

Reference Information:

Au, K.H. (2005). *Multicultural issues and literacy achievement*. Mahwah NJ: Erlbaum.

10

Schoolwide Change to Improve Literacy Achievement

In other chapters in this volume, I have provided principles and ideas that teachers can put into practice in their own classrooms. This chapter differs in addressing change at the level of the whole school, rather than the classroom, to improve the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds. I begin the chapter by discussing why whole-school change based on standards is needed and why educators should focus on in-depth change for long-lasting results and avoid the temptation of superficial quick fixes. Four characteristics of in-depth change are presented. I then discuss the standards-based change process (SBCP) as an example of a system with these four characteristics. The SBCP centers on a nine-step To-Do List, and each of these steps is described. I close this chapter and the volume with a discussion of the importance of long-lasting change for schools serving students of diverse backgrounds.

THE STAIRCASE CURRICULUM

Chapter 1 presented evidence documenting a literacy achievement gap between students of diverse backgrounds and mainstream students (Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003). With the sweeping changes brought about by globalization, students of diverse backgrounds need many more opportunities, than they presently receive, to learn comprehension strategies and higher level thinking with text. Efforts undertaken by individual classroom teachers to improve students' literacy achievement, for example, by provid-

ing sound instruction in comprehension strategies, can certainly be effective—for that year. As explained in chapter 6, comprehension strategies and higher level thinking involve complex, multistep cognitive processes that take time for students to learn. Clearly, students of diverse backgrounds stand a much better chance of becoming excellent readers when they receive coherent literacy instruction, coordinated across the grades. Coherence in a school's instructional program has been found to be related to improvements in achievement test scores (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001).

In an effective whole-school change effort in literacy, the goal is to create a staircase or spiral curriculum in which students receive well organized, coordinated instruction that enables them to make consistent progress as they move up the grades (cf. Taba, 1962). The left half of Fig. 10.1 shows such a staircase curriculum. The top step represents the vision of the excellent reader who graduates from that school. Beginning at the bottom of the staircase, each step is intended to move students closer to the achievement of this vision. Figure 10.1 uses the example of an elementary school with students from kindergarten to Grade 5. After gaining a thorough understanding of the vision of the excellent reader who graduates from his or her school, the kindergarten teachers define the end-of-year literacy outcomes they will help their students attain. These outcomes form the first step. The first-grade teachers define the end-of-year literacy outcomes they want their students to attain, and these outcomes form the second step. This same process continues up the grades. Teachers make the adjustments in end-of-year outcomes necessary to ensure that students can move up the staircase systematically, year after year, to achieve the vision of the excellent reader.

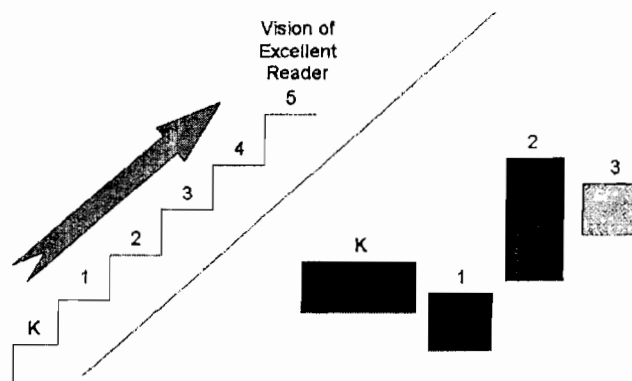


FIG. 10.1. Staircase versus fragmented curriculum.

Obviously, this kind of coordination in end-of-year outcomes can only be achieved when teachers at different grade levels or departments are communicating with one another on a regular basis.

The right half of Fig. 10.1 shows a fragmented curriculum, the opposite of the staircase curriculum and the situation seen in many schools, including those serving large numbers of students of diverse backgrounds. At the typical school, teachers at different grade levels may well have planned interesting literacy lessons and thematic units for their students. However, although coordinated within the grade level or department, these lessons and units usually are not coordinated across the grade levels or departments. The progress of students of diverse backgrounds, who may struggle with literacy learning in school, is hampered by the gaps between the learning opportunities presented from one grade level to the next.

Research suggests that a coherent curriculum helps students make achievement gains because they have the time to acquire basic skills as well as the strategies needed to tackle challenging tasks (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). Students' motivation also appears to improve when there is continuity in instruction within and among classes over time (Pittman, 1998). Success builds on success, because as students gain confidence, they are willing to work harder and can more readily learn.

WHOLE SCHOOL REFORM MODELS AND PACKAGE PROGRAMS

The approach to building instructional coherence through a staircase literacy curriculum, recommended here, is the SBCP. Before turning to details of the SBCP, I want to address a frequently asked question: Why should the teachers at a school have to develop their own staircase curriculum? Why not just adopt a ready-made, externally developed solution? The answer to this question is that schools enrolling high proportions of students of diverse backgrounds almost always do rely on ready-made, externally developed solutions. Yet this proclivity seems to me to be one of the reasons that so few of these schools ever succeed in bringing students of diverse backgrounds to high levels of literacy.

