

FEATURE ARTICLES



The staircase curriculum: Whole-school collaboration to improve literacy achievement

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“We decided to change our assessment,” a third grade teacher announced at the start of her presentation to the entire school. She explained, “Because our whole school has been working on reading comprehension for a while now, the students are coming up to us knowing story elements. They do well with comprehending fiction. At third grade we think we need to spend more time helping them comprehend nonfiction.”

After the third grade teachers had finished sharing their new assessment task, as well as their students’ pretest results, a second grade teacher spoke up. “Our grade level needs to meet with your grade level,” she said. “We want to spend more time working with our students on comprehension of nonfiction, to get them ready for their work with you.”

This exchange is representative of those we observe after teachers have been engaged in building their school’s own staircase curriculum for a year or two. Our approach to whole-school improvement in literacy is called the Standards Based Change (SBC) Process (Au, 2005; Raphael, 2010; Raphael, Au, & Goldman, 2009). In this process, we help teachers come together as a school-wide professional learning community for the purpose of building a staircase curriculum to improve students’ literacy achievement.

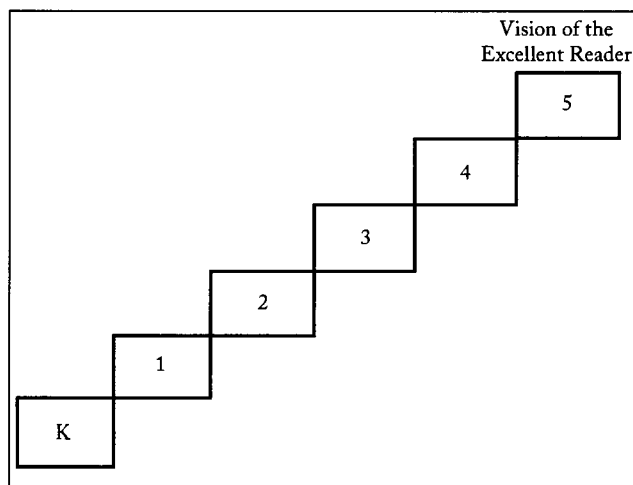
When teachers make comments such as those above, we can tell that they have gained a solid understanding of the staircase curriculum. Our purpose here is to elaborate on this key concept. We

have structured this article around the issues that arise when we guide teachers to build their school’s own staircase curriculum in reading or writing. These issues arise primarily because administrators and teachers in many schools have come to believe that the way to improve literacy achievement is to purchase a packaged program (Dillon, 2003). With the SBC Process, we propose instead that literacy achievement can best be improved by guiding teachers to create their school’s own staircase curriculum. As we discussed below, the staircase curriculum may be built around a school’s existing reading program. However, the staircase curriculum will always be broader than this program. In addition, it will be customized to address the literacy learning needs of the students served by the school.

What is a staircase curriculum?

Our concept of a staircase curriculum builds on research on curriculum coherence (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001; Smith, Smith, & Bryk, 1998). We find that visualizing the curriculum as a staircase (Taba, 1962) helps teachers to understand why they will want to collaborate within and across grades to coordinate and align their goals for student learning, assessment, and instruction. As shown in Figure 1, teachers within a grade level create their own “step” in the staircase curriculum.

Figure 1
Staircase Curriculum



Across grade levels, teachers strive to adjust and align their particular steps to eliminate any gaps and inconsistencies. When a school has a staircase curriculum, teachers know the goals for student learning at other grade levels. Having this knowledge enables teachers at each grade level to build systematically on what students learned in the grades below, as well as to prepare students for what is to come in the grades above.

We developed the concept of the staircase curriculum because of our work in Hawai'i and Chicago schools enrolling a high percentage of students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Many of these students were reading and writing far below the expectations for their grade level. To become strong readers, these students needed consistent instruction, coordinated across all the grades in elementary school. Having a staircase curriculum allows schools to address this need for consistency.

