

FOREWORD

With the enactment of the educational reform legislation titled No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the United States has, in effect, boldly proclaimed that all children will learn—or else. The motivation behind NCLB legislation has been widely debated. Proponents portray the initiative as a sincere attempt to guarantee that every child, particularly poor and minority students, receive an education that leads to high levels of learning. Opponents contend the legislation is unrealistic and simplistic at best or a thinly veiled attempt to dismantle the public system of education at worst. Regardless of the motivation, contemporary public schools in the United States are being called upon to achieve a standard that goes far beyond the goals of any previous generation—high levels of learning for all students. Furthermore, NCLB threatens schools and the educators within them with escalating sanctions if they fail to meet newly imposed standards. The rationale behind this approach suggests that educators have always known how to help all kids learn but have been too disinterested in the welfare of their students or too lazy to put forth the necessary effort. Fear is needed to provide the necessary motivation—either perform or risk closing your school and/or losing your job.

In *The Learning Communities Guide to Improving Reading Instruction*, Valerie Gregory and Jan Rozzelle Nikas embrace the premise that schools and the educators within them must be committed to the learning of each child entrusted to them. They make a compelling argument that helping each student develop the ability to read with high levels of comprehension is an absolute prerequisite if the concept of “learning for all” is to move from politically correct hyperbole to reality in our nation’s schools. They make it clear, however, that they honor teachers and teaching, that they believe educators have the best interests of their students at heart, and most importantly, that training and support are more effective than threats in helping teachers meet the formidable challenges they face in their classrooms. Their book is based on the premise that educators have both the willingness and ability to become more effective if the culture of their schools focuses on the ongoing learning, continuous improvement, and professional growth of the adults. They set out to provide solid information, specific strategies, and much-needed encouragement to teachers—and they succeed at every level.

There is much to commend in this book. One of its greatest strengths is the way in which the authors provide specific, pragmatic, proven strategies to teach literacy in ways that teachers can apply immediately in their classrooms. Too often researchers and practitioners hold different interests, speak

viii THE LEARNING
COMMUNITIES
GUIDE TO
IMPROVING
READING
INSTRUCTION

different languages, and live in different worlds. Too often they hold each other in low regard. This book does a wonderful job of bridging the chasm that often exists between the separate worlds of higher education and K–12 educators. It applies powerful research findings and nontechnical, jargon-free advice for classroom teachers. The authors demonstrate an understanding of and appreciation for the K–12 setting that can come only with working extensively in that environment.

For example, the Reading Reflection Survey presented in Chapter 7 represents a powerful instrument for the improvement of a literacy program that a school could use in a number of different ways. An individual teacher could use the guide to reflect upon and assess his or her instruction. A team of teachers could use it to gather data on the practices at their grade level and to develop an action plan for improvement. An entire school could use it as a basis for identifying areas that require focused training. The guide—like the book in general—is powerful, pragmatic, and beneficial to real teachers and schools.

A second strength of *The Learning Communities Guide to Improving Reading Instruction* is the authors' recognition of the link between adult learning and student learning. Throughout the book Gregory and Rozzelle Nikas call for increased attention to and support of powerful professional development as a linchpin of any effort to help all students achieve at high levels. Moreover, they make it clear that the professional development they envision is more likely to occur in the workplace than the workshop. Again, their respect for educators is evident as they describe schools in which teachers work together to identify areas of concern and build the shared knowledge necessary to address those concerns. The focused, sustained, teacher-led professional development they describe is essential to the success of any school committed to learning for all of its students.

Finally, *The Learning Communities Guide to Improving Reading Instruction* does not simply present a new program for teaching literacy: It calls for the creation of a unique school culture. In the school the authors describe, educators share a strong sense of purpose: high levels of learning for all students. In order to achieve that purpose, they work together collaboratively, engage in collective inquiry, participate in action research, embed continuous improvement processes into their routine practices, and monitor their effectiveness on the basis of tangible results. In other words, the educators in the school move beyond merely implementing programs and instead focus upon building their collective capacity to function as a professional learning community.

The reference to “professional learning communities” in the title of this book carries profound implications, as each word presents a challenge to educators. A professional is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. In the scenarios presented by Gregory and Rozzelle Nikas teachers do more than pool opinions. They investigate emerging research and build shared knowledge of best practice in order to better achieve their common goals. In short, they act professionally.

Learning suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. In Chinese, the term *learning* is represented by two characters: The first means “to study” and

the second means “to practice constantly.” In the situations presented in this book, educators engage in the ongoing study and constant practice that characterize a commitment to their own learning. Furthermore, an emphasis on learning shifts the focus of a staff from inputs to outcomes, from intentions to results. When educators regard teaching as the primary purpose of their school, they are driven by questions such as “Did every student have access to the appropriate curriculum?” and “Are the instructional materials and strategies appropriate?” Their focus is on whether or not students have been taught. When educators regard learning as the fundamental purpose of their school, the most pressing questions become, “Is each student mastering the intended outcomes?” and “What can we do to assist students who experience initial difficulty?” The difference between a focus on teaching and a focus on learning is much more than semantics, and so the term *learning* community carries significant implications.

Finally, while much has been written about learning organizations, Gregory and Rozzelle Nikas chose to use the term *community*. In an organization, the emphasis is on structure and efficiency. *Community*, on the other hand, suggests a group linked by common interests and a place of emotional support. When teachers create an environment in which people work together and support one another to accomplish collectively what they could not possibly accomplish by working in isolation, they are clearly building community.

This book will be an invaluable resource for any school practitioner—teacher, principal, literacy coach, or instructional coordinator—who recognizes that literacy is the door of opportunity through which a student must enter to truly learn at high levels and avoid being left behind. We highly recommend it to all educators who hope to open that door for every child entrusted to them.

—Richard DuFour

—Rebecca DuFour