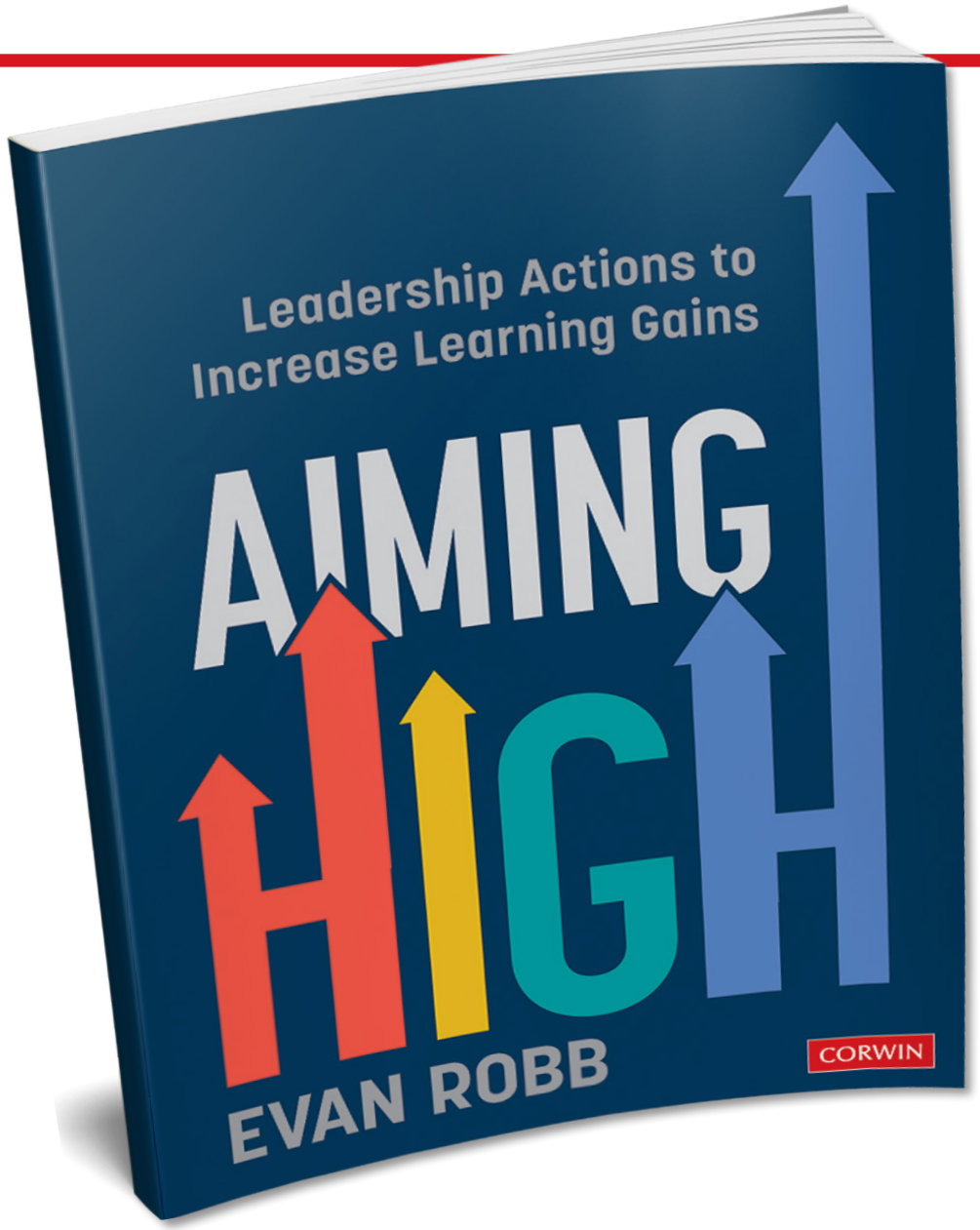

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CHAPTER 6

Leading for Literacy

I called Jake, our division personnel director, to let him know that an English teacher was moving to another state and I would have a vacancy. As I waited for Jake to answer, I couldn't help recalling that I was losing a strong, student-focused teacher who was knowledgeable about our curriculum and able to effectively incorporate four types of reading: teacher read-alouds, instructional reading, authentic notebook writing, and independent reading. He spoke quickly and loudly: "Evan, this is no problem at all. We get tons of English applicants."

