

Comprehensive Approach to Adolescent Literacy

BY CASSANDRA RICHARDSON KEMP

PREVIEW

State and national mandates provide the impetus for Pittsburgh Public Schools comprehensive literacy strategy.

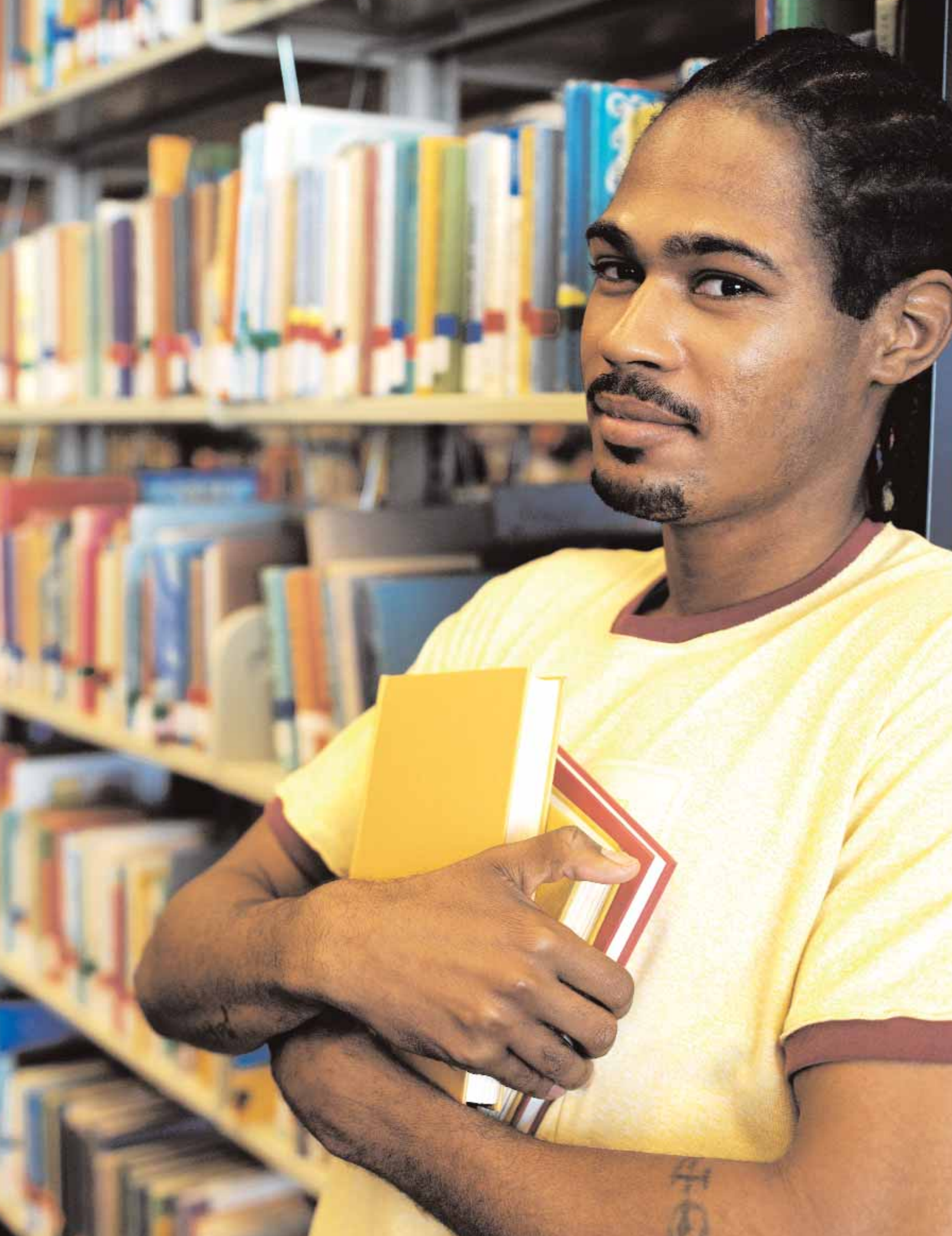
Full-time literacy coaches in all high schools work one-on-one to assist teachers and provide professional training for the entire staff.

Educational technology is also an important part of the districtwide program to ensure that all students are literate.

Like most states, Pennsylvania has a state accountability system that is aligned with the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and requires that students reach adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in reading and mathematics at the end of grades 3, 5, 8, and 11 in 2003–2004. In 2005–2006, students in grades 4, 6, and 7 must meet AYP as well.

