’ but what about our kids’ feelings? We are weeding out animals, robots, to find real people.”

- Kindergarten Focus Group

“We definitely need more classroom library books and much more diversity.”

“I would like an earmarked budget for growing the multilingual/native language collection [of the school library].”

“We see our students as a ‘culture of readers.’”

“Thanks to [the Library Media Specialist] for bringing reading to a ‘live’ place with our Special Education students, bringing authors, making it engaging.”

- McCracken ELA Department Focus Group

“I surveyed students and a lot said they have not felt seen in their reading.”

“One of the goals of this committee is to increase access to culturally relevant texts, including in guided reading and shared reading.”

“Yes, most of the new texts teachers are either buying themselves or we receive as part of our partnership with a Loyola Professor, Dr. Aimee Ellis, who is providing books to us as part of her study.”

- District Equity Leadership Team, Teaching & Learning Strand (DELT) Focus Group

“There has been no funding for classroom book purchases.”

“I am impressed with how the teachers know how to pick books well, it’s not that they need books handed to them, it’s that the board could give a set amount of money to each grade.”

- Middleton Building Leadership Team Focus Group

While seeing the teachers' commitments to diversifying their books is inspirational, this urgency is not systematized and is currently based on individual teachers' purchasing and/or networking. This also means that while face out books are changing to better represent our diverse world, larger classroom and school library collections need institutional support to shift.

Strategic Actions:

Build on teachers' thoughtfully purchased texts, in response to the equity audit

The District should put resources behind reviewing, weeding, and expanding of classroom and school library collections.

Teachers across grade levels are showing an ability to thoughtfully review and select texts as well as forming strategic partnerships. With proper funding and time, this is work that could be well executed when entrusted to staff, in partnership with Library Media Specialists/Learning Center staff.

Increase classroom book access to support choice across a range of text complexities and interests

In addition to the above, classroom libraries should be reviewed and expanded to support choice and engagement across a range of genres, interests, identities, and text complexities (España and Herrera, 2020; Miller and Sharp, Miller & Sharp, 2018; Mulligan & Landrigan, 2018; Mulligan and Landrigan, 2018; Kittle, 2013; Miller, 2009, 2012; Calkins, 2001).

This should include both independent choice reading as well as instructional texts, such as Guided Reading books and Read Aloud texts.

Build on school library holdings to include native language texts and further develop representation of diverse identities

As the school libraries are an integral part of Skokie 73.5 reading life and instruction, so too should these collections receive support. Classroom libraries and school libraries work hand-in-hand and both should be reflective of district goals.

In particular, during the Audit visit requests were shared for supporting the purchase of native language texts to support multilingual students as well as increasing diversity in characters, subjects, and authors represented in the school collections.

Literacy Cohesion

“We can create a learning climate where students see the steps needed to tackle the tasks in front of them rigorously and believe that they can have success along the way—a learning climate that clearly shows what is gained by putting in the hard work to tackle something challenging and achieve something great.”

- Kate Roberts and Maggie Beattie Roberts, *DIY Literacy* (2016, p. 57)

Articulation Across Buildings



Strategic Actions

- Using newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision,” articulate student experience across buildings
- Redesign “Early Childhood” (PreK to 2nd grade) roadmap
- Plan both “up” and “down,” with readiness and graduation in mind

Staff and leaders named various forms of articulation as a critical need and expressed that through pandemic disruptions the time to meet to have these discussions has been limited. The one exception to this is the McCracken Leadership Team reporting that vertical articulation meetings have taken place across the school year between their school and the high school.



“We don’t talk about curriculum with first grade. We don’t know what they expect.”

“Sheltered English needs to partner together.”

- Kindergarten Focus Group

“We need vertical articulation.”

“Teachers might say, ‘writing is easiest to differentiate,’ but we are often shooting in the dark, we don’t have a clear continuum [of writing expectations].”

- Middleton Leadership Focus Group

“We have made little changes to our units in grades, but we have not had time [recently] for vertical articulation and that is not reflected in our plans.”

- Middleton Building Leadership Team Focus Group

“A strength is vertical alignment, they look closely at this and coordinate with the High School. Teams have six department articulation meetings per year.”

- McCracken Leadership Focus Group

The District should provide time for critical cross-school and cross-grade planning.

Strategic Actions:

Using newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision,” articulate student experience across buildings

A newly defined vision of Literacy instructional best practices should inform articulation planning, including those outlined below.