With some hesitation, I said, "Okay, you know I've worked for several years to build a very skilled team. I don't think replacing her will be that easy, but maybe I'm wrong!"

"Of course you're wrong. English teachers, dude, they're a dime a dozen. By the way, what's that four types of reading stuff you talk about all the time?"

"Never mind, I'll save the explanation for another time."

"You know, I'm sure I heard you discuss the four somethings a few times; I just can't remember it. Oh well, who won the golf tournament yesterday?"

"I didn't get a chance to watch it. I'd like to start interviews next week."

Over the next three days, my assistant principal, English department chair, and I reviewed applications and were pleased with the number of applicants. Ultimately, we selected six and arranged for three interviews per day. Prior to the first interview, we reviewed the standard questions we were to ask teacher applicants, and then we each added an extra question: *How would you instruct a novel? How does independent reading improve students' reading skill? How can you integrate reading and writing in a middle school classroom?* After the second day of interviews, we debriefed using this question: *"What are the strengths of the applicants and are there any concerns?"*

My assistant was quick to share that four applicants didn't appear knowledgeable about how to teach reading. She noted, "I get perplexed when a person has a master's degree and the best idea they share to teach a novel is round robin reading or reading it out loud to the class."

Joan, our English department chair, chimed in, "If we need to select from these interviews, Evan, you better help me find some extra mentor time, as this will be a lot of work."

"Let's go back to the applications and see if we can set up some more interviews." I suggested, trying to sound optimistic. Frankly, my worries about the applicant pool increased. Moreover, given English teachers' workloads, it would be difficult for me to ask any of them to volunteer to train a teacher with a limited knowledge of teaching reading and writing. Momentum seemed to be slipping. The three of us hoped that luck would smile on the English department by sending a skilled applicant, but we began to accept that it was more likely the new teacher would require extensive training.

Later that afternoon, my phone rang; it was our personnel director. "Didn't I tell you we had lots of applicants? Let me know which candidate you're offering the job to. I've gotta get the applicant's name to the board. Did any of them know about those two types of reading?"

"It's four types, and I've got a call on my other line."

The process of finding the right person for our teachers and students wasn't easy. We didn't find a person who was highly skilled and well trained, but we were fortunate to hire a teacher very eager and willing to learn. As I reflect, I'm lucky to have a team committed to the mentorship needed to maintain our core beliefs for teaching reading and writing. And I've come to understand that at times hiring faculty for potential instead of credentials can also work out for the team, department, and students.

DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE READING PLAN

Effective principals elevate, support, and collaborate with teachers and also raise and discuss questions that enable faculty and them to work toward the development of initiatives to enhance learning. Literacy and leading for literacy are challenging during ideal times, but the challenges have escalated post-pandemic. Virtual learning and hybrid classrooms have increased the opportunities for some students to disengage from reading and for other students to read more than they ever have done before. The pandemic has heightened disparities among students, and having an effective reading plan can support your goal of addressing literacy disparities. A well-thought-out and well-led plan will set your school on a path to meet the needs of *all* readers, as you increase the amount of reading students complete daily and elevate the teachers' role in

promoting literacy through professional learning conversations and collaborative inquiry.

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE FOUR TYPES OF READING

To lead literacy in a school, it's important to gain an understanding of what an effective literacy curriculum looks like. My experiences as a student, adult learner, and partnership with Laura Robb helped to form, shape, and now continually refine my understanding of the four types of reading that allow ELA teachers in my school to meet the literacy needs of all students.

