

Irene C. Fountas & Gay Su Pinnell



LEADING *for* LITERACY

What Every School Leader Needs to Know



Fountas & Pinnell
LITERACY™

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Portsmouth, NH



Introduction

The Journey Ahead

A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.

—Lao-tzu

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN on a trip and found yourself spending time with a stranger because you were, at least for a while, headed in the same direction? Perhaps you shared a ride, passed the time while waiting for a flight, sat beside one another on a bus, or buddied up during a tour. Your separate journeys brought you together and, for a period of time, you traveled side by side. You may have enjoyed some pleasant conversation, laughed at a few jokes, recommended a new book, shared photos of the family or friends, and told stories from the road and of home. Maybe you discovered that you shared lots in common, or (more exciting!) you found companionship in someone very different from you.

We think of this book as an opportunity to join your journey as a school leader for a short time. We are coming from different places and bring with us different experiences, perspectives, and understandings, but in these pages our professional lives as educators converge. We're companions who get to think

together, reflect on our roles and responsibilities, take up some challenging ideas, and dive into the important work of school leadership.

It's an important time for us to join together, because the stakes couldn't be any higher for the children and families we serve. As an education leader, you are surrounded by passionate, dedicated, and well-meaning professionals who are working very hard and doing admirable work. And yet, despite the best intentions and the tremendous efforts, you witness the educational system failing too many students. The system's flaws are revealed, painfully, in the unevenness of the intellectual, social, and emotional outcomes for the children who live so many hours of their lives in your schools. The system fails to deliver on the promise of equitable, high-quality learning experiences and academic opportunity for every single child.

But you and your colleagues strive every day to fulfill that promise. You believe the schools you lead can make the lives of children better. You are determined that the outcomes for all of your students be positive and equitable. You want educational systems to improve, for children and for the quality of life in our society.

We've written this book to support you in your efforts. We believe *your leadership* is the primary factor that can spark and sustain improvements to the system. Through the quality and strength of your leadership, you can cast a vision and communicate a clear rationale for meaningful change. You can harness the collective efficacy of the educators with whom you work to create a system that produces strong, equitable learning outcomes that enable children to meet the literacy demands of the twenty-first century. Your collaboration with other leaders at every level—from the central office to the classroom—can cultivate a culture of continuous improvement. This work is challenging but has important, lasting consequences. The effects of your leadership will impact generations of children and families. And that is the most important reward for an educator.

Leadership Throughout the System

Let's begin our journey together by thinking about two questions. Who are the leaders in your educational system? And what roles do they play? As you consider these questions, maybe a particular leadership role comes to mind, such as “principal” or “coach” or “curriculum coordinator.” Or perhaps you think of a particular responsibility, such as “to supervise teachers” or “to lead data analysis.” As a leader yourself, you may immediately think of your own role and your own responsibilities. Or maybe you think of a place, such as the central office or the school office, that is associated with a variety of leadership positions. Or perhaps, in your experience, leaders are just titles on the district website, seemingly detached from the accountability felt by classroom teach-



ers. Your experiences as an education leader and your work with other leaders in the system are important, for they may narrow or expand how you think about who leaders are and what roles they play.

Over the past thirty years, we have spent time with many different leaders in many different schools and districts. Our experiences and work have led us to think of these professionals in this way: as educators in a *variety of roles* who are responsible for *improving the educational system* in order to ensure *positive, equitable outcomes for each child*. Let's spend a moment unpacking that idea, beginning at the end.

As an education leader, you direct all of your professional energy toward ensuring *positive, equitable outcomes for each child*. You have an enormous responsibility for the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical well-being and growth of the children in your school and district. Many leaders with whom we have worked—and we are sure this also describes you—desperately want every child, every day, in every classroom to experience the joys of living a literate life in and out of school. You want each child to become a member of an inclusive, equitable learning community—one in which learning is relevant and meaningful and the unique perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of each child are valued. You want every student to make progress because of responsive, culturally sustaining teaching that is provided by observant, informed, and supportive teachers who are growing and learning as professionals.

Creating healthy, highly productive learning communities and supporting effective teaching can be daunting. That's especially true if you attempt to fix issues in isolation, issue by issue, classroom by classroom, or school by school, while larger processes, policies, and practices in the system may be working against your efforts. As a leader, your focus on *improving the educational system* holds the most promise. And the system is incredibly complex. Processes, policies, schedules, personnel, budgets, digital infrastructure, local and state funding, learning materials, instructional practices, teaching resources, approaches to intervention, school culture, and whole communities are but some of the interrelated factors that need to be examined and grappled with when analyzing the system of educating students in your district. And those factors are notoriously resistant to meaningful, lasting improvements. Working for systemic change is demanding, and the challenges are complex.

