

A Whole-school Approach to Improving Reading Outcomes

Part 1: What Is a Whole-school Approach?

Simply put, there is no template or definitive resource on what a whole-school approach is or looks like. There isn't a Wikipedia entry, and finding introductory articles or webpages written in plain, non-academic language is a challenge.

That being said, whole-school approaches have been applied successfully to improve outcomes for students and schools in areas as diverse as literacy, numeracy, spelling, physical health, and anti-bullying in places as far spread as Australia (where the most comprehensive studies were conducted), Sweden, Italy, the United Kingdom, as well as Ontario and Alberta.

Here are some operational definitions for a whole-school approach—also referred to as whole-school design/planning/programming/reform—adapted for an early literacy and reading context:

A whole school approach engages all key learning areas, all grades and the wider community. Students and adults in the school and the community develop awareness and understanding of the factors that contribute to reading. All aspects of school life are considered, such as curriculum, school climate, teaching practices, policies and procedures.ⁱ

A whole-school approach to reading assumes that [poor outcomes around] reading is systemic, requiring a systemic solution.ⁱⁱ

"[Whole school planning](#) is about developing that coherence where there is a common understanding about what literacy teaching is and what role all teachers play in teaching literacy."ⁱⁱⁱ

Six Essential Traits of a Whole-school Design Approach

There are a number of whole-school design elements or themes that appear frequently in the literature:

1. **All members of the school community, including staff, students, and parents, are taught basic information about teaching reading, the school's plan for improving outcomes, and their role in achieving those outcomes.** "Reading is everyone's responsibility, not just the primary teacher's."
2. **Teachers are trained extensively and on an ongoing basis, both in the whole-school design process and in how to teach reading.** This includes:
 - a. Identifying trained teacher educators and literacy leaders to provide professional learning and teaching support in the classroom, including observation, feedback and in-class modelling. These may be consultants and others outside the school, or teachers and staff within the school.
 - b. Establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLC) for teachers.
3. **Principals and school leadership play a critical role in overseeing the big picture** and in driving the cultural changes necessary to foster greater teacher collaboration. **The development of their instructional leadership capacity is essential.**

4. **Comprehensive data analysis** to plan for student development, to identify students in need of additional support, and to track student progress.
5. **Considerations given to the circumstances and unique situation of each school.** For example, targets should be specific to, and tailored to, the demographic characteristics of the students in the school.
6. **Constant evaluation** on the part of leaders and teachers of their practices and progress toward the targets, with adjustments made as necessary.

Advantages to a whole-school approach

- Involving all education and community partners is an important step to bring about systemic changes
- Avoids the stigmatization that can occur when individuals are singled out
- When properly implemented, whole-school plans are customized, addressing socio-economic and cultural factors
- Provides a set of common goals, language, and values
- Helps reduce inconsistencies and incoherencies across subjects, classrooms, and teachers
- Enables the big vision to be accomplished

Disadvantages to a whole-school approach

- Evaluations have not always shown improvements over other programs. Multiple years of data is required to demonstrate long-term impact
- May necessitate a change in style or approach to teaching and cultural change can be challenging
- Requires buy-in at all levels
- Is time intensive and may be cost intensive

Calgary Reads will continue to research and explore whole-school design, and bring relevant articles to your attention. If you have insights to share or have an interest in attending a guest speaker presentation on this topic—please be in touch with us.

Part 2: Whole-school Literacy: An Alberta Case Study

The Wild Rose School Division, headquartered in Rocky Mountain House, implemented a [project](#) focused on increasing literacy by teaching students how to construct meaning as part of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). The district's 17 schools and 5,400 students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 and all staff were involved. See [page 30](#) of the AISI report for more.