However, my connections with school districts in and out of Virginia reveal that there's much work to do, and to that end, I've developed a list of reading practices that can't support the progress of all students—practices that still exist in many schools:

- One book for everyone in the class
- Textbooks and anthologies with selections from actual books that many students can't read
- Books read out loud by the teacher because too many students couldn't read them
- Assessments to motivate students through point accumulation and prizes
- Endless test-prep materials to prepare students to take state assessments
- Demoralizing round robin or popcorn reading

The one book or one program for all students in a class supports literacy learning of students that read near or on

grade level. Above-grade-level students, though bored and unchallenged, can do the work. Developing readers, those two or more years below grade level, make little progress, and many teachers refer to them as "the low group."

I am often asked what types of reading should occur in a middle school English classroom. What is a balanced, research-tested, authentic literacy program? My answer is not that complex: Reading can and should be taught. Effective language arts curricula improve the literacy of all students. To accomplish this goal, classrooms need four types of reading:

1. Instructional interactive read-alouds
2. Instructional reading
3. Readers' notebooks
4. Independent reading

INSTRUCTIONAL INTERACTIVE READ-ALOUDS

An interactive read-aloud allows the teacher to model in a think-aloud mode how to apply a reading strategy as well as emotional reactions and posing questions. This modeling during a read-aloud builds and enlarges students' mental model of how a strategy works and what readers do while interacting with a text. For this aspect of instruction, the teacher models with a short text that matches the genre and/or theme that ties a reading unit together. Short texts can include a picture book, an excerpt from a longer text, a folk or fairy tale, myth or legend, a short short story, or an article from a magazine or newsletter. Following are six of many strategies and responses that teachers can model during interactive read-aloud lessons:

- Making inferences
- Linking literary elements to a text
- Identifying big ideas and themes
- Skimming to locate important details
- Posing questions
- Emotional responses

The interactive read-aloud is your teachers' common text. Once teachers complete the modeling over five to eight classes, they move to reading aloud from culturally diverse texts that resonate with students—texts that are enjoyable and are catalysts for meaningful discussions of topics and/or issues. Interactive read-alouds are resources that teachers can refer to while supporting students with instructional reading.

Schools Full of Readers by Laura Robb and Evan Robb (2020) has detailed information on planning and implementing lessons for the anchor text, an interactive read-aloud.

INSTRUCTIONAL READING

Instructional reading occurs during a classroom session. Students need to read materials at their instructional reading level, which is about 90–95 percent reading accuracy and about 90 percent comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009). Organizing instructional reading around a genre and theme—for example biography with a theme of obstacles—permits students to read different texts at their instructional reading levels and discuss their reading around the genre and theme. Teachers also use guided

or strategic groups for instruction, and small groups of students read and learn from the same accessible text.

LITERACY LEADERSHIP TIP

Most likely, one book for all does not support the range of readers in your school's classrooms. Moreover, it's based on a false premise that all students are on the same reading level.

Instructional reading asks and guides students to apply specific strategies to texts that can improve comprehension, vocabulary, and critical thinking and foster diverse interpretations. These texts stretch students' thinking with the teacher, the expert, as a supportive guide. Reading does not exist isolated from writing, and writing about reading in readers' notebooks can be a bridge connecting reading and writing to deepen comprehension.

READERS' NOTEBOOKS

When you consider your school's writing program, it's important to understand how much daily writing students complete and whether teachers embrace the workshop model. Readers' notebooks are a place for students to write about their instructional reading and teachers' read-aloud texts. Notebook writing can flourish when teachers "cold write" and think aloud to provide students with a model of specific types of responses to texts before inviting students to write. Responses can include lists of words to describe characters' and readers' feelings, characters' personality

traits, questions the text raised, predictions, application of strategies and literary elements, and notes for an analytical paragraph. Readers' notebooks represent the reading journeys students take and are often hunches that students adjust, rethink, and add text evidence in support of their interpretations.