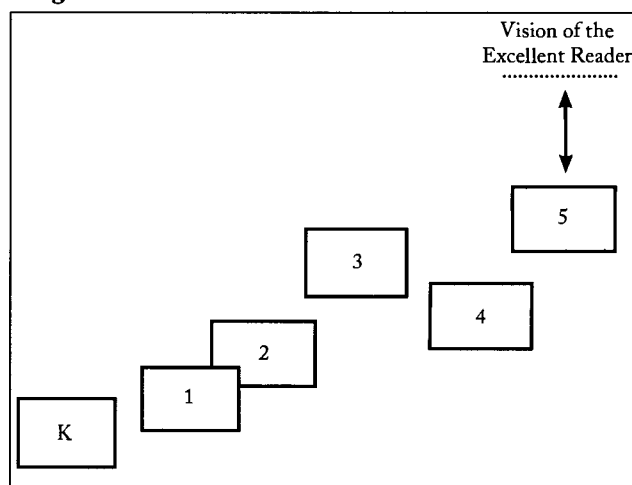
Each grade level is responsible for helping students accomplish the goals represented by its step in the staircase, which leads to the vision of the excellent reader who graduates from the school. An inspiring vision statement developed by teachers at Philip D. Armour School in Chicago calls for graduates to acquire the “necessary skills and strategies to communicate

effectively in all realms of literacy for the purpose of being a critical thinker, problem solver, and advocate in a continuously changing world.” Think of all the learning that can take place when a staircase curriculum reaching toward such a vision is in place. The kindergarten teachers help students accomplish the learning goals represented by the first step, the first grade teachers help students accomplish the learning goals represented by the second step. This process continues all the way up to the school’s last grade and the highest step where, if all has gone according to plan, students are able to fulfill the vision of the excellent reader.

The fragmented curriculum

Perhaps the easiest way to appreciate the benefits of a staircase curriculum is by considering its opposite—the fragmented curriculum—as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Fragmented Curriculum



In a fragmented curriculum, wonderful things may be happening at different grade levels, but the teachers have not yet had a chance to coordinate their efforts. This lack of coordination means that there are gaps, overlaps, and inconsistencies in the curriculum. Although these faults usually pose no problem for capable students, they can slow or even derail the progress of students who find literacy learning challenging.

Having worked with leadership teams at 130 schools spanning the elementary, middle, and high school levels, we know from documentation that not one of these schools had a staircase curriculum in reading or writing before they began work with the SBC Process. Instead, all had fragmented curricula with bright spots in various grade levels and departments, but little or no coordination across these structures.

The following example of the situation at a K-6 school in Hawai'i illustrates this point. The teachers had decided to focus on reading comprehension. Kathy asked the teachers to work within grade levels to

identify their end-of-year goals for student learning in this strand. When their charts were posted, the teachers were surprised to see that all grades had the goal that students should know story elements. This discovery led the teachers to a discussion of how story elements were defined at each grade level, the literature each grade level was using to teach story elements, and whether it was really necessary for all grade levels to have this focus. Over time, the teachers agreed that story elements would be taught in kindergarten and first grade, with an exploration of more sophisticated elements of literature, such as author's message and character development, beginning at second grade. The teachers realized that they were placing too great an emphasis on fiction and literature and too little emphasis on nonfiction and content area text. Eventually, nonfiction and content area text became the focus for teachers in grades three and above.