Two major patterns are observed at many schools that do not succeed in elevating the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds. In the first pattern, the school attempts to work with a variety of initiatives (Newmann et al., 2001). Teachers divide up to attend the workshops and conferences related to each initiative. Over time, it becomes clear that these initiatives have collectively failed to produce improvements in student

achievement, and teachers experience feelings of frustration and burnout. Even as failed initiatives are discontinued, the school still adds one new program after another. This “Christmas tree” pattern continues in part because of the positive attention and resources the school receives for undertaking each new initiative (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998). A “Christmas tree” school often looks good in the eyes of outsiders, such as district officials and community members, because of its high level of activity. A “Christmas tree” school does not succeed because it lacks a central focus. Teachers’ time and energies are always scattered across several different initiatives, and no new effort ever becomes the focus of sufficient attention to yield positive results in terms of student achievement.

Administrators at schools that follow the second pattern understand that they must avoid the “Christmas tree” problem. They believe they can achieve curricular coherence by focusing on a single externally developed solution, either a whole-school reform model (Newmann et al., 2001) or a package reading program, as a means of pulling the staff together. Whole-school reform models and package programs give the appearance of being a ready-made solution to the problem of coherence in a school’s literacy instruction efforts. This choice is made easy for schools because whole-school reform models or package programs are often supported or even mandated by school districts. Furthermore, adopting an established model or program involves less effort and commitment on the part of the teachers than developing a unique, school-based solution.

Yet, all whole-school reform models and package programs prove themselves effective in some schools but ineffective in others (cf. International Reading Association, 1999). Newmann et al. (2001) explained why this is the case. Whole-school reforms may be effective in spurring a school to make improvements or to restructure. However, these reforms may not succeed either in aligning together all of the components (such as school leadership, teachers’ professional development, and parent involvement) at a school or in establishing definite links among all of these components and student learning. Whole-school reform models may succeed or fail, not only because of weaknesses in their design, but also because of the manner in which they are implemented at a particular school.

Similar conclusions can be drawn about package reading programs. I followed the achievement results of a number of Hawaii schools that had used the same package reading programs over periods of 3 to 5 years or more. Some schools showed gains in test scores, especially in the first 2 years, with small but steady improvements in later years. In other schools, test scores remained at the same level with no significant gains, whereas in others,

scores even declined a bit. The reasons for these differences were often obvious to teachers within the schools, as well as to district officials. Successful schools had principals who provided strong leadership, pulled the school together around the package program, and declined to have the school participate in initiatives that might detract from its focus. Large schools had a strong curriculum coordinator who monitored the details of program implementation that the principal did not have time to pursue. Teachers at successful schools received extensive professional development that gave them the knowledge needed to successfully implement the program. Less successful schools generally lacked strong leadership, curriculum support, and coordinated professional development. In short, it was not the program alone, but the way it was carried out and supported in a particular school, that made the difference. Clearly, factors other than a whole-school reform model or package program come into play to influence a school's success in improving the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds.

DIMENSIONS OF SCHOOL CHANGE

Most policymakers, district leaders, and researchers tend to see change in schools as largely a matter of "scaling up" reform efforts. In the common view, the idea is to identify effective programs and to disseminate these programs to as many schools as possible (e.g., Slavin & Madden, 1994). Some of the problems with this view of educational change have already been discussed, in terms of the potential weaknesses of whole-school reform models and package reading programs. Research by Coburn (2003) presented a different picture of what it means to extend reform efforts. She argued that the strength of reform efforts should be judged not simply on the basis of the number of schools and districts involved, but according to four related dimensions: depth, sustainability, spread, and shift in the ownership of reform.

In terms of depth, Coburn (2003) pointed out that the history of public education is filled with reform efforts that failed to reach into the classroom and affect instruction. Quite naturally, teachers tend to gravitate toward teaching approaches compatible with their existing beliefs and prior practice. Therefore, Coburn suggested, reforms need to bring about "deep and consequential change in classroom practice" (p. 4). In my view, Coburn's notion of depth is particularly significant in schools with many students of diverse backgrounds, because of research pointing to the poor quality of instruction students typically receive (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1995; Fitzger-

ald, 1995). As established in earlier chapters, students of diverse backgrounds benefit from instruction that focuses on higher level thinking (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003) and develops their ownership of literacy (Au, 1997). Coburn's concept of depth includes changes in teachers' beliefs about students and their abilities, and their expectations for students. Lipman's (1998) study of reorganization in two middle schools serving African American students verified the importance of changing teachers' attitudes and expectations. Restructuring in these schools was conceptualized as an "at-risk" project. Unfortunately, using the "at risk" label permitted teachers to view their African American students as deficient in terms of mainstream norms, without considering their cultural and linguistic strengths. In Lipman's view, a change effort with depth helps teachers to see that it is educational institutions and their systems that need fixing, not students of diverse backgrounds.