Redesign “Early Childhood” (PreK to 2nd grade) roadmap

The early childhood experience for students in Skokie 73.5 is both physically and at times pedagogically disjointed. Several Focus Groups shared frustration with how grades PreK to 2 are housed across two different buildings, PreK and Kindergarten at Meyer and grades 1 and 2 at Middleton, and how there are some abrupt changes in pedagogy and practice across these grades and schools.

This is a critical time, it is one where children are just beginning their schooling experience, where students can be overidentified for special education or, conversely, be missed for support, and where so much is possible with the energy and opportunities alive in our youngest learners.

We recommend a shift to seeing these early childhood grades as one cohort, even though they are across buildings. Provide this cohort with regular collaborative planning time and early childhood focused coaching and supervision.

Some areas of concern that arose through the Audit visit include:

- While PreK has a robust play-centric curriculum that reflects research on young learners, the Kindergarten program does not
- There are two different word study programs used across buildings, each with their own progressions, routines and cueing systems
- There are not consistent Tier 1, 2, or 3 interventions or supports for EL students across the buildings
- As well as other concerns raised across this report to be addressed

Early childhood classrooms offer some of the most student-centered and differentiated practices across the district, but much of this innovation is siloed into individual classrooms, grades, and schools. Redefining these grade levels as a cohesive early

childhood program and providing time, support, and supervision to do so will help to strengthen learning for our youngest community members.

Plan both “up” and “down,” with readiness and graduation in mind

Some staff noted that when articulation conversations happen there is sometimes a top-down dynamic to these conversations, that younger grades need to do X, Y, Z so older grades do not have to waste a minute in moving forward. Whether a fully fair assessment or not, this is not uncommon.

We suggest being mindful of these dynamics during articulation discussions across schools and to be open to a two-way roadmapping:

- Plan “down,” considering end of grade level expectations and what older grades’ schools hope is accomplished in younger grades’ schools
- Plan “up,” considering what children are ready for due to their interests, abilities, and routines established in younger grades’ schools that can influence practices in older grades’ schools.

Devising a protocol to ensure these interactions may be helpful.

Articulation Across Grades



Strategic Actions

- Using newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision,” articulate student experience from grade to grade
- Consult literacy and language research when reviewing and updating these alignments

While school to school differences were often stark and in need of clearer alignment, so, too, will careful planning from grade to grade help to refine learning pathways for children as well as support the sharing of best literacy instructional practices.

Strategic Actions:

Using newly defined “Literacy Instructional Vision,” articulate student experience from grade to grade

A newly defined vision of Literacy instructional best practices should inform articulation planning, including those outlined below.

Consult literacy and language research when reviewing and updating these alignments

While the state standards (N. G. Association & Others, 2010) are a grade-to-grade articulation of increasing expectations, they only “define what students should understand and be able to do by the end of each grade”(p. 10) and “while the Standards focus on what is most essential, they do not describe all that can or should be taught”(p. 6). The standards do not encapsulate the full breadth of knowledge in the field of literacy about how children acquire skills and language. Therefore, it is essential that literacy research is consulted while working to articulate grade level curricula.

For instance, the *Fountas & Pinnell Literacy Continuum, Expanded Edition* (Fountas, 2017) is a robust, deeply researched and field tested, and extremely fine grained set of continua that can support planning, assessment development, and teaching objectives.

Lucy Calkins et. al’s *Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions* (Calkins et al., 2015) contains standards aligned descriptors, performance assessments, student facing rubrics and student writing exemplars to support articulation of writing expectations.

Kathy Collins and Matt Glover’s *I Am Reading* (Collins & Glover, 2015) draws and expands on the research into emergent readers by Elizabeth Sulzby and suggests a continuum of pre-reading and emergent reading behaviors observable in very young children.

Diane Snowball and Faye Bolton’s *Spelling K-8: Planning and Teaching* (Snowball & Bolton, 1999) draws on research from a foremost authority on spelling instruction to guide the creation of schoolwide word study planning. As does Donald R. Bear et. al’s *Words Their Way*, now in its seventh edition (Bear et al., 2020) offers developmental stages of phonics, vocabulary, and spelling acquisition.

The WIDA *Can Do Descriptors* (Years, 2019) offer grade by grade *overlaid with* language acquisition stage by stage descriptions of what children can do to support planning and assessment.

In *DIY Literacy: Teaching Tools for Differentiation, Rigor, and Independence* (Roberts & Roberts, 2016), Kate Roberts and Maggie Beattie Roberts build from others’ research to suggest methods for educators developing their own skill progressions to support teaching and differentiation.

These and other literacy focused tools can support careful articulation of student expectations during curricula review and redesign.