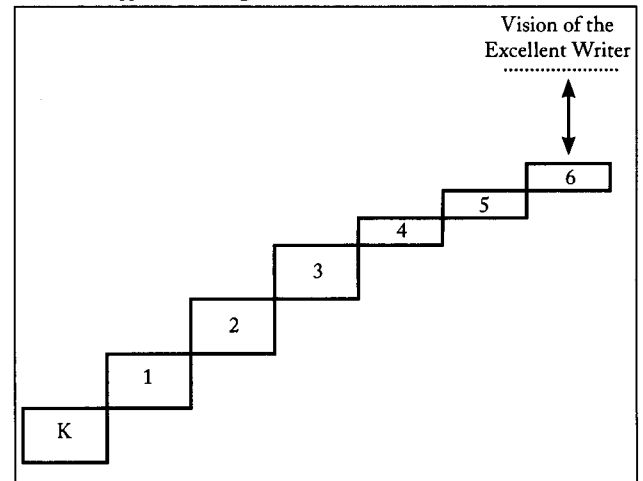
As this example suggests, once a school makes a commitment to building its staircase curriculum, teachers begin communicating systematically across grades and departments about their goals for student learning, instructional strategies, assessments, and rubrics. This communication enables teachers to build on the teaching and learning that took place in earlier grades or courses. Teachers are also able to prepare students with the background needed for success in the grades and courses that follow.

Alignment and rigor

To build a staircase curriculum and accelerate the advancement of struggling learners requires coherent, sustainable improvements. To accomplish this goal, teachers in a school must meet two challenges. The first challenge is *alignment*. Teachers must agree upon the strands—such as ownership, comprehension, and vocabulary—that will flow across all grade levels. They must reach consensus about the definitions of these strands. For example, what concepts, strategies, and skills should be included in our school's comprehension strand? Teachers will want to make sure that expectations at each grade level build on those of the grade level below and lead up to those of the grade level above, so that the curriculum flows consistently from one grade to the next.

The second challenge in creating a staircase curriculum is *rigor*. Teachers must not only achieve alignment through the agreed-upon strands. They must also make sure that their grade level's step in the staircase, as defined by their expectations for students' end-of-year performance, is sufficiently steep and ambitious. For example, Kathy worked at a school where the teachers in grades K-3 had high and demanding expectations for their students. However, the steps in the staircase were much less steep in the upper grades, with the end-of-year expectations for grades 4-6 being

Figure 3
Example of a Staircase Curriculum with Insufficient Rigor



only slightly different from one another.

As depicted in Figure 3, the curriculum at this school showed alignment but insufficient rigor. The double-headed arrow shows the gap between the goals for students' writing performance at grade 6 and the vision of the excellent writer.

Not surprisingly, this school had weak writing test scores in the higher grades. Working together, Kathy and the school's curriculum coordinator helped the upper grade teachers elevate their expectations for students' end-of-year performance. These teachers benefited from revisiting state writing benchmarks for their grade levels, as well as from examining writing samples available for other Hawai'i schools and on websites for various states.

Relationship to external standards

As discussed earlier, the steps of a school's staircase curriculum are based on the benchmarks drafted by teachers at each grade level. The drafting of these benchmarks is the most difficult part of the SBC Process for teachers at most schools. We define benchmarks as high but achievable end-of-grade expectations geared to the hypothetical average student. We discuss issues surrounding benchmark development at some length here because teachers' willingness to draft their own benchmarks is critical to construction of the staircase curriculum.

In the SBC Process we make certain that each school's staircase curriculum is carefully aligned to state and other relevant external standards, in terms of the content and strategies addressed and the level of student performance expected at each grade level. However, we begin by asking teachers to "think their own thoughts first." As we have established, the SBC Process is based on the idea that teachers must construct their school's own staircase curriculum for sustainable curriculum

improvement. Our research suggests that literacy achievement improves and is sustained when teachers take ownership of their school's literacy improvement efforts and become creators, not just receivers, of curriculum (Au, 2005; Raphael, 2010).

All states now have standards for the English language arts, and these standards will likely grow more similar over time under the influence of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010). Many teachers may well wonder why they should go through the process of "reinventing the wheel" when external standards and benchmarks, those from their state and the CCSS, already exist. This concern is understandable given widespread educational trends, such as an over-reliance on packaged programs, which have tended to de-professionalize and disempower teachers (Dillon, 2003).