Fortunately, in your system, leaders are at work in a *variety of roles* (Figure 1). Central office leaders have the responsibilities of focusing on system issues that are relevant to all the schools in a district. Superintendents, assistant superintendents, and curriculum directors work toward effective, equitable learning opportunities for students across schools by developing processes and systems of support that elevate the expertise of teachers and result in success for students in every discipline at every grade level.

School-based leaders play a critical role at the school level. While many



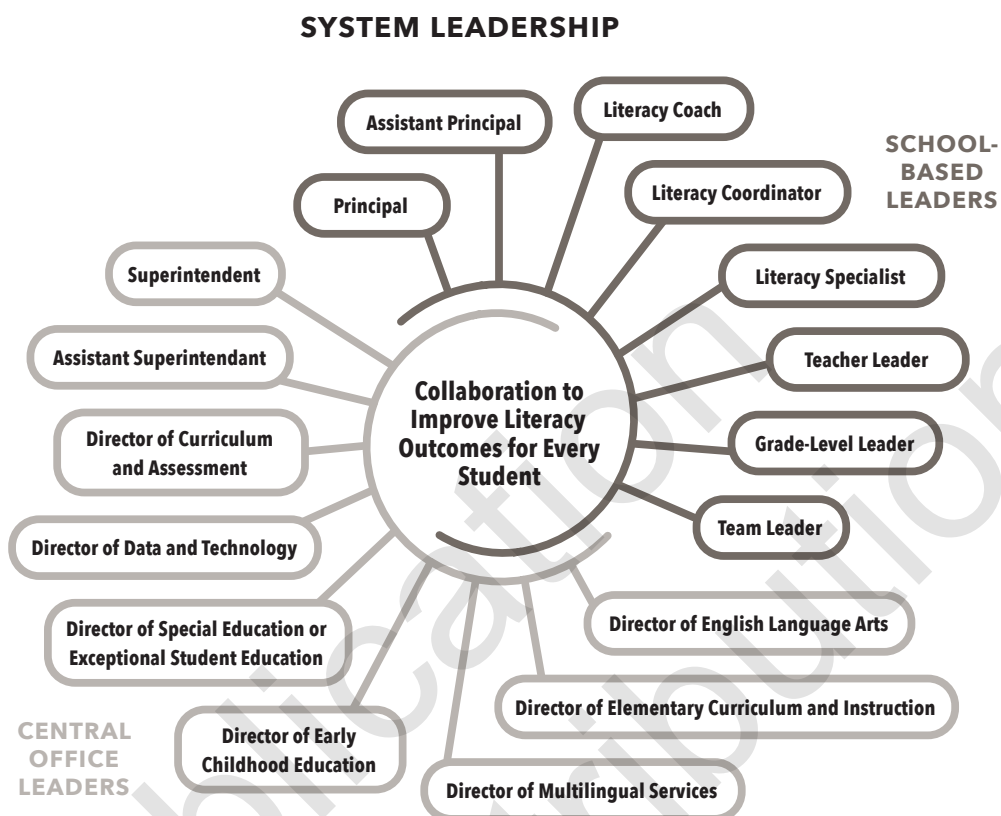


Figure 1. System Leadership

educators and families think first and foremost of principals and assistant principals—the administrative roles in which school leadership has traditionally been concentrated—school-based leaders can be found throughout schools where there has been intentional development of shared leadership. These leaders include coaches, team leaders, literacy specialists, and other building-level instructional leaders who work collaboratively with colleagues to support professional learning and effective teaching practices. They can also include teacher leaders and grade-level leaders who have responsibility for both teaching children and supporting the professional growth of their colleagues.

Education leaders have a variety of roles and titles and different scopes of responsibility. Each of you is most effective when using your influence—wherever you are positioned in the system—to lift the collective efficacy of your team, to champion positive change, and to take action that is linked to improvements in teacher expertise and positive outcomes for all students.

Literacy Changes Lives

This book is our way of supporting you in that important work. And because of our years of research and experience in supporting school improvement, we focus on helping you reflect on and improve the systems to produce high

literacy outcomes for every child. We believe literacy is freedom. When children attain a high level of literacy, they have access to voices, ideas, and perspectives that can bring joy, offer guidance, inform decisions, and change minds. They can pursue learning that is personally meaningful. They have the ability to share their unique voices, ideas, and perspectives through texts they create. They can advocate for a more just society and challenge inequities in our systems. Literacy doesn't inoculate children from every hardship, but with a high level of literacy, children's potential to move beyond harmful or unhealthy conditions increases significantly. Literacy brings the freedom of new and positive choices, offering hope and the promise of a fulfilling, productive life.

