



# Supporting Secondary Literacy Reform in a Low-Resource Context

The Pasadena Story

By Kiley Walsh



A heartfelt thanks to all the many Stupski, PUSD and CORE staff members who made this report possible.

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# Executive Summary

## Overview

The Pasadena Unified School District has been engaging in systematic literacy reforms in a challenging setting: secondary schools within a low-resource district. Over the past few years, the district has seen solid, consistent growth in secondary academic achievement. Deep implementation of aligned literacy interventions and savvy utilization of external resources have helped PUSD make promising progress.

Even with all the typical secondary-level challenges, the district has managed to restructure the school day and reduce class size to provide below-grade-level secondary students with more focused time on reading. All secondary sites now share the same curriculum, aligned assessments and the same system for diagnosis and placement for all struggling readers. One of the reasons Pasadena has been successful in these ambitious reforms is due to its understanding that it couldn't do it alone. Seeing the limits of internal capacity, the district utilized state resources for curriculum and professional development and partnered with the Consortium on Reading Excellence (CORE) to ensure high-quality implementation, training literacy coaches in every secondary site and conducting cross-role walkthroughs in intervention classrooms.

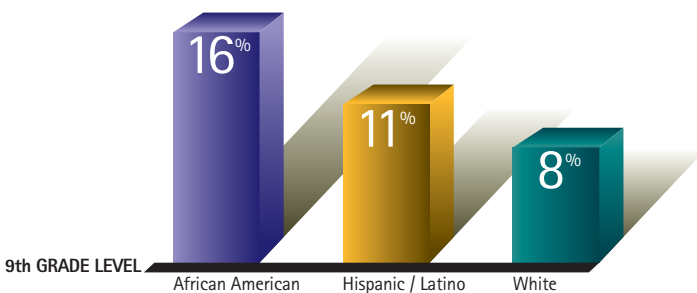
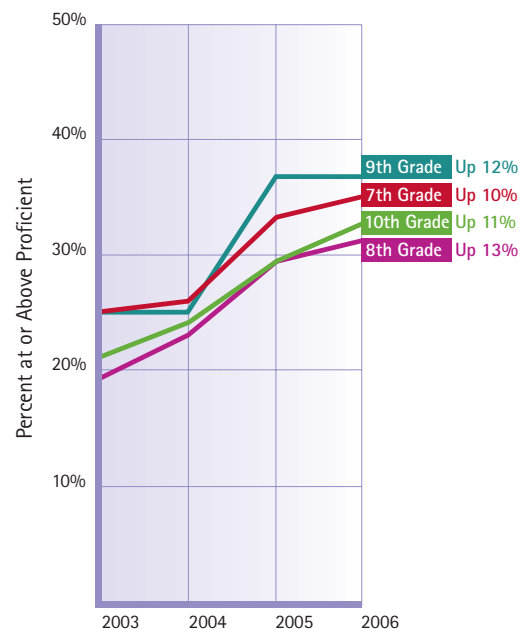
This report is part of the Stupski Foundation's multi-faceted initiative to advance a systemic, results-oriented approach to district reform. Through reports such as this, the Foundation hopes to shed light on elements of district improvement, spotlighting successes when and where they occur and helping to illuminate any structures, practices or processes that can catalyze improvement.

## District Context

Pasadena Unified School District is located in Southern California northeast of Los Angeles. It serves over 21,000 students K-12 in 28 schools, 11 of which serve secondary students. Fifty-five percent of students in PUSD are Hispanic/Latino, 25% African-American and 16% White. Approximately 23% are English language learners, more than 90% of whom speak Spanish as a primary language, and 68% of Pasadena's students qualify for Free-Reduced Priced Lunch.

Between 2003 and 2006, the district made double-digit gains in California Standards Test (CST) English-Language Arts (ELA) achievement for every grade from 7th through 10th.

PUSD Secondary Performance on the California Standards Test



Every significant Pasadena racial/ethnic subgroup in grades 7-10 improved in reading on the CST ELA during the 2003-2006 time span, but the most dramatic reduction of the achievement gap was in 9th grade, where African-American students made twice the growth of white students.

## Key Findings and Lessons Learned

The full report provides a story of change, offering a retrospective look at PUSD's secondary literacy reforms. It highlights the essential elements of the district's progress:

- Components of PUSD's secondary literacy initiative, including diagnosis and placement of students, structuring differentiated instructional delivery, selecting common curriculum and assessments, and significant investments in professional development for teachers and principals.
- Strategies the district employed to promote greater alignment and shared learning in secondary literacy practice, including coaching, collaboration time and walkthroughs.
- Utilization of external resources, namely the state of California's frameworks and funding, and partnerships with CORE and the Stupski Foundation, to help with development and implementation of the initiative.

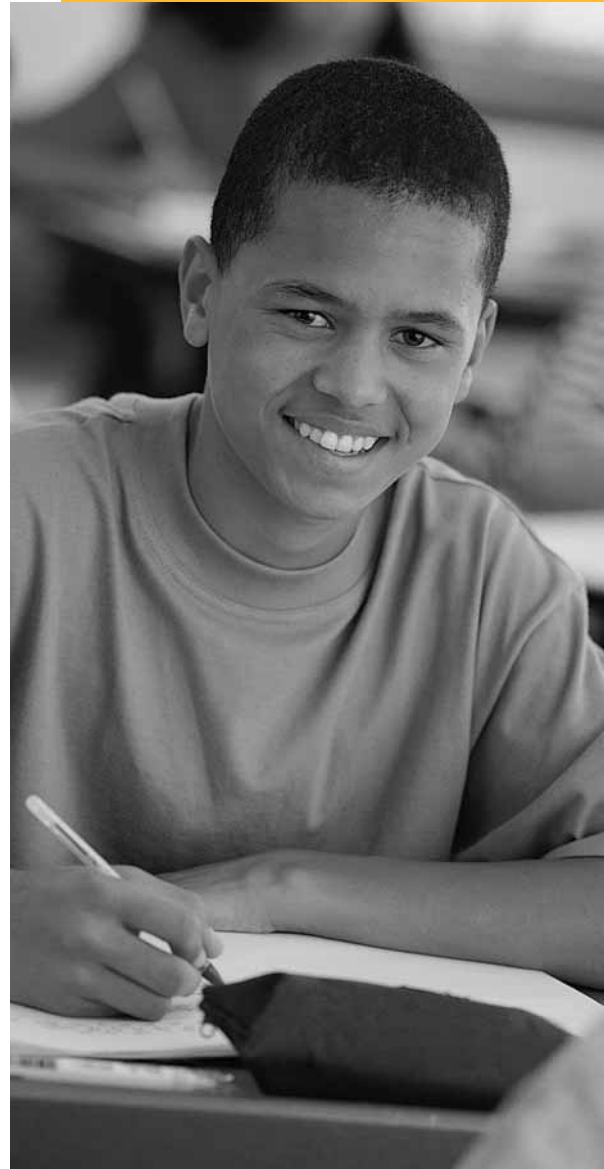
What can leaders in the field take away from the PUSD story? Based on findings, we offer the following four considerations and action items. The components of PUSD's literacy reform are significant, but there is just as much to learn from the way in which this low-resource district leveraged external resources to build internal capacity.

