Best Practices Newsletter

Literacy Strategies That Grow Teachers and Students

Every student should graduate from high school with the literacy skills necessary for success in college and 21st-century careers — not just reading, but writing and speaking skills as well. The Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) empowers teachers with the tools and strategies to engage students in learning and make learning relevant. Teachers use mini-tasks and instructional modules to scaffold instruction, begin with the end in mind and ultimately raise student achievement.

Students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, think critically and use language effectively in all content areas. Therefore, teaching literacy is not just reserved for language arts teachers. Teachers in all disciplines and all grades must help students become more literate in their disciplines. That's the focus of this newsletter.

LDC in CTE: A Transformative Alignment

"LDC makes me look good," says agriculture teacher **Dustin Inman**, describing his first experience with creating a Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) module in a school where low socioeconomics and poor career planning and assessment (CPAS) scores threatened to close his program.

Initially overwhelmed by the stresses of mandatory testing, participation in a variety of daily professional learning communities (PLCs) and his principal's directive to take LDC training, Inman soon discovered that "if you are already scaffolding (instruction), you can do this." That realization and his "start small" philosophy led Inman to success in his LDC work with agriculture students at **Mendenhall High School** and then later at **Simpson County Technical Center**, both in Mendenhall, Mississippi.

Literacy — Reading, Listening, Speaking, Listening
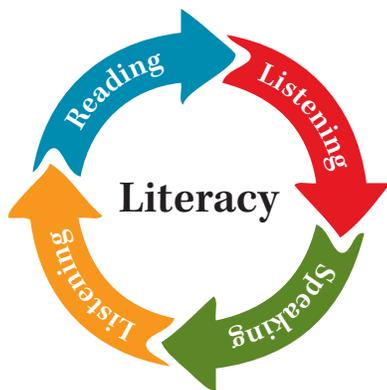
Mississippi administers CPAS to career and technical education (CTE) students twice a year, expecting students to correctly answer an average of 59 percent of exam items. If a school consistently scores less than 59 percent in a program, it must

close the program altogether. Inman's most challenging class had fewer than 10 students — most with Individualized Education Programs or other challenges. This class scored 30.66 percent. His larger, but more proficient classes, scored only 36.42 percent.

Dustin Inman
Agriculture teacher

Starting Off

Inman decided to implement his first LDC module with the smaller and less proficient class. He told them, "You are so smart; I'm going to try this new process on you. If you can do it, I'll try it with the other classes." He began by showing a short video on bees and pollination, asking students to use the Cornell method of taking notes. He had already taught the Cornell process, which helps students document main and supporting ideas in their reading; however, some students had trouble distinguishing between the main and supporting ideas. He explained the text structure of visual media and told them, "When a scene changes in the movie, that's a new idea." Just that little tip helped students see that they could successfully take good notes.

In his second effort, a module on animal ethics, Inman emphasized developing a "hook" when writing an argumentative essay. Along with SREB coach **Donn Kirkwood**, Inman created an LDC mini-task (Drafting the Hook) that earned an exemplary rating from LDC's national jurors. As students went step-by-step through the writing process, Inman discovered that they liked to argue, but they needed instruction on how to base their arguments on facts and research instead of opinion.

Exceeding Expectations

He scaffolded his students' instruction and, ultimately, they conducted a mock trial on animal ethics. Small steps in the form of mini-tasks enabled his less proficient students to outperform their more proficient classmates. The class averaged 30.66 percent on the first CPAS and 40.76 percent on the second try. That is a growth of 10.09 percentage points. The class that did not use the LDC modules showed growth averaging 8.12 percentage points.

In his second year of creating and implementing LDC modules, Inman "moved down the road" to Simpson County Technical Center. There he used LDC modules with all his classes. In 2014 and 2015, the Simpson students averaged 50 percent and 49 percent respectively on the agriculture CPAS, with 80 percent as the highest score. Those scores ranked Simpson at 23rd in the state in 2014 and 26th in 2015.

