



How to plan for whole-school literacy



School resources

Whole-school planning to enhance students' literacy at both primary and secondary schools can play a role in improving student literacy, and this review shares research-informed insights to guide a practical approach to this planning¹.

Literacy beyond English

Literacy skills are needed for learning and achievement across all areas of the curriculum, and responsibility for fostering students' literacy needs to be taken up by teachers across all learning areas. Literacy needs to be situated as a whole-school priority, as literacy skills and knowledge in **reading, writing, listening, and speaking are used to both learn and demonstrate learning across subjects**². For example, students' reading comprehension has been found to influence their performance in science³. There is also a link between students' engagement in literacy-supportive practices and achievement in subjects beyond English. For instance, greater reading in childhood is substantially associated with more advanced progress in maths⁴. A strategic whole-school policy or plan to promote literacy should be enacted across the school as improving literacy will result in improved performance across learning areas.

A whole school approach

A whole school literacy policy can be defined as a planning document that comprehensively details how literacy knowledge and skills will be fostered across the school, outlining a common language and strategies for approaching literacy that can be shared by all teachers and relevant support staff. No two policies will be the same as they must **reflect the unique needs of each school**⁵. Schools need to create practical policies to support a whole-school approach. This means that they should be able to be realistically enacted with available resourcing, use language that is accessible to all policy users, and the changes they seek to introduce should be clearly articulated and measurable⁶.

Without these practical considerations, whole-school literacy can remain merely aspirational. Many recently analysed whole school literacy policies paid lip-service to literacy ideals pasted from curriculum materials, without considering what changes needed to be made and how these changes would be achieved and measured.

A broad view of literacy

In addition to meeting students' needs in traditional literacy areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, a whole-school literacy plan should cover important skills within these areas such as handwriting and typing or keyboarding⁷. There are many different kinds of literacies beyond traditional literacy that may also be considered in a whole school policy, and many of these literacies are also closely related to and dependent on the traditional literacies. A key factor of effective literacy instruction in schools is shared literacy goals that extend beyond the individual classroom⁸. These can be instituted through effective planning⁹, and the expectation that every teacher needs to be a teacher of literacy¹⁰.

Spotlight on content area literacy and disciplinary literacy

When considering literacy across all subjects, a whole-school literacy policy must include consideration of how to foster students' content area literacy and disciplinary literacy knowledge and skills.

Content area literacy relates to literacy skills that are used to learn and communicate learning across subject areas¹¹. They are not unique to specific learning areas. For example, students use reading comprehension to understand both short stories in English and word problems in maths. The writing skills that are drawn on to compose grammatically correct sentences might be used to write a report about anti-vaping initiatives in health or to write a review in music¹². Students need to develop their content area literacy skills across the curriculum.

Students also need **strong disciplinary literacy skills, which are the literacy skills needed to meet discipline-specific needs¹³.** For example, unique formatting, skills, and knowledge are used to communicate ideas in a science report, such as how a hypothesis should be structured, and elements such as diagrams and the bibliography must be presented in ways that are compliant with discipline-specific norms¹⁴ in order to achieve a high score. Students need explicit instruction in disciplinary literacy skills so that they can both learn and communicate their learning in ways that comply with disciplinary expectations.

Literacy learners needing additional support

When planning for a whole school approach to literacy, the most important group of students to consider are the struggling literacy learners¹⁵. These are the students who trail behind their peers in literacy knowledge and skills¹⁶. Struggling literacy learners deserve whole school approaches that can support their improvement. A whole school literacy policy can outline an implementation process for shared strategies to both identify and support struggling literacy learners with diverse issues¹⁷. While struggling literacy learners benefit from early identification, they often fall through the cracks, remaining unidentified until the gap between their performance and that of their peers is already substantial¹⁸. For example, some students will pass through all years of formal schooling without having their dyslexia diagnosed¹⁹. A whole-school approach to identification could lead to more timely intervention.

Strategies to support struggling literacy learners must be implemented across the school. This can help to achieve consistency in approaches to intervention, student feedback, and assessment²⁰, such as through use of common feedback annotations across learning areas for literacy assessment²¹. Nor should supporting struggling literacy learners only be concerned with literacy skill and knowledge development. Attention needs to be given to building confidence and motivation²², and adequate time and resourcing to providing whole school support must be factored into planning²³. Furthermore, given that teachers also indicate difficulty meeting the diverse needs of struggling literacy learners, whole school professional development in this area may be needed in some cases so that teachers can address the often complex barriers students may experience²⁴.