**1. An Instructionally Aligned System:** ensure aligned standards, curriculum, assessments and professional development; provide structures to support differentiation; and promote an aligned context.

**2. Learning Communities:** restructure professional expectations, support teachers, engage principals, and catalyze central office staff.

**3. Build Internal Capacity with External Resources:** engage high-quality vendors, utilize state context, and work with aligned funders.

**4. Target Resources to Need:** let data be the guide, signal a focus on equity from the top, and provide supports in multiple forms.



# I. Why Do We Need Comprehensive Secondary Literacy Reform?

The number of middle and high school students in this country who struggle with reading is staggering. On the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test, only 31% of 8th grade students scored "proficient", indicating full mastery of reading subject matter. Disaggregated for race/ethnicity, scores starkly illuminate the achievement gap. While 40% of Asian and 39% of White 8th grade students scored "proficient" on reading on the 2005 NAEP, only 15% of Hispanic and 12% of Black students did so. Compared with the international community, the United States is 21st in literacy rates, behind most European countries as well as Australia and Japan, coming in right behind Romania, Argentina and the Maldives.<sup>1</sup> As the skill and ability level necessary to be globally competitive rises, literacy is now just the bare minimum required to pursue a lifetime of choices and opportunities.

While the need to invest in early literacy is well recognized, with programs such as Reading First in grades K-3 providing resources and guidance, secondary literacy has not received as much attention. Literacy interventions in middle or high school grades have largely been band-aids affixed to the main program, with students pulled out from core instruction for extra help or attending after-school or summer school classes. These outsourced strategies can have some effectiveness with small numbers of students; in many urban school districts, however, below-grade-level students constitute the majority of the student body. The reality is that tens of thousands of secondary students each day spend time in classes where they can't access the content.

Secondary schools present a challenging arena for reform in general and literacy reform in particular. Departments and teachers in high schools, and to a lesser extent in middle schools, are used to operating fairly independently, with neither a receptive culture nor system-wide mechanisms to



promote change. In addition, most high school English teachers are not prepared to teach literacy; they have been trained to teach literature to students who already have a mastery of reading. Rigid schedules and the lack of diagnostic tools to assess literacy levels create additional logistical barriers.

Even if a district knows what to do to meet the needs of struggling older readers, it may lack the resources and the internal capacity to execute. While some states provide resources and frameworks for aligned instructional reforms, many do not. When given access to resources, districts frequently have difficulty making integrated use of the supports and take a "Christmas tree" approach to reforms, simply tacking on new grant programs instead of making comprehensive, system-wide changes. Beset with all these challenges, what's a district to do? The report that follows offers the story of one district's promising response.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Programme Report 2005

## II. Stupski Foundation

The Stupski Foundation is committed to working within the K-12 education system, linking will with skill to help all children gain access to a wide range of life opportunities. Founded in 1996, we are an operating Foundation providing resources – a core team offering ongoing support, connections to consultants and experts in the field, information on promising practices – as well as funding to help districts improve. The bold goal of the foundation is to improve the roughly 200 high-poverty, mostly urban school districts across the country, with the aim of increasing achievement for all while closing achievement gaps.

This report aims to share some lessons learned about the real challenges and potential solutions on the road to school district improvement. The Stupski Foundation hopes to shed light on aspects of this journey, spotlighting successes when and where they occur and illuminating replicable practices and processes that can catalyze improvement. The foundation deliberately works with districts on the move – those that have need for improvement *and* the capacity and will to work toward it. No single school district has negotiated all the hairpin turns of change or answered all the complicated questions on how to best meet the needs of all students. Many districts, however, have arrived at certain milestones.

Built upon knowledge generated through district

partnerships and field-based research, the Foundation has constructed a Theory of Action (TOA) for district reform (see inside back cover). Embedded in the TOA is a critical focus on helping districts develop a Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System (CAIS) (see Appendix A). The reports in this series are designed to illustrate and refine the TOA and the companion CAIS.

The Stupski Foundation began a partnership with Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD) in 2002. The Foundation has facilitated data analysis to determine priorities, conducted needs assessments within the system, supported strategic planning and accountability initiatives, and helped to build the capacity to execute within the central office. A large part of the literacy initiative in PUSD was conducted through a vendor with the Stupski Foundation providing funding and resources to manage that contract.



This report highlights what PUSD has accomplished in the past few years in its effort to improve secondary literacy instruction and offers information on the external levers for change that helped to guide and catalyze improvement. Information for this report was collected through document review, interviews of district, school-site and teacher leaders, and Stupski Foundation staff, and observations of literacy coaches and literacy intervention teachers.

