

Kellogg/ECHS Literacy Institute



Rigor with Support: An Inquiry-Based Approach

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Advancing Literacy: **Building Capacity for Success in Early College High Schools**

Background

In 2002, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Jobs for the Future launched the Early College High School (ECHS) Initiative. This initiative seeks to increase the number of low-income and minority students who not only graduate from high school but enter and complete a postsecondary program by establishing a national network of early college high schools. The ECHS initiative specifically targets first-generation college-goers and other students underrepresented in colleges. In the ECHS model, students complete college courses while still enrolled in high school. These schools facilitate student success by creating a network of support around students as they make the sometimes difficult transition between high school and college-level work. The ECHS model is different from other high school reforms in that secondary and postsecondary faculty work collaboratively to create and align curriculum and supports that streamline the high school-to-college experience.

As the first set of early college high schools opened, it became immediately apparent that—in keeping with national trends—literacy skills were an obstacle to success for many of the students ECHSI sought to serve. Students enrolled in early college high schools were not ready to move quickly into college courses without development of the literacy skills necessary to access and understand rigorous academic content. The schools involved in the initiative wanted to better understand how to address these academic literacy skills while moving students through a rigorous curriculum. The intermediary organizations supporting those schools also needed to learn quickly in order to develop their support mechanisms for existing schools and plan strategically for the opening of new schools. Thus, in 2003, all the ECHS participants—schools, intermediaries, and foundations—came to the unanimous decision that addressing literacy challenges (or accelerating literacy skills) must become a focus of concerted effort if the foundation and JFF were to achieve their goal of promoting postsecondary success for these students.

ECHS/ Kellogg Literacy Project

Accordingly, JFF launched the Kellogg/ECHS Literacy Project to support intermediary organizations and their schools to address the literacy needs of their students. Rather than to “reinvent the wheel,” the goal of the Kellogg/ECHS Literacy Project has been to identify research

on best practices that improve literacy outcomes for adolescents, to promote their adoption in the participating schools, and to spread their implementation to other early college high schools. JFF has built the literacy project around the ideas of the foremost thinkers in the field of adolescent literacy and has collaborated with a notable group of researchers, practitioners, and advocates. Among these are the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Council of Chief State School Officers, Margaret Ciardi at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, Mary Beth Curtis at Lesley College, Judith Irvin at Florida State University, Julie Meltzer at the Center for Research Management, Inc., Ruth Schoenbach and Aida Walqui at WestEd, and Catherine Snow at Harvard University.

What became clear in the research phase of the project is that improving literacy outcomes for adolescents is not simply a matter of instruction; there are also organizational requirements to improving literacy outcomes for adolescent readers. Two organizational practices in particular have proven especially important, and these have influenced the design of the Kellogg/ECHS Literacy Project.

First, is a focus on school-wide literacy practices that cut across content and grade levels. There is a growing body of evidence that points to the need for literacy instruction in middle and high schools to occur “across the curriculum,” and for this instruction to specifically address the reading and writing requirements of each discipline. Most struggling adolescent readers do not need help with decoding, but they do need instruction that supports their understanding of increasingly difficult texts and their ability to communicate their own ideas to different audiences. Texts are not the same across disciplines. There are structural differences as well as differences in the purpose and uses of texts in each discipline. As a result, studies have repeatedly shown that students benefit when comprehension instruction is embedded in the study of “real” text across academic disciplines (e.g., Alfassi 2004; Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy 1996; Casteel, Isom, & Jordan 2000; Vaughn, Klingner, & Bryant, 2001). The benefits increase when comprehension strategies are adapted to reflect the specific demands of content area classes (e.g., Carnine & Carnine 2004; Lederer 2000; Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz 2003; Palincsar, Magnusson, Collins, & Cutter 2001; Schleppgrell & Achugar 2003; van Garderen 2004).

Second, effective literacy programs require a concentrated and sustained emphasis on professional development (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet 2000; Darling-Hammond 1998; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon 2001). Teaching adolescents to read and write in the disciplines has not been a part of the training of most secondary teachers. The instructional skills that accelerate adolescents’ literacy skills are unfamiliar for many teachers and require sustained practice among colleagues. Effective professional development efforts regularly incorporate teacher inquiry (Darling-Hammond 1999; Frey, 2002) and reflection (Cutter, Palincsar, & Magnusson 2002; Englert & Tarrant 1995), and are structured to be a collaborative effort (Englert & Tarrant 1995; Erb, 1997). For early college high schools to implement effective, school-wide literacy practices, they would need ongoing professional development to understand and implement shared practices targeted to their students’ needs.

