

The Learning Journey

A Collaborative Approach to Literacy Instruction

Whether you map your road trips on paper, GPS, or phone, the first step in getting to your destination is knowing where you are and what you will need to sustain you as you travel. Last fall, NCTE began a journey with 21 schools in five states across the country designed to build their local capacity to support stronger literacy teaching and learning. The first step in every site was a comprehensive needs assessment.

“The Needs Assessment was a powerful foundation for our school community to begin to look at where our strengths and weaknesses lie. Teachers at our school have tended to operate fairly independently, so this was a positive experience and a first step in identifying some of the common challenges we were facing,” explains Carol Placer, a counselor at STAR School.

STAR is located in the southwest corner of the Navajo Nation in East Flagstaff, Arizona. It is one of the rural schools that are part of the federally funded Literacy Innovation in Rural Education through Collaboration (LIREC) grant. The two-year \$4.6 million grant involves the work of three partner organizations: NCTE, the Rural School & Community Trust; and the Institute for Educational Leadership.

Placer and her colleague Nicole Burkhardt, who teaches early childhood at STAR, say the needs identified in this assessment “provide the framework for our professional development, and they remind us of ‘why’ we are doing what we are doing.”

“While our attention may focus on specific literacy practices that we want to explore and deepen our understanding of, the survey actually grounds those



The STAR (Service to All Relations) School is a charter elementary school located 25 miles east of Flagstaff, Arizona, near the southwest corner of the Navajo Nation. As one of the schools participating in the federally funded LIREC grant, STAR School held summer labs to provide focused literacy instruction for struggling students.

efforts in the bigger perspective of how we want to operate as an instructional community.” One clear need that emerged from the data was centered on better collaboration and “deprivatizing practice.”

Burkhardt participated in the summer lab STAR hosted this year, in which a small group of teachers provided innovative and focused instruction for a small group of struggling students.

“This summer we got to really practice that idea of coming together, using ourselves as resources, and opening up the doors of our classrooms,” Burkhardt said. “We were able to talk more openly, build trust between the teachers, and really get to a point where we could say, ‘Okay I’m struggling with this.’ And be comfortable and confident in revealing those struggles. I think that has been a major shift; there’s a lot more openness and discussion around where each of our challenges are.”

A Powerful Navigation Tool

It’s not easy to transfer what happens in the ideal environment of a summer lab into the daily experience of a full-sized school, but Burkhardt says she can see that “we’re building the ability within our own group of professionals to collaborate effectively—to be able to find within our own resources the expertise and mentoring that would be useful for all of us.”

She says the secret to that shift lies in another tool the school has adopted through their LIREC grant support: discussion protocols. Protocols are essentially

meeting planning guides that are designed to facilitate discussion that is timed, focused, inclusive, and purposeful. All LIREC grant sites receive support in implementing protocols.

“When we were introduced to using these protocols it felt a little artificial at first. We were having to navigate our way through these new structures. But what we found in the end is that we felt our time was so much more efficiently used. . . . We ended up with actual agreements or actionable items. The conversation stayed on target. So even though it felt a little awkward at first, we made a commitment to really stick to the protocols. We got a lot more accomplished . . . and we all knew that we were following the structure for a good reason.”

Sharon Roth is NCTE’s Director of Professional Learning and one of the facilitators who has introduced protocols to the LIREC sites. “The power of the protocol,” she says, “is that it ensures all voices get heard but also that conversation moves from reflection to action.”

“We know collaboration is important, but not all collaboration is created equal. Protocols help people move from personal opinions to professional analysis grounded in data, which leads to actions and ongoing inquiry.”

Mapping Hidden Treasures

A crucial component to building strong literacy learning communities in schools involves an awareness and celebration of the myriad literacies involved. This summer STAR School teachers embarked upon a community-mapping exercise in which they reached out to a family, met at a location of the family’s choosing, and invited the family to take an informational survey and talk about themselves.

Placer says that the day after she visited with one of the STAR families she learned the mother had directed her sons and their grandfather to build a library in their living room “so it would be front and center and they would be using that as a way to encourage all their kids



Young writers are shown talking and writing about the book *Chandra’s Magic Light: A Story in Nepal*, which was used as a read-aloud book in the summer lab program in Gilmer County, West Virginia.

to be reading. It’s a very small house, but she came up with that idea on her own.”

But community mapping isn’t just about engaging families. KaiLonnie Dunsmore, project director for the LIREC grant, explains, “There is an academic purpose—the primary objective is to help teachers understand their students, their families, and their community, so that they can design classroom instructional practices that build on the literacy assets that children bring with them.”