Using a whole school literacy policy to build a literacy-supportive culture

As part of their efforts to boost student motivation, schools may wish to use their whole school literacy policy to introduce or reinforce a literacy supportive culture that fosters positive attitudes toward literacy activities. This is important as policies typically focus strongly on knowledge and skills without considering how to foster positive attitudes toward literacy learning²⁵, a shortcoming given that [motivation](#) is very important for student learning²⁶. For example, research found that few whole school literacy policies promote reading engagement strategies as a whole school priority²⁷, and failed to consider supportive reading engagement environments such as school libraries²⁸. There are many whole

school practical strategies that can be detailed in implementation planning to foster a literacy supportive culture and enhance the social positioning of literacy activities such as reading for pleasure²⁹.

Key features of policy and planning

Here are 15 of the key features found in some whole school literacy policies that you may wish to use in your whole school literacy policy³⁰.

1. Information about the school

As whole school literacy policies need to be responsive to their contexts, they should include information about the school, including incorporation of local linguistic and cultural resources as well as avenues for community involvement³¹.

2. Definition of literacy

Rather than just pasting in a one-size-fits-all definition of literacy from the curriculum, whole school literacy policies should include a working definition of literacy that is reflective of the school's needs and values, fostering school-wide shared understandings about literacy³².

3. Rationale and goals

Whole school literacy policies should include overarching shared goals, such as maintaining high expectations for student's individual improvement³³.

4. Explicit literacy targets

Beyond aspirations, whole school literacy policies need to articulate explicit literacy targets that align with the aforementioned goals³⁴.

5. Implementation planning

Whole school literacy policies should feature implementation plans that detail when and how strategies and activities linked to the achievement of explicit literacy targets are enacted, and how success will be measured³⁵.

6. Roles and responsibilities

All stakeholders within and beyond the school need to know what their roles and responsibilities are in relation to the whole school literacy policy³⁶.

7. Assessment of progress

A whole school literacy policy needs to include details about how student progress in literacy will be assessed across the school, and not just in English, in order to track progress towards meeting policy targets, and for determining gaps that need to be addressed in future revisions of the policy to enhance students' literacy learning³⁷.

8. Interventions, enrichment, and accommodations for students with specific needs

Strategies for identification and intervention of struggling literacy learners need to be situated as a whole school responsibility at both primary and secondary levels³⁸.

9. Ongoing professional development for educators

Whole school literacy policies should include expectation for and planning related to ongoing professional development of staff in current and emerging literacy-related areas³⁹.

10. Resources and the library

Key literacy resources such as the school library and its staff need to be detailed in the whole school literacy policy to ensure that the budget supporting key literacy promoting resources is maintained, and that these resources are recognised, valued, and optimally used within the school⁴⁰.

11. Links with other policies

Links to other relevant policies can also be included in a whole school literacy policy in order to place this policy within a broader context, and to demonstrate alignment of the policy with other key internal and external policies⁴¹.

12. Defined roles for parents and external partners

Defined roles for parents and external partners, and plans to strengthen relationships with these stakeholders, should feature in your whole school literacy policy, given that the relationship between parental support for their child's literacy is linked to that child's literacy outcomes⁴².

13. Building capacity for parent-supported learning

Whole school literacy policies can also actively plan to educate and support parents from diverse backgrounds to support child literacy within the home in areas such as maintaining reading engagement⁴³.

14. Transition support

Whole school literacy policies should include strategies to support students as they move through large (such as primary to secondary) and smaller (like year to year) transitions⁴⁴ within their schooling lives, including diagnostic opportunities to identify students who are falling behind their peers.

15. Policy evaluation and review planning

Every whole school literacy policy needs to include details of how and when it will be evaluated⁴⁵.

What else is needed?

An analysis of whole school literacy policies found many gaps and issues in these documents, and these could be addressed in future policy writing and revisions. These included but were not limited to:

- paying attention to developing writing modalities (handwriting and typing)
- creating literacy targets beyond what is measured in high stakes testing
- planning for implementation of uniform whole school feedback mechanisms
- enhancing the research base for literacy-supportive activities and strategies featured in policies⁴⁶.

While this review provides a starting point for creating or revising a whole school literacy policy, considerable attention will need to be given to the process to ensure that the resultant policy meets the unique needs of the school. It needs to be fit for purpose and actionable, not merely aspirational. There may be resistance in some contexts where teachers may be sceptical about the implementation of yet another policy, so it is important that a whole school literacy policy be introduced with consideration of alignment to best practice in change management⁴⁷. Furthermore, research that explores whole school literacy policies and their enactment in the context of New Zealand is needed to support schools in this country to design and implement whole school literacy policies that hold contextual and cultural relevance.

Endnotes

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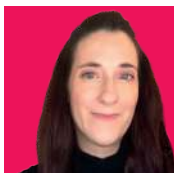
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