To help early college high schools get at these two priorities, JFF identified three goals for its own work that would move literacy practice forward throughout the national network:

- 1. Introduce teachers, leaders, postsecondary partners, and intermediary staff to models of effective practice** and provide opportunities for ECHS literacy teams to share their knowledge and learning both within schools and across the ECHS network.

2. **Develop school-wide literacy action plans** for each school that incorporate instructional and infrastructure practices of successful adolescent literacy programs that accelerate students' acquisition of literacy skills and prepare them for the demands of college.
3. **Build capacity to collect and analyze student data** on an ongoing basis so that schools, postsecondary partners, and intermediaries can continually refine their plan of action by identifying gaps in instruction and sharing successes.

These goals build on research and are not unique to the needs of the ECHS Initiative. However, they prioritize collaboration of high school and postsecondary faculty and continuous reflection about the particular literacy demands of college; postsecondary involvement is what distinguishes the ECHS/Kellogg Literacy Project from other adolescent literacy initiatives.

JFF decided that to address these three goals most strategically, its staff should work closely with a small set of early college high schools, where practices could be piloted and studied in depth, then documented and disseminated to the full ECHS network. After issuing a request for proposals to all intermediaries and schools in the ECHS Initiative, nine school teams were selected to participate in the pilot phase of the project. In this phase, each team—consisting of the school's principal, at least two content area teachers, a postsecondary faculty or staff member, and a representative from the school's intermediary organization—would create and refine a school-wide literacy action plan. Five more schools joined the network in 2005. With all 14 schools, JFF's work has centered around the three aforementioned goals. That work is described in more detail below.

Goal #1: Sharing Models of Effective Instruction

One area of focus of the Kellogg/ECHS Literacy Project has been to showcase and examine examples of effective teaching methods and other whole-school literacy practices. The members of the 14 school teams that comprise the network have been introduced to a common set of practices through residencies and summer institutes at University Park Campus School in Worcester, MA, semi-annual literacy institutes organized by JFF, and follow-up supports via phone and Web. Through these mechanisms, school teams see effective, whole-school literacy practices in action, discuss their evolving practice with each other and consultants, and read and share helpful texts and tools with each other.

Literacy network schools are invited to participate in two-day residencies and full-week summer institutes at the University Park Campus School (UPCS) in Worcester, MA. Participation in these residencies and institutes, which is partially subsidized through the Kellogg grant, is often teachers' first and deepest exposure to the literacy across the curriculum methods promoted through the network.

UPCS was chosen as a model for the Kellogg/ECHS Project based on its success with a population of students that mirrors that of participating ECHS schools. UPCS, a small, grades 7-12, urban school, has been widely acknowledged for its success in addressing skills gaps for adolescent readers and writers and provides proof that success is attainable for traditionally underserved adolescents. In fact, the literacy program at UPCS has received numerous awards, including recognition as a national model by the Alliance for Excellent Education and the "Dispelling the Myth" award from the Education Trust for closing the achievement gap. UPCS students, many of whom enter the

school far below grade level, have all passed Massachusetts's rigorous state exam on the first try (most at proficient and advanced levels), and have all gone on to college.

Visits to UPCS have been an important part of each school's initiation into the literacy network. Seeing the powerful leadership strategies and instructional techniques that support success at UPCS allows practitioners to see how they might implement an effective literacy plan at their own school. Thus far, 13 of the 14 schools in the network have sent teams to UPCS.

All of the network teams have also worked with UPCS faculty during the semi-annual literacy institutes. JFF has contracted with current and former UPCS principals and several content-area teachers to plan and conduct workshops at the literacy institutes. The interactive workshops highlight effective instructional practices that encourage reading, writing, and critical thinking across the curriculum. Workshop participants try out activities, discuss why they are used, and experience how these instructional practices build and enhance students' literacy competencies. The institutes provide a vision of what good instruction looks like, and constantly advance the teams' conception of high-quality literacy instruction and individual teachers' repertoire of instructional strategies.

UPCS faculty and leaders offer further support through a series of regularly scheduled conference calls, during which network participants have a chance to ask questions and discuss challenges they have faced in implementing the instructional methods experienced in residencies and institutes. UPCS staff have also written papers and compiled resource lists for a teacher audience, which are posted on the ECHS extranet. The extranet makes key documents, research, lessons, and tools available to the entire network.