Laura Robb recommends not grading students' notebooks or marking them up to correct grammar and punctuation (Robb, 2022). Instead, have students complete their paragraphs or writing to show how they infer, compare and contrast, visualize, and so forth on separate paper and let them know these will be graded. She also recommends that teachers keep a list of grammar and punctuation needs and turn these into mini-lessons during writing workshop.

During the reading class, students should have their headed notebooks on their desks, so they're ready to write to increase understanding. The research on writing about reading shows that students' comprehension of text they can read improves when they write.

RESEARCH ON WRITING ABOUT READING TO IMPROVE COMPREHENSION

A landmark study and meta-analysis published in 2010 by the Carnegie Corporation, *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading,* revealed the power of readers' notebooks and writing about reading to improve students' comprehension (Graham & Hebert, 2010). The recommendations that Steve Graham and Michael Hebert suggest are the kinds of writing they want students to complete:

- Reading responses expressing personal reactions to a text
- Interpreting themes and big ideas using text evidence as support
- Summaries
- Lists of words that describe characters' personality traits and readers' emotional reactions to events, settings, decisions
- Notes about a text
- Posing questions about the text and answering them

When teachers ask students to write about conversations after a pair-share or small-group discussion, they are providing the practice of clarifying ideas needed to write about reading. In 2015, Steve Graham completed another study of the benefits of writing about reading with Katherine Harris and Tanya Santangelo. The three researchers found that when students write about material they can read and understand, their comprehension of that text can rise by 24 percent (Graham et al., 2015).

Clearly, teachers reading aloud, instructional reading that meets students where they are, and writing about reading boost students' expertise and skill. Now, add independent reading, the practice that can move students forward quickly, and you can see the power behind the four kinds of reading.

INDEPENDENT READING

Students should always carry a book they are reading independently, so if they complete the class work, they can read. By encouraging them to read accessible books they

select on topics they love and want to know more about, teachers develop students' motivation to read! Review and share the "15 Benefits of Independent Reading" (page 171, in the Appendix) with your staff and families, so they can see the value of independent reading and how it impacts students' learning (Robb et al., 2020). Getting hung up on how to hold students accountable is counterproductive. Remember, enthusiastic readers of any age do not summarize every chapter they read in a journal. Neither do you!

Students should complete twenty to thirty minutes of independent reading a night for their main homework assignment. If you're on a block schedule, set aside two days a week for students to complete independent reading at school. If you have 90 to 120 minutes for reading and writing daily, then independent reading should occur every day. Independent reading of self-selected books is an important use of classroom time because it's the practice that builds students' background knowledge, vocabulary, literary tastes, reading identities, and a lifelong love of reading. When students read, the teacher can read part of the time, which communicates a great message to students: adults read independently, too! Equally important during this time, teachers can have a few brief conferences with students about their reading.

For students to make significant learning gains, they should be engaged in practices that are far better than popcorn reading or reading an entire book aloud to students because they can't read it. Including the four types of reading can serve as the framework for your reading curriculum, bringing balance to your school's reading curriculum and at the same time motivate and engage students. As you develop a reading initiative that includes the four types of reading, you'll participate in and create teacher buy-in

as well as find funds for books and professional learning opportunities.

As leader of your school's reading initiative, reflect on the collaborations with teachers that need to occur to enhance their understanding of the benefits of the four types of reading and increase learning gains for all students.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LITERACY LEADERS

Literacy leaders are knowledgeable about research, research-tested practices, and how a partnership between research and best instructional practices can improve reading. Most important, as a literacy leader you communicate ideas, collaborate and seek opportunities to learn alongside teachers, listen to understand, and are open to feedback and new ideas. Highly visible throughout the day, you continually spend time in classrooms, discuss literacy with teachers and students, attend school events, and consistently cultivate a culture that celebrates and promotes literacy. The principal sets the tone and climate in a school through interactions and support and by communicating high expectations for all learners. Set aside time to read and self-evaluate the characteristics of a literacy leader listed below and then create a list of your own strengths and needs.