The second dimension identified by Coburn (2003) is sustainability. Coburn found few studies of schools that had been involved in the same reform for 4 years or more. In my experience, it takes schools from 2 to 3 years to make significant changes, and the longer a school can move in a consistent direction, the better. For example, the principal of a successful school in a rural, low-income community in Hawaii reported that his school had worked for 8 years to raise their reading achievement scores. When I asked what his school had done that less successful schools had not, he replied that his school had not chosen a whole-school reform model or a package program. Instead, his school decided to stick to its own plan because students were beginning to make good progress. However, he and the teachers examined these models and programs for ideas and concluded that they needed to increase the amount of time students spent in small-group instruction. This consistency of direction and leadership over a long period of time is noted as well in other schools that beat the odds, those that have attained higher than expected reading achievement scores within their demographic category. For example, Mosenthal, Lipson, Sortino, Russ, and Mekkelsen (2002) described two successful rural schools that had begun the change process about 10 years earlier.

Because schools are embedded in districts, which in turn are embedded in states, schools have a better chance to sustain reform when their efforts are supported by these larger systems. A few coordinated state and district efforts seem to have led to substantive change at the classroom level (e.g., Connecticut, described in Darling-Hammond, 2003; Michigan, described in Dutro, Fisk, Koch, Roop, & Wixson, 2002; and Nebraska, described in

Gallagher, 2004). However, because these efforts are rare, strong leadership at the school level is likely to be a more reliable route to positive change in the classroom. Principals, curriculum coordinators, resource teachers, and other leaders who can maintain a consistent focus for a period of years are particularly important for the many schools located in large, highly politicized, urban districts.

The third dimension of change identified by Coburn (2003) is spread. Certainly, spread involves the idea that reforms should move out to a growing number of classrooms and schools. However, Coburn noted that it is also important to look at the spread of new norms and instructional principles within classrooms and schools. She argued that spread of this nature can be especially important with reforms that challenge conventional teaching approaches. If the goal is to close the literacy achievement gap, reforms that challenge conventional teaching approaches are the right choice. According to Coburn, reforms must show spread in the sense that new practices become embedded or institutionalized in the school's policies and routines. At the classroom level, spread can be indicated by the extent to which teachers apply the new instructional principles and norms of interaction to subjects and activities beyond those originally targeted.

The final dimension identified by Coburn (2003) concerns the shift in the ownership of reform. Many, but not all, reforms are initiated externally, rather than internally by the administrators and teachers at a school. However, if a reform is to be sustained for the length of time required to make significant improvements in student achievement, it must be valued and taken over by the school itself. Coburn pointed out that discussions of ownership typically focus on the early stages of reform, such as teachers' "buy-in," rather than on sustainability over the long term, such as how the school will maintain its direction in the face of new mandates. A key feature identified by Coburn was the capacity of the school and district to provide reform-related professional development and other mechanisms for promoting ongoing teacher and administrator learning. Too often, professional development related to the reform continues to be supplied by an external provider, a situation that prevents ownership from shifting to educators in the school and district.

In considering how to move their whole school forward, staff members at schools enrolling a high proportion of students of diverse backgrounds will want to remember Coburn's (2003) four dimensions. In schools with a history of poor performance on large-scale measures of literacy achievement, accountability pressures have made change a necessity, not an op-

tion. Because these accountability pressures are often associated with standards, that is the next topic I address.

Standards and the Staircase Curriculum

When the standards movement began in the 1980s, standards were proposed as a means of establishing a public conversation about the goals of education, and that intent found continued expression as the years went on (e.g., Pearson, 1993). Advocates of standards argued that goals for student learning were too often implicit in textbooks and the minds of educators and therefore inaccessible to parents and the general public, not to mention students. In my view, this original vision of standards and the public conversation about the goals of education remains a powerful and potentially beneficial concept, especially for students and families in marginalized communities.

Unfortunately, standards have come to be associated, not with a public conversation about the goals of education, but with accountability pressures and mandated testing. In many cases, these tendencies have had devastating effects on schools serving large numbers of students of diverse backgrounds. Darling-Hammond (2003) found that, in several states, standards and accountability were equated with high-stakes testing, and not with policies related to improving the quality of teaching or the allocation of resources. With high-stakes testing, crucial decisions about students are made on the basis of test results, often in the absence of other evidence about student performance. For example, students whose test scores fall below the bar may not be able to advance to the next grade or to earn a high school diploma. Darling-Hammond pointed out that, in states relying on high-stakes testing as the major policy reform, disproportionate numbers of students of diverse backgrounds experience failure in school. In these cases, expectations for the performance of students and teachers have been raised without provisions for the resources that would enable success, such as professional development for teachers or up-to-date textbooks for students.

