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## Centering Community in Disciplinary Literacy Implementation: One District's Story

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# Centering Community in Disciplinary Literacy Implementation: One District's Story

by Jenelle Williams with Stacie Angel, Jen Wilcox, and Angela Church



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## Introduction

As the 2022-23 school year began, we noticed the theme of “community” emerging in multiple ways. Educators were working hard to rebuild classroom community, administrators were fostering community among staff, and central office personnel were strengthening connections with families and community members. Berkley School district, which serves the entirety of Berkley, Huntington Woods, and the northern portion of Oak Park in southeast Oakland County, is no exception. Berkley is a small northern suburb of Detroit well-known for its family-friendly vibe. In this article, we share the story of how recent changes in central office leadership in Berkley Schools led (and continues to lead) to broad-scale improvements in systems and literacy instruction. Through this story, we describe how the district has centered the concept of community—in many forms—through these efforts.

## Fall 2021

*In this section, Stacie Angel, Supervisor of Instructional Services in Berkley, shares the beginning of the story.*

When we started on this path, we did not realize we were heading toward disciplinary literacy. Because of available funding, we had the opportunity to provide books and professional learning for high school

teachers, but we did not have a clear idea of what that would look like. We had some models of rich reading communities in our elementary and middle school literacy workshop classrooms, and we had high school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers eager to increase student engagement in reading. This work on implementing choice reading would require professional learning around effective instructional approaches, as well as curriculum development. It would also include purchasing books—lots and lots of books. When I brought this relatively unformed idea to the literacy consultants at Oakland Schools, my local intermediate school district (ISD), they both nodded and said, “Disciplinary Literacy is what you need.”

The literacy consultants and I co-planned and co-facilitated a few full days of professional learning and curriculum development with participating high school ELA teachers. A portion of one of these days included an introduction to applicable Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy (Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Disciplinary Literacy Task Force, 2019). Specifically, we focused on 1) identifying specialized ways of reading, writing, thinking, and communicating in ELA, 2) teachers’ own literacy identities, and 3) connections between inquiry and engagement. We also

offered time across two days for observations of effective instructional practices in middle and high school ELA classrooms, with debriefing conversations following each observation. Teachers created new units of study that emphasized student choice in texts and authentic reasons for reading and writing. The success and energy around this work led us to think about ways to broaden the literacy conversation beyond ELA classrooms.

## Continuing The Story

*Jenelle Williams, literacy consultant at Oakland Schools, continues the Berkley story in the paragraphs below.*

In Spring 2022, the central office team connected me with Angie Church, a teacher-leader-turned-instructional-coach, who has been deeply involved in Reading Apprenticeship work, both inside the high school and as a trainer for other schools. We talked about whether working on disciplinary literacy would shift focus away from the Reading Apprenticeship work from the past (it would not), and we decided that staffing changes and disrupted learning due to the pandemic made this the perfect time to reset a schoolwide focus on literacy. So...where to begin?

The district had recently updated its strategic plan, so the May 2022 teacher professional learning event was a perfect opportunity to support teachers in connecting the dots between the strategic plan and a focus on disciplinary literacy. This was teachers' first opportunity to come together in person since the beginning of the pandemic, so we wanted to prioritize connection and communication. During the professional learning event, middle school educators got together in one location with Stacie and Jen (Curriculum Coordinator for Berkley Schools) as facilitators, and high school educators met in another location with Jenelle and Angie. Although groups met in different locations, they experienced the same content at the same time. The planning team—Jenelle, Stacie, Jen, and Angie—intentionally sorted teachers into interdisciplinary table groups to break down the silos typical of secondary settings. Elements of this morning session included identifying elements of joy, engaging in a Generate-Sort-Connect-Elaborate thinking routine (Project Zero), and completing a reflective survey (see Figure 1 for a snapshot of one group's work and the QR codes later in this article).

