



PaSLP Guiding Principle 3

Guiding Principle 3: High Expectations

There must be high expectations for all learners and a belief that all can gain literacy skills that prepare them to be future ready; that is, to be successful in college, career, and as citizens. Instruction must address the full range of learners and be differentiated to meet each child's needs; such instruction requires a well-integrated system connecting general, compensatory, gifted, and special education.

Foundational to this principle is the commitment to providing all students access to high quality literacy instruction that is age appropriate, evidence-based, and aligned to a progression of well-articulated, rigorous standards. In PA, as in the entire nation, expectations for students as identified in state standards have become more demanding; students are expected to participate in and be successful with high-level literacy tasks. For example, students are expected to respond to text-dependent questions and analyze texts from both literary and informational sources. Resources for such work can be found on www.education.pa.gov or www.pdesas.org. Further discussion can be found in Essential Element 1.

In addition to the emphasis on more rigorous standards, teachers are also facing another task, specifically of educating groups of students who continue to become increasingly diverse (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Consequently, formal instruction in literacy is often strongly impacted by economic disadvantage and language barriers, as well as a myriad of physical, mental, social, and emotional challenges often presented by many students in this diverse group.

Since the early 1970s, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (later transformed into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) has required that schools integrate students with disabilities into the mainstream of education as much as possible. In addition to students with disabilities, classrooms today include an increasing number of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Data from a governmental report (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016) indicated that:

"Between fall 2003 and fall 2013, the number of White students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools decreased from 28.4 million to 25.2 million, and the percentage who were White decreased from 59 to 50 percent. In contrast, the number of Hispanic students enrolled increased from 9.0 million to 12.5 million, and the percentage who were Hispanic increased from 19 to 25 percent" (p.1).

Cultural differences displayed by students who speak another language or have home experiences different from those of their school peers are often incompatible with the existing school cultures and directly influence teaching and learning (Gay, 2014).

Many of these same students face language barriers that further complicate learning to read and write in English. Additionally, socioeconomic disadvantage may affect the learning of a significant number of students. Although the United States does not necessarily have a greater proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students than other advancing countries,



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“socio-economic disadvantage translates more directly to poor educational performance in the United States than is the case in many other countries” (OECD, 2010, p. 35). The result is an increasingly diverse population of students, many of whom face learning challenges and ALL of whom must achieve the highest levels of literacy skills possible.

Moreover, ensuring high levels of literacy requires high literacy expectations for ALL students, from those at the low end of the spectrum to those at the high end. Bromberg & Theokas (2013) used the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data to discuss findings across this spectrum. They found that although there is progress being made with low-achieving students, there is not the same rate of progress for students all along the distribution. They recommend that:

“We continue— even accelerate — recent progress at the low end, working hard to make sure initially low-achieving students get the high-quality instruction and supports they need to meet standards. But if we want to close the gaps that have haunted us as a country for so long, we’ve got to make more and faster progress with students all along the achievement distribution. That includes high-achieving, low-income students, and students of color, who’ve made progress in recent years, but need to make much, much faster progress if they are to be proportionately represented at the advanced level of achievement” (p. 12).

As they emphatically state, there is a need to focus on closing the gap for all students, “building capacity to support low-performing students while challenging students who are ready to go further faster” (p.13).

Educators must believe that all students have potential and therefore can acquire a high level of literacy skills if they have appropriate instruction, support, encouragement, and adequate resources. Oakes (2003) referred to these expectations as a “college-going school culture” and contends that in such a culture:

educators believe that all of their students can learn at very high levels. A school culture that expects all students to spend time and effort on academic subjects and emphasizes that the effort will pay off, fosters high levels of academic achievement. (p.2)

Teacher perceptions are not always accurate and at times underestimate the literacy capabilities of students from diverse backgrounds (Ready & Wright, 2011). Such students often lack confidence in their own abilities to read and write; therefore, they put forth very little effort. Conversely, students who are led to believe in their own abilities put forth more effort, which results in greater success. According to Mehan (2007), all other conditions for success flow from this culture of high expectations. Researchers who interviewed kindergarten through 12th grade students attending urban schools about their educational expectations highlight the importance of caring teachers with high academic expectations as one of the major themes influencing performance (Caruthers & Friend, 2016).

Unfortunately, simply believing in and conveying students’ potential to acquire literacy skills is not enough. It is equally important that teachers understand and value learning differences in



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literacy acquisition. In addition to providing high quality literacy instruction, they must be prepared to intervene with instructional supports that enable students to meet the high expectations that are set for them. Teachers must recognize that background knowledge, motivation, and purpose play an important role in the literacy acquisition of all students, particularly students with learning challenges.

Finally, high expectations and intervention strategies in the general education classroom often must be coupled with specialized supports from outside the regular classroom (Oakes, 2003). Well-prepared specialists must be available to assess specific literacy needs, recommend targeted interventions, and employ highly intensive instruction when required. A coordinated system of care and support must begin early and continue as the child progresses through school. The PA Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) defines specific guidelines for providing coordinated support to students. See detailed information in Essential Element 5.

While early intervention is key to future success, it is also true that personalized literacy instruction for many students must continue throughout the grades. Plans for students need be no less robust at the high school level than they are in the early years. Once in place, ongoing monitoring and adjusting are necessary to ensure continued growth and avoid eventual plateaus or even digressions in performance that educators often come to expect.

In sum, teaching literacy skills to all students is an immeasurably complex task. For the growing numbers of students with learning challenges, this challenge begins with high expectations for each individual student coupled with an artful coordination of a tiered system of strategies and services. No one entity working in isolation can provide the necessary programming. For this reason, careful attention must be given to ensuring that instructional supports and services are woven into a cohesive and coherent plan—a plan that spans the grades and intentionally addresses significant transitions along the way. Policy makers, administrators, and teachers must share the commitment to understanding diversity and its impact on literacy acquisition, fostering high expectations for all students, and providing a concomitant system of personalized support for students with diverse literacy needs. This ever-increasing need calls for well-coordinated efforts that begin with teacher preparation and continues through ongoing professional development for practicing teachers and administrators.

To promote teaching of literacy skills in Pennsylvania schools, the Pennsylvania State Literacy Plan identifies Recommendations for Action for those involved with improving literacy instruction.