



Literacy Leadership

by MATT RENWICK

Through a lifetime of working in schools, one of my most powerful insights and core beliefs is that teachers must be leaders, and principals must know literacy. Without a synergy between literacy and leadership and a committed, joint effort by teachers and principals, fragile achievement gains do not hold.

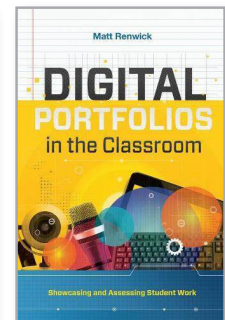
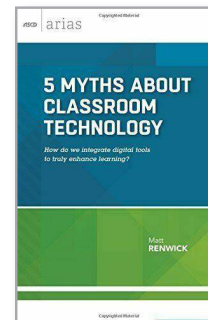
—Regie Routman



LITERACY CHAMPION: MATT RENWICK

Matt Renwick taught 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th grade in Rudolph, Wisconsin. He observed the power in student engagement as readers and writers, and wanted to spread these ideas by becoming a principal. As a building administrator, Matt encourages all staff to leverage resources to make sure kids have access to texts that they want to and can read. Literacy

is a priority for a school when leaders in every position advocate for authentic texts, teaching excellence, and time to read. Matt shares about these topics on Twitter at [@ReadByExample](https://twitter.com/ReadByExample) and on his newsletter, <https://readbyexample.substack.com>. He is also the author of two books for ASCD, *5 Myths About Classroom Technology* and *Digital Portfolios in the Classroom*. And watch for this third book (from Corwin) January 2022, *Leading Like a C.O.A.C.H.*



One to Know: The Power of Beliefs

A recipe for inequity is accepting today's conditions as tomorrow's reality. Leaders can help students, teachers, and family members overcome our own limiting beliefs by first examining them. What are we doing and why? Assessing our current practices and resources can provide insights into what is going well and what might be improved.

What to Do: Build Trust, Prioritize, Affirm, Communicate

Anyone can be a literacy leader. Teachers, parents, even students can increase book access in a community and dedicate time plus support to providing the best environment for supporting readers, writers, thinkers, and communicators. Consider the following four strategies for making a positive difference in the lives of all learners.

Create Conditions for Trust

To foster growth and eventual change, people need to feel safe to take risks. Permission from leaders to try and apply new strategies gives teachers and other learners the support to make mistakes, learn from them, and improve.

What does trust look like in the school and the community? Certain conditions lead to a trusting environment for learning, including responsiveness, effective communication, and presence.

What does trust look like when leading literacy?

Trust starts with leaders. We can demonstrate our faith in teachers and students and be perceived as trustworthy through the following actions:

- Be responsive to requests for resources and innovative ideas. For example, if a teacher wants to build up their classroom library and include more diverse authors and characters, try to support their efforts with funds and research as available.
- Visit classrooms daily. For leaders, presence might be the most effective trust-building activity. Go in with a desire to learn and with curiosity vs. a need to evaluate or judge. Talk to kids and teachers to build an understanding of collective literacy instruction.
- Communicate across many modes and platforms the importance of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Share with your families and community what is happening in the school via social media, newsletters, and in person. Articulate how your school's efforts are making a positive impact on students' literacy lives.

Organize Around a Priority

We cannot attend to more than one thing and do it well. To ensure focus, leaders can organize time, resources, and energies around a specific area of growth.

Leaders can identify what specific area will be the focus for the school year or beyond. It can be a subject area and/or a set of instructional practices. Whatever the focus, professional learning in other subject areas and practices is limited.



What does a priority look like when leading literacy?

A schoolwide literacy improvement can be a complex process. It helps to have an instructional framework to guide the priority. This framework articulates specific practices that are based on sound, shared beliefs and will likely lead to positive student outcomes. Next are a few elements of my own school's framework for authentic literacy experiences (Routman, 2014).

- **Authenticity** Reading, writing, speaking, and listening for real-world audience and purpose; integration of digital media; choice within structure; use of highest-quality texts across the curriculum
- **Level of Discussion** Level of questions being asked (open or closed); who is posing the questions; conversations versus interrogations; quality of the conversations; hearing all voices

These descriptions offer a scaffold for any teacher to approximate toward more promising practices, while giving them some autonomy to adapt these practices to their unique context.

Affirm Promising Practices

One of the strongest predictors of future success is past success. Leaders can help build teachers' confidence by noticing, naming, and celebrating their attempts at more promising practices. Visiting classrooms and documenting the teaching and learning through a strengths-oriented approach ensures that faculty are experiencing frequent wins in their work.

What does affirmation look like when leading literacy?

Using a framework gives leader a lens in which to view instruction. Observational notes shared by the leader affirm the practices teachers are implementing during instruction.

As an example, a leader observes the teacher facilitating the organization of the classroom library with their students. The kids are deciding how to categorize the different texts, making labels, and negotiating placement of the books in the classroom for optimal use. The leader writes and shares their observations that affirm the authentic experience, including the choice within structure (**authenticity**) and the student-led conversations (**level of discussion**).

Communicate Feedback

With trust in place, a clear priority, and more promising practices consistently affirmed in classrooms, leaders set the stage for facilitating dialogue that leads to professional improvement. This discourse is not about telling a teacher what they are doing right or wrong. Rather, it involves conversations that surface new ways of thinking about current practices.

These conversations often have more of a coach-like feel to them vs. a formal observation. Paraphrasing, posing questions, and pausing are some of the key skills for communicating feedback—not to correct, but to construct new understandings about our complex work.

What does feedback look like when leading literacy?

The goal with instruction is independence. Can students transfer the literacy knowledge, skills, and dispositions to new situations and authentic contexts? Do kids view reading and writing as lifelong pursuits and enjoyable tasks?

This long view of literacy can be the entry point for posing questions with faculty. For example, a leader might visit a classroom during independent reading time. They can notice and name how students are interacting with the classroom library, such as:

- how long it takes students to pick a book,
- the types of books students are selecting, and
- the amount of time students devote to *actually* reading.

This information can help the teacher reflect on their current practices and, facilitated through professional conversation, possibly make different decisions about literacy instruction.

More to Know and Do

Each of these strategies can be employed at any time. For example, while it is helpful to build trust prior to communicating feedback, trust can increase by leaders simply getting into classrooms and noticing what is happening in a positive and objective manner.

Not sure where to begin? Engage faculty in a schoolwide examination of your literacy beliefs. Combine this with getting into classrooms daily to start developing a collective understanding of your school's literacy strengths and areas for growth. For more information on these topics, visit Read by Example (<https://readbyexample.substack.com>), a newsletter dedicated to literacy leadership.

References

Routman, R. (2014). *Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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Read by Example