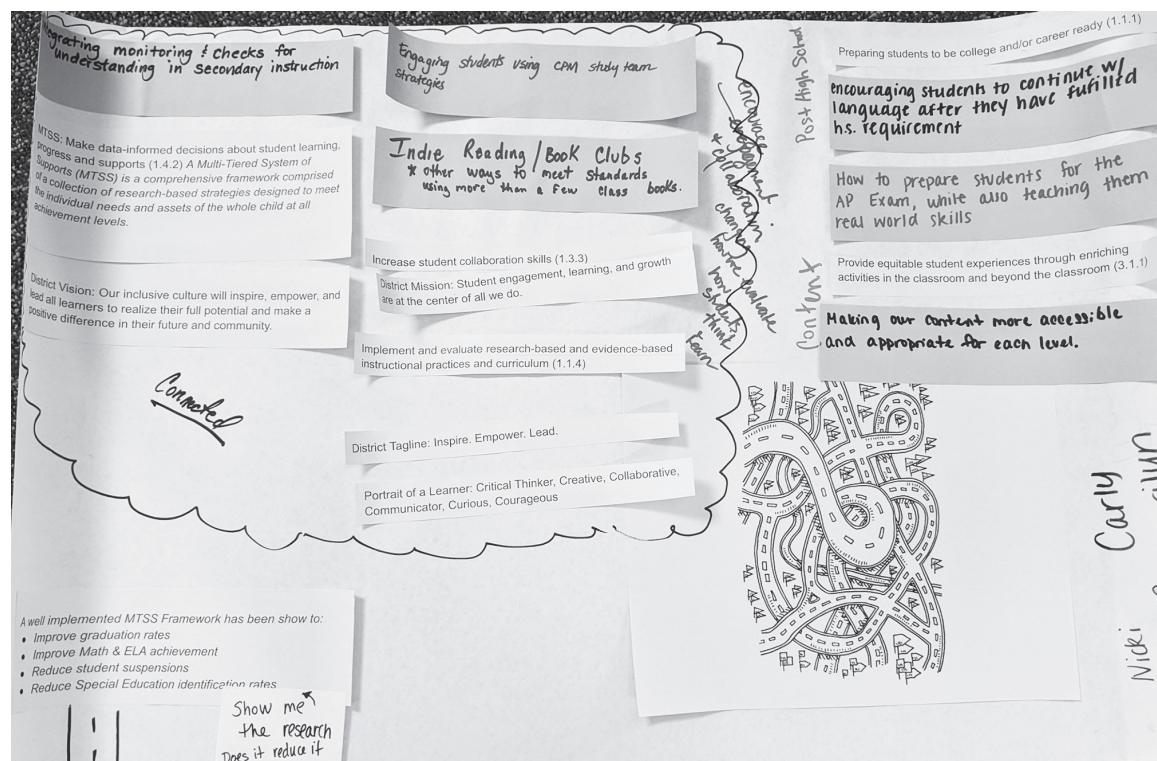


Figure 1. Snippet from Generate-Sort-Connect-Elaborate Activity

For the thinking routine, facilitators pre-populated strips of paper with elements of the updated strategic plan. For example, one strip included a definition of “Multi-Tiered Systems of Support” (MTSS), which was one area of focus for the district. Additional strips of paper listed the district’s vision, mission, “Portrait of a Learner” descriptive phrases, and more. The team also provided blank strips of paper, which teachers could use to make connections with additional areas of focus in their professional growth over the past few years. Table groups were asked to sort the strips of paper, grouping similar items together and labeling the categories. The sort activity provided facilitators with excellent formative feedback addressing teachers’ current understandings about connections across areas of focus for continuous improvement.

Facilitators then rounded out the morning by having each teacher complete a survey on their current perceived level of knowledge and skill with literacy instruction within their discipline. The survey results informed the planning team’s next steps. See Figures 2 and 3 for QR code links to these resources. A few of the key excerpts from conversation included:

- On #30 related to independent choice reading, 16% of people were not sure. That was the highest “unsure” category.
- Teachers were less confident about meeting the needs of all students, whether they are students who need more support or students who need extension.
- We were startled that many teachers reported not feeling confident in teaching reading and writing. Why would that be?
- We identified three potential areas of focus: writing, independent choice reading, and curricular supports.



*Figure 2.* QR Code for Survey Question Bank



*Figure 3.* QR Code for Survey Analysis Protocol

After the event, we spent several hours analyzing and discussing the survey results, taking careful notes from the conversation. While there were several possible avenues for future professional learning, we decided Essential Practice 2 (Diverse texts and abundant reading opportunities in the school; see Table 1) was a great place to start, because the survey indicated that teachers were less confident in this area. Additionally, the team decided to begin with a focus on abundant reading, because there were pockets of work around this already occurring across the district. Thus, the district could continue to build on those areas of success.

Since high school ELA teachers were already exploring ways to increase student choice with reading in their classes, the district could build on that momentum. Teachers in other disciplines had recently received updated curriculum resources with opportunities for reading in their classes. For instance, math teachers had recently adopted a resource that emphasized inquiry and authentic engagement with rich mathematical texts, science teachers were using resources aligned to Next Generation Science Standards, and middle school ELA teachers were already engaging in reading and writing workshop approaches.