The project's **goals** were to:

- Improve student reading comprehension in all subject areas and grades
- Enhance teacher skills to improve student comprehension
- Expand levelled student resources/collections and curriculum support for all subject areas

Key strategies included:

- A literacy consultant working with facilitators at each school
- Targeted teacher resources
- Increased student assessment and regular evaluation

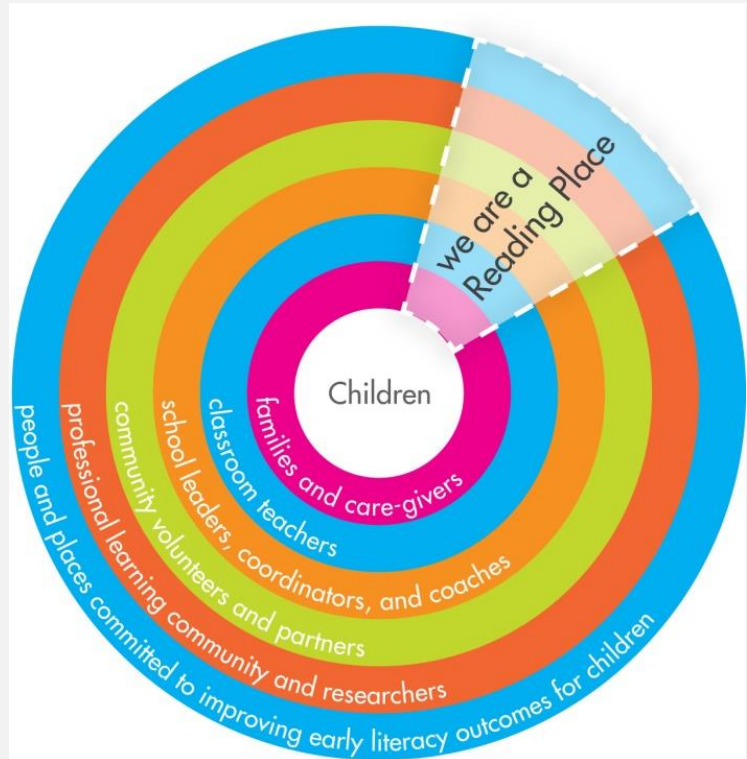
Outcomes included:

- Greater emphasis and awareness of the reading and comprehension process by teachers and students
- Staff recognizing reading as integral, not solely the responsibility of Language Arts or English teachers
- Greater engagement with parents
- Greater collaboration between teachers in the division and subsequent smooth implementation of the Professional Learning Communities model

Part 3: A Whole-school Design: Calgary Reads Reading Place

Calgary Reads' *Reading Place* prototype, piloting in five Calgary Schools, acknowledges the need to create holistic reading environments: places with layers of people, spaces, and objects that work in concert to support young readers. Reading Place was informed and inspired by the whole-school design approach research of Peter Hill's (see below). We have implemented several of the key elements of whole-school design, including:

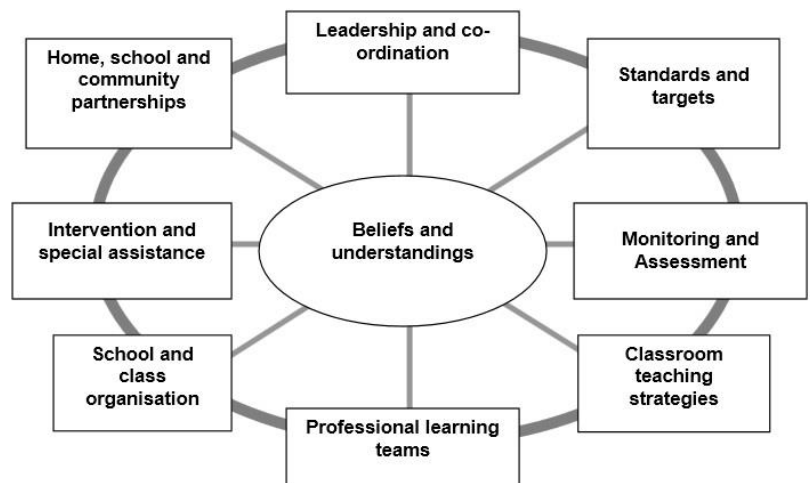
- **Baseline data** of teacher, student, and parent awareness of reading (through pre- and post-surveys)
- Support for teacher **Professional Learning Communities** (*Y Read?*)
- **Literacy expertise** provided by Calgary Reads Literacy Coaches to train and support teachers and staff
- Creation of **Design Teams** to aid principals and school staff
 - Each Design Team may consist of a principal, teachers, librarian, artist or designer, literacy coach, and community members
 - Each team begins by conducting an **audit of community resources**
- **Ongoing support for principals** through a Principal Advisory and regular meetings with program staff
- **Social and cultural considerations** that are distinct in each school (no "one size fits all" approach)
- **Customized programming** available from a suite of more than a dozen programs
- **Rigorous evaluation**—a year-long developmental evaluation process tests the essential ingredients of creating a culture of joyful and confident readers
- Continuous communication with Reading Place partners and colleagues