Conclusion

We provide this Audit report with the hope and intention that it provides meaningful reflection and positive action for Skokie 73.5 leaders and staff. The list of recommendations are not exhaustive, but represent our best effort to outline key strategic actions built from review of district provided documents, Focus Group conversations, and walkthrough visits. Equally so, citations are not a full list of all sources we learn from or recommend, but these were selected to build from the Audit visit and provide some avenues for further study.

The District now has the autonomy to make all decisions in relation to this report, including accepting or rejecting findings, prioritizing actions steps, defining the metrics of success, and implementation and measurement of defined actions. District staff were largely open and honest with their assessments of strengths and needs and it was encouraging to see frequent overlap between various Focus Groups comments. We hope this report does justice to the concerns and hopes many staff and leaders shared.

We recognize that in our efforts to synthesize pages of documents and hours of conversations and observations, some quotes, strengths, or concerns may not have risen to the level of highest priority or may have been unintentionally overlooked. We strongly encourage the district to engage in continual and ongoing self-reflection and conversation. Pay particular attention to listening to voices that may often be quieter or marginalized. We found in this process, as can sometimes be the case, that while some comments were made loudly and resolutely, often the comments made in private or in smaller group settings were as equally valuable and sometimes in opposition to statements assumed to be shared experience. There is work to be done to create a safe and welcoming environment for collaboration amongst all district colleagues and continuing the listening and observation practices used in this “living audit” can be an important step.

As these recommendations are reviewed and turned into actions, other strengths and needs will arise. We recommend engaging an auditor again in five to seven years to review your actions and support an updated strategic plan.

The District has the autonomy to make decisions with this report entirely independent of the auditor, including pursuing other objectives, seeking other experts, and securing implementation support from available sources. The auditor has provided proposals for additional support, but this is nonexclusive and all decisions about next steps are up to the discretion of the District. As action steps are determined, we recommend finding the best fit to support the defined work.

We thank the leaders, staff, and students of Skokie 73.5 in sharing their community with us, being open to critical reflection and feedback, and for dedication to teaching and learning.

Definitions

In this report the following terms are in use:

- **Building Leadership Team vs. Leadership Team:** the Middleton “Building Leadership Team” (“BLT”) is comprised of staff representatives and school administrators, the team meets frequently to attend to school business. For purposes of this Audit, the BLT met with the auditor without administrators present. “Leadership Team” (“LT”) is used in this Audit separately from the BLT to mean a Focus Group composed of building administrators who often invited instructional coaches and MTSS members as applicable (e.g. Meyer Leadership Team, Middleton LT, and McCracken LT)
- **Daily 5/CAFE:** Is a literacy delivery model created by Gail Boushey and Joan Moser that is semi-related to a workshop approach, organizing children into independent stations while the teacher provides direct instruction to small groups
- **ENL:** “English as a New Language,” used somewhat interchangeably with EL “English Learning/Learner” and ELL “English Language Learning”
- **Instructional Coaching/Impact Cycles:** Terms used in the District to describe the Skokie 73.5 adaptation of the coaching approach developed by Jim Knight.
- **Literacy:** used broadly to encompass domains: reading, writing, speaking, listening, language, and foundational skills; taking into account “21st Century” ideas of literacies across a variety of content consuming and content creation modes
- **RCD/“RCDC”:** “Rigorous Curriculum Design” (“RCD”) is a backwards planning curriculum design approach created by Larry Ainsworth. In Skokie 73.5 the term “RCDC” (Rigorous Curriculum Design Cycle”) is used interchangeably to mean the adaptation of the RCD template, the “Cycle” of designing units using the RCD approach, as well as a term used for the units themselves (e.g. “our RCDCs are not where we want them to be”)
- **Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3:** Coined by the “Response To Intervention” (“RTI”) model stemming from the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This same language is used in Skokie 73.5’s Multi-Tiered System of Support (“MTSS”) approach. Tier 1, refers to universal interventions and differentiation at the core curriculum level, shifts made to both instruction and environment to meet the needs of diverse learners while in the general setting. Tier 2 and 3 are increasing levels of intervention
- **Understanding by Design (“UbD”):** A backwards planning curriculum design approach and template created by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe

- **Universal Design for Learning (“UDL”)**: a curriculum and lesson design framework created by the CAST organization to improve teaching and learning for all students. The framework is often thought of as a helpful tool to provide access and differentiation for neurodivergent learners, students with special needs, and the differing learning styles of all children
- **Writing/Reading “Workshop”**: A delivery model of literacy instruction widely shared in the literacy pedagogy and research community with a number of differing permutations. The main tenets include having a literacy rich environment, student independence and choice, and teacher modeling of skills and habits. It should be noted that many textbook and other program creators use the term “Workshop” in marketing and materials but may not actually be aligned to key tenets

