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# *Workshop Instruction in Boston's Schools*

## Next Steps in Whole-School Improvement

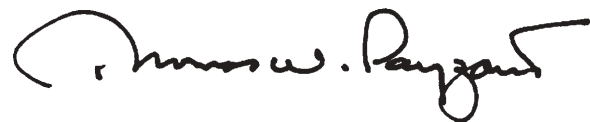
When states across the country began developing content and performance standards ten years ago, few educators — including superintendents — anticipated what would follow. As we have since learned, making the shift to standards would not be satisfied as other “reforms” have been by minor modifications to curricula or adjustments in our professional development offerings. It would require a rethinking of everything we do as an institution and would demand the attention of every staff person in the district.

Each September since we began, we have added pieces to complete this complicated puzzle. We developed local standards, matched to but more detailed than the state's curriculum frameworks, to create a year-by-year outline of content. We focused on improving first literacy instruction and then math to keep from attempting too much, and knowing that our learning in these key areas would inform efforts in all other areas. With generous support from the private sector, we assigned staff developers to every school. Each year, we have learned from our experiences and made adjustments.

Among our most important lessons is that improving instruction is more than doing better at what we are already doing. Our first and most important task is to develop skilled, motivated, independent learners who love to read, write, and grapple with information and ideas. We cannot develop this kind of learner in a classroom focused on information transmission alone. We need learning environments and curricula that stimulate ownership, independence, engagement, and motivation. We need an instructional approach that helps students to learn how to learn — inside and outside of the classroom, on their own, and with their teachers and peers.

Building on what we have accomplished, I have taken the next step — promoting the workshop approach to instruction for the district. This school year and next, the priority for all elementary school teachers, middle and high school English language arts teachers, and Native Language and ESL teachers will be to implement Readers' Workshop in their classrooms. This priority complements work that has already been done to introduce Writers' Workshop in every school, and we count on your strengthening that work as well. In truth, the two are tightly interwoven.

Adding this piece to the puzzle may give us our greatest challenge yet, but it promises to deepen our students' learning, and that makes the challenge *very* worthwhile.



August 2002

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## TOO MANY OF OUR STUDENTS ...

... are not skillful, independent learners who read and write well and have the knowledge and habits essential to success outside of school. The major reasons are two: Our students haven't mastered the strategies skillful readers, writers, and learners use, and they don't read, write, or use disciplined discourse enough in or outside of school. By the time they start high school, the reasons are compounded: Students are often so far behind they feel that they can't succeed and that no one cares if they do. As a result, they often lack the commitment and motivation that is a prerequisite to learning.

As a district, we need to ensure that all teachers:

- understand and teach students effective reading, writing, and learning strategies
- structure their classrooms and instructional time to teach the strategies well, to allow them to know each student as an individual, and to use the knowledge of each student's needs to shape their instruction
- give students sufficient time to practice and master the strategies and meet standards
- have sufficient resources to implement the strategies and enable their students to meet standards

To that end, Boston has chosen the workshop approach to instruction and has dedicated resources so that every school has the support to implement Readers' Workshop by September 2003.

### THE PRINCIPLES OF WORKSHOP INSTRUCTION

The **theory of action** behind Whole-School Improvement is that *for students to learn, instruction has to improve, and for instruction to improve, principals-headmasters and teachers need a very different kind of professional development and a different school organization.*

“Workshop” is both a structure for organizing classroom instruction and a vehicle to get students more engaged and invested in content. The structure provides more time during the school day for students to read, write, talk, and use effective learning strategies and to explore and respond to the topics and ideas they are studying. It provides more time for teachers to work with individual students, and for students to work with one another.

The structure evolved as teachers realized that much traditional instruction — the transfer of information from adult to student — was not leading to the ownership of the learning process and to the deeper understanding that students now need to meet standards. To do that, the teacher and students must co-construct learning. The teacher also must recognize that each student begins at a different place but that *all* must meet the same high standards, even though this may take more time.

Workshop starts with **TIME** — time for students to read, write, talk, and think in class, independently or in small-group sessions. The structure also offers teachers time to observe, take notes, and confer with students. Because students often choose what they read and write, they develop **OWNERSHIP** of their learning. As they begin to use newly taught strategies that make them more skilled readers, writers, and learners, they are able to access more and a greater variety of materials, increasing their confidence and sense of ownership.

**RESPONSE** is built into workshop instruction. During the mini-lesson, students have the opportunity to question and clarify strategies before they adapt them to their own learning. The teacher-student conferences, small-group work, notebooks, and sharing sessions all offer opportunities for students to explore and respond to content with their teachers and others. By experiencing genuine discourse, considering and building on the ideas of others, finding evidence in what they read, and sharing their work, students develop as a **COMMUNITY** of learners. In workshop instruction, the whole *can* be greater than the sum of the parts.

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## THE STRUCTURE OF A WORKSHOP

- **MINI-LESSON (20% of class time but rarely more than 15 minutes)**

The teacher presents and often models a specific teaching point at the start of each class, helping students draw on their prior knowledge and answering any questions they have. The teaching point, which guides the independent and small-group work that follows, is determined by what student work and formative assessments show students need to know to meet standards and is part of a logical sequence of teaching points that comprise the unit of study.