Goal #2: Developing the Literacy Action Plan

JFF has also provided direct technical assistance to the 14 schools by: 1) co-developing school-wide literacy action plans with the literacy teams and the schools' intermediary based on the results of a literacy needs assessment; and 2) providing on-site guidance to teams and accountability through assessment of progress on and refinement of their school-wide literacy plans.

Each school began with a needs assessment, which JFF developed by combining the strengths of several existing needs assessments and tailoring them to the ECHS model. Each member of the school team rates his/her perception of their school's progress on each indicator, and also rates the relative importance of each item in the school. With facilitation from JFF staff, the school team examines the results of their needs assessment as a starting place for drafting a school-wide literacy action plan. These plans form the foundation of the literacy project and the work of each school.

The school-wide literacy action plans are dynamic documents that change as goals are reached or as student data indicates the need for adjustments. School teams revisit their literacy plans during the second site visit by JFF staff and during the semi-annual institutes. They update plans to include progress made in key areas and to incorporate new learning and understandings from institute workshops and the analysis of student data.

JFF staff made site visits to each school twice in the first year of participation, and once in subsequent years. The on-site visits provide an opportunity for JFF staff and the intermediary to observe classes, talk with teachers about their current practice and professional development needs, offer instructional and management coaching to school leaders and teachers, and facilitate the team's progress. During each visit, the school literacy team meets to review its literacy action plan, discuss

overall progress, and problem-solve outstanding dilemmas. Through these visits, JFF staff gains a deeper understanding of each school's unique needs and of cross-network commonalities that can inform the content of institutes and follow-up support.

As the literacy project has progressed, members of school teams have taken a greater leadership role in shaping and contributing to the content of network activities. During the institutes, teachers from network schools have conducted their own workshops and shared exemplary work being done in their schools. They have also paired with other school teams to share ideas and trouble-shoot common challenges. This coming year, partnered schools will be supported to conduct cross-site visits. This showcasing and sharing among network schools is done with the intent of creating experts within the group and moving these schools toward becoming demonstration sites, like UPCS, within their intermediaries' network of schools.

Goal #3: Building Capacity for Data-Driven Instruction

At the core of any successful literacy plan is the consistent use of data to drive instructional decisions. The teachers and leaders of UPCS consistently look at data to inform their decisions and encourage similar practices for their ECHS colleagues. JFF has supported teams to increase their capacity and expertise at collecting and using data through institutes, where sessions and discussions have focused on collaborative data analysis and formative assessment practices.

JFF has also helped schools to look at the data they have available and consider other sources that provide quick, diagnostic data that can inform instruction. Several schools have begun to use the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) produced by Northwest Evaluation Associates—a computerized system that tests students in math and English language arts and is aligned to the frameworks for every state. Several other schools use the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) by Pearson AGS Globe Publishers—an English language arts measure. JFF is helping the remaining schools to choose the assessment that best fits their needs, and the data from these diagnostic assessments will be incorporated into the ECHS Student Information System.

While these diagnostic assessments can be used to guide and differentiate instruction for individual students in each school, they also serve an evaluative purpose by allowing JFF to measure student and school progress over time. To this end, these measures will serve as a pre- and post-assessment for schools involved in the literacy project.

Achieving Impact Network-Wide and Beyond

An organizational goal of every JFF effort is to motivate widespread adoption of successful approaches by providing evidence of success and disseminating the knowledge needed to replicate these approaches. As such, JFF is deliberately building human and written resources to make the literacy project sustainable and self-replicating.

A first step towards this goal is to disseminate the strategies developed and lessons learned throughout the ECHS network in order to ensure that all ECHS schools become exemplars of high-quality, adolescent literacy instruction. JFF is currently pursuing this goal on several fronts:

Documentation

Best practices for UPCS and other schools are documented and disseminated through the Early College Extranet and the UPCS Institute Web site. All early college high schools have access to these sites. To date, the Extranet contains lessons and resources provided largely by UPCS faculty and JFF staff. Some resources have also been gleaned from network schools.

As JFF enters the third and final year of the Kellogg-funded literacy project and schools have had more time to implement and revise their school-wide literacy practices, more emphasis is being placed on documenting promising practices within the network through case studies and other publications. The first case study will focus on effective postsecondary/secondary collaboration that supports students as they develop the literacy skills, confidence, and maturity for full immersion in college coursework.