- Collectively establishes a culture of high expectations
- Promotes diversity, inclusivity, and equity
- Encourages instructional risk-taking
- Helps teachers view failures as information that can help them refine present instructional practices and try new ones, always with the goal of improving instruction

- Believes in sharing leadership with teachers
- Communicates and maintains high standards for professionalism
- Works closely with the school librarian and language arts teachers to create literacy goals
- Commits to learning about researched-tested best practices for effective instruction
- Makes professional learning an ongoing priority and actively participates

Collaborating with teachers to develop a schoolwide reading initiative enables you to pinpoint your school's strengths and needs. The seven indicators that follow can support you and faculty as you set literacy priorities and develop a plan.

IMPLEMENTING A READING INITIATIVE USING SEVEN INDICATORS

The success of a reading initiative requires planning, collaboration, and at times a cultural shift. The first step is to visit ELA classrooms to observe whether the four types of reading are part of instruction. Then, begin informal conversations with individual teachers to understand their teaching and learning strengths, challenges, and resources they need.

To stir reflection, a question follows the description of each indicator. Reserve time so you can think of each question independently and then collaborate with ELA and content teachers to discuss one indicator at a time. Doing this can enable you and teachers to create a list of priorities for your reading initiative. For example, if teachers have

forty minutes a day for reading and writing, a top priority would be to study and adjust your schedule so that teachers can include the four types of reading into each class and develop students' critical and analytical thinking skills.

SCHEDULES

A schedule alone does not create readers, but skilled teachers do, and they require enough time to focus on literacy effectively. Typically, school schedules range from seven or eight periods a day to blocks of time every day or every other day. The ideal schedule for your school is the schedule that allows teachers to meet the needs of students using the four types of reading. However, creating a schedule is not always possible, and changes to schedules can impact other class offerings and staffing. If your teachers have a genuine concern about the schedule's limitation, consider a meeting with you, teachers, and central office personnel to discuss their scheduling concerns.

Question: *Does your school's schedule provide enough time for teachers to incorporate the four types of reading?*

CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Instruction in ELA and content classrooms should provide students with multiple opportunities to observe as teachers model and think aloud the process of critical thinking and problem solving. As students build their mental models of the process, they can examine and analyze information from teachers' read-alouds and instructional and independent reading. Students can use writing about reading and student-led conversations to critically analyze, reflect on, and evaluate information, so they can separate faulty

conclusions from sound ones and identify misleading or false information, always citing text evidence and data to support their conclusions.

Question: *Are teachers modeling and thinking aloud to explicitly show students how to think analytically and critically and solve problems?*

HIGH-LEVEL THINKING STRATEGIES

Strategies such as visualizing, inferring, comparing and contrasting, and posing interpretive questions encourage students to think deeply about information and facts to determine their level of recall, and deepen their understanding by moving beyond the facts. Too often, reading instruction focuses only on factual recall instead of inviting students to find multiple interpretations supported with text evidence. When my daughter was in sixth grade, she missed a question on Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* (1975) test asking the color of the stranger's suit. It was yellow, but there is much more to the book than the question she answered incorrectly.

Question: *Are teachers integrating high-level reading strategies into their units of study and inviting students to explore and practice finding multiple interpretations of texts?*

CHOICES FOR STUDENTS

Effective ELA classrooms offer students choices in independent and instructional reading and writing topics, audience, and genres. Choice not only invests students in their reading and writing, but it also leads to independence as students become more and more responsible for their learning.

Question: *How are teachers in your school incorporating student choice into instructional and independent reading as well as in writing tasks?*

AUTHENTIC WRITING

Writing is a skill, and skills improve when students practice. Many schools need to increase the amount of time students write each day in ELA classrooms and across the school. "Most writing researchers and teachers of note now advise that students should write between 30 and 60 minutes every day. The logic behind this is that nothing is more important for writing development than putting in the hours defining and refining one's voice, organizing and reorganizing one's thoughts, and learning how words spill out of one's head and onto the page" (Johnson, 2017). In addition to choosing the topics and writing stories, poems, articles, plays, and so on, students' reading comprehension improves when they write about reading in notebooks (see pages 119–120).