## II. PUSD Context

### Demographics

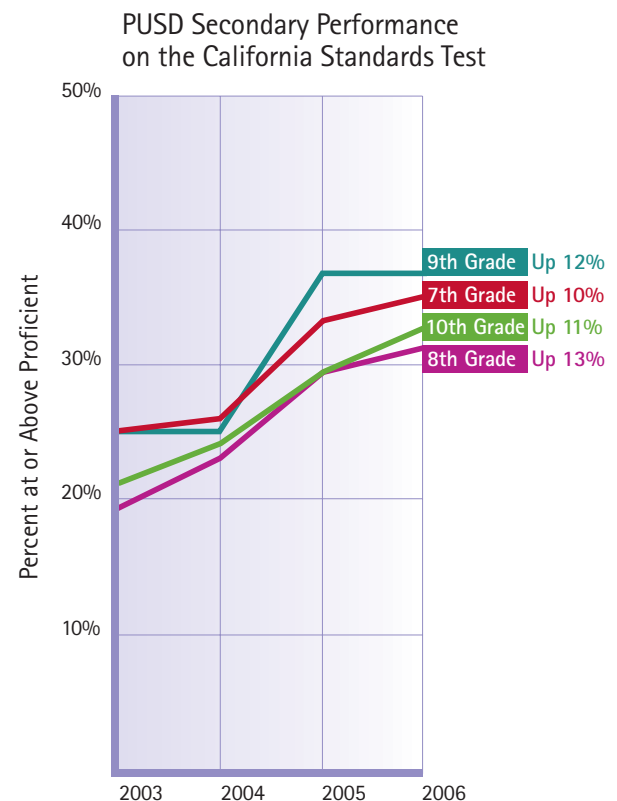
Pasadena Unified School District is located in Southern California northeast of Los Angeles. It serves over 21,000 students K-12 in 28 schools. Fifty-five percent of students in PUSD are Hispanic/Latino, 25% African-American and 16% White. Approximately 23% are English language learners, more than 90% of whom speak Spanish as a primary language, and 68% of Pasadena's students qualify for Free-Reduced Priced Lunch.

Approximately 10,350 students are enrolled at the secondary level in PUSD in three K-8 schools, three large middle schools, one 6-12 school, one 7-12 school, two large comprehensive high schools and one alternative high school. In 2001-2002, Pasadena Unified began experiencing a decline in enrollment which became dramatic in 2003-2004 and resulted in a decline of 2,450 students (approximately 10% of the student body) between 2001-02 and 2005-06. The increasing cost of housing is the primary reason for the decline in enrollment, which has required the district to make significant budget reductions over the past five years.



### Student Achievement

An analysis of student achievement in Pasadena reveals gains in the crucial area of secondary literacy. In every year between 2003 and 2006, the district made gains in California Standards Test (CST) English-Language Arts (ELA) achievement for every grade from 7th through 10th. Over the span of three years, every grade made double-digit improvements, as follows:





Performance in each of these secondary grades grew at a faster rate than state average. In 9th grade PUSD made twice the state's average growth, in 10th grade PUSD's growth was nearly three times that of the state's average growth.

In 2006, every subgroup in the four Pasadena high schools made what the federal government terms Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in reading. AYP is the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts and schools must achieve each year. This level increases steadily, with the goal of all students attaining at or above grade level by the 2013-2014 school year. Even as minimum requirements for AYP have steadily risen, PUSD has made gains.

**“Just five years ago, people were not talking about teachers being reading teachers. They were still talking about literature, but not realizing their kids weren’t reading at all.”**

*– District Administrator*

Every significant Pasadena racial/ethnic subgroup in grades 7-10 improved in reading on the CST ELA during the 2003-2006 time span. The most dramatic reduction of the achievement gap was in 9th grade, where African-American students made

twice the growth of white students. African-American students grew 16 percentage points, from 21% at or above grade level in 2003 to 37% in 2006. During the same time period, the White students grew 8 percentage points from 50% at or above grade level in 2003 to 58% in 2006. Though the gap between the groups is still large, it did decrease from 29 points in 2003 to 21 points in 2006, representing a 28% reduction. For African-American students, these achievements meant that over one in three were at or above grade

level in 2006, whereas only one in five could claim that distinction in 2003.





## Launching Reform

About four years ago, Pasadena Unified School District found itself in the unenviable position of facing declining enrollment and low academic achievement with limited resources. The district was beginning to face pressure from federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements, made all the more challenging due to the California state context, with some of the nation's most rigorous state standards. While the district keenly felt the myriad local, state and federal pressures, it lacked the internal resources and capacity to meet student needs, particularly in the difficult arena of secondary literacy. What the Pasadena story offers is an example of how, in the face of severe resource constraints, a district responded by targeting an extremely challenging area, focusing and aligning internal structures, and leveraging external state, vendor and foundation resources to embark on the path to improvement.



### *Cultivating Support in Leadership*

In 2002, PUSD's Deputy Superintendent made a presentation to the school board proposing a systematic way to develop an aligned literacy delivery system from preK-12. Two major influences in developing the PUSD model were the National Reading Panel report *Teaching Children to Read*, released in 2000, and Los Angeles Unified School District's literacy model. While the need was great at the secondary level – about three-quarters of middle and high school students were below grade level in reading – the district felt strongly that more information was needed about best practices for literacy

interventions at the secondary level before choosing an appropriate course of action.

For the 2002-2003 school year, the PUSD school board adopted Open Court reading for grades K-6. During that same year, PUSD applied for and was accepted into the first cohort of Reading First school districts in California, a literacy initiative focused on grades K-3. To build broad momentum around change, the district convened a mixed-role group of teachers, principals, community members and union leaders to discuss the achievement gap. Pursuant to district leaders' requests, the Stupski Foundation arranged for the group to meet with Education Trust Director Kati Haycock, whose presentation on equity and achievement galvanized many in the audience.

### *School Board Strategic Plan*

As part of an effort to become more data-driven in decisions and allocation of resources, PUSD's school board held a data-based retreat in February 2003. With Stupski Foundation funding and staff facilitation, board members examined student achievement data with an emphasis on achievement gaps. After careful data analysis, the PUSD school board adopted a comprehensive strategic plan in July 2004 that included two related goals:

- Building and implementing comprehensive language arts/literacy systems and structures preK-12.
- Increasing the number of secondary students receiving appropriate language arts/literacy and/or math interventions.

Within the strategic plan, the board adopted three priorities for the 2004-05 school year, one of which was secondary literacy interventions. In addition to naming this as a priority for the district, the board allocated \$1.2 million to support the literacy interventions. Due to budgetary constraints, the district decided to focus initially on grades 7 and 9, though some schools also elected to offer interventions in 10th grade. This signal from the top provided an enabling condition and focused people, time and money on secondary literacy interventions.