### **Following Through with Next Steps**

*Jen Wilcox, Curriculum Coordinator for Berkley Schools, continues the story in the paragraphs below.*

As we neared the end of the 2021-22 school year, we felt it was important to build the capacity of building administrators prior to further learning for teachers. Since our team had recently completed the Disciplinary Literacy for Secondary Leaders course offered through the General Education Leadership Network (GELN) Disciplinary Literacy Task Force and Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP), we felt that similar learning experiences would be helpful for middle and high school administrators. In June 2022, we engaged seven secondary building administrators in a day of learning about disciplinary literacy—what it is (and is not), why it is important, how it is distinct from content area literacy, and effective leadership approaches. The day culminated with administrators



Table 1

*“Essential Instructional Practice 2: Diverse texts and abundant reading opportunities in the school” from the Grades 6 to 12 School-Wide Practices in Disciplinary Literacy.*

<p>Essential Instructional Practice 2: Diverse texts and abundant reading opportunities in the school (English Language Arts Section).</p> <p>The teacher:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• engages students with texts that provide entry way into questions, puzzles, themes, authors, issues of equity, power, and social justice, and/or genres that can be investigated further.</li> <li>• provides access and regular opportunities to work with a wide range of diverse texts (e.g. books, online texts, databases, and tools) that reflect diversity across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic locations, genders, and social roles; and of varying complexity, structure, and genre; (e.g., novels, short stories, poetry, comics, newspaper articles, magazines, journals, advertisements, websites, discussion boards, internet postings), including the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o rigorous texts on grade level and beyond,</li> <li>o texts that allow students to reflect on their own interests and identities and also explore interests and identities different than their own, so that they can participate in diverse cultural and social contexts</li> </ul> </li> <li>• engages students with online texts, databases, and tools that provide an entryway into concepts, themes, and/ or investigations of compelling issues authentic to the disciplines.</li> <li>• fosters a reading culture that promotes engagement with diverse texts in a variety of contexts (e.g. independent reading, online communities, reading conferences, book clubs, book talks).</li> </ul>
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indicating which portions of the day’s learning would be applicable for teachers in the fall. Themes that emerged in their responses included 1) defining disciplinary literacy, 2) communicating the importance of attending to literacy in all content areas, and 3) understanding the needs of individual students. The administrative team also worked to co-create an “elevator speech” expressing why they were prioritizing this work. After that day, our team reflected and began to craft a plan for teacher professional learning in the fall. Much like before, we prioritized co-facilitation, as opposed to having the ISD consultant positioned as the expert coming to share knowledge on disciplinary literacy with local teachers. This meant that our team, along with building leaders, needed to identify portions of the session that everyone felt comfortable facilitating with teachers. It also meant we would need time for practice prior to the professional learning day. To accomplish this goal, we met with the administrative team and reviewed the plan, seeking volunteers for the various portions.

## Fall 2022

*Angie Church, instructional coach at Berkley High School, continues the story in the paragraphs below.*

The day for teachers’ professional learning arrived. Much like before, middle school educators were in one location and high school teachers were in another. Teachers engaged, via Padlet, in the ever-popular “rock activity,” in which participants selected a rock from the center of the table and wrote about the rock from the lens of their content area in order to make visible the varying ways of reading, writing, thinking, and communicating across disciplines. The “rock activity” offered space for teachers to identify the disciplinary lenses that they work from, while also giving them opportunities to hear from their colleagues about their various lenses (See Figure 4). The School Reform Initiative Student Profiles protocol (Thompson et al., 2017), which asked educators to consider the type of learner they were in high school, as well as reflect on what they needed in order to engage in rigorous work, broadened

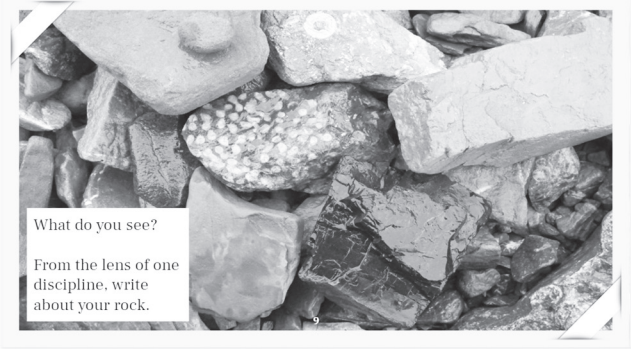


Figure 4. Screenshot of the “Rock Activity” in Padlet

educators’ understanding of their colleagues’ and current students’ experiences with school. This professional learning allowed teachers to grapple with their own identities as well as their students’ identities.