Because of this belief, we work to create and improve educational systems through high-quality literacy teaching and learning, which together assure the basic human right of every child to grow up literate. As we think about assuring children their right to literacy, an important question to ask is: *What are the barriers that stand in the way of every child's right to success in literacy?* Spend some time considering the answer based on your work in your school or district. In this book, we'll think together about the strengths you can build on, obstacles you face, and ways to approach and address them through systemic improvements, one small step at a time.

In our experience *there is no quick fix*. You will have to address the complexities of the system, so throughout these chapters, we will need to get comfortable with the complexity. Our goal is not to reduce or simplify the important work before you, but rather to offer ways of thinking about your work that we hope will help you begin to plan for, study, and take actions that address the challenges that exist.

As a leader in an education system, you are the most powerful lever for systemic change. And the way you *think* about your role and responsibilities matters greatly. Your effectiveness as a leader is not just about *what* you do in your role; your impact and influence will be enlarged or diminished based on how you *think* about what you do. Rationales rooted in evidence will provide a strong foundation for your leadership. Therefore, we will focus on the *thinking* part of *doing*, which is where the greatest potential for sustained, systemic change lies.

Who Is This Book For?

We have written this book for all leaders in the education system who have a responsibility for assuring successful literacy outcomes for students. They include central office and school-based leaders. The information in the chapters



is directed specifically to leaders at the school level—teacher leaders, team leaders, literacy coaches, literacy specialists, principals, and more. Throughout the book, we'll refer to these leaders as *school leaders*.

Since the ideas in this book have critical implications for central office leaders in their role of leading and coordinating the work of all personnel in the system, we have included notes in each chapter with information specifically for central office leaders (more on that soon). When central office leaders and school-based leaders work collaboratively toward common goals, their leadership provides coherence for educators throughout the system, and the students benefit as a result.

A Look at the Map

As we journey onward from here, let's take a look at the organization of the content so that you can get the most from the information provided.

In section 1 we discuss the foundations of inspirational school leadership. We'll examine the qualities of effective school leaders and invite you to reflect on how you're viewed as a leader. Then, we'll discuss the importance of creating the common vision and shared values that will help you nurture and sustain a healthy, collaborative school culture. Finally, we'll look at how to build effective teams that deliver high outcomes for all students.

In the middle of the book, we focus on important aspects of literacy teaching and learning. Think of these chapters as your go-to guide for observing, understanding, and supporting systems that produce strong student outcomes in your school. We focus on big ideas about effective learning, how children learn to read and write, the importance of a healthy learning community, and the important role of language in literacy teaching. Then we describe a curriculum based on the observable behaviors and understandings of readers, writers, and language users. We think together about effective systems for assessing children's literacy learning. And then we dig into research-based instructional practices; explore contexts for reading, writing, and word study; and learn what to listen and look for when observing lessons. We share ideas for teaching English learners and designing effective systems for intervention. From there, we look at the importance of high-quality books and text collections for literacy learning.

In the last section of the book, we discuss the responsibilities and opportunities you have as a school leader. We'll think together about how to build the leadership capacity of your system by lifting teachers into leadership roles and creating new leadership opportunities throughout the system. We'll reimagine professional learning as a continuous, sustained characteristic of the school culture, and we'll look at coaches and teacher leaders as important agents of change.