## IV. Aligning the elements of an instructional system

California has actively pursued the development of a comprehensive, aligned instructional system, establishing rigorous academic standards, implementing annual standards-based assessments and providing funding only for those textbooks that are standards-aligned and include benchmark assessments. The state has also provided standards-aligned funding for professional development for those who purchase adopted – or state-approved – materials. Many of the changes detailed below stem directly from the state's initiatives. Others, however, show how PUSD used the state's framework as a starting point and then created the structures that enabled higher quality implementation.

### Aligning Internal and External Resources to Support Instruction

To help design, manage and execute the interventions, the district contracted with a vendor with both content and process expertise and created several new leadership positions at school sites and in the district central office.

#### *Consortium on Reading Excellence (CORE)*

Given the district's low-resource context, leaders knew they needed to draw upon outside supports to ensure high-quality implementation of the interventions. After exploring potential vendors, district leaders decided to contract with the Consortium on Reading Excellence (CORE) based on their prior knowledge of CORE's work and the Stupski Foundation's recommendation. CORE specializes in providing support and training for comprehensive

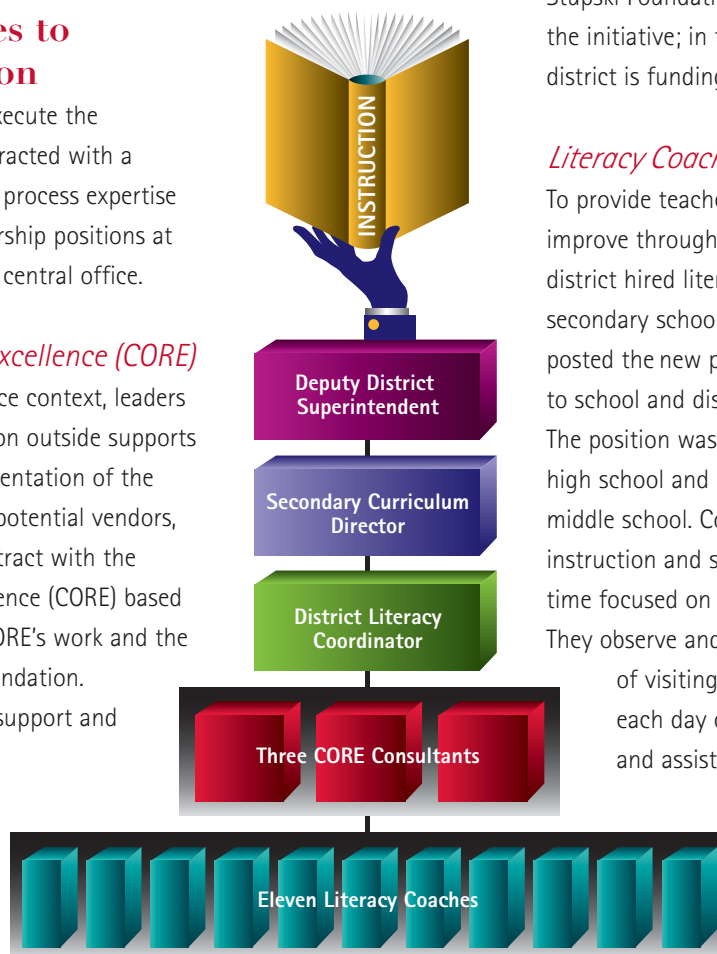
implementation of literacy reforms, regardless of the program used. The contract with CORE was made with the explicit understanding that primary literacy had been its area of expertise and that the work in PUSD at the secondary level would be a joint learning experience. Funding for CORE's work was initially provided by the Stupski Foundation, but by the 2006-07 school year the district covered all associated costs.

#### *District Coordinator for Secondary Literacy Intervention*

At the start of the 2004-05 school year, the district created and staffed a literacy coordinator position to oversee the secondary intervention effort. The coordinator works closely with the District Director of Secondary Curriculum and the Deputy Superintendent, CORE's three field-based operatives including the District Implementation Advisor, school-site principals and literacy coaches. The coordinator also facilitates monthly literacy team and coaching meetings and coordinates assessments and professional development on curriculum for teachers. This position was funded by the Stupski Foundation for the first two years of the initiative; in the 2006-07 school year, the district is funding the position.

#### *Literacy Coaches*

To provide teachers systemic opportunities to improve through collaboration with peers, the district hired literacy coaches for each of the secondary schools. In winter 2004, the district posted the new position of literacy coach, open to school and district central office staff alike. The position was staffed at 1.0 FTE at each high school and roughly 0.5 FTE for each middle school. Coaches support literacy instruction and spend the majority of their time focused on the intervention program. They observe and model classes, with the goal of visiting a minimum of one classroom each day of the week to offer feedback and assistance with changes in practice.



Coaches also do the bulk of data collection and analysis to diagnose and place students. Prior to the start of their first year, in summer 2004, coaches participated in professional development on the responsibilities of their new role delivered by CORE.

### *Additional Secondary English Teachers*

To provide smaller, more focused learning environments for below grade level students, the district increased the number of English teachers in secondary sites. Seventh-grade intervention classes were staffed at a ratio of 25 students to every one teacher. With the help of state-provided class size reduction funds, 9th grade intervention classes were staffed at a ratio of 20 students to every one teacher.

## **Developing Instructional Infrastructure for Aligned Delivery**

During the 2003-04 school year, district staff worked with CORE staff to collect baseline data on the state of literacy instruction in the district's secondary schools. Many inconsistencies emerged. Each secondary site had a different core curriculum for English-Language Arts; collaborative work happened on an individual, volunteer basis. Although intervention materials were purchased for secondary school sites and some individual teachers took ownership and avidly used the material, most schools had no intervention classes. Whether teachers used curriculum and materials aligned to existing state standards for secondary grades varied from classroom to classroom. It became quite clear that the literacy intervention team's first priority had to be developing the infrastructure for aligned instructional delivery.