Part 4: Articles

1. [Key Features of a Whole-school, Design Approach to Literacy Teaching in Schools](#)

Peter W. Hill and Carmel A. Crévola from the University of Melbourne undertook two large-scale, longitudinal projects in the mid-1990s that indicated that "substantial, measurable improvements in early literacy outcomes can be achieved when schools adopt a whole-school, design approach.



These results were achieved by attending in a systematic fashion to all the elements in a school that contribute to improved learning outcomes." The table shows the general design elements for improving learning outcomes.

2. [A Whole-school Approach in Literacy and Numeracy](#)

Positive outcomes in a New South Wales, Australia, school district were connected to the capacity of schools to choose appropriately from a suite of literacy programs and strategies that best met individual student learning needs and the wider school context, rather than imposing a particular program on a school that may be inappropriate or ineffective for the school or an individual student's circumstances.

3. [One School, Six Whole-school Programs](#)

The Connolly Primary School in Western Australia has used a whole-school approach in six subject areas: Literacy, Numeracy, Technology & Enterprise, Society & Environment, Science, and Health Education. Here is their [whole-school literacy plan](#).

4. [A Whole-school Approach to Literacy](#)

This synopsis outlines the shift in values and teacher training that a whole-school approach to literacy helped create at a New Zealand school. A key success of the project has been challenging the subject silos, by demonstrating to teachers the impact of improving literacy on student's learning across subjects.

"Literacy leaders must be carefully selected as there are many demands on them. The role is very different to the traditional literacy support person, who most likely works with students, one-on-one, in a small back room. We are trying to take literacy out of the back room."

5. [Adolescent Literacy and the Benefits of Whole School Planning](#)

Literacy teaching is everyone's responsibility and every teacher is a teacher of literacy in all years of schooling.

If the work of the early years teacher results in excellent achievement in young children and is not followed up with similar support, then that investment in the early years is largely wasted.

It is important that across the school, as a professional learning community:

- the beliefs and understandings about learning are common to all
- consistent terminology exists as professional learning is ongoing and common to all
- any scope and sequence is jointly developed and known by all

6. [The Benefits of Whole-school Literacy Plans](#)

This is a series of four videos totalling 37 minutes from Australia that outlines how to build a whole-school program, and not "buy one off the shelf." A transcript of the videos may be found [here](#).

ⁱ Promoting a Positive and Inclusive School Climate: A Whole School Approach. (2012, February 1). Retrieved November 24, 2014, from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/memos/feb2012/Issue1Feb2012.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Smith, J. D., Schneider, B. H., Smith, P. K., & Ananiadou, K. (2004). The effectiveness of whole-school anti-bullying programs: A synthesis of evaluation research. *School Psychology Review*, 33, 547-560.

ⁱⁱⁱ Witt, C. (2012). Adolescent literacy and the benefits of whole school planning. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 20(2), 34.