In the SBC Process we ask teachers to treat external standards and benchmarks with respect, while recognizing that they are not sacrosanct. To strengthen teachers' knowledge base for constructing their own benchmarks, aligned with those of external sources, we make sure to bring teachers up to date on the latest definitions and results from international comparisons such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (2010) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Center, 2010) and national projects such as the CCSS and NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010). Teachers in most schools are quite familiar with their state standards and benchmarks, but if they are not, these too are presented. We also provide overviews of current research on key topics about which teachers have expressed concern, the most common being phonics, comprehension strategies, and vocabulary.

In addition, we want teachers to understand that external standards and benchmarks, while cloaked with an air of authority, are always developed through a human process requiring a large measure of professional judgment. We can make this point by describing our own experiences with developing standards, but it is made more effectively when teachers hear it from their fellow teachers. At a school in Hawai'i, Kathy asked two second-grade teachers to describe their experiences with working on the state's language arts standards and benchmarks. "When we looked around the room," one teacher said, "we realized that we were the only second-grade teachers there and that we were supposed to be representing all the second-grade teachers in our state." While these teachers agreed with the benchmarks eventually selected, they pointed out that other benchmarks could have served just as well.

Other points we establish to help teachers appreciate the benefits of constructing their own benchmarks include the following.

- External standards and benchmarks are written

to apply across a wide range of settings, not to address the needs of students at any particular school. Yet the strongest curriculum for each school will be one tailored to its students' own needs as literacy learners. In creating their school's own staircase curriculum, teachers must draw on their knowledge of the students, school, and community, as well as on the professional resources mentioned above.

- The people who have the best understanding of any set of external standards and benchmarks are those who wrote them. To gain a deep understanding of standards and benchmarks, teachers must engage in an active process of construction, rather than a passive process of reception. The background gained by drafting their own benchmarks enables teachers to evaluate external benchmarks critically and create their own for sustainable improvements to their literacy curriculum, assessment, and instruction.
- Our research suggests that schools where teachers show a willingness to construct their own staircase curriculum, including grade level benchmarks, progress quite quickly in improving students' literacy achievement. In contrast, schools where teachers are unwilling to undertake this task progress much more slowly.

At a few schools, where teachers had not received professional development beyond that necessary for the implementation of packaged programs, we encountered considerable resistance from teachers unwilling to draft their own grade level benchmarks. In these cases, we did allow teachers to select from the benchmarks available through external sources, while we continued to build their professional knowledge and ability to analyze standards documents critically.

For example, Kathy worked at a school in Hawai'i where the third-grade teachers asserted that they did not have the expertise to develop their own grade level benchmarks and instead wanted to select those in state documents. A year and several workshops later, these teachers asked to meet with Kathy to discuss their progress. "Who wrote these benchmarks?" they asked. "We know our students are able to identify the author's message and provide a justification for their choice. But these benchmarks don't include anything about the author's message." They further criticized the existing benchmarks for being too narrow and asked if they could combine several benchmarks into one larger statement. These teachers did end up constructing their own reading benchmarks, including one about the author's message, but it took some time for them to develop the insight and confidence to do so.

After teachers have the agreed-upon strands for their literacy curriculum and have drafted their grade level benchmarks for these strands, we ask them to compare their benchmarks to those in state documents for the purposes of alignment. During this alignment activity, we have teachers consider two questions.

- Content: Do the benchmarks you drafted address all of the content in the state standards and benchmarks?
- Rigor: Are the benchmarks you drafted at least at the same level of rigor as state benchmarks?

We have worked with the SBC Process at a wide range of schools, from those that have consistently made adequate yearly progress (AYP) according to state test results, to those with a history of low achievement where it has been a challenge to reach AYP targets. Nevertheless, we deliver the same message to all schools: State standards and benchmarks are the floor, not the ceiling. The reason we make this statement is that, in schools that have had their own staircase curriculum in place for a number of years, teachers find themselves in a gradual process of raising their expectations for student performance as time goes on.