### *Common Standards-Based Curriculum and Assessments*

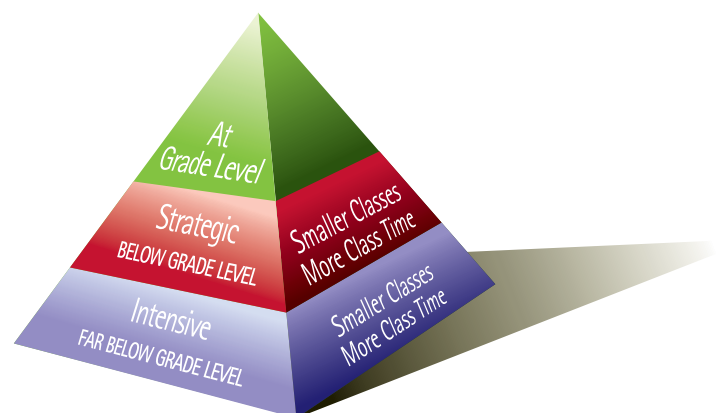
The first important step in the process of uniformly improving the quality of education for struggling readers was the selection of a common English-Language Arts curriculum across all PUSD secondary schools. In 2003, a cross-role committee comprised of principals, teachers and district administrators reviewed and selected standards-aligned secondary materials for grade-level, intervention and English Learner coursework. At the outset, some high school staff disagreed over the choice of textbooks, but the central office held firm to the principal of alignment. They clearly

stated that they would not split their use of state funds, and that every site had to use the same materials. The textbook selection committee was able to reach agreement and the district invested in *Holt Literature* as the core curriculum for every secondary school, with partial implementation in 2003-2004 and full implementation in 2004-2005.

The district also made systemic decisions regarding literacy intervention curricula. *Language!* was selected as the intervention text for all high school students; already in use in one site, 2004-2005 was the first year of full implementation in every high school. Students more than three grade levels behind are placed in intensive intervention with *Language!*; high school students two or three grade levels behind are placed in strategic intervention using *Holt Literature* with ancillary materials. All middle schools but one chose *REACH (Corrective Reading)* for intervention materials; the remaining middle school chose *Read 180* for interventions. *High Point* was purchased as the English Learner curriculum, which was implemented on the same timeline. State-provided funding covered the cost of purchasing all of these state-adopted materials.

### *Differentiated Instructional Delivery*

Principals, literacy coaches and CORE consultants worked collaboratively to schedule a minimum of 90 minutes each day for all secondary students entering 7th and 9th grade with below-grade-level literacy skills. Students receive interventions in two skill groups – "strategic" for those two years below grade level, and "intensive" for those three or more years below grade level. Though most secondary classes usually have between 32-35 students per teacher, the district staffed intervention classes at a maximum of 25 students per teacher in 7th grade and 20 students per teacher in 9th grade for the full extended time period.



In the latter half of 2003-04 school year, CORE consultants spent a good deal of time at secondary school sites meeting with principals, leadership teams and teachers, building buy-in and ownership of the new structure for instructional delivery. Changes to accommodate differentiation were implemented at all secondary school sites for the 2004-05 school year for 7th and 9th grade, and some sites also elected to offer interventions in 10th grade. In the 2005-06 school year, some sites had to cut back on the double block for strategic students, only offering them one period of instruction due to budgetary constraints.

### *Professional Development on Instructional Delivery*

Prior to and during the first year of the literacy initiative, almost every teacher involved received five days of professional development on *Holt Literature*, Language! and *REACH* curricula. Using state professional development funding as the base, the district added to the compensation to ensure that teachers were paid at their hourly rate for the full 40 hours of training. This amounted to about twice the typical rate of compensation in districts solely utilizing state-provided funds. The district also provided training in *High Point* materials. Additionally, in October 2004, school teams attended a reading institute provided by CORE. Union leaders, cognizant of the magnitude of instructional change, recognized the value of the materials and training and were supportive of the initiative.

Coaching, walkthroughs and weekly collaboration time across all secondary schools provide teachers with ongoing opportunities for collective learning, alignment and improvement of instructional delivery. Literacy coaches work intensively with intervention teachers to continually assess, develop and refine instructional capacity. A typical coaching engagement with a teacher follows a pre-conference / observation / post-conference pattern, giving teachers ample time to learn, reflect and develop next steps in conjunction with his or her coach. In addition, starting in the 2003-04 school year, PUSD has

provided weekly teacher collaboration time at every school site. Half the days are administrator-led and half are teacher-led. The administrator-led days at all sites and the teacher-led days at some sites are used to look at data, rubrics and state assessments to diagnose student need and discuss strategic next steps.

### *Diagnosis, Placement and Progress Assessment*

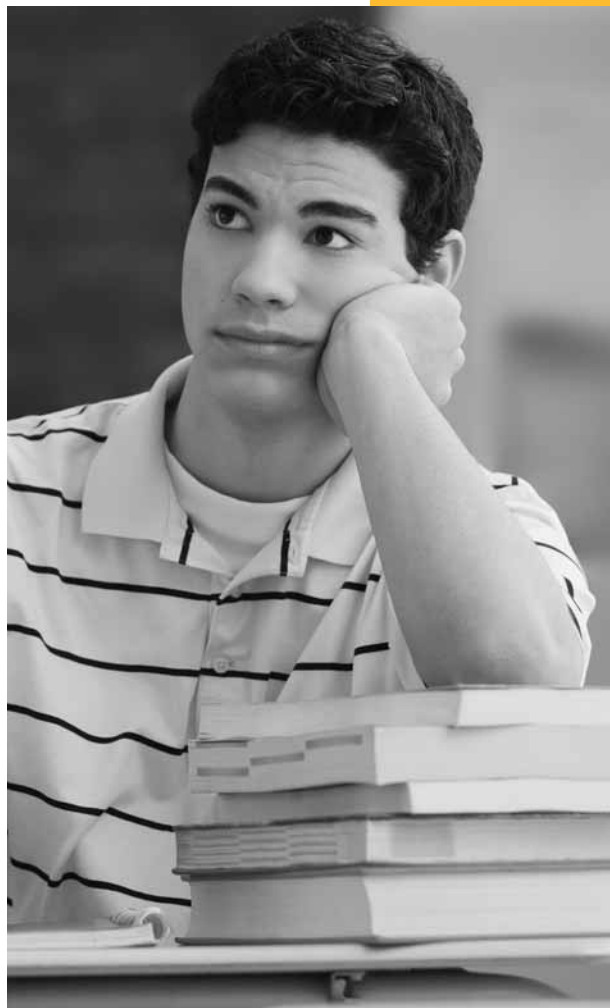
Literacy coaches use student achievement data, specifically the annual California Standards Test and *Holt* diagnostic assessments, to determine proper placement for students. Assignments in intervention courses are not permanent. If a student demonstrates 100% mastery on a series of unit tests, that student will be re-assessed to determine if his/her needs would be better met in a more challenging course. In addition, if parents, students or teachers question placements during the year, literacy coaches re-diagnose students and parental preference is the final arbiter. Students transitioning out of English Learner status move into whichever intervention or core class meets their English literacy needs.