Haney (2000), Gordon and Reese (1997), Paris, Lawton, Turner, and Roth (1991), and others have documented the negative effects of high-stakes testing, especially on students of diverse backgrounds. Because of pressures to raise test scores, schools can be tempted to resort to such measures as retaining students in their present grade or encouraging them to drop out of school. Some states, including Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas, have seen rising dropout rates as an apparent

effect of such policies as holding students back in the same grade (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

Furthermore, high-stakes testing, when unaccompanied by adequate support for teachers and students to meet rising expectations, often results in the sanctioning of schools with low test scores. Often, the sanctioned schools are those serving large numbers of students of diverse backgrounds. Sanctioned schools, and those about to be sanctioned, have an even more difficult time recruiting the well-qualified teachers who could turn the situation around. In the words of a principal, "Is anybody going to want to dedicate their lives to a school that has already been labeled a failure?" (Darling-Hammond, 2003, p. 2). In this way, the vicious cycle created by high-stakes testing can inflict further damage on the students already least well served by schools.

Darling-Hammond (2003) emphasized the need for midcourse corrections if standards are to promote greater equality, rather than inequality, in educational outcome. According to Darling-Hammond, successful reforms do not emphasize high-stakes testing. Instead, these efforts focus on the use of standards to guide and upgrade teaching and learning. Standards, curriculum, and assessment are aligned and oriented toward higher level thinking. Multiple measures of student achievement are endorsed, including portfolios containing samples of completed classroom assignments. Teachers receive extensive professional development that gives them the knowledge to use standards to change their schools and improve their instruction (Dutro et al., 2002). These changes contribute to school-based systems that improve student achievement through standards.

Rationale for the Standards-Based Change Process

The SBCP is designed to help schools implement a system for improving student achievement through standards. The SBCP leads schools to develop their own staircase curriculum in reading and writing, as well as in other content areas. The logic of the SBCP is that every school, but especially one serving many students of diverse backgrounds, should take charge of its own future and create its own system for closing the literacy achievement gap. A school that successfully implements the SBCP arrives at an ongoing, schoolwide conversation about what everyone at the school is doing to improve student achievement. Over time, participation in this schoolwide conversation results in a closer coordination of teachers' efforts

across grade levels and departments and leads to improved teaching and learning and steadily rising expectations for student performance.

The To-Do List

The SBCP centers on a nine-step To-Do List, shown in Fig. 10.2. Many teachers have knowledge of most, if not all, of the steps. However, in conducting SBCP workshops with leadership teams from over 100 public schools in Hawaii, I did not encounter any school that already had all the steps in place. The To-Do List is shown in a circular form, with arrows going back and forth between the steps, to show that the process of working through the To-Do List is recursive. That is, as they gain new insights, teachers often go back and forth between the steps. For example, after teachers have scored students' work with rubrics, they often see ways of strengthening their procedures for collecting evidence. The following description of the SBCP assumes that the school has decided to focus on reading, the subject area most often addressed first. The exact same steps are followed when the SBCP is applied to writing, mathematics, science, and other areas.

Philosophy. The starting point in the To-Do List is the philosophy or underlying beliefs of the teachers at the school. In the SBCP, the focus is on beliefs about teaching, learning, and literacy. Teachers work in small

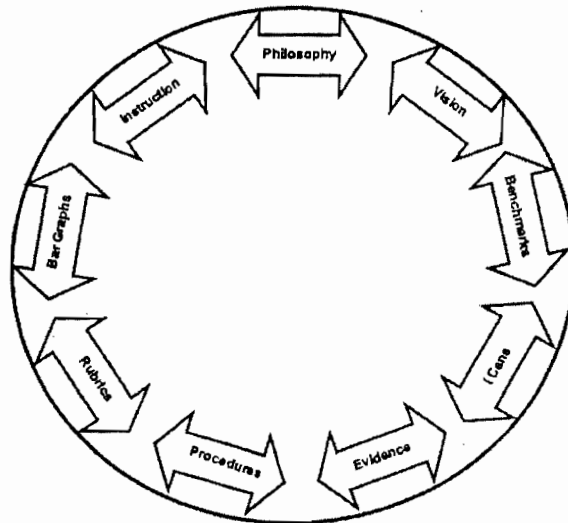


FIG. 10.2. The To-Do List as a recursive process.

groups, usually by grade levels or departments, to arrive at two key beliefs about teaching, two about learning, and two about literacy. For example, a typical belief about teaching is that the teacher must be able to adjust instruction to reach all children, whereas a typical belief about learning is that all children can learn, although they may learn at different rates and through different means. Beliefs about literacy often center on the importance of reading and writing for different purposes, including school, work, and personal enjoyment, and on literacy as a process of lifelong learning. Each small group records its beliefs on chart paper and then shares its beliefs with the whole school. The leader or facilitator of the meeting highlights common beliefs that cut across the small groups and appear to be held by most of the faculty.

A discussion of philosophy is necessary to establish the foundation for the SBCP, or, for that matter, any other whole-school change effort. Although this step in the change process is often neglected, it is especially important at schools serving students of diverse backgrounds. Many of these schools experience high rates of teacher turnover. As a result, teachers usually know little about the educational philosophies of the other teachers in their own grade level or department, much less outside that immediate circle. Furthermore, rifts sometimes exist between grade levels or departments, due to earlier misunderstandings and differences in perspective. When a discussion of philosophy is conducted, beliefs about teaching, learning, and literacy can be made explicit. This process often allows teachers to see that they have much more in common with one another than they had assumed. The discussion of philosophy also serves as the occasion when the principal and other leaders can affirm the school's unwavering commitment to helping students of diverse backgrounds reach high levels of literacy.