In the afternoon, we encouraged teachers to explore their existing curricular resources to identify, via Jamboard, opportunities for abundant reading and discuss areas of focus within Essential Practice 2 with their department (See Figure 5). As they talked, they discovered multiple opportunities for abundant disciplinary reading within resources they were already using. In many cases, they realized that change was just a matter of building intentional opportunities for students to have choice and time to engage with existing materials. From there, district leaders shared their commitments to continuing the work over multiple years through

ongoing professional learning for themselves. They also committed to providing district professional learning events, including a district professional learning day where all secondary educators came together to continue learning.

This year, in 2022-23, the leadership team has continued to participate in a year-long professional learning and networking series offered by the ISD. Following up with the ISD consultant afterward provided the team with additional clarity about next steps, which include co-creating a vision for what success will look like at the end of year one, using that vision to guide decisions, and identifying opportunities to gather evidence of growth during the year.

Part of the leadership team’s planning includes intentional use of free, online courses aligned to the Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy. In an effort to improve adolescent literacy in every secondary classroom and provide materials to all educators in an equitable manner, Michigan’s Disciplinary Literacy Task Force is creating a series of courses available through the openly-available Edupaths portal. In doing so, the Task Force has put into practice the belief that we must provide equitable access to systems and high-quality disciplinary literacy instruction to all students by offering these opportunities to educators. To enroll in the

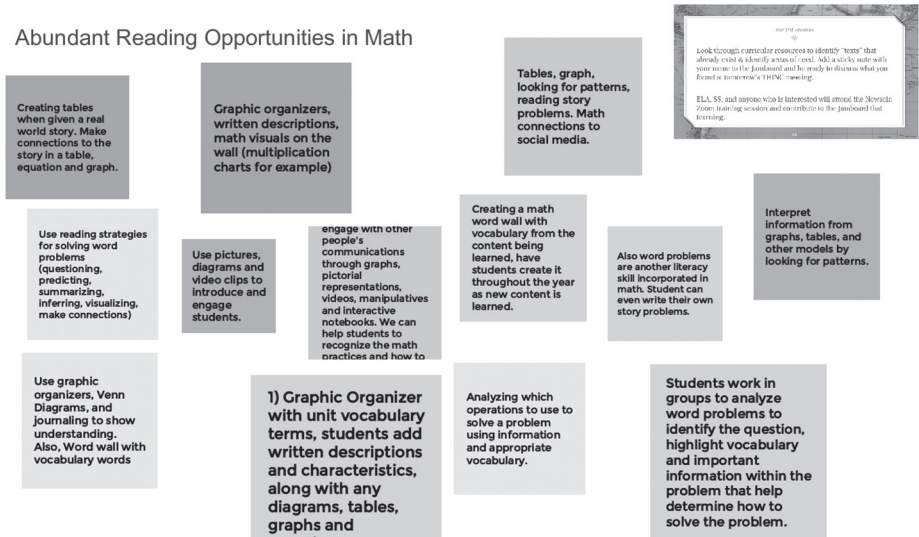


Figure 5. Screenshot of the “Abundant Reading” in Jamboard

courses, educators can visit <[www.edupaths.org](http://www.edupaths.org)> and then search for “Disciplinary Literacy.”

## Summary

*The story of Disciplinary Literacy in the Berkley School District continues to unfold.*

What began as a small initiative involving a few high school ELA teachers has expanded to a whole-district goal involving all content areas, with every teacher, all secondary administrators, and additional members of the district Teaching and Learning Team. We have made short-term and long-term plans with the goal of enduring shifts in instructional practices. The long-term impact of this initiative remains unclear, but early indications point to the power of a shared vision and thoughtful professional learning.

And because we are talking about stories, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the theme that has been a part of this work. That theme is “community.” It is at the heart of the Berkley School District, and exploring the potential of disciplinary literacy has been an opportunity to bring that value to the forefront. The classroom communities we want students to experience will be enhanced through this work. We have given our teacher communities a voice in the direction of this district goal. The administrators have embraced the opportunity to work in community with each other at their building level and across buildings. Beyond our local district, we are leveraging connections with Oakland Schools consultants and a county-wide network of leaders taking up this same work.

Disciplinary literacy has provided the path to move away from isolation and lean into a shared vision, a common goal, and, and most of all, each other.

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## Author Biographies

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