During the mini-lesson, the teacher sometimes uses read alouds, modeled writing, shared reading and writing, and interactive writing. Near the end, he or she explains what students are expected to do during independent reading or writing time.

- **INDEPENDENT READING OR WRITING TIME (60% of class time)**

Most class time is set aside for students to read or write independently, with a focus on the concept presented in the mini-lesson. As they become more skilled, students are ready to meet in small book clubs to read and analyze a book together. They usually choose the book and decide what they write, with guidelines and direction from the teacher. In their discussion and writing, they are asked to cite the text.

During this time, the teacher holds several individual or small-group conferences, serving as sounding board, facilitator, coach, and instructor and helping students identify strategies they can use to solve problems they are struggling with. At the same time, the teacher is identifying areas where students — a small number or many — need more instruction, which may become a mini-lesson in a later class.

Conferences are one means to assess student learning, and teachers keep notes on each conference. Students are also assessed through their notebooks and more formal assignments. Student participation and contributions during shared learning also provide teachers with important assessment data.

During independent reading, teachers and students engage in guided reading and writing, literature circles (book clubs), interactive writing, buddy reads, and independent reading.

- **SHARING (20% of class time)**

Near the end of the class, several students share with the whole class how they applied the concept from the mini-lesson and what they learned. Other students and the teacher respond to the informal presentation, citing lessons learned.

The class ends with the teacher clarifying the teaching point, assignments, etc.

<b>Traditional Instruction: ELA</b>	<b>Workshop Instruction: ELA</b>
The teacher always decides what books are read and what papers are written	Students often choose what they read and write, with some direction from the teacher
All students are given the same reading and writing assignments	Every student keeps a reader's notebook and a writer's notebook
Reading and writing are done outside of class	Reading and writing are done in class as well as outside of class
The teacher presents content in a lecture, and students answer questions the teacher asks	The teacher presents a concept or skill in a mini-lesson and confers with students as they apply that concept or skill to their own reading and writing
Taking risks is not encouraged: Questions usually have one "right" answer and others are not considered	Taking risks is encouraged: Students are expected to relate what they're learning to the world outside school
Students are assessed primarily by assignments and test scores	Discussion is among students as well as with the teacher
	Students learn to assess their own work and to improve it
	Students are assessed primarily through their notebooks and assignments

adapted from  
*Why Workshop?*  
*Changing Course in 7-12 English*

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## EXPECTATIONS & SUPPORT FOR READERS' WORKSHOP

By September 2003, all Boston elementary school teachers, middle and high school English language arts teachers, Native Language teachers, and ESL teachers will have implemented Readers' Workshop in their classrooms, under the leadership of the principal-headmaster. Each school will have support from a full- or part-time Literacy Coach trained in workshop strategies and will receive additional reading and writing materials for workshop instruction.

Workshop instruction will begin to be used in all subjects, and the district will provide professional development for teachers on workshop instruction and how it can be adapted to science, social studies, and other subject areas. Much of Boston's curricula already supports workshop instruction: Investigations, Connected Math, Math Connections, History Alive, and the Foss, STC, Carolina Biological, and Cambridge Physics science kits.

Professional development in workshop instruction and support will be provided for all principals-headmasters, directors of instruction, program directors, and other instructional supervisors. By June 2003, all supervisors will have received sufficient training and support to effectively supervise the implementation of workshop instruction in all classrooms.

### Suggestions for Launching Readers' Workshop

- **Start with a book.** Those on the list below offer school staff an introduction to workshop instruction and practical advice for getting started.
- **Organize inquiry groups for staff.** Based on what student work and data show about students' learning needs, choose one or two books to read and study in small groups. Purchase books for all participants from sources such as transition funds, if needed.
- **Take time to introduce workshop in the classroom.** Establish routines, concentrate on a few comprehension skills, work to increase students' abilities to read independently.
- **Begin book clubs** once students have developed comprehension skills and are familiar with workshop instruction.
- **Be patient.** Ask for help. This is very hard and takes time.

#### Recommended Readings

*Book Club for Middle School*  
(Raphael)

*Guiding Readers and Writers (Grades 3-6): Teaching Comprehension, Genre, and Content Literacy*  
(Fountas & Pinnell)

*How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers*  
(Anderson)

*In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning*  
(Atwell)

*It's Never Too Late: Leading Adolescents to Lifelong Literacy*  
(Allen & Romano)

*Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, second edition  
(Daniels)

*Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop*  
(Keene & Zimmerman)

*Reading for Understanding*  
(Schoenbach)

*Reading Instruction That Works*  
(Pressley)

*Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*  
(Harvey & Goudvis)

*The Art of Teaching Reading & The Art of Teaching Writing*  
(Calkins)

*There's Room for Me Here: Literature Workshop in the Middle School*  
(Allen & Gonzalez)

*Time for Meaning: Crafting Literate Lives in Middle and High School*  
(Bomer)

*What Really Matters for Struggling Readers*  
(Allington)

*Why Workshop? Changing Course in 7-12 English*  
(Bullock)

*Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*  
(Fletcher & Portalupi)

*Yellow Brick Roads: Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading*  
(Allen)