**“[In intervention classes], kids start learning and feeling good about themselves. They realize how much they’ve missed. Doing choral and partner reading, it helps them, gives them a spark to learn.”**

*— Intervention Teacher*



Each of the texts used at the secondary level in PUSD are approved by the California Board of Education, aligned to state standards and have assessments embedded within them to measure student progress. Assessments are frequent, given to students every week or two, and students in intensive interventions must reach at least 80% mastery on them before moving to the next unit. Constant reinforcement of progress bolsters confidence in students with a lifelong history of poor academic performance in literacy. It also ensures that teachers have real-time information on their students' strengths and opportunities for growth, helping them make constant mid-course corrections and base instruction on evidence as opposed to estimation of need.



**“When I was a teacher, I always knew no matter how hard I tried, there was a group of kids I wasn’t doing much to help. I didn’t know what to do with them. There are major**

**differences now. We have knowledge of how reading develops and time to work on it.”**

*– Literacy Coach*

## V. Aligning all roles to ensure effective implementation of the secondary literacy initiative

For a reform to be successful, each person in the system must understand the urgent student need, recognize how the new initiative can meet that need, and have a clear understanding of the exact role he or she can play to make the initiative a success. This is especially true when attempting an aligned and systemic reform which requires deep ownership at all levels and an understanding of the interdependence of roles oriented toward the central mission of helping all children achieve their potential. PUSD has begun to create this climate in their secondary system, providing opportunities for staff at all levels to learn from experts in the field and from each other. Central office staff, in partnership with the Stupski Foundation, has been engaging in the work of continual improvement, learning from promising practices in other districts and conducting system analyses.

### Central Office Administrators

To ensure effective implementation of the secondary literacy initiative, one of the primary functions of central office staff has been to manage the relationship with CORE. Even when contracting with a vendor with a high degree of professionalism and expertise, it takes careful internal reflection and constant effort to fully access and integrate an external organization's offerings. The relationship with CORE has not been static; PUSD's District Literacy Coordinator is in nearly constant collaboration with CORE's field-based consultants, and the Director of Secondary Curriculum and Deputy Superintendent also have a steady flow of dialogue with CORE leadership. Central office staff, Stupski Foundation staff and CORE leaders have worked together to develop appropriate measures of success such as walkthrough observation rubrics, monthly reports and teacher or literacy coach feedback from trainings.

District administrators have also worked with secondary principals to ensure continued funding for the initiative utilizing school-based monies. During the first year of the

initiative, 2004-2005, the district covered almost all related expenses due to the one-time allocation of \$1.2 million by the school board. For the second year, however, the district could not provide the same level of funding and needed to rely upon schools utilizing their own funds. The Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning was instrumental in this work, using her knowledge of school-based funds to help principals ask the right questions, illuminating when and where general funds could be used so schools could gain more resource flexibility. Though district administrators admitted they would prefer to be able to pay for everything, some reflected that they observed a higher level of accountability when school leaders began spending their own funds on the initiative.

The Stupski Foundation has provided resources and assistance on a variety of fronts to increase district central office capacity. Foundation staff provided professional development and coaching on areas such as operational planning and project management to district leaders. To help build the infrastructure for data-based decision making, the Foundation funded the development and deployment of the data system Edgenuity, as well as professional development on its use. The Foundation also worked to improve the district's Information Technology department and funded an interim IT Director. Each spring, the Stupski Foundation conducts an Organizational Assessment (OA), evaluating districts on seven core components: leadership, strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, efficient and effective processes, curriculum and instruction, stellar people and accountability. Findings help district leaders identify strengths within their system, as well as specific opportunities for growth. Members of PUSD's cabinet also have participated in Stupski-convened role-alike professional development with other district leaders across the country and a Stupski-coordinated learning visit to the Broad Prize winning Norfolk Public School District.



## Principals

With roughly half of all secondary students enrolled in literacy interventions, ownership and leadership from principals is crucial to the success of the initiative. To cultivate buy-in, facilitate quality implementation and promote alignment, the district has provided multiple avenues for principal professional development and created a structure for regular, cross-role conversations between principals and central office staff.

### *Professional Development with Secondary Principals*

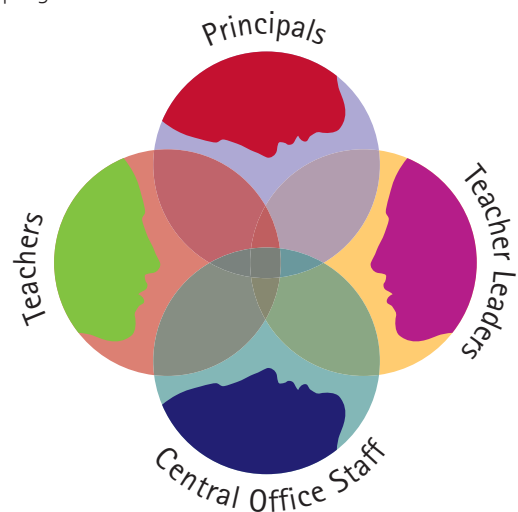
To develop secondary principals' understanding of both the need for and the attributes of high-quality secondary literacy interventions, the district has provided multiple professional development opportunities. At the outset of the 2004-05 school year, CORE leaders spent time with secondary principals discussing the need for more time devoted to interventions, more uniformity among programs and the importance of proper assessment and placement of students. In August 2005, the district convened secondary principals, presenting them with what one district administrator described as the "brutal facts," illuminating the depth of the district's secondary literacy problem and the inability of traditional approaches to meet needs. Those involved described that meeting as crucial to cultivating principals' will and skill in support of the initiative. Two secondary principals became so enthused about the importance of literacy intervention that they became de facto leaders, traveling to the Stupski Foundation to spend a day charting growth and improvements to the initiative and then sharing that vision with their peers. The district has also utilized state-provided professional development for principals through AB75, the Principals Training Program, focused on developing the tools for principals to implement a standards-based and data-driven instructionally aligned system.