“Before we did this community mapping exercise our teachers were thinking more along the lines of, ‘Gee it would be great to have more parent volunteers; it would be great to have more parents coming in for parent-teacher conferences.’” Placer says. “The mapping exercise shifted our focus to thinking more about what we can do to help the parents feel more included and more important, and to recognize the strengths that already exist within families—their interests, their hobbies, and particular set of knowledge and experience that could be built upon in the school.”

This can extend, she says, to “the books we select for students to read, the reports they write,” the questions teachers ask, and the way they scaffold students learning.

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Want to bring the capacity-building approach to your school?

Contact NCTE's Professional Learning Department at **1-800-369-6283, ext. 3627** or email sroth@ncte.org

What is community mapping?

“Community mapping is a practice designed to uncover a rich array of resources in households and communities that hold the potential to enhance literacy learning for children while developing reciprocal relationship with families. There are many benefits to developing strategies and practices that build collaborative relationships between families/communities and educators that are mutually beneficial. The knowledge each brings to constructing literacy experiences for students (in and out of school) is viewed as a resource essential to fully developing students’ literate lives.”

Source: <http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/community-mapping>

What are discussion protocols?

“Protocols are structured processes or guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving, and learning. Protocols used within a group that shares common values permit an honest, deeply meaningful, and often intimate type of conversation which people are not in the habit of having, building skills and culture needed for successful collaboration.”

Source: <http://www.nsrffharmony.org/about-us/glossary#Protocols>



A seventh grader from STAR School shares a project she has been working on related to identity and finding one’s voice.

Connecting Routes, Building Bridges

While the LIREC work that NCTE does with schools starts with a needs assessment, unlike most other forms of professional learning that rely on outside materials and resources, this work is designed to help schools and systems meet those needs through their own previously untapped ideas and expertise.

Placer describes the work this way: “From the very beginning we really ‘got it’ that this grant was not about just giving us access to great experts in the field who would come and train us and give us great experiences, but it was really about building the capacity from within the school. . . . We’re not going to just have this project and then the grant is over and that’s all, we’re done. [Rather, it’s] helping us look at how we want to operate as a faculty and school community, and then it’s helping us find the ways to support that growth.”

In rural schools, what that growth looks like varies tremendously depending on location. Two thousand miles east of STAR School sits Gilmer County, West Virginia. Gilmer is 340 square miles and houses three elementary schools across that spread that all feed into one high school.

“We are the smallest school system in the state,” says Cherri West, the literacy coach for the district. “Sometimes that can be a negative. But what we have found with the grant is that it can allow for community discussion. We’re pulling resources together as a team and giving our children more success in reading. And it’s amazing what’s taking place.”

For example, as in STAR School, there was a summer lab in Gilmer County, and West says after they took the needs assessment, it was clear they needed to focus on “real writing,” so they did a lot of it.

“Students from the summer lab said, ‘[During the school year] we write and the teachers never read it, so what’s the point?’ But when we said, ‘We’re going to publish a book of the summer lab’—Whoa! Then we had children who were interested in writing.” Now West is connecting the local college publishing program with the schools so “we can have each of our schools publish a book this year.”

This will be the last year those books come from three separate schools. A timely benefit of the LIREC work in Gilmer County right now is that it's getting teachers who historically have been isolated in their small and disparate schools to collaborate. That's paving the way for a smoother transition when all three elementary schools consolidate into one next year. Here again, the teacher-centered inquiry-driven collaborative process that the LIREC grant has enabled is making all the difference.

"We had built 'professional learning communities' [prior to the summer lab], but often when they happened there was just someone speaking at the teachers and they became overwhelmed with, 'oh great, here's another thing to do,'" says West.

"[After] the summer lab experience the teachers said, 'we want to spend more time actually talking with each other.' So [the district has] built the time into the school schedule for that to happen."

West said they've learned through the grant experience that "we are professionals and we have ideas and can work together to build that team."

Like her peers in faraway Flagstaff, West is mapping a new way forward for literacy teaching and learning throughout the district. "We're building for capacity," she reflects. "We're already looking to next year."

Jenna Fournel is Director of Communications for NCTE.

A Comprehensive Approach

The LIREC grant from the US Department of Education has enabled NCTE to develop a comprehensive suite of services that help rural schools and school systems build capacity for high-quality literacy teaching and learning. At 21 schools across five states the project includes:

- Site-based professional learning for all educators (including administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and special-ists) customized to local needs;
- Instructional leadership coaching to foster effective collaboration;
- Strategic resource allocation to ensure student access to high-quality texts at home and school;
- Development of a community-wide literacy plan that leverages local expertise and resources;
- Coordinated interventions for the most at-risk students.

"By simply uniting your school through a common mission and nomenclature, teachers, administrators, and staff can rise to meet a **school's greatest challenges.**"

—*Matt Skillen,*
NCTE Middle Level Section Chair



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