> *Students were "engaged like never before."*
> Dustin Inman
> Agriculture teacher

In 2016, students were "engaged like never before," Inman says, "When kids are enjoying writing so much that they want to do it a second day, you are doing something right." Their hard work paid off. The class average on CPAS last year was 65 percent, earning Simpson bragging rights as number one in the state. Simpson also posted a single student's average of 85 percent, the highest in the state.

Inman says that the greatest reason for student growth was a change in attitude caused by the LDC process. Through LDC's scaffolded instruction, teachers give students feedback that focuses their thinking and improves their writing. Their participation goes deeper than surface level. Modules address several objectives at once and help students see the links in information. His students work in groups to read college-level material in "small bites" to "eat a little at a time," enabling them to see that reading and writing are processes.

He adds, "It's like Legos. It's a big job, but you have a little manual that says step one, step two, step three." LDC has helped Inman increase his students' level of engagement in their work and raise their CPAS scores. Simpson County Technical Center is no longer in danger of losing its agriculture program.

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From Reluctance to Engagement: Using LDC to Stimulate Student Success

Like many young teachers, **Leah Sellers** prepared lessons for her students and "hoped for the best." The English language arts teacher at **McAdory High School** in McCalla, Alabama, was often dismayed that students did not give her the quality of work she expected, while whining," This is boring. Why are we doing this?"

Sellers quickly learned to make sure students are intellectually engaged in their work and not "just awake and fooling (her)." She uses Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) modules and mini-tasks as the primary method to change reluctant students into engaged learners. She also uses those tools to get to know her students.

Sellers began an early module with this task: *After reading and researching "Tears of a Tiger" and informational texts on the five stages of grief, write an essay in which you describe how people persevere through difficulties.*

Keeping it Relevant

Knowing that her modules and mini-tasks must be relevant to engage her students, Sellers' first mini-task asked them to define perseverance, explain it in their own words and give an example of someone they knew who had demonstrated perseverance in action. From reading and listening to their responses, she learned a lot about her students' personal lives. She also discovered that "if they can talk it, they can write it." One young man was brought to tears by his connection to the words in "Dear Mama," a song they were studying.

Sellers learned how important it is to group students appropriately for higher-level thinking so they teach each other. "Do it wrong," she says, "and it is a train wreck." She divided classes into groups of four-to-six students. Revolving among the groups, she provided coaching and formative assessment while listening to their conversations. She reassembled the full class for a time of reflection before moving on to the next mini-task.

The mini-tasks transformed her normally disengaged students, who can be unsocial and resistant to learning, into interactive, awakened and challenged learners. As one of her students said with great excitement after only one mini-task, "I get this!"

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Creating LDC Modules: An English and Science Perspective

A second-year English teacher and a veteran science teacher working together to implement the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) have seen an increase in student engagement and success in their classrooms.

(L) Raven Shepherd, (R) Brittney Gilmer, Pike County High School Teachers

Raven Shepherd, English and language arts teacher at **Pike County High School** in Brundidge, Alabama, has been teaching for only two years. Even as a novice, she sees the benefits of LDC and advises other teachers to use mini-tasks on "anything you think is good for your students." In her first module, Habits of Success, Shepherd used a template in LDC CoreTools to create this task:

What habits help us become successful? After reading/researching literary and informational texts on habits and success, write a manual in which you describe the habits of a successful seventh-grader. Support your discussion with evidence from the texts.

Using *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens* by Steven Covey as her primary text, Shepherd designed a separate mini-task for each of the seven habits to scaffold instruction for her students. She also found engaging poems and books about success and created mini-tasks for each one of them.

For example, as students read *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk*, Shepherd asks them to annotate the poem in two ways: Highlight the verses that indicate the speaker is being proactive and draw a sad face by passages that indicate the speaker is being reactive. Mini-tasks such as these engage students and enable them to create an authentic writing product for an authentic audience.

Reading and Writing Like Scientists

Shepherd's colleague, **Brittney Gilmer**, is a science teacher with more than 10 years of experience. She realized the importance of having her students read and write after seeing their awkwardly written posts on social media. The words of Richard Vaca in *Content Area Reading: Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum* convinced her that she must teach her students to read and write like scientists. Vaca wrote,

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens and conduct their personal lives.