Vision of the Excellent Reader. The philosophical beliefs of the faculty serve as the springboard for creating a vision of the excellent reader who graduates from the school. The vision centers on the kind of reader teachers want their students to become by the time they exit at Grade 5, 8, 12, or other, depending on the highest grade level in the school. The purpose of the vision of the excellent reader is to provide a common overall goal to which all teachers will be directing their instructional efforts in reading. Most schools already have a general vision statement developed during strategic planning or for the purposes of accreditation. This statement often describes what the school—not students—will do or be (for example, provide a safe and nurturing environment) and so does not eliminate the need for a separate vision of the excellent reader.

Teachers work in the same small groups to draft their vision statements. At this point, all groups focus on the excellent reader who graduates from school, not on the outcomes for their particular grade or course. For example, if the school goes up to Grade 5, kindergarten teachers draft a vision of the excellent reader who graduates at Grade 5, not of the excellent reader at the end of the kindergarten year. As before, each group writes its vision statement of the excellent reader on chart paper, and the results are shared and discussed by the whole faculty. Because it is difficult to work out the precise details of wording in a large group, the appropriate committee in the school, usually a language arts or curriculum committee, takes responsibility for developing the wording of the final vision statement. The committee's proposed statement is brought back to the whole faculty for approval, and the vision statement of the excellent reader is posted in a prominent spot for continued reference.

Here is the vision statement created by teachers at a middle school in Hawaii:

The successful reader who leaves Wheeler Middle School will be able to read with a clear purpose, engage in an ongoing process of questioning to understand big concepts and generalizations, and continue to apply and make connections.

The teachers at this school were familiar with the definition of reading and levels of reading performance used in the NAEP (NAEP, 2004), and their vision statement reflects this knowledge. Vision statements of the excellent reader frequently include such ideas as the following: students will read for different purposes, read with understanding and confidence, enjoy reading, make personal connections, and be lifelong literacy learners. In my experience, the vision statements of successful schools with many students of diverse backgrounds often include both cognitive and affective dimensions by incorporating the notions of higher level thinking with text and students' ownership of literacy.

Grade Level or Department Benchmarks. Once teachers have agreed on the vision of the excellent reader they will all work to achieve, they are ready to develop benchmarks. Benchmarks are defined as the expectations for the hypothetical average student at the end of the year in an elementary school, or at the end of a course in a secondary school. To decide on the benchmarks, teachers think about the kind of performance they would hope to see from the typical student who has been well taught

throughout the year. Teachers create five to seven benchmarks in reading. Of course, the benchmarks do not reflect everything that is taught in reading, only the most important outcomes. I recommend that teachers develop reading benchmarks to address three areas: (a) attitudes, (b) comprehension, and (c) strategies and skills.

Here are typical reading benchmarks developed by teachers at schools in Hawaii. Examples of primary- and upper-elementary grade benchmarks are shown for each of the three areas:

- Attitudes.
 - Children will enjoy reading everyday. (Kindergarten)
 - Students will have favorite authors and topics for voluntary reading. (Grade 5)
- Comprehension.
 - Children will identify the problem and solution in the story. (Grade 1)
 - Students will construct the theme for the story and give reasons for their idea. (Grade 4)
- Strategies and skills.
 - Children will read a grade-level text aloud with 90% accuracy. (Grade 2)
 - Students will monitor their comprehension and seek clarification when necessary. (Grade 6)

Developing benchmarks is the most challenging item on the To-Do List, for good reason. Teachers have no difficulty when the task is to brainstorm a long list of benchmarks. However, they must think long and hard when forced to limit the list to a handful of the most important outcomes. Teachers should take their time when creating benchmarks, because sound benchmarks are crucial to the successful implementation of the SBCP.

Once they have a good draft, teachers check their benchmarks against state, district, or other standards to which their benchmarks should be aligned. This process of alignment is important for two reasons. First, teachers must make certain that they are teaching the appropriate content, with the appropriate degree of rigor, according to state, district, and other guidelines that their school should follow. Second, teachers need to build confidence in their own professional judgment. On checking these documents, they almost always receive validation that they are thinking along the right lines. Teachers revise their benchmarks for content and rigor, and in my experience, only minor revisions are usually required.

Then teachers share their benchmarks with the whole school. The purpose of sharing is to help everyone in the school become informed about the end-of-year targets being proposed by each grade or department. In this first round, no pressure is put on teachers to coordinate benchmarks across the whole school. However, teachers often notice inconsistencies and make the appropriate adjustments. For example, the first-grade teachers at one school learned that the second-grade teachers expected their students to read informational text to write a simple research report. As a result, the first-grade teachers decided that they would add a benchmark on the reading of informational text as well as fiction.