This situation was illustrated at a K-6 school where teachers created their own staircase curriculum in writing. After four years, Kathy and the curriculum coordinator compared the “meets” exemplars for each of the grade levels to the exemplars provided in new state documents. This analysis showed that the school’s exemplars looked like the state exemplars for the grade above (i.e., the school’s kindergarten exemplars looked like the state’s grade 1 exemplars, the school’s grade 1 exemplars looked like the state’s grade 2 exemplars, and so on). When the results of this analysis were shared with teachers, they immediately recognized what had happened. A fourth grade teacher explained, “Now when the students come up to me, they are much better prepared than in previous years.” The other teachers nodded in agreement, because many of the students had experienced a staircase curriculum in writing in grades K-3. This consistency in instruction made the students much more capable as writers by grade 4 than students in earlier cohorts. “Because they’re coming up as stronger writers,” the fourth grade teacher continued, “we know we can move them farther along in writing than we used to. We adjusted our benchmarks upwards last year, and we’re planning on doing the same thing again this year.”

In short, there is a strong relationship between a school’s staircase curriculum and external (including state) benchmarks. At the outset, the school’s staircase curriculum and the state standards and benchmarks are often quite similar. Because we have involved teachers in alignment activities, they have checked to make certain that the school’s staircase curriculum addresses all the

content and strategies in the state standards, and that the outcomes in their staircase curriculum are at the same level of rigor as the state standards and benchmarks. Over time, however, the school’s staircase curriculum and the state standards and benchmarks begin to diverge, with the school’s staircase curriculum having expectations considerably higher than those of the state.

Packaged programs and the staircase curriculum

We frequently encounter the poignant situation where educators believe that they have solved the problem of students’ low achievement because they have just adopted a new packaged program. These educators assume that purchasing a new reading program has automatically given their school a staircase or coherent curriculum, an assumption that does not find support in the research.

A study by Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, and Bryk (2001) in Chicago showed that schools with packaged reading programs, such as basal reading programs, did not automatically have consistency in reading instruction across the grades. Inconsistencies resulted because teachers could interpret a program differently or choose to emphasize certain parts over others. Adopting a packaged program can save teachers a great deal of time and effort, and in fact nearly all the schools that have worked with the SBC Process have used packaged programs. However, teachers at schools successful in the SBC Process viewed these programs as resources used to support the implementation of their staircase curriculum. Administrators at successful schools understood that adopting a packaged program did not remove the need for teachers to engage in detailed discussions about the staircase curriculum within and across grade levels.

In the SBC Process, we make a distinction between a school’s adopted packaged reading program and its reading curriculum. We define a curriculum as all of the planned learning experiences for students within a particular domain, such as reading. This means that a curriculum is always broader than any particular packaged program. For example, we urge teachers to attend to students’ ownership of literacy as the overarching goal of their language arts curriculum (Au, 1997). While ownership and the affective dimension are highly important to students’ growth as readers (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), all the packaged programs known to us give insufficient attention to aspects of motivation. To cite another example, packaged programs almost always pay considerable attention to lower-level skills, including word identification, while paying much less attention to reading comprehension, including students’ critical evaluation of texts. In short, packaged reading programs rarely cover all of the dimensions that research and teachers’ own experience show to be important to students’ literacy development.

Focused discussions, for the purpose of constructing and strengthening the staircase curriculum, are central to effective classroom instruction and a school's success in improving literacy achievement. Research by Smith, Smith, and Bryk (1998) found that, in low-performing schools, there was inconsistency in the content and strategies teachers taught within grade levels as well as between grade levels. At high-performing schools this inconsistency was greatly lessened because teachers had the opportunity to engage in professional conversations with their colleagues to ensure consistency of instruction within and between grade levels.