In an argumentative module, Gilmer asks her students to discuss whether parents should be allowed to manipulate their unborn children's genes to give them an advantage in life. Students participate in a "tug of war" mini-task, in which they post their arguments for and against genetic engineering, and debate the merits of each discussion point. Gilmer says that without realizing it, her students learn about Mendelian genetics and "get the content of genetic disorders."

Despite differences in seniority and content area, Shepherd and Gilmer have seen the LDC process engage students in their disciplines and cause an "about face from 'I can't do this' to 'Yes, I can!'"

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LDC and CTE in the Culinary Classroom

At first, it may seem difficult to find authentic writing products to use in a career and technical education (CTE) classroom. **Sherryann Sinclair**, a culinary arts instructor at **Mortimer Jordan High School** in Kimberly, Alabama, knows this is not so. Teachers can use and manipulate a large variety of writing products to engage students. Sinclair says the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) and its use of backward design help her reflect and carefully choose the writing products she selects for her teaching tasks.

Adapting Authentic Writing

Sinclair began her journey into LDC in 2015. The initial training was challenging, especially because the literacy strategies are applied to CTE. When she considered student writing, her first

thought was the essay format, but she realized that wouldn't always work well in her classroom. Undaunted by the task of integrating LDC into her practice, she searched for other ways to bring authentic writing into her classes.

"When putting together my teaching tasks, I quickly realized that a lot of [CTE teachers] already create authentic products," says Sinclair. "It really just comes down to seeing those products in that light."

Sinclair wants her authentic writing products to meet three criteria. First, the products must be relevant to her curriculum, helping her to identify student needs as well as covering her content. Next, she makes sure the instructional ladder is reliable. Finally, she wants expectations around student work to be realistic, which led her back to the reliability of her instructional ladder.

Sinclair's students have created many different writing products, including blogs, proposals, formal letters, interviews, memos, critical reviews, business plans and public service announcements.

Creating Accountability

There were challenges when introducing LDC into her classroom, particularly the rubric and guiding students through understanding the scoring process. "I found that using the same LDC rubrics across the board helped immensely," says Sinclair. "The rubrics are solid and create accountability in all areas. After a while, students automatically know what the expectations are." Despite her struggles teaching the rubric, she states she would not do it any other way. "Expecting quality work from students without direction is unrealistic. How can we pass on strategies around quality expectations? We do have to teach what those expectations are and what they look like."

Sinclair stresses LDC's power with teaching and learning: "LDC ensures the teaching of all things needed for student success," she says. "I thought I was doing everything right all along when it came to my instruction, but thanks to LDC, I'm doing it even better."

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Teaching Inquiry in Social Studies Using LDC and the C3 Framework

Shawnda Fizer, Ewing Elementary School and Wayne Stevens, Kentucky Department of Education

Whether your school is using the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) or the College, Career and Civic Life Framework for State Social Studies Standards (C3) modules, students can use inquiry to delve into the learning of the content. **Wayne Stevens**, an effectiveness coach for the **Kentucky Department of Education** and **Shawnda Fizer**, a teacher at **Ewing Elementary School** in Ewing, Kentucky, use a variety of inquiry strategies to prove teachers can take any available module and incorporate inquiry strategies to engage students and build in opportunities for students to own their learning. The vital element connecting inquiry-based learning is Document Based Questions (DBQs):

Laying the Groundwork for Building Inquiry-Based Learning

In Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices and Implications of the College, Career and Civic Life (C3), the National Council for the Social Studies describes the key to inquiry-based learning. Using the Inquiry Cycle (see graphic), students become social scientists, whose curiosity about content helps them see various perspectives and focus on deeper, more authentic learning.