“I Can” Statements. Grade-level benchmarks are written in the professional language of educators. However, particularly in the primary grades, children may have difficulty understanding this language. To foster greater student understanding, teachers translate the benchmarks into “I Can” statements for the students (cf. Cleland, 1999). Here are examples of “I Can” statements based on the primary-grade benchmarks presented earlier:

- I can tell about the problem in the story and how it was solved.
- I can read the words in a story written for second graders.

Teachers may work with their colleagues to reword the benchmarks as “I Can” statements, or they may hold class discussions to enlist students in developing wording for the “I Can” statements. “I Can” statements serve as an essential link between standards and students, because discussions of “I Can” statements help students become familiar with what they are expected to learn at each grade level.

Many teachers put the “I Can” statements on charts or posters where they can easily be seen in the classroom. When they teach a lesson, they refer to the “I Can” statement being addressed. Through the use of “I Can” statements, teachers can make the connection between instruction and standards explicit for students. In chapter 6, you read about a comprehension strategy lesson that began with the teacher identifying the “I Can” statement being addressed. Similarly, in chapter 9, you read about a skill lesson that opened with the teacher stating the two “I Can” statements being covered. As these examples illustrate, “I Can” statements play a central role in the SBCP because they keep the attention of both the students and the teacher focused on important learning outcomes.

An added bonus of “I Can” statements is that they can serve as a useful communication tool with parents. During an open house or during parent–teacher conferences, teachers can refer to the “I Can” statements when explaining to parents what their children are being taught. In this way, standards for student learning become clear to parents as well, and parents are better able to assist their children in meeting the benchmarks.

Evidence. After teachers have decided on the benchmarks and “I Can” statements, they identify the kinds of evidence they will collect to monitor students’ progress toward meeting the benchmarks. In general, classroom work is the type of evidence most likely to provide teachers with information useful for analyzing strengths and weaknesses in students’ performance and improving instruction. Teachers can select assignments typical of the ones students are often asked to complete. For example, if the benchmark addresses summarization, the evidence might be the summaries students have written about a chapter of a novel.

Table 10.1 shows examples of benchmarks with the evidence that teachers might collect. Most teachers working with the SBCP do not rely on tests developed by outsiders, such as the end-of-unit or end-of-level tests often found in package reading programs. For example, if the benchmark addresses summarization, students’ progress cannot be measured by a test that consists of multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank items. Teachers come to prefer their own classroom-based measures because they can tailor these measures to assess the benchmarks directly.

Procedures for Collecting Evidence. Teachers must not only identify the kinds of evidence they will use to assess students’ progress—they must also identify the procedures for collecting the evidence. The importance of this step on the To-Do List became clear to me one day when I was working with a group of third-grade teachers. The teachers had previously agreed that they would use story summaries as the evidence that their stu-

TABLE 10.1
Benchmarks and Evidence

<i>Benchmark</i>	<i>Evidence</i>
Students have the habit of daily reading.	Book logs for SSR and home reading.
Students comprehend informational text.	File cards with notes for research reports.
Students understand the characteristics of different genres.	Completed matrices for biography, historical fiction, fantasy.
Students monitor their own comprehension.	Double-entry journals showing questions and reflections on the novel.

dents could comprehend a text at the third-grade level. In one of the four classrooms, the teacher had obtained written summaries far superior to those of her colleagues. All of the teachers had given their students the same directions, and students in all classes had read the same text. However, in three classrooms, the students went straight from reading the text to writing their summaries. In the fourth classroom, the teacher had led the students in a discussion of the story before they wrote their summaries. Apparently, this scaffolding helped the students in this class to write stronger summaries.

In my opinion, either procedure for collecting evidence about students' comprehension—with or without the class discussion—might be appropriate at the third grade. The point is that all the teachers in a grade level or department must agree on the procedures to be followed, so that they will be able to aggregate their results. Groups of teachers working with the SBCP usually create a list of the exact procedures they will follow in collecting evidence for a particular benchmark. Teachers forge agreements about the wording of the directions students will be given about the task, the amount of time students will have to complete the task, and the degree of scaffolding or assistance students will receive. For example, students might or might not be allowed to consult a dictionary or other resources.

An important issue centers on how often evidence should be collected. In most schools in the SBCP, evidence is collected three times: at the beginning (pretest), in the middle (midyear check), and at the end (posttest) of the school year. Most schools establish a 2-week window for each of these evidence collection periods (for example, first 2 weeks in September, first 2 weeks in January, and last 2 weeks in May), when all the teachers gather evidence on their students' performance. Teachers at many schools are accustomed to collecting pretest and posttest results. The SBCP includes a midyear check to allow teachers time to make any necessary adjustments to instruction before the high-stakes, large-scale testing that occurs in the spring in most districts. Some schools in the SBCP collect evidence on a quarterly basis, but many schools do not, because the results for the first and second quarters tend to be quite similar.