To support the unique role of literacy coaches, the district has also invested in professional development with principals on classroom-based peer coaching. The literacy coach role is atypical, neither teacher nor administrator, and temptations are strong to fill in traditional gaps by asking coaches to function either as administrators in an evaluative capacity or as teacher's aides, helping to organize or prepare materials. The central office and CORE have emphasized the

distinctly different nature of the literacy coach position, with the goal of supporting principals in being able to clearly articulate the role of the literacy coach to school staff and support the coach in his/her responsibilities.

### *Academic Conferences*

Starting in the 2004-05 school year, the district began convening principal academic conferences to promote both accountability and communication. The conferences typically occur at the beginning and end of the school year and involve central office cabinet members, principals and optional additional school-site leaders. The goal of the process is to involve site administrators in evidence-based reflection on their school's progress in meeting its goals and impacting student achievement, particularly for major subgroups of students. Literacy interventions are one part of the larger conversation regarding school improvement and progress.



### *Teacher Leaders*

To continually develop the capacity of teacher leaders, in 2004-05 the district formed the Secondary Literacy Team. Comprised of English department heads in secondary schools, literacy coaches and the District Secondary Literacy Coordinator, the team meets at least once a month. Much of team time is devoted to sharing strategies, working on questions such as how to provide an objective, non-evaluative mirror for teachers on their practice, challenge assumptions and promote self-analysis. The level of candor built up over the past two years provides teacher leaders with a forum to openly discuss challenges and collaboratively problem-solve. On each agenda, time is also devoted to reading and/or discussing recent research on literacy acquisition and coaching best practices.



## Teachers

To ensure consistency and cross-pollination of learning, the District Secondary Literacy Coordinator and CORE consultants facilitate walkthroughs in every secondary school throughout the district. The composition of walkthrough teams varies, but generally consists of school-site administrators, counselors, literacy coaches and district staff as well as the literacy coordinator and CORE consultants.

The goal of these walkthroughs is not evaluative, rather it is to improve and align instruction in intervention classes through developing a common understanding of best practices. Walkthroughs are a key element in the attempt to shift the culture of instruction in schools, with principals serving as instructional leaders and teachers sharing practices with colleagues and continually cultivating their own learning.



**“What’s done a lot is the regular system of walkthroughs. The first year they did it, it was a wake-up call. It communicated clearly that the district took this seriously. It’s a big change in culture to have an open classroom.”**

*– CORE Consultant*

**“I’m proud of the idea that we’re taking kids**

**that otherwise would have dropped out or not really ever have mastered reading and giving them the opportunity for a future.”**

*– Board Member*

## VI. Challenges & Next Steps

### What are the next steps for PUSD's secondary literacy initiative?

#### 1. Maintaining funding levels.

Maintaining aligned funding for all the elements of the initiative – curriculum and linked assessments, positions to manage and support the initiative, and professional development at all levels – is a challenge. Within the context of a shrinking budget due to declining enrollment, the district is struggling with how to maintain quality when faced with cutbacks.

#### 2. Providing triage without tracking.

The goal of PUSD's secondary literacy interventions is to rapidly accelerate learning in the pockets of greatest need, bumping students up to grade level within two to three years. This model is based on ability-grouping, attempting to accelerate students along the on-ramp to grade-level learning, versus tracking, a model in which students are permanently stuck in the slow lane. PUSD's data show growth and improvement; the challenge, however, is not just continuing on this positive trajectory but accelerating growth with even more rapidity and jump-starting that growth at even earlier ages.

#### 3. Shifting adult behavior toward collaboration.

At the heart of Pasadena's secondary literacy initiative is a fundamental shift in the practice of teaching from private to public. Teachers need continued supports such that they become not just familiar with but expert in this new way of working. In the current school year, the district is working on promoting more consistency between school sites regarding the depth and frequency with which literacy coaches are in classrooms working on instruction. Weekly teacher collaboration time is another area in need of greater consistency, moving toward a system in which all school sites utilize the time for shared, data-driven work with peers.

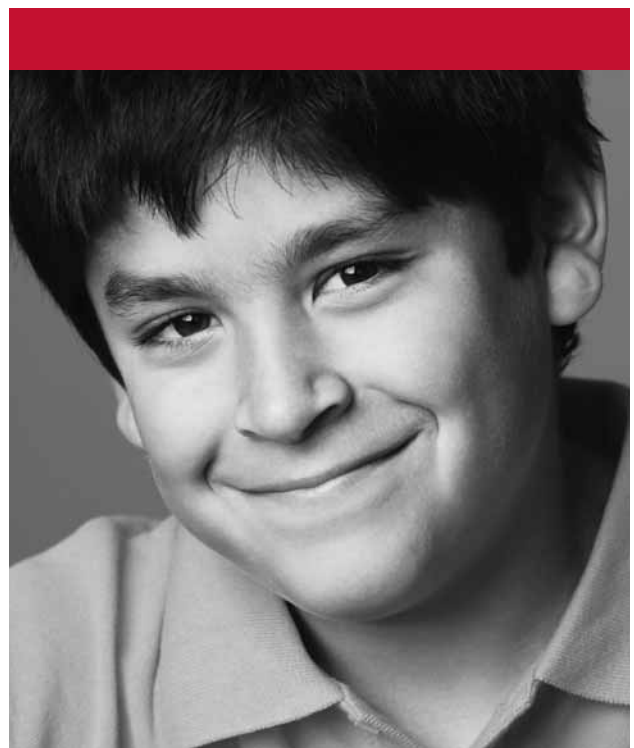
#### 4. Full integration of all teachers and students.