When we begin work at a new school, we ask the leaders and teachers not to make an immediate decision about adopting a new packaged program. We want the school to maintain the status quo so that we have time to build teachers' understanding that their school's reading curriculum is broader than their school's packaged reading program or, indeed, any packaged reading program.

Furthermore, we want to take advantage of the fact that those teachers who have been working with a packaged program for a year or more have developed a clear idea of that program's strengths and weaknesses. If the school were immediately to adopt a new program, at least a year would have to pass before the teachers gained this same degree of insight about the new program. Our strategy, then, is to guide teachers to identify and build on the strengths of their present instruction in reading, while taking the opportunity to correct any weaknesses.

Kathy worked at a Hawai'i school that had used a highly structured, scripted program for six years. When Kathy met with the teachers to discuss what they saw as the strengths and weaknesses of this program, they clearly knew the answers. One of the third-grade teachers replied, "Well, our students are very good at decoding, but they don't understand the meaning of what they are reading." Other teachers verified that students were indeed strong in the area of word identification but lacking in the area of comprehension. A fifth-grade teacher pointed to another problem, stating that students lacked the motivation to read. This lack of enthusiasm for reading was particularly evident at grade 3 and above.

As the discussion progressed, the teachers agreed that they were satisfied that they had a sufficiently strong staircase curriculum for word identification. They knew how to teach students phonics and other word identification skills. However, they noted significant weaknesses in the staircase curriculum for reading comprehension. At the primary grades, teachers recognized that they needed to pay more attention to comprehension. At the upper grades, teachers recognized that, while they did more work with comprehension, many of their lessons focused at the literal level of understanding and did not foster students' ability to

interpret and evaluate texts or make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. At this school the work of Kathy and her colleagues focused on helping teachers create a staircase curriculum in the two strands they had identified: (1) reading comprehension and (2) habits and attitudes toward reading. No time was spent with the teachers on word identification because the packaged program had already provided them with a suitable staircase in this strand.

Practical ideas

Are you interested in building or strengthening your school's staircase curriculum? Here are some ideas you can try.

Practical idea #1. Work on your school's vision of the excellent reader. Start with the question, "What do good readers do?" Have each small group brainstorm 5 – 10 answers to this question and record their ideas on a chart paper. Display the charts around the room and examine them for ideas shared by two or more groups. With these ideas in mind, have the small groups try their hand at drafting a vision statement of the excellent reader who graduates from your school. You can draft a vision statement of the excellent reader for your grade level, as well as for your own classroom. However, the process of drafting a vision statement is most powerful when conducted as a whole-school activity.

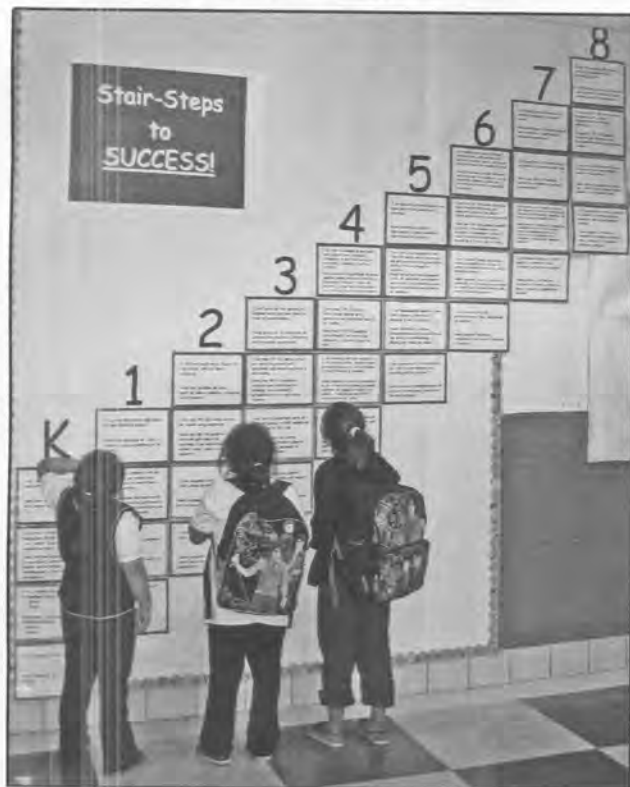
Practical idea #2. Work with teachers at your grade level to define the end-of-year outcomes or benchmarks you will work toward. Meet with teachers at other grade levels to see if your outcomes build on what is being taught at lower grades and lead up to what is being taught at higher grades.