Appendices

Appendix A - Audit Visit Schedule

March 15, 2022 - McCracken Middle School, 8000 East Prairie Road, Skokie

7:30 -7:45 Arrival (Parking in the Back)
8:00 - 8:30 MTSS (Multi Tiered Systems of Support) Focus Group
8:45 - 9:20 (MC Large Boardroom) McCracken Leadership: Nancy Ariola, Marty Behm, Priya Amin, Kristen McCann, Lynn Catanus, Annie Monak
9:30 - 10:00 Classroom Visits 6th & 8th Grade Classrooms
10:10 - 11:10 Classroom Visits: 8th Grade LE (Learning Enrichment - Part of MTSS) & 6th Grade Content (4th Period), 7th Grade (5th Period)
11:15 - 12:00 EL Department *Lunch Provided* (Board Room at McCracken)
12:00 -12:30 Break
12:30 - 1:30 (MC Large Boardroom) Instructional Coaches Focus Group
1:30 - 2:00 (MC Large Boardroom) Classroom Visits - Classroom Libraries, STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math), and Learning Center
2:15 - 2:55 (MC Health Room 242) ELA Department Focus Group
3:05 - 3:45 (MY Conference Room) Pre-Kindergarten Focus Group

March 16, 2022 Middleton School - 8300 St. Louis, Skokie, IL

8:00 - 8:45 (Room: Main Office) Middleton Leadership: Nikki Tammaru, Stephanie Larenas, Tiffany Voight, Kristine Paulson, Keri Williams
9:00 - 9:45 Classroom Visits: 5th Grade Literacy (English Learners included)
9:45 - 10:30/11:00 Classroom Visits: 1st Grade Literacy (English Learners and Self Contained Special Education)
11:00 - 12:00 Break
12:00 - 1:00 Classroom Visits: 2nd Grade Literacy (English Learners Included)
1:00 - 2:00 Classroom Visits: 3rd Grade Literacy (English Learners Included)
2:00 - 3:00 Classroom Visits: 4th Grade Literacy (English Learners Included)
3:15 - 4:00 (Nikki Barnold's Room) Middleton Building Leadership Team

March 17, 2022 Meyer School - 8100 Tripp, Skokie, IL

8:45 - 9:15 (Dr. Wei's office) Meyer Leadership (Helen Wei, Kristen McCann, Amanda Dunakin)
9:15 - 11:00 Kindergarten Literacy
11:00-11:30 Break
11:30 - 12:15 (Meyer Conference Room) Interventionists (K-5 Reading - Whitney Kamaikis, Katheryn Murray, Sara Sukalski) - Lunch Provided
12:30 - 1:20 Preschool Classroom Visits (Rooms 24, 26) Hannah Saibert, Debbie Chen

1:20 - 1:45 Classroom Visit (Room 59- Kindergarten Special Education) Rachel Douglas
1:45-2:45 Break
2:45 - 3:30 (Meyer Conference Room) Kindergarten Focus Group
3:45 - 4:30 (Meyer Conference Room) DELT (District Equity Leadership Team) Teaching & Learning Strand

March 18, 2022 - McCracken Middle School, 8000 East Prairie Road, Skokie

8:33 - 11:00 (MC Large Boardroom) Literacy Walkthroughs - 6th & 7th Grade ELA, Social Studies (Includes Instructional ELA, Content)
11:00 - 12:00 Break
12:00 - 12:45 (MC Large Boardroom) Follow-Up ELA Department Focus Group (6th Grade representatives)
12:45 - 1:30 (MC Large Boardroom) District Office Focus Group

Appendix B - Document review list

Main Folder:

- Schedule for Literacy Review (Teacher Version) March 15-18
- Goal Outcomes Updates - Copies of the updates to staff throughout the year re: literacy audit

Folder 1: Literacy Mission Vision

- Copy of Skokie School District 73½ Literacy Belief Statements

Folder 2: Literacy Curriculum Information

- Inside this folder is a separate folder for each grade level
- There are three main documents inside each grade level folder (Folders A-J)
 - Sample Unit
 - Units of Study Document: Outlines the Unit and Standards
 - Pacing Calendar: Provides a Scope and Sequence for grade level
- Note: Some grades shared additional pieces of information as follows
 - Pre-K included a 2 year cycle document for their scope and sequence and examples of their lesson plans
 - Kindergarten included a copy of their priority standards and did not include a pacing calendar
 - 1st Grade included their lesson planning document and long term planning calendar, but did not include a pacing calendar
 - 4th grade included a copy of their prioritized standards and included a Units of Study document for 4th grade ELP
 - 5th Grade included their thematic units overview
 - 6th Grade included documents for their on-level course and ELP (accelerated course)
 - 7th and 8th grade ELP courses are embedded in the documents they shared for on level courses.
 - 8th grade did not share a pacing calendar
- Folder K has information on self-contained special education ELA courses.
 - Grades 1 through 5 have a copy of their units of study
 - Middle School uses Read 180 as their core resource and shared 2 unit plans.

