Leading for literacy
Engaging schools and districts in transforming subject-area literacy

For 25 years, the Reading Apprenticeship program has helped subject-area teachers to reflect on their own reading and writing practices and rethink their approach to literacy instruction.

By Ruth Schoenbach and Cynthia Greenleaf

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., middle and high school students once spent most of their time sitting alone at their desks and taking notes while their teachers lectured about history, math, English, and other subjects. But today, across the district’s 75 secondary schools and in every kind of class, it’s common to see students sitting together and having animated discussions about their own ideas, supporting their arguments by pointing to evidence that they’ve found in primary source documents, science diagrams, literary works, and other materials.

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what would be required, they said, ‘We can’t do this alone. Can we please work with a team of people from our school?’”

As CMS has learned and as many other districts are learning as well, it takes a large-scale culture shift to change entrenched classroom practices in an area as foundational as subject-area literacy. Administrative command and control will never succeed. To produce high-quality reading and writing instruction, local principals and teachers will have to lead the way.

**The challenges of subject-area literacy**

Like numeracy, literacy is a foundational academic skill. Yet, two-thirds of U.S. high school students today are unable to read and comprehend complex academic materials, think critically about texts, synthesize information from multiple sources, or effectively communicate what they have learned (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This leaves them unprepared to take on challenges later in life, particularly since growing numbers of entry-level jobs now require the ability to read, write, and think critically.

Based on decades of national data, we know that many students of all ages have difficulty learning from the many forms of texts presented to them in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). And as students move into middle and high schools, literacy doesn’t just become more demanding — it also becomes more differentiated, with each subject area involving its own, characteristic ways of reading and writing. For example, it takes different strategies to make sense of a 19th-century political cartoon in history class than it does to decipher conceptual diagrams and technical language in a chemistry lab or to make sense of the metaphorical language and syntax of Shakespeare’s plays. Unsure of how to read what they’ve been assigned, and often feeling overwhelmed, many students simply give up and don’t do the reading assigned for homework.

Teachers, for their part, may simply stop assigning challenging texts, opting instead to “deliver content” through lectures. Many of them may think they don’t have the capacity or knowledge to help students understand course material. Other subject-area teachers think that only English teachers are responsible for helping students develop the ability to comprehend texts across the academic disciplines. And though school leaders believe that teaching must fundamentally shift from front-of-the-room lecture modes into active learning engagements for students, they have seldom seen any professional development that helps teachers make this transformation.

Much of the professional development traditionally offered for literacy in the subject areas focuses on specific instructional methods for teaching comprehension strategies, rather than on building teach-
A strong foundation for the social-emotional aspects of learning that subject-area teachers often struggle to integrate into academic learning. The program begins with three simple premises:

#1. Teachers, like their students, have untapped resources — the invisible thought processes they use to problem solve and make meaning of many kinds of texts;

#2. Teachers can “apprentice” students into ways of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking that are unique to their subject areas; and

#3. Strategically engaging students at the social and personal level is a necessary foundation for students’ academic growth.

Metacognitive routines — for example “thinking aloud” about texts or “talking to the text” by writing questions, connections, or images that arise in their minds as they read — provide structured opportunities for both teachers and students to make visible the ways they work to comprehend challenging ma-
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