Practical idea #3. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of your school's reading program, in terms of its match to your end-of-year outcomes. In what areas is your existing program strong? In what areas is it weak? What can you do to compensate for these weaknesses?

Conclusion

Professional development that enables teachers to construct their school's own staircase curriculum is an important counterbalance to what has become an over-reliance on packaged programs and the equating of program with curriculum. Perhaps the most insidious effect of this over-reliance is that administrators and teachers in some schools have come to believe that it is the program, rather than the teachers' expertise and agency, that has the greater impact on students' literacy

Figure 4
Students Examining the Visual Display of Their School's Staircase Curriculum



achievement. In our approach to whole school literacy improvement, the SBC Process, we follow the opposite logic. We argue that it is teachers' expertise and agency that makes the greater difference to students' literacy achievement. When teachers own the curriculum, high levels of instruction can be sustained over time. Through the SBC Process, teachers participate in professional development that strengthens their knowledge of literacy, instruction, and assessment for the purposes of constructing their school's own staircase curriculum, then provide instruction and monitor student progress within the framework of this curriculum.

A staircase curriculum offers many benefits to a school's administrators, teachers, and students. Administrators are often concerned about whether teachers, who have seen many initiatives come and go, will commit themselves to a new school improvement effort or simply go through the motions. By being involved in the SBC Process and constructing their school's staircase curriculum, teachers have the opportunity to take ownership of literacy improvement efforts, a benefit to administrators who might otherwise face yet another fleeting initiative. Teachers benefit because they have the chance to create a curriculum tailored to the literacy learning needs of their students, rather than being required to follow a packaged program that may

not address these needs. Teachers appreciate having the time to engage in detailed discussions of curriculum within their grade levels, as well as the time to meet with teachers at other grades for the purpose of coordinating their steps in the staircase. Teachers describe their work with the SBC Process as some of the most worthwhile of their careers. Students benefit because they receive literacy instruction that flows consistently from grade to grade, enabling them to achieve at higher levels and, in many cases, to reach the school's vision of the excellent reader and writer.

At a K-8 school in Chicago, Carrie King, the literacy curriculum coordinator and her team created the visual display of their school's staircase curriculum shown in Figure 4.

As they were completing the display, three students walked by. Without any prompting, they stopped to examine the display. They pointed with interest to the end-of-year goals for their grade level, and compared it to what their siblings were doing in the other grade levels. They looked at the goals and talked about what they had learned the previous year and what they would learn the next one. As this anecdote suggests, perhaps the true power of the staircase curriculum is that it can empower students to take control of their own literacy learning.

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NERA

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KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



Irene Fountas

Professor in the School of Education
Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Topic: Teacher Expertise:
Key to Improving Literacy Achievement



Georgia Heard

Poet, Teacher, and Author of Children's Books
Topic: Teaching to Make a Difference:
Touching the Hearts and Minds
of Our Students

LUNCHEON SPEAKERS



Linda B. Gambrell

Professor of Education
in the Eugene T. Moore School of Education
Clemson University, South Carolina
Past President, International Reading Association
Topic: Joy of the Journey:
The Power of Pleasure Reading



David A. Monti

Professor Emeritus of Reading and Language Arts
Central Connecticut State University, Connecticut
Topic: Journeying into Literacy
Through a Data Driven Perspective