"Kentucky's Social Studies Standards for the Next Generation builds a paradigm of teaching and learning that asks learners to be meaningfully engaged in the Practices in the Inquiry Cycle: Questioning, Evaluating and Communicating, while accessing and developing Disciplinary Core Concepts.
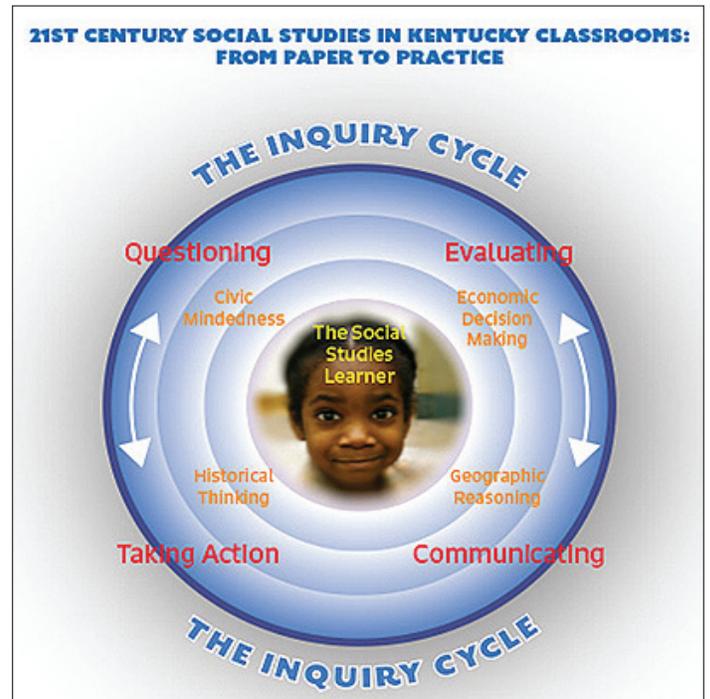
The components of the Practices in the Inquiry Cycle frame the Disciplinary Core Concepts to construct opportunities to critically think about and collaborate on fundamental aspects of what it means to think like a social scientist. The outcomes from such rich and meaningful learning experiences will better prepare future citizens to communicate and creatively resolve the problems of our world through the combined lenses of civics, economics, geography and history."

This is the basis of a powerful, purposeful, thought-provoking session of exploration, analysis and inquiry.

Social Studies for the Next Generation outlines the inquiry cycle and the standards for each grade level. After teachers review and analyze a module from any source, they can use the practices in the inquiry cycle to make quality decisions about adding and emphasizing different aspects of the inquiry cycle. Not all aspects are needed, say Stevens and Fizer; however, the best results occur when there is at least one opportunity in each aspect, and students have multiple opportunities in one or more aspects.

Using the participant-exploration process, analyzing modules and the inquiry cycle, social studies teachers can see that LDC modules, the C3 framework modules and various professional development all have a heavy English language arts (ELA) drive. This leads social studies teachers to select more "ELA-like" text.

When the two inquiry practices were analyzed and connected to modules, researchers found content should be authentic and connect specifically with the content area. Once teachers realized that inquiry-based education required DBQs, a shift occurred and teachers "started the use of authentic social studies documents instead of ELA documents," says Stevens.

As teachers begin to improve, modify or create modules, they should reference the practices in the inquiry cycle and embed strategies in all aspects of the module that address the standards within the inquiry cycle. With the incorporation of these strategies, students learn content but also become more inquisitive and think more, and more critically.

Practices in the Inquiry Cycle			
Questioning	**Evaluating Sources**	**Communicating**	**Taking Action**
Students will independently and collaboratively:	*Students will independently and collaboratively:*	*Students will independently and collaboratively:*	*Students will independently and collaboratively:*
1. **Develop compelling questions** that promote inquiry around key disciplinary concepts and embedded enduring issues. 2. **Develop supporting questions** that identify facts, concepts and research interpretations associated with a key disciplinary concept.	3. **Determine the types of sources** that will assist in answering compelling and supporting questions. 4. **Gather relevant information** from multiple sources from a wide range of perspectives and **evaluate for credibility**. 5. **Identify and utilize evidence** to seek solutions to questions.	6. **Develop and create claims and counterclaims** using appropriate evidence to construct strengths and weaknesses. 7. **Construct viable arguments, relevant explanations and/or public demonstrations** that convey ideas and perspectives to a wide array of appropriate audiences. 8. **Critique the arguments and explanations** of others paying particular attention to credibility and relevance of information.	9. **Address opinions** of individuals and groups to identify and apply a range of strategies and complex reasoning to take public action or propose a solution. 10. **Engage in disciplinary thinking** used by social scientists (historians, economists, political scientists and geographers), independently and proficiently resulting in civic readiness.