Question: *How often are students writing in ELA classrooms, and how much of the writing connects to what students are reading?*

CONVERSATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Discussions are usually teacher-led and students raise hands waiting to be called on to respond to a teacher-made question. Conversations ask students to listen carefully and respond to what a peer says without raising a hand; they are usually student led and use questions that students raise. Literary conversations about books and other texts occur in ELA classes, but conversations can also occur in content subjects when talk centers on texts related

to specific topics and issues. Conversations and discussions invite students to interact with texts and can create a shared literacy culture (Robb, 2017).

Question: *What would literary conversations look like in an ELA classroom? What are the roles of students and teachers?*

CONFERRING WITH STUDENTS

Conferring can be between a teacher and one student, a teacher and a small group, or student partners exploring similar issues and topics. Teachers hold brief—no more than five minutes—one-on-one meetings with students to learn about their reading and writing lives and attitudes as well as to observe and support students' growth as readers and writers. Effective conferring allows teachers to honor and build on a student's strengths in order to support specific needs. It's helpful for teachers to keep dated notes of conferences so they can monitor students' progress and review specific details and observations to make informed instructional decisions (Yates & Nosek, 2018).

Question: *Is conferring occurring on a regular basis in ELA classrooms in your school, and what are other students doing when the teacher is conferring with an individual or small group?*

As you and teachers take time to discuss the seven indicators and the questions, invite them to reflect on the kinds of professional learning they'll need. Then, ask teachers to take on leadership roles and develop professional learning experiences for each indicator that requires additional study.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING LEADS TO GROWTH IN STUDENTS' LEARNING

For teachers to learn and practice instructional moves that positively impact students' rate of growth, designing a professional learning menu that offers teachers choices of groups that meet simultaneously taps into the diverse learning needs of your teachers. For example, you might organize two groups meeting at the same time—one on conferring and a second on readers' notebooks and writing about reading. Depending on the background knowledge of your teachers, you might add a third group studying student-led conversations or high-level thinking strategies.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER BEFORE GETTING STARTED

The questions that follow can enable you, teachers, and your school's librarian to set priorities, consider the funding needed for purchases, and decide on a menu of professional learning opportunities that meet your teachers' needs.

- Which indicators are strongest and which require immediate attention?
- What do you and your teachers think the best starting point or points are?
- What materials do teachers need: additional texts for interactive read-alouds, a document camera, and bookcases?
- How many additional books for classroom libraries and for instructional reading texts does each teacher require? Do students need readers' notebooks?

- How much funding do teachers require immediately? How much funding do you need to set aside for books and materials annually?

Once you and teachers have committed to changes in your literacy curriculum, it's important to communicate these to families.

KEEP FAMILIES IN THE LOOP

Keep families informed about changes in your literacy curriculum, so you can explain how they can support your reading initiative at home and by volunteering to help in the library and with special projects and events. A video from you detailing the goals and benefits as well as updates from teachers and your librarian in electronic newsletters and email blasts can continually keep families in the loop. This can result in families feeling that they are a valued part of your school community and will also prepare them for changes in virtual and hybrid learning.

HYBRID LEADERSHIP TIPS

Whether students are hybrid or all-virtual, it's important for them to experience the four types of reading. As you review the suggestions that follow, remember that volume in reading matters for all students—volume ensures they're practicing enough to make significant reading gains.

Teacher Read-Alouds

I recommend that when teachers use interactive read-alouds as an instructional tool they complete the read-aloud in person during a hybrid class or online, so students can be part of the process. Teachers can also create a video of the high points of the instructional read-aloud so students can rewatch to deepen their understanding. Read-alouds that are a catalyst for students discussing a topic should also be in person. However, read-alouds for students' pleasure and enjoyment can be asynchronous and accessed anytime by students or within the guidelines of a listening schedule that teachers post.