High school students must meet Pennsylvania graduation requirements, which include completing a course of studies and making satisfactory grades; completing a culmination project; and demonstrating proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics on either the PSSA administered in grades 11 or 12 or local assessments that are aligned with the Pennsylvania academic standards and the PSSA (Pennsylvania Chapter 4.24 Draft Regulations, 2002). These mandates required Pittsburgh Public Schools to review and assess the practices in its high schools to improve literacy instruction and assist teachers in deepening their own content knowledge and pedagogy. As a result, all 10 high schools have resource personnel and programs in place to improve literacy instruction and to empower teachers to improve student achievement. Strategies include literacy coaches, the Academy of Reading Program, and the A+nyWhere Learning System.

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Literacy Coaches

One key to improving adolescent literacy is assigning literacy coaches to all high schools. These coaches are master teachers who were selected at the district level by the Program Office for Literacy Plus. The literacy coaches receive intensive training on research-based reading and studying strategies and on the best practices for connecting the teaching of literacy to various disciplines in secondary schools.

As explained by Sturtevant (2003), cochair of the Commission on Adolescent Literacy for the International Reading Association (IRA), one of the most important roles of the literacy coach is to help teachers understand that their students “can develop content knowledge at the same time that they are improving in literacy” (p. 10).

The literacy coaches work in each high school from Monday through Thursday. Every Friday, all literacy coaches participate in professional development sessions that are coordinated by the Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC) at the University of Pittsburgh. These training sessions include data analysis, strategy development, and review of reading research.

Literacy coaches work primarily with teachers rather than with individual students to develop innovative methods to actively engage teachers in strengthening their literacy strategies. They provide one-on-one assistance to teachers; work with groups of teachers by departments, in inquiry groups during professional development periods where teachers study particular topics, and during weekly after school department meetings called Teacher Interaction Planning; and lead professional development activities for the entire staff during monthly faculty meetings and school in-service programs. The literacy coach works in conjunction with the principal and the instructional cabinet at each high school to determine the appropriate implementation structure. When teachers collaborate and discuss new ideas or skills, a transfer of training becomes more apparent (Joyce & Showers, 1996). Moreover, teachers might benefit from opportunities to observe and interact with other teachers who have related concerns and problems in similar contexts. Joyce and Showers concluded that peer coaching contributes to the transfer of training because coached teachers generally use their newly learned strategies more appropriately, exhibit greater long-term retention of knowledge about and skill with strategies, and exhibit clearer cognitions with regard to the purposes and uses of the new strategies.

The strategies that literacy coaches recommend are aligned with the literacy core curriculum framework for Pittsburgh Public Schools. The primary responsibilities of the literacy coach include the following:

Assume the role of a resource person who knows the research, the programs, the strategies, and the assessments. The literacy coach observes in a variety of classrooms, provides critical feedback, and helps teachers view assessment

as a means to inform and guide instruction. The coaches also help schools disaggregate data for the purposes of reviewing individual student and classroom achievement, identifying subgroup performances, highlighting strengths and weaknesses, and benchmarking toward student proficiency.

Assume the role of a facilitator who provides assistance and guidance as teachers develop a repertoire of literacy strategies. The literacy coach plans, coordinates, and leads the implementation of schoolwide reading interventions and assists principals in delineating professional development needs, identifying desired instructional support services and other district resources, and promoting an ongoing commitment to training and development for all staff members. In addition, the coaches guide principals and school staff members in the production and use of key performance diagnostic reports.

Assume the role of a presenter who explains and demonstrates strategies and programs. The literacy coach provides information on how to integrate literacy instructional time into content-area curricula and teaches demonstration lessons in research-based strategies and programs for groups of teachers and others to observe. The coaches also help teachers analyze student work and identify students’ level of understanding and proficiency.

Assume the role of an adviser who gives recommendations to school staff members. The literacy coach promotes the utilization of research-based strategies in all classes and helps teachers develop an increased knowledge base about literacy instruction, engage in reflective practice, and analyze the effect on learning. Moreover, the coaches help to guide the implementation of school improvement plans with measurable progress objectives that serve to move students to AYP achievement levels.

Assume the role of a mentor who demonstrates the ability to share knowledge and experience with colleagues effectively and to promote peer collaboration. The literacy coach connects teachers to best practices through collegial discourse, modeling, and professional literature and fosters literacy learning by honoring and respecting individual learning styles and diverse opinions. The coaches also provide ongoing opportunities for teachers to reflect with their colleagues, to try new ideas and test creative approaches, and to share literacy best practices.