Quizzical Strategizing

Stevens and Fizer suggest that teachers explore and investigate to uncover the keys to teaching inquiry in social studies. Two engaging and effective strategies are Meet Me At… and the Question Formulation Technique.

Meet Me At…

Quizzical strategies call for students to work in partners. Many teachers use clock partners in their classroom.
The Meet Me At… strategy is a creative twist on this. Teachers provide a world map with various cities labeled, and ask partners to identify those specific cities, leading to several question and answer opportunities and sharing discussions. This quick, simple strategy allows students to move about and interact with partners of various levels and interests throughout the class.

Question Formulation Technique

There are various entry points for students in this easy strategy: photos, music, videos, etc. Teachers can pique students' interests by sharing visuals or texts about the content that they will explore.

While the exploration takes place, instruct students to complete a t-chart collecting information: I Notice/I Wonder. Upon completion of the I Notice/I Wonder strategy, invite students to create questions.

Have them gather in small groups around a piece of chart paper and choose a recorder. The teacher asks a guiding question or makes a guiding statement to provide students' direction to build their questions. Once students are prepared, instruct them to provide questions in rapid succession to the recorder. All questions are recorded and lead to further inquiry or discussion.

As the list of questions grows, students become more inquisitive. Those questions not answered in class can become an opportunity for students to research on their own and share, making them lifelong learners rather than stewards of classroom learning.

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Coaching Up: Selecting and Preparing Modules for Jurying

Publishers use several lenses — content specialist, text selection and grammarian — to give feedback to writers and accept articles for publishing. Similarly, teachers and coaches crafting a Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) module use several lenses to obtain/provide feedback and determine readiness for jurying.

Mary Lynn Huie, Independent Literacy Consultant

Independent Literacy Consultant **Mary Lynn Huie** has created guidelines so LDC teachers can determine if their modules are ready to submit to the jurying process. Huie says not all modules, especially those developed by beginning LDC teachers, should go through the jurying process. Published modules are written by teachers with great ideas who can explain how their ideas translate into classroom activities.

"Many great teachers are not great at explaining how they make magic in the classroom," says Huie. Many LDC teachers find jurying is a valuable feedback tool that provides clarity for how to improve their practice. When teachers submit a module and receive feedback, they acquire a better understanding of how LDC can help them in their teaching process. Sending it (the module) in will provide you with more eyes, giving you more ideas for how to improve your work," Huie maintains.

The Steps to Jurying

Screening is the first step after a module has been submitted for jurying. Two experienced practitioners spend 10-20 minutes looking for any glaring problems using the LDC screening checklist — a list of common technical problems that may not be addressed in the jurying rubric. Before modules are submitted for a more in-depth review, authors may receive feedback from pre-screening and be encouraged to make adjustments.

If the module passes screening, it is sent on for **jurying**, a full evaluation by two reviewers. Each reviewer independently applies the LDC jurying rubric. The two then confer, often by phone, to reach consensus. Although time-intensive, this stage of the jurying process keeps an LDC-trained teacher or coach sharp. All LDC teachers should consider attending the LDC studio peer review training to become certified in peer review of modules.

The goal of submitting a module for jurying is to attain the status of good-to-go or exemplary. Approximately 10 percent of modules submitted are deemed exemplary. In addition to receiving feedback, teachers who are trying to craft their own modules can find exemplary or good-to-go modules

on the LDC CoreTools website. These include models of the LDC framework that add rigor and increase student achievement in the classroom.

"Clarity and coherence are critical in scoring and screening," Huie says. These two qualities always should be included in the teaching task so students know exactly what to do. Huie identifies the LDC Basic Basics checklist, found on the CoreTools website, as a quick check for teachers or coaches to use as a screening guide. In the jurying process, the teaching task, content, texts and product must align tightly, and teachers or coaches can apply the guiding questions found on the jurying rubric to reflect on changes needed. Other questions to consider while preparing a module for jurying:

- Are the exams rigorous?