Folder 3: Other Curriculum Information

- This folder contains other places in our programming that includes literacy.
 - Folder A: EL - Our students who qualify for full time EL supports are pulled out of the reading part of the literacy block for a full replacement of reading and writing (approximately 1 hour). Students who qualify for part time EL supports are pulled out during the writing component of the literacy block. This folder contains an EL Program guide for reference and example of one of the units used by the EL staff.

- Folder B: Science - Included in this folder are copies of key documents from the science department that relate to literacy. There are Pacing Calendars, Units of Study, and assessment tools.
- Folder C: Social Studies -
 - K-5 Social Studies Units
 - MS Units of Study Documents
 - MS Pacing Calendars
 - MS Unit Samples
 - Connections to the Reading in the discipline standards
- Folder D: Drama - Provides some examples of 1st to 5th grade connections to literacy in their curriculum
- Folder E: Library - Work in progress of our 1st to 5th grade librarian who is working through their curriculum. She meets once a week with each class.

Folder 4: Data

- Copy of Board Data Presentation - Most recent (fall of 2021) data presentation to the board of education
- Copy of Spring 2019 “Year in Review” Board Presentation- Last non-pandemic data review
- Data Slide Provided to Teachers after Assessment Windows:
 - Copy of Data Dive Slides Fall 2021
 - Copy of Winter Data Dive Presentation
 - Copy of Winter 2022 Goals Areas Grade Datta (NWEA)
 - SKOKIE SD 73-5 _ Grade & Demographics.pdf - IAR (Formerly PARCC - State Assessment)

Folder 5: Resource Information

- Copy of Core Curriculum Inventory with Research Base- Most up to date resource list for core curriculum
- Copy of Special Education Curriculum Inventory Skokie 73.5 (Updated 2.1.2019) - Most up to date special education resource list
- Copy of Primary Grades--What We Use for ELA Block Components - K-2 Literacy Block overview created prior to pandemic
- Copy of 3-5 Grades--What We Use for ELA Block Components - 3-5 Literacy block overview created prior to pandemic
- Copy of ELA Tier I Materials: Expectations for Use - Document from 2016-2017 outlining expectations for core curriculum use - no recent document available

Folder 6: Schedules

- For reference, building schedules are provided.

Appendix C - Literacy Instructional Vision



Literacy Belief Statements

A literacy belief statement is intended to provide schools with an overview of where they want to go and what they want in terms of literacy instructional best practice. These statements establish clear expectations and values for the literacy program.

1. The purpose of literacy is to build and share knowledge about the world and self to find answers, solve problems, and equalize opportunity.
2. We believe that all children can be literate and transfer learning into usable knowledge.
3. We believe that literacy is understanding and clearly communicating ideas through reading, writing, speaking, and visualization.
4. Literacy challenges students to develop their identities and empathize with others whose identities and perspectives differ from their own.
5. Literacy is nurturing imagination.
6. Literacy is a collaborative process among all stakeholders (author, students, teachers, specialists, administration and parents in the District 73½ community) to foster a lifelong passion for reading.
7. Literacy includes development of and application of listening skills.

How were these developed?

On August 11, 2017 approximately 26 educators from Skokie 73½ attended a full day workshop led by Laura Beltchenko, literacy expert and consultant. A portion of the workshop entailed learning about, and developing, a literacy belief statement. A literacy belief statement is intended to provide schools with an overview of where they want to go and what they want in terms of literacy instructional best practice. These statements establish clear expectations and

values for the literacy program. Participants were asked to write their own statements, and then worked in small groups to refine them. These were then shared out with the entire group, who discussed each idea carefully. During the fall and winter of 2017, staff who attended the full day workshop were asked to bring the draft statements to their teams for feedback. The feedback provided was used to make suggested edits, which were reviewed and commented on by members of the district Academics Committee.

Suggested Literacy Instructional Practices

List in Development

1. Reading and writing is a reciprocal process
2. Readers should be wise and critical consumers of a variety of genres, multi-cultural texts, and digital mediums.
3. Mentor texts should be at the core of all literacy instruction

References

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