Teachers are key to integrating the teaching of literacy into the curriculum to create the learning environments that develop literacy skills for all students. Accordingly, high school teachers need training and assistance as they integrate literacy into the curriculum and confront the tension between traditional methods of instruction and new pedagogic methods that incorporate literacy instruction across the disciplines. The ultimate goal of the literacy coach is to improve literacy teaching and learning so students will be able “to read at higher levels and comprehend the complex texts

and other informational sources they need in order to graduate from high school prepared for college or a challenging job” (Sturtevant, 2003, p. 13).

Resource Programs

The Academy of Reading (AOR) program. The use of educational technology content allows teachers and students to transform the learning environment into a more dynamic, demanding, vibrant, and interactive exchange. Thus, the learning process becomes more problem and project centered, student centered, collaborative, communicative, and customized. In their meta-study, Kulik and Kulik (1991) conclude that students generally learn more in classes where they receive computer-aided instruction; students learn lessons with less instructional time when they received computer-aided instruction, and students like classes better if there is computer-aided instruction in them.

AOR is a software-based literacy program that includes a variety of modules that cover various skills: phonemic awareness, reading subskills, and comprehension paragraphs to practice the student’s reading ability. The program assesses a student’s reading ability and prescribes individual lesson plans to address the student’s specific educational needs. This course is mandated for all students in grade 9 who scored basic or below basic on the reading subtest of the eighth grade PSSA and all students in grade 10 who scored basic or below basic on the reading subtest of the ninth-grade Terra Nova Multiple Assessments.

AOR is offered both as a semester course and a yearlong course in each high school. During a regular 40-minute class period, the student spends 15–20 minutes on intense training sessions using the AOR software. The student participates in other activities that augment the instruction during the remaining 20–25 minutes of the period. The literacy coaches work closely with the AOR teachers to incorporate a variety of literacy instructional activities that have been developed by the Program Office for Literacy Plus to meet the needs of each student.

The AOR records-management system tracks student testing and training results, including time on task, speed of trial completion, number of attempts required for mastery, percentage of items correct, and words read per minute. This provides a powerful diagnostic tool, allowing teachers to identify precisely the strengths and weaknesses of each student. In

addition, students and parents can be supplied with concrete, quantifiable evidence of all progress.

The A+nyWhere Learning System (A+LS). After extensive review by the Program Office for Literacy Plus, the A+nyWhere Learning System (A+LS) software for English and Reading from the American Education Corporation was selected to strengthen and expand literacy instruction in all high schools. This software program provides English and reading teachers with additional tools and resources to raise the literacy competencies of all students in their classes.

A+LS facilitates automatic lesson prescription for individualized student enrichment or remediation. The study guides teach the concepts and skills associated with each lesson. The practice test module allows the student to work through exercises while giving access to the study guide for reference. In the mastery test module, the student takes a

Resource Personnel in Pittsburgh Public Schools				
	STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT	ROLE	RESEARCH-BASED RATIONALE	ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES
LITERACY COACH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Works primarily with teachers rather than with individual students to develop innovative methods to actively engage teachers in strengthening their literacy strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assumes the roles of a resource person, facilitator, presenter adviser, and mentor who help content teachers across the disciplines employ strategies that improve adolescent literacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helps teachers to understand that their students “can develop content knowledge at the same time that they are improving in literacy” (Sturtevant, 2003, p. 10) 	High school teachers need training and assistance as they work to integrate literacy into the curriculum and confront the tension between traditional methods of instruction and new pedagogic methods that incorporate literacy instruction across the disciplines

scored examination, and then electronically turns in the test and the results are recorded. The essay module allows the student to compose individual, free-form answers to a wide variety of questions and problems.

A+LS also features a multimedia authoring system that enables Pittsburgh teachers to create and modify curriculum content. Through this process, new text, graphics, video, or voice may be added to any lesson. Because assessments can be focused to specific learning objectives, the A+LS curriculum content has been aligned to Pennsylvania academic standards. The Report Wizard also allows teachers to quickly track class or student progress by standards, objectives, or skills mastered.

For example, Secondary Building Vocabulary includes high school level use of the dictionary, thesaurus, review of multiple meaning words, review of parts of speech, analogies, words in context, prefixes, suffixes, Latin and Greek words, foreign terms and phrases, core word vocabulary,

Results of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)

Grade 11 PSSA Reading and Mathematics Proficiency Levels For All Students for 2001, 2002, 2003, & 2004

SCHOOLS	2001 PSSA Reading % of students proficient or advanced	2002 PSSA Reading % of students proficient or advanced	2003 PSSA Reading % of students proficient or advanced	2004 PSSA Reading % of students proficient or advanced
Allderdice	40	72.6	73.9	75.7
Brashear	34	50.2	58.1	58.8
CAPA	56	69.8	67.1	85.8
Carrick	32	42.4	52.4	50.3
Langley	43	45.7	48.0	47.9
Oliver	13	28.8	30.5	29.0
Peabody	20	22.0	23.0	24.3
Perry	37	47.2	45.2	43.4
Schenley	44	53.9	55.3	59.9
South	7	19.5	23.1	26.2
Westinghouse	11	13.6	14.1	19.6