Support for Leaders

In March 2006, JFF organized the first ECHS retreat for school leaders to deepen leaders' understanding of what it takes to lead a high-performing small school and to enable them to share their knowledge and expertise. The first leadership retreat and proposed future leadership activities use school-wide literacy work as an organizing focus for school development.

Capacity-Building Within Intermediaries

Another important step towards sustainability and replication is increasing the capacity of intermediaries to undertake this work on their own. In the first year of the Kellogg/ECHS Literacy Project, JFF chose to work directly with schools, as intermediaries had little professional development capacity in place. Now, after two years of involvement in the project, a shift is taking place in how intermediaries understand their role as an ongoing source of support to their schools. Several intermediaries have hired staff with more instructional expertise and have created instructional coaching and staff development positions.

Some examples of increasing intermediary capacity include:

- Antioch University Seattle's ECHS Initiative for Native Youth has recruited a staff member with a background in literacy who serves as a literacy coordinator with all of the consortium's schools, creating a program to support the unique literacy needs of Native American youth.
- The National Council of La Raza brought in a coach to work with its site and has paid for his participation in two literacy institutes. They also host a summer literacy workshop for their schools. PUC Schools, an affiliate of NCLR that comprises two high schools and three middle schools, now has two full-time staff developers, one in math and one in literacy.
- The staff person from the Foundation for California Community Colleges, through her participation in every aspect of the literacy project, now understands how important the opportunity is to "see" what a good school and good instruction looks like, and how vital ongoing support from the intermediary is to those schools. As a result, FCCC has contracted with UPCS teachers to provide professional development workshops for all of the teachers in the FCCC network.

As staff development capacity has increased, JFF has pulled together an advisory group of coaches, staff developers, and teacher mentors to guide the next phase of the work. These roles will be critical to sustainability of the work in each school and the spread to other early college high schools; the people in those roles are positioned well to advise future work.

Professional Development Sites

An end-goal of the Literacy Project is to produce a few demonstration schools that will serve as residency sites in their intermediary networks. These schools will show a record of success in creating and utilizing processes to identify literacy needs, implementing effective instructional approaches to close skill gaps and to inform the field, developing a school-wide literacy action plan, and in establishing an ongoing professional development effort focused on improving adolescent literacy outcomes. UPCS' relationship with the initial cohort will be replicated as these sites become demonstration schools themselves, allowing interested parties to visit model schools, converse with its teachers, and consult with staff around literacy.

Looking Ahead

The success of the Kellogg/ECHS Literacy Project will ultimately be measured by academic growth exhibited by ECHS students on statewide assessments and in their attendance and grades in college/university classes. This important data will not be available in large numbers until the program has been ongoing for several consecutive years. In the meantime, the documented achievements of UPCS offer great hope for the potential positive impact of ECHS schools participating in the Kellogg/ECHS Literacy Project.

In addition, the accomplishments made during the first two years of Kellogg/ECHS Literacy Project are promising. Important movements have been made toward meeting the goals set at the inception of the project: data-driven, research-based classroom literacy instruction within the participating early college high schools has taken root; a model for school-wide literacy action plans has been developed and is being implemented across participating schools; and an array of professional development opportunities focused on improving adolescent literacy outcomes continue to be made available.

Moving forward from here, JFF will consider two critical questions:

1) What is the best way to strengthen literacy practice in ECHSs at this stage?

Now that some intermediaries have put in place resources for staff development, and a powerful ECHS leadership network has been launched, JFF is considering the most strategic way to extend and deepen its school-based literacy work. Should the initiative focus on direct work with teachers, coaches, school leaders, and/or intermediaries? What should that work look like?

2) How do we incorporate what we've learned from the literacy project into the leadership development work coming out of UPCS?

Given that JFF has determined the centrality of school-wide literacy work to the overall development of effective small schools, the next step is to figure out how lessons from the ECHS Kellogg Literacy Project can be embedded in next-stage initiatives, including the proposed leadership development work stemming from UPCS.

3) What are the best strategies to leverage postsecondary partnerships that support a strong school-wide literacy program?

To date, postsecondary partners have engaged with school-wide literacy work through different means and on different levels. Drawing upon the experience of the literacy project, JFF needs to look at the incentives, norms, structures, and processes that create effective partnerships around literacy.

These questions will guide JFF's thinking in the final year of the project and, particularly, as the organization considers its future role with the 260 early college high schools and their intermediary organizations.

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