Rubrics. Once teachers have collected their evidence, the question arises of what this evidence indicates about student progress. Thus, the next step on the To-Do List focuses on the development of rubrics or procedures for scoring the evidence. In some cases, I work with experienced teachers who already have in place suitable rubrics matching their benchmarks and evidence. In this situation, teachers show students the rubrics

in advance, so that knowledgeable students can address the rubrics in their work.

In many other cases, I work with teachers who need to develop new rubrics. These teachers follow the procedure of first collecting student evidence. On the basis of their own professional judgment, they sort the evidence into stacks representing three levels of performance: working on (below grade level), meeting (at grade level), or exceeding the benchmark (above grade level). Focusing first on the student evidence that appears to be meeting the benchmark, teachers identify the characteristics of this work. After teachers have settled on the characteristics of work that meets the benchmark, they usually do not have a difficult time deciding on the characteristics of performance that indicate students are working on or exceeding the benchmark. In the SBCP, the category of exceeding the benchmark is reserved for work that indicates students are performing at a level typical of those in the grade level above. For example, to show work exceeding the benchmark, a third grader must demonstrate comprehension of a fourth-grade text by writing a summary comparable to one written by a typical fourth grader.

Rubrics play a critical role in the SBCP because they represent the clearest and most detailed statement of teachers' expectations for students' end-of-year performance, based on grade-level benchmarks. Teachers find rubric development challenging, because to develop a sound rubric, they must be extremely clear in their own minds about the kind of performance they want to see. In essence, a sound rubric should read like a list of minilessons. If the rubric is sufficiently detailed, teachers can easily identify students' strengths and weaknesses and the kind of instruction they need.

A group of third-grade teachers worked with the following benchmark: "Students will be able to summarize a story." The "I Can" statement for this benchmark was "I can summarize a story." The evidence was a written summary of a story at the third-grade level. The procedures for collecting evidence were that students would independently read the text and write their summaries. The teachers taught students story elements and familiarized them with the rubric. However, when collecting the evidence, they decided not to cue students about story elements required, because they believed that students should be able to include the required elements on their own. Here is the rubric these teachers developed:

- Above grade level.
 - The response shows a clear understanding of the story and includes the elements of setting, character, problem, solution, and theme.

- The response provides accurate and relevant information and shows sound reasoning about the story.
- At grade level.
 - The response shows an adequate understanding of the story and includes the story elements of setting, character, problem, and solution.
 - The response provides accurate information, although not all of this information may be central to the story.
- Below grade level.
 - The response is incomplete and shows little understanding, or inaccurate understanding, of the story.
 - The response may include random details and unimportant information.

Although these teachers were targeting the comprehension strategy of summarization, a kind of higher level thinking, they kept their rubric brief and to the point.

Bar Graphs. In the next step in the SBCP, teachers prepare and present their scored student evidence in the form of bar graphs. In my experience, this is the step most unfamiliar to many teachers. The bar graphs serve several purposes. First, they provide teachers and administrators with a clear picture of students' progress on targeted benchmarks at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Second, bar graphs give teachers and administrators an easy way of sharing the overall results of instruction with a variety of audiences, including fellow teachers, parents, community members, district administrators, and policymakers. Third, bar graphs send a clear message that accountability and improving student achievement are central concerns of the school.

In the bar graphs, teachers map out the number of students whose evidence has been rated as working on, meeting, or exceeding the benchmark at each of the three assessment points. Figure 10.3 presents a sample classroom bar graph. These results, for a second-grade class in reading comprehension, are typical of those seen at Title I schools during their second year in the SBCP. At the beginning of the school year, most of the students scored below the benchmark, an expected finding given that benchmarks are set for the end of the school year. At the midyear check, some students had progressed from the working on to the meeting category. At the end of the school year, the majority of students could produce work showing they met the benchmark, and the number of students working on the benchmark

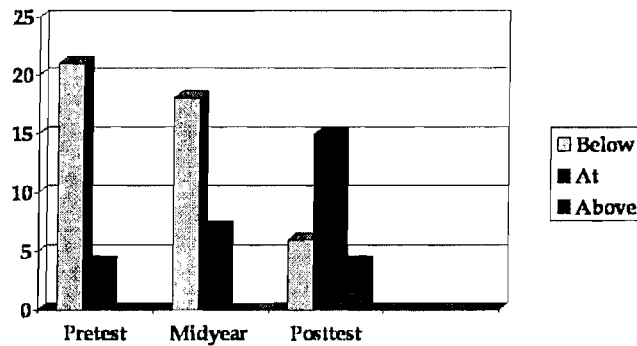


FIG. 10.3. Sample classroom bar graph.

had fallen. A small number of students had exceeded the benchmark. In my observations, teachers in Title I schools frequently focus on moving students from the working on to meeting categories. Teachers will also want to be aware of moving students from the meeting to the exceeding category.

Instructional Improvements. The final step in the SBCP involves instructional improvements. I am often asked why instruction appears at the end of the To-Do List, when instruction is obviously the way to improve student achievement. The reason that instruction comes last is because gains in achievement do not occur as a consequence of making changes to instruction willy-nilly. Instead, in efforts to close the literacy achievement gap, the starting point for instruction must be teachers' clear understanding of the kind of performance they want to see in their students by the end of the year—their grade-level or department benchmarks. Once the benchmarks have been identified, teachers need to know how well students are performing on these benchmarks, hence the need to identify evidence and procedures for collecting evidence before making changes to instruction.