Instructional Reading

For instructional reading to support the skill and progress of all students, texts must meet them where they are to move them forward. This means that teachers organize students into online and/or in-person reading groups or develop a reading workshop that has books on a genre and theme that meet the range of instructional reading levels in their classes. Your librarian can help teachers find books in the school's library, and teachers can find additional appropriate books in their classroom libraries as well as in colleague's libraries. Hybrid students can choose their books for an instructional reading workshop at school. Teachers can have students learning virtually pick up books at school or books can be delivered (see pages 108–109 in Chapter 5 for suggestions).

Independent Reading

Choice is really important for independent reading, and it's important that you ensure teachers are modeling and thinking aloud to show students how they choose books. You can suggest that teachers post the chart on a wall or bulletin board or give a

(Continued)

copy to students as a resource. Students learning virtually can choose e-books if these are available, and/or they can visit their public library if parents can drive them there or if they can walk. It's also possible for you to ask teachers to create independent reading book bags and have them picked up at school or delivered to students' homes. Ask students to keep a list of the books that they've read or abandoned on the form in the Appendix on page 176. You can suggest to teachers they have students complete a short book talk each month. Book talks are an excellent way for students to learn about books their peers have read and enjoyed.

Readers' Notebooks

Whether hybrid or all-virtual, it's best to use online journals for notebooks. This allows teachers to access and read specific entries, and it allows students to share entries with classmates. It's still possible for teachers to model what a notebook entry should include by writing under an online document camera that many platforms have. It's important for students to watch teachers write, think aloud, and edit notebook entries before they write.

HOW TO CHOOSE A "GOOD FIT" BOOK: TEACHERS

Choosing a "good fit" book: what teachers can do and a chart for students to use (Robb, 2022).

- Think aloud to show what happens when you choose a book that's too difficult: can't say many words, don't know many word meanings, and can't recall details.
- Think aloud when you find a "good fit" book: it's easy to read and enjoyable and you can retell.

- Model using suggestions from the list below.
- Keep modeling and emphasize that independent reading should be enjoyable and easy.
- Reassure students that they are safe selecting a book that looks easy in your class. Explain that the more they read, the faster they'll improve.

HOW TO CHOOSE A "GOOD FIT" BOOK: STUDENTS

- Look for books on topics and genres that interest you.
- Study the front cover illustration and read the information on the back cover or the inside cover flap.
- Think of books you've read and enjoyed. Is the topic, genre, or author similar?
- Look at and enjoy the illustrations or photographs.
- Ask a friend to recommend a book.
- Ask your teacher to recommend a book.
- Read the chapter titles in the table of contents and ask yourself, *Does this interest me?*
- Take a test drive and read two to three pages or the first chapter. Can you retell key points?

CONSIDER THESE ACTIONS AND AIM HIGH

- Meet with department chairs and explore how teachers use the four types of reading, and then discuss strengths and needs.

- Invite your librarian and/or reading resource teacher to meet with ELA teachers and discuss their needs for interactive read-alouds. Have the librarian follow up with suggestions.
- Ask teachers to assess their classroom library needs—print and e-books—and let you know what's needed immediately so you can support them.
- Collaborate with ELA teachers to explore their instructional reading needs and whether there's funding for additional books.
- Collaborate with teachers to compare your reading curriculum to the seven indicators and develop a list of priorities.
- Create with teachers a plan for professional learning and decide if everyone needs to study all the topics or if you can create a menu that has two to three topics available simultaneously.
- Ask teachers to volunteer to organize and facilitate a professional learning group and gather materials for the study. Make sure you meet with each teacher leader to review materials, time frames, and expectations.
- Invite a group of teachers to investigate the different types of conferring they can do with students and report back to you and colleagues with information and a list of books and articles.

Closing Reminder

It's important to remember that one book, one basal program, or computer programs that promises to meet students' needs with short texts and frequent quizzes can't meet the needs of a diverse student population. Instead, with your teachers, develop a literacy initiative and curriculum that invests in ongoing professional learning and sets aside annual funding for culturally relevant books for classroom libraries, instructional reading units, and your school's media center!