- Does the module address important course content?

- Is the student product appropriate to the content discipline?

- Based on the teaching task, do the mini-tasks listed in the instructional ladder prepare students to write?

To receive a good-to-go or exemplary ranking, submitted modules must include two or three samples of student work at different levels, preferably with the scored rubric, with identifying information (student names or school).

Examining Modules

Three resources can help coaches and teachers examine a module prior to submitting it for jurying:

1. Apply the LDC Teaching Task and Instructional Ladder Pitfalls checklists to sharpen a teacher's understanding of how an LDC module may differ from other instructional units.

2. Apply the Basic Basics checklist to make sure technical aspects of the module are correctly completed.

3. Use the jurying tool in CoreTools to determine whether the module should be published for a broader audience.

The purpose of all three resources is for module authors to receive feedback that helps them develop modules that support student success.

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Learning LDC Online

In the Heart of the Delta

Not far from the Sunflower River near Clarksdale, Mississippi, in the middle of the Coahoma Community College campus, lies a small, rural high school, **Coahoma Agricultural High School** (CAHS). CAHS was in danger of being closed. Then two of the school's teachers participated in the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) training offered by SREB. In Year 1 of learning and implementing LDC modules (spring semester, 2015), students' exam scores showed positive results, even with the usual challenges of doing something new. Assistant Superintendent **Angela Jones** says this single, simple decision saved the school for another year.

Jones decided that students needed literacy instruction in all classes. In the fall of 2015, she was given an opportunity she could not pass up: SREB offered to train her entire staff of 10 in an LDC pilot program. The whole school could be certified in LDC. She did not hesitate, and work began in January of 2016.

Launching the Online Pilot Program

LDC.org and SREB now partner to offer a three-course online program in lieu of person-to-person training. The detailed, interactive program walks the learner through an overview of LDC, including how to build teaching tasks using the templates, the selection of skills, building mini-tasks, inputting results, and the jurying and reflection of the module and its implementation.

The courses are user friendly and cover a variety of teaching techniques. In the first and second course, participants study online readings, then develop a clear understanding of the teaching task and the instructional ladder; the process to access learning; and how to demonstrate knowledge through exploration, engagement and evaluation.

The teachers work at their own pace, and they are required to complete the quiz at the end of each section with a score of 80 percent or higher. They also submit portions of an LDC module as they go through each step. Course 3 is similar, but it focuses on implementing a module and how to reflect the results. Participants earn a certificate of completion.

Lessons Learned

After working through the pilot project, Jones and the SREB trainers could see the strengths of the online process, as well as where to make adjustments.

LDC makes a positive impact on student learning at any depth. While a teacher can learn it either online or in person, the success of the online course depends on a few pertinent factors:

- Have an LDC-trained individual available for the launch and initial setup.

- Provide a realistic schedule for completion.

- Establish specified LDC course time during the teachers' work days.

- Specify time, at least once a month, or at specified points during the online course schedule, for the previously trained LDC-trained teacher and online participants to meet and hold at least an hour-long session to review acquired knowledge for accountability and ensure the courses are being completed with fidelity.

- An LDC-trained individual reviews, provides feedback and approves participants before they can move onto the next phase. The work includes:

  o Course 1 – Participants review teaching tasks.

  o Course 2 – Previously trained LDC teacher reviews and provides feedback for each skill cluster before participants move to the next skill cluster.

  o Course 2 – Previously trained LDC teacher reviews participants' work before they can implement a module.

  o Course 3 – Previously trained LDC teacher scores a few papers with each participant to ensure understanding, help with consensus and provide collaborative feedback.

  o Course 3 – Previously trained LDC teacher meets with participants and reviews everything before submitting the module for final certification.

Implementation of the online training yielded good results, but the pilot required a learning curve and illuminated gaps in the original plan. Valuable information through close observation; deep, honest discussion; and analysis of all components revealed that the blended model provides teachers a better experience with the LDC online courses, but the time and effort of completing the courses with fidelity is more beneficial to both teachers and students. The adjustments being made based on CAHS's experience are sure to yield even more impressive positive results.

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