To focus instruction to move students forward, teachers must carefully analyze student evidence according to their rubrics. This analysis reveals to teachers the content, strategies, and skills needed by the whole class or by small groups of students. Teachers can then design lessons to be given to the whole class or a flexible skill group. For example, a group of fourth-grade teachers learned from their pretest results that their students could not determine important information when they read nonfiction text written at the fourth-grade level. They decided that they should teach whole-class comprehension strategy lessons on determining importance when reading nonfiction. In terms of the comprehension of fiction, these teach-

ers found that most of their students did quite well. However, a few of their students could not determine the important information in fiction because they did not know story elements well, particularly the concept of theme. The teachers decided to conduct small-group lessons for these few students. They knew that whole-class lessons would not be a good solution in this case, because most of their students did not require further instruction in story elements.

REGULAR REPORTING AND RISING EXPECTATIONS

SBCP schools establish a regular schedule in which teachers report on their bar graphs and plans for instructional improvements at three times during the school year, following the collecting, scoring, and analysis of student evidence for the pretest, midyear check, and posttest. Successful schools often use a day when teachers can meet together in the morning to revise their rubrics, score and analyze their evidence, and arrive at instructional improvements. Teachers in each grade level or department then prepare a presentation reflecting everything they have done on the To-Do List and including as well their reflections on the whole-school change process. After lunch, the whole school gathers to hear and discuss the department or grade-level presentations. Some teachers prefer to create their presentations on a computer, using a program such as Microsoft PowerPoint. Others prefer overhead transparencies or large charts. The exact form of the presentation matters less than the fact that these thrice-yearly reporting events foster an ongoing, schoolwide conversation about what all the teachers are doing to improve students' literacy achievement through standards.

How does the SBCP contribute to improvements in students' literacy learning? Teachers' clarity about exactly what they would like their students to learn—as indicated in grade-level or department benchmarks—is the key to rising achievement in literacy. Experienced teachers who are crystal clear about their goals for student learning are willing and able to acquire and apply the instructional strategies needed to move students in the right direction. As teachers teach to the benchmarks, they help more and more students to reach these goals. As an increasing number of students are able to meet the benchmarks, teachers see that they can aim for higher levels of learning. Teachers in SBCP schools benefit from the work of teachers at the lower grades in finding that their students arrive better prepared than ever before. Over time, teachers in these schools establish a cycle of rising expectations, allowing steady improvement in literacy achievement.

In my experience, schools that use the SBCP generally have strong, positive relationships with parents and the community. Parents indicate that they appreciate the “I Can” statements, which make expectations for their children’s performance clear to them. Parents and community members attend gallery walks or curriculum fairs where they can view displays prepared by grade levels or departments, showing rubrics, anchor pieces, bar graphs, and other products stemming from work with the To-Do List. These events show parents and the community what the school is doing to address standards and how students are progressing. In the future, it will be important for schools in diverse communities to involve parents and community members not only as consumers of standards-based reform but as full participants. For example, parents and community members can contribute to the school’s vision of the excellent reader and writer by informing educators about literacy practices valued in the community.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In concluding this chapter and the volume, I address the SBCP and the four dimensions of change identified by Coburn (2003) and connect these concepts to the goal of closing the literacy achievement gap. The SBCP enables schools to implement a system for improving students’ literacy learning through standards. This approach to school change centers on the notion that each school should have its own literacy curriculum, developed by its own teachers for its own students. This approach represents the antithesis of the usual situation in schools serving students of diverse backgrounds, in which the norm is to adopt an externally developed program to solve the problem of low achievement.

In terms of Coburn’s (2003) four dimensions, the SBCP has “depth” in leading to significant changes in classroom instruction, as teachers become clear about their end-of-year outcomes for students’ literacy achievement and focus their instruction, especially on comprehension strategies and higher level thinking with text. The SBCP has “sustainability” in establishing a direction for change that teachers take responsibility for maintaining—because they see the difference in their students’ learning. The SBCP has “spread” in helping schools to institutionalize a system for improving student achievement through standards. With the SBCP, schools keep to a schedule in which teachers collect, analyze, and report on evidence of student progress three times a year, year after year. This consistency of direction allows schools to stay the course for the period of time necessary to bring about improvement in students’ literacy achievement. Finally, the

SBCP leads to a “shift in the ownership” of reform, as teachers develop their own curriculum, tailored to their students’ needs as literacy learners. Teachers recognize that, although externally developed models and programs may provide useful materials and lessons, these models and programs must match their school’s own literacy curriculum, not the other way around. In short, the best chance for closing the literacy achievement gap lies in strong schools staffed by expert teachers who set higher and higher expectations for students of diverse backgrounds and provide the powerful instruction that allows students to meet these expectations.