SPECIAL FEATURES IN THIS BOOK

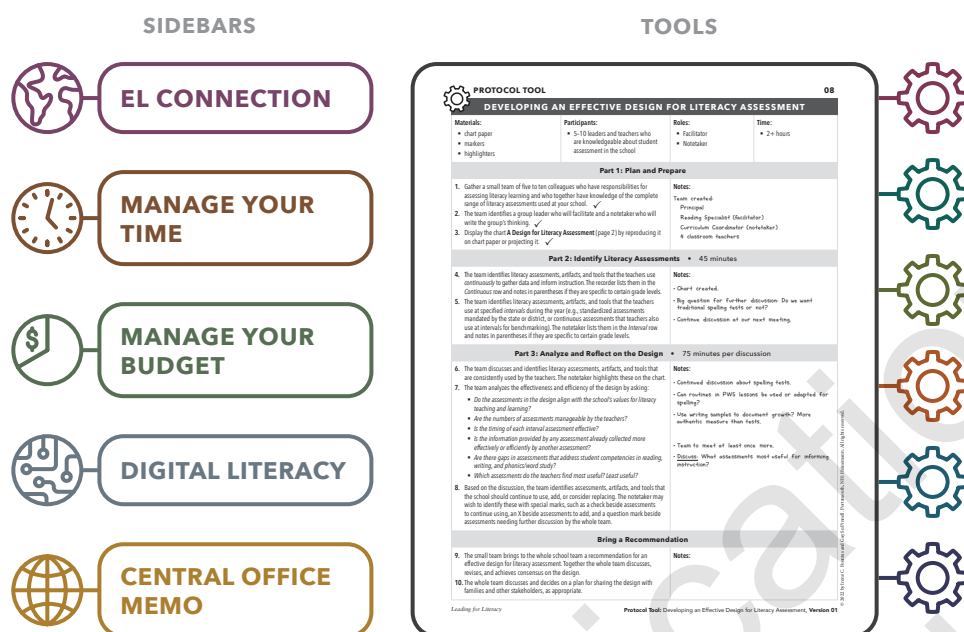


Figure 2. Special Features in this Book

Finally, as we part ways in the last chapter, we'll offer ideas for sustaining and scaling up systemic improvements as you continue on the journey of school leadership.

Throughout each chapter, you'll find special features that are designed to support your work in practical ways (Figure 2). The side columns of pages contain key ideas and useful guidance to help you support English learners in your school, manage your time and budget effectively, and use digital tools and resources with greater impact. A special note in each chapter offers implications of the chapter content for central office leaders. You'll also find a variety of tools throughout the book, such as protocols, templates, and observation tools. These practical resources have been helpful to many of the school leaders with whom we've worked. The tools will support you across many aspects of your work,

A SPECIAL NOTE ABOUT OBSERVATION TOOLS

Observation tools (also known as look-for tools) are designed to help you, as a school leader, notice and reflect on important aspects of the education system—from the physical space in classrooms to teacher talk to the various instructional contexts. Observation tools also offer an important opportunity for teacher professional learning.

To maximize professional learning, we suggest engaging teachers in the construction of tools for observation and reflection. We suggest a process that helps teachers see tools as valuable for their own learning. We suggest you begin your use of a tool by working with teachers to discuss the topic and identify the essential elements for observation and reflection. Use *The Literacy Continuum* (see Chapter 9) and other articles or professional readings as the basis for the content of the discussion. For example, before observing interactive read-aloud lessons, talk with teachers about the lesson structure and what they would see and hear in an effective interactive read-aloud lesson and co-create the look-for tool.

When you give time and opportunity for teachers to contribute their understandings, engage in the thinking, and develop the criteria that is important to look for, they understand the tool from the inside instead of simply looking at a list of phrases they may not understand. You could type up your list and use it for your observations. You might also decide to distribute the observation tool we have provided and discuss how the criteria compare. Talk about criteria they may want to add or change. If you decide to use the tool we have provided, you will do so within a context in which the teachers already understand the tool from their engagement in the process. This collaborative process supports the professional learning of the teachers who will use the tool for reflection and contributes to the collective efficacy of the whole team.

For more information about using observation tools, see Chapter 21.

from welcoming new teachers with a letter that introduces your school's values and priorities, to assessing your school culture, to observing and talking to a teacher about a literacy lesson. The last chapter contains *The Fountas & Pinnell LIFT: Literacy Improvement Facilitation Tool*, a comprehensive tool that brings together many of the important ideas in the book and can help you and your school team make a plan for moving toward a coherent and sustainable system for literacy improvement. We provide an example of how each tool has been effectively used, and you'll be able to copy or download blank tools as often as you need. We will continue to refine and improve these tools over time, so the documents that you find online will always reflect our most current version.

As we mentioned earlier, we will take a thinking, noticing, and reflective stance toward the work of school leadership. At the end of each chapter, you'll find a summary, called the Takeaway, of the big ideas we explored as well as questions that can prompt deeper thinking about your school and possible actions that can move your school forward. If you're reading this book with your colleagues, you may find it helpful to discuss the questions and reflect on the ideas together.

Essentials for the Journey

As we embark on this journey, what do we need to pack (or perhaps repack)? There are a few essentials we would suggest: a willingness to ask questions, an openness to self-reflection, a commitment to listening to the voices of educators around you, and a tentative stance toward all of the work. We've discovered that leaders who are honest, vulnerable, collaborative, and reflective have the capacity to lead significant and sustained improvements in their schools and districts.

We have written this book with the belief that yesterday's or even today's schools will not meet the needs of tomorrow's children. Our educational systems need to change for the good of our children as they live into the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century. We'll have given you a lot of information and support to accomplish your goals by the time you finish reading this book. By then, we hope that you'll have shifted your lens and that you'll be feeling energized and empowered to do the visionary work of school leadership. Bring everything you've learned and be willing to add on to your learning. Think with us so that you can build on your understandings. We hope you will celebrate what's working well, reflect, and grow. Armed with a wealth of information and practical tools, you will become a more effective school leader and the children and families you serve will benefit.

Our journey has begun, so let's take the next step together.