

# Literacy Design Collaborative and Struggling Readers: A Perfect Match

Avalon Middle School, Orange County, Florida



**SREB**

High Schools  
That Work

In Florida, middle grades students take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test 2.0 (FCAT 2.0) in reading and writing. In partnership with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), Avalon Middle School implemented LDC beginning in the 2012-2013 school year to develop literacy skills across content areas. Subsequently, the school saw increases in the percentages of students meeting and exceeding standards (Level 3 and above) on the FCAT 2.0 — well exceeding statewide results.

A common misconception is that Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) is not a good fit in classes geared toward struggling readers and writers. Nicole Craig, a reading intervention teacher at Avalon Middle School (AMS) in Orlando, Florida, knows firsthand this is not true. Schoolwide, in 2013, 80 percent of AMS seventh-graders and 78 percent of eighth-graders met or exceeded standards on the FCAT, a 4 percent and 7 percent increase respectively over the previous year.

**TABLE 1**  
**FCAT 2.0: Reading Percentages of students meeting and exceeding standard (Level 3 and above)**

	2011-2012	2012-2013
Seventh Grade Avalon M.S.	76%	80%
Seventh Grade Statewide	58	57
Eighth Grade Avalon M.S.	71	78
Eighth Grade Statewide	55	56

**FCAT 2.0: Writing Test Percentages of students meeting or exceeding standard (Level 3 and above)**

	2011-2012	2012-2013
Seventh Grade	No Test	No Test
Eighth Grade Avalon M.S.	67	79
Eight Grade Statewide	52	54

Source: Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, 2012-2013 school year

At the same time, 79 percent of Craig’s reading intervention class (all at Basic or Below Basic reading levels) met state-assigned learning targets on the FCAT. Avalon’s gains were recognized as some of the best in the district. Craig credits these results to using the LDC framework and the work students produced using her LDC reading and language arts modules.

Craig’s modules took a unique approach to the traditionally laborious task of exam preparation. When preparing students for the FCAT, many teachers refer to “FCAT 2.0 Reading Test Item Specifications on Test Taking Skills and Vocabulary.” This handbook, created by the Florida Department of Education, provides an overview of the exam, the types of questions, how the exam questions align to specific standards and strategies for finding the correct answers. Teachers often use it to present isolated exam-taking strategies not used in the real world.

Craig took a different approach. Using LDC tools, she created a teaching task that had students read the exam specification document, review key standards, write exam questions and produce a written analysis of their own and their peers’ exams.



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Subsequently, students had to complete a close reading of the exam specification guide, determine the key factors used to build questions that align to standards, and apply this knowledge by designing original questions. Finally, they had to use a rubric to peer-review each other's questions and write an analysis using evidence from the document.



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“I didn't want to do another PowerPoint or lesson on test-taking strategies” says Craig, “Instead, students learned how to think like a test maker to apply the vocabulary skills they were learning in addition to the language of the standards.” The impact of this process was evident once students began using what they learned during the module on district-created benchmarks. “When students eventually took school benchmarks, they could easily

identify the types of questions, what was being assessed and recognize the thinking behind each question.” Because of the analysis and reflections, Craig could make this connection between the module and the benchmarks. Students were applying the very skills about which they wrote.

Avalon Middle School's principal, Judith Frank, observes the impact of LDC across her school. She says, “On a regular basis, I see teachers requiring students to justify their answers more; they are asking students to cite evidence for their conclusions; they are narrowing their focus.” Moreover, she sees teachers “beginning to start with the end product and then scaffolding back to see what skills students need to produce the writing.”

To spread the work and build capacity, Frank and her instructional coach, Cheryl Vanatti, created a literacy team comprised of members of each content area. This team is responsible for sharing best practices with their colleagues, including the LDC approach to unit design. Vanatti says this team allows the faculty to see how the various resources, tools, and strategies fit together. She says, “Our teachers have all types of strategies they learn at workshops. This group helps us focus these disparate strategies and organize them into sequential LDC modules.”

Frank believes teacher planning time is a key factor for success. “In addition to time to attend training, they need additional planning opportunities to design units. They need time to share ideas with peers who are not at training sessions.”

Craig says LDC has helped her connect what students learn to a clear and concrete purpose. “Before, I would look at recent classroom, district or state test scores and assign a couple of lessons based on students' weaknesses. There was no tie in to the real world or what students will produce at the end of a unit. Now, I'm looking at how the students will use what I'm teaching, not just for testing but for later in their academic career and once they enter the job market. Every assignment has a purpose behind it,” Craig explains.

LDC allows Craig to incorporate relevance and rigor into a reading class, and her students consistently impress her by rising to the occasion. “While teaching LDC modules,



I've seen my students not only understand concepts but apply them. They are reading and comprehending grade level and above texts. Students have been able to create proposals to improve the school, write their own urban legends, argue what equal rights mean to them and even create their own multiple choice tests."

While some modules engage students from the start, others require further differentiation. To reach all her students, Craig sometimes incorporates choice within limits. She says, "I try to choose information that will motivate students. Sometimes, like with the urban legends module, it works with all students. Sometimes, as with the equal rights module, I have to differentiate and allow my students to choose their materials. We start out with specific guidelines and lessons on research and then allow students to choose within the framework of the module." She also differentiates by allowing students to "choose what graphic organizer they will use for prewriting to help them organize information." Teaching students how to read becomes more impactful as she also teaches them how to learn.

Vanatti, Avalon's instructional coach, credits LDC with helping teachers focus on the planning process. "I love lesson planning, but a lot of teachers haven't been taught how to do it well" she says. "Once they write an LDC module and move through the ladder, they become better teachers because they are planning with the end in mind and will measure if students meet that goal." As a coach, it gives her a process when collaborating on unit plans. "Ms. Craig or another teacher might come to me with a big, lofty idea of what they want their students to do. Using LDC, I talk them through the reading and writing process. I ask, 'Why are you doing this lesson? What is the ultimate purpose? What is it leading to?' or I ask 'How will these lessons build better reading skills, and how will they prove to you students are learning?' LDC makes it much easier to have these conversations because the process is so clear and focused."

The teachers and leaders at Avalon agree that the individual feedback and support provided by SREB has been essential. Craig says, "The most helpful was sitting down with our coaches to go through my modules. It helped to discuss what my plans were, what was currently happening and what I was planning for the future. I tend to plan big, crazy ideas, and it was nice to have a sounding board to bring me back down to earth. I also struggled in the beginning since I wasn't used to backwards planning. It was great to have these two wonderful ladies making me think through what steps my students would need to be successful."

Principal Frank agrees that SREB's approach to professional development plays a key part in her teachers' success. She says, "The model SREB offers ensures everyone, including administration, receives the support necessary for successful implementation. They individualize the work to the school's needs." According to Frank, teachers often receive a lot of training, but not the follow up and feedback SREB offers. She says, "The coaching piece is vital to success of implementation."

Research shows when teachers *believe* students can do rigorous course work, students will often meet those expectations. This is likely a key reason Craig's students have seen such growth. "I love my job, but even more, I love my students. Teaching LDC modules has reinforced how brilliant my students are. Last year's state test scores were the best I've ever seen, and it was because I pushed my students harder than I had before. I am extremely proud to say I taught those kids."



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