Results of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)

Grade 11 PSSA Reading Proficiency Levels White and African American students (2002–2004)

Schools	2002 PSSA Reading % of White students proficient or advanced	2003 PSSA Reading % of White students proficient or advanced	2004 PSSA Reading % of White students proficient or advanced	2002 PSSA Reading % of African American students proficient or advanced	2003 PSSA Reading % of African American students proficient or advanced	2004 PSSA Reading % of African American students proficient or advanced
Allderdice	82.5	83.5	86.3	42.0	43.0	44.8
Brashear	56.3	69.4	70.3	19.6	20.0	29.0
CAPA	75.8	76.3	88.7	53.3	58.8	* Not reported
Carrick	47.9	52.2	55.9	13.5	23.6	* Not reported
Langley	55.3	58.6	59.6	19.2	27.8	32.7
Oliver	35.3	37.1	* Not reported	20.7	24.4	26.1
Peabody	66.7	77.8	* Not reported	17.8	19.3	20.9
Perry	50.1	52.2	54.5	32.9	33	34.3
Schenley	81.7	84.0	84.8	41.5	38.2	49.5
South	30.3	31.3	* Not reported	8.5	16.3	22.1
Westinghouse	* Not reported	* Not reported	* Not reported	13.6	14.1	19

* Not Reported—Subgroup did not have at least 40 students.

Resource Programs in Pittsburgh Public Schools

	Content and Skills Addressed	Research-Based Rationale	Anticipated Outcomes
Academy of Reading Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assesses a student's reading ability and prescribes individual lesson plans to address the student's specific educational needs Includes a variety of modules that cover various skills: phonemic awareness, reading subskills, and comprehension paragraphs to practice the student's reading ability 	Many high school students simply lack the mechanics of reading. Phonemic awareness and decoding skills do not come naturally to all students, and many must be trained in these basic skills to become successful readers. Once these subskills of reading are properly developed, students are empowered to develop higher-order comprehension skills for problem solving and critical thinking.	On average, students who use the software will achieve an average of 2.5 grade level gains in their comprehension scores after 25 hours in the program.
A+LS Computer-Based Learning System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Features an integrated language skills curriculum that directs students from beginning language skills to more advanced in a title series that encompasses three Grammar & Usage titles and seven Language Skills titles Facilitates automatic lesson prescription for individualized student enrichment or remediation 	Students who receive intensive, focused literacy instruction and tutoring graduate from high school in significantly greater numbers than those not receiving such attention (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2002).	This software program provides English and Reading teachers with additional tools and resources to raise the literacy competencies of all students in their classes.

testing word vocabulary, grade-level review of vowel clusters, consonant blends, silent letters, letters with multiple sounds, and review of sounds.

For teachers to incorporate A+LS into their teaching practices, professional development was essential. Substitute teachers were provided so all English and reading teachers could attend the training sessions that were conducted at their respective high schools. Literacy coaches, instructional team leaders, principals, and other administrators also received training. Three training sessions were provided so participants could work with the software between sessions. Once the implementation phase was complete, each school continued to receive ongoing teacher-oriented support including both functional and technical help as well as monthly proactive follow-up visits by the district coordinator.

During the 2003–2004 school year, all English teachers augmented their courses with this software. Beginning with the 2004–2005 school year, however, a more specialized approach will be utilized in preparation for the 11th-grade PSSA. Accordingly, all 11th-grade students in all high schools who did not achieve the standard on the 10th-grade Reading for Basic Understanding and the Reading Interpretation and Analysis subtests of the New Standards Reference Exams (NSRE) will be scheduled for an A+LS literacy course in addition to their regular English class. Similar to the AOR program, the A+LS class will be offered both as a semester course and a yearlong course. Moreover, English teachers in other grade levels will continue to supplement their courses with the A+LS software.

Conclusion

If student achievement is to be increased, personnel and

resources must be made available to ensure that all students can meet the standards. A well-developed action plan can maximize the high school's performance by using strategies and ideas that incorporate scientifically based literacy research. Transforming faculty thinking from traditional lecture formats to information driven, collaborative learning experience requires a new approach to training. Principals must also provide strong instructional leadership in their schools by continually facilitating the alignment of curriculum, assessment, and instruction. As we continue our improvement efforts in Pittsburgh high schools, data will help us know whether we are making progress and provide critical information for redirecting efforts to achieve goals for students. **PL**

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