Each student along the continuum of learning has a particular set of needs. PUSD has made

major strides in diagnosing and meeting the needs of its struggling secondary readers in the mainstream program. It takes continuing effort, however, to integrate the specialized services of English Learners and students enrolled in special education such that all students' needs are met in a seamless manner.

#### 5. Data-Based Decision Making.

PUSD has many elements in place to create a data-based accountability culture. The academic conferences between principals and district administrators, school-site data teams and the board's review of data all contribute to a system that can continually revisit data to evaluate successes and challenges in initiatives and allocate resources accordingly. Next steps include ensuring that these processes are integrated and, particularly for data teams, highly implemented in every site. The district is also working on providing a stronger technological and data infrastructure, so that adults in the system have all the information they need to make decisions in a reliable and timely manner.



## VII. Lessons Learned

What can district leaders, reform support organizations, funders and policymakers learn from the Pasadena story? Based on findings, we offer the following four considerations. Each includes action items and practical examples derived from the PUSD experience. The specifics of the secondary literacy reform initiative are significant, but there is just as much to learn from the way in which this low-resource district leveraged external resources to build internal capacity. The work of aligning and improving an instructional system can begin in many different ways; lessons from PUSD shed light on how low-capacity districts can do this work even in the challenging secondary grades.

### 1. *An Instructionally Aligned System*

- A. Ensure Aligned Standards, Curriculum, Assessments and Professional Development.** Provide level-appropriate, standards-based curricular materials to give students at all skill levels the opportunity to succeed and grow. Develop a process for continually and accurately diagnosing students' reading abilities to ensure proper placement and growth throughout the year. Materials, professional development and assessments all need to map to standards such that each element is aligned to core work and helps to focus instruction.
- B. Provide Structures to Support Differentiation.** An instructionally aligned system requires differentiated instruction, providing additional time and lower class sizes for below-grade-level students to build their skills. Given the scientific nature of reading, in which specific skills must be acquired in a particular sequence, accurate diagnosis of literacy level and placement in appropriate coursework is crucial.
- C. Promote an Aligned Context.** The context of surrounding districts can be the main arbiter of how a district conducts business. If incentives, pressures and funding are targeted toward an aligned instructional system, the district's work becomes that much easier. All

levels of policy governance, from local school boards, to county or regional offices of education, to state agencies and on up to the federal government, have a crucial role to play in promoting greater alignment so districts can focus their resources on what matters most.

### 2. *Learning Communities*

- A. Restructure Professional Expectations.** It's almost a tautology to state that educators are responsible for transmitting knowledge; what's less prevalent in the system is a recognition that educators must also constantly be in the position of learners. Each individual in the education system must be held responsible for continually improving his/her work, whether in the classroom or as an administrator. The cornerstone in this shift is collaborating with and learning from peers. Districts must structure regular time into educators' work days for learning, both to set expectations and to provide the time needed to do the work.
- B. Support Teachers.** Teachers need constant opportunities to learn, both through traditional trainings on materials and strategies, and through innovative new forums to learn from and with peers. Classroom-based coaching and observations can provide teachers with the vital "how-tos" they need to actually change day-to-day practice. Professional development in all forms, but especially walkthroughs and coaching, increases communication, alignment and effectiveness across the system.
- C. Engage Principals.** Engage principals early and often. As the managers of school sites, they are a critical link to any reform effort. Use data so that principals understand why change is necessary. De-privatizing practice for the purpose of collaborative learning and improving requires a mental and cultural shift. The principal needs to be at the heart of this change, understanding the importance of and possessing the skills to facilitate practices such as non-evaluative walkthroughs.

**Catalyze Central Office Staff.** The most neglected group in any district's professional development plan is the people writing the plans – district administrators. Apart from the occasional conference, central office staff can be extremely isolated in their roles and lack opportunities to reflect, learn from peers and collaborate. Learning visits to similar districts, coaching from external role-alike consultants and time with peers in other districts to collectively problem solve can jump-start otherwise stagnant organizations.

### **3. Build Internal Capacity with External Resources**

**A. Engage High-Quality Vendors.** High performing districts don't function in isolation. Effective systems know when and how to draw upon external resources and expertise to help improve, and even deliver, supports. The objective is not for every district to become a master in every aspect; rather, it is to have districts draw upon shared expertise and best practices as needed to engage in continual improvement. A high-quality vendor with expertise in the targeted area of student need can sometimes help to accelerate student learning more effectively and efficiently than marshalling internal resources.

**B. Utilize State Context.** Some states, such as California, offer a wide variety of frameworks and resources to promote a comprehensive instructionally aligned system. School districts sometimes balk at accepting state funds tied to adopted materials, perceiving them as too prescriptive or constraining. If the funds support alignment, however, and districts are savvy about how to cultivate ownership and engagement for deep implementation, state resources can be the key leverage point toward improvement.

**C. Work with Aligned Funders.** Foundations and grant programs come in all shapes and sizes; districts need to be both selective and intentional when partnering and agreeing to use external resources. Though additional funding is hard to turn down, if the work is not aligned and pulls the district off-kilter, it can do much more damage than good. Most importantly, only partner with funders whose goal is to make themselves unnecessary, leaving the district with more internal capacity and self-sufficiency than before.

## **4. Target Resources to Need**

**A. Let Data be the Guide.** Ground all resource investments in a sound understanding of student need. This requires both the measurements and system to gather data, as well as the structures and skills to conduct analysis. At the district level, boards need to examine their student achievement needs and explicitly align funding and human resources to greatest priorities.

**B. Signal from the Top.** Children who have been traditionally underserved will continue to be unless leaders take a visible stand to prioritize their learning. Starting with the school board and superintendent, a system needs to clearly and explicitly communicate a commitment to equity. Prioritize students in need of intervention in the district's strategic plans. District and school site leaders need to have tough conversations with teachers and parents about why below-grade-level children need more.

**C. Provide Multiple Supports.** There are many ways to provide children with greater needs a higher level of supports. Examples are: double-blocks of instruction with a small class size ratio for students below grade level; full-time coaches working specifically with teachers of intervention classes; and professional development with teachers of intervention classes to ensure mastery of content and curriculum.

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# Appendix A

The framework below has been designed by the Stupski Foundation as a guide to the critical components of a Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System.

