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## **Purchasing Power: One School District's Decisions to Purchase Three Reading Programs**

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*To understand decision-making processes of purchasing supplemental reading programs, the researchers conducted interviews with teachers, administrators, and central office personnel, asking them to describe curricular purchasing decisions, grant writing, and budgeting process. These interviews, observations, and documents allowed us to understand many perspectives of the decision-making process.*

SINCE 1999, the authors have been working with the Thomas School District in a rural district in the Southeastern United States in several capacities. We have been involved in several grant-funded programs at Thomas Elementary School, an elementary school in the district, collaborating with teachers and administrators to provide professional development, curriculum, and tutoring. At Thomas Elementary, we collaborated with teachers to review curriculum and determine what needed to be addressed in the tutorial programs. In addition, we met with teachers and administrators from Thomas School District to discuss, assist in implementing, and participate in professional development at the school.

Thomas School District includes two elementary schools and two high schools which serve just over 1200 students. More than 80 percent of students in the district are African-American, more than 90 percent receive free or reduced lunch and/or are designated as "economically disadvantaged." The district serves families that live across Thomas County, an area covering more than 250 square miles. The Thomas School District is plagued by high teacher and administrator turnover. In 2000, 10 percent of teachers were uncertified or teaching with emergency certification, and nearly half of teachers had fewer than five years' experience. Three of the schools have changed principals in the last three years, and Thomas Elementary, where we primarily work, is on its third principal in four years.

As is common in a poor, rural district in the south, reading achievement is below national and state standards in the Thomas School District. Results from the year 2000 administration of the state standardized test indicated that over 60 percent of third graders scored in the lowest quartile for both reading and language arts, and only 7 percent scored above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile.

Voters of the county elect the school board and the superintendent. During the 1990s the district lost state accreditation and is now operated by a state-appointed conservator who has responsibility for supervising reform efforts and raising achievement scores.

The district has a relatively small number of central office administrators. These include an elementary education coordinator and a testing coordinator/grant writer, in addition to the state-appointed conservator and the elected superintendent.

During our second year of collaboration with the school district, the district purchased (and trained teachers to use) three different reading programs:

- *Breakthrough to Literacy* (2000, Wright Group/McGraw-Hill Publishers)
- *Lightspan Achieve Now!* (2000-2001, Lightspan), and
- *SRA Open Court* (2000, McGraw-Hill Publishers).

We became interested in documenting the district's decision-making processes as we heard teachers express concerns about the purchasing of the reading materials and whether or not these materials could successfully meet the needs of the students. This study uses case study (Stake, 1995) and participant-observer (Patton, 1990) methodologies to examine the decision-making processes that led to the purchase of the three reading programs in the Thomas School District.

As literacy professionals, we believe that it is our responsibility to undertake work, which is likely to contribute to efforts to improve teaching and learning in literacy classrooms. By understanding the ways in which one district makes decisions about its literacy curriculum, we hope that we can make better decisions for our own research in and teaching of literacy. We believe this research can improve our interactions with schools and that we will more likely be effective in working with classroom teachers. We also hope that this information will be used to inform other literacy educators about reading programs.

### **Perspectives**

Prepackaged literacy programs are repeatedly advocated as a means of ameliorating some of the most intractable issues affecting reading achievement:

- linguistic and economic diversity
- poverty
- inexperienced teachers, and
- teachers without appropriate credentials.

Unfortunately, as MacGillivray, Ardell, Skoda, and Curwen (2002), Gutierrez (2001), and others (e.g. Adcock and Patton, 2001) have shown, these programs often serve to exacerbate the very problems they are intended to solve.

Prepackaged literacy programs are intended to be teacher-proof and to meet the needs of all students by presenting a unified, one-size-fits-all curriculum. Teachers deliver, rather than create, the curriculum, as they read the scripts and assign the assignments specified in the teacher's manual. These materials often tend to ignore the rich linguistic skills, competencies, and knowledge children bring to school. Moreover, these materials tend to divert precious professional development time and resources away from helping teachers examine their day-to-day practice and understand children and content. Gutierrez (2001) describes these materials as "characterized by reductive literacy practices, bolstered by English-only legislation, narrow conceptions of the teaching and learning of literacy, [and] a focus on teaching a narrow range of basic skills" (p. 565).

In spite of these concerns about prepackaged programs, in recent years federal legislation has increasingly emphasized the purchase of prepackaged curricular materials. The federal Reading Excellence Act (2001) provided millions of dollars to improve instruction by providing improved curriculum. Guidelines for grant applications specified that grant proposals must ". . . select one or more programs of reading instruction, developed using scientifically-based reading research, to improve reading instruction by all academic teachers for all children in each of the schools selected by the agency . . ." (section 2255.b.1.A). Districts were allowed to design their own programs for reading instruction and professional development, however, funding would only be given to programs which were designed according to the guidelines of scientifically based reading research and needed to include an agreement or a relationship with a "person or entity with experience or expertise

about such programs" (section 2255 d.1.A.2) who has "experience or expertise about the program" (section 2255 b.1.B) and has demonstrated success. The legislation precluded teachers and school faculty from designing their own literature based programs based on their knowledge of teaching and children. The statute itself privileged consultations with vendors and the purchase of reading programs which come complete with consultants, professional development, and research supporting claims about their success.

The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLBA) also seems to privilege the purchase of prepackaged curriculum materials as a means of increasing literacy achievement. An on-line fact sheet about the *No Child Left Behind Act* stated that NCLBA "Requires that Title I funds be used only for effective educational practices," based on "strategies that are grounded in scientifically based research." (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The NCLBA legislation itself states that funds for improving students' reading skills may be distributed to local education agencies if they select and implement "a learning system or program of reading instruction based on scientifically based reading research and that schools may also use the funds for procuring and implementing instructional materials, including education technology such as software and other digital curricula, that are based on scientifically based reading research." (Part B, Subpart 1, Section 1202).

In order to try to understand the impact of federal legislation of this sort on local decision-making about reading curriculum, we began an investigation of the factors that impacted the curriculum purchasing decisions of one small school district.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collected for this study were gathered as a result of our roles with Thomas School District. In 1999, school district officials asked us to collaborate on teacher education, professional development, and remediation programs. This collaboration has led us to complex roles with the district. We are teacher educators supervising teacher candidates in field experiences; we are collaborators helping with grant efforts and professional development; we are part-time teachers working with

children and family members in a grant-funded after school and summer program; and we are researchers studying factors that influence literacy achievement in a rural setting. As we collaborated with teachers and administrators in the school and administrators at district level, we were allowed access to observe the events, which unfolded as a particular case of decision-making, consistent with the case study research as described by Stake (1995).

As participant-observers, much of the data for this study have arisen as a component of our participation in and interaction with the district. We have established meaningful identities with the administrators in the Thomas School District central office and the State Department of Education and with teachers at Thomas Elementary School. These relationships have allowed us to gain entry into both formal and informal operations of the school and school district. Administrators and teachers at Thomas Elementary School and the administrators at the district level seem to understand our tripartite role as they have interacted with us as teachers, researchers, and teacher educators.

The data for this study include field notes documenting our interactions with school and district personnel. We have spent many hours at the school and central office, observing the decision-making process as it unfolded, documenting interactions with curriculum vendors, and collecting appropriate documents that were part of the decision-making process, such as budgets, grant proposals and requests for proposals, advertising materials and free samples of curriculum, and internal memos (Denzin, 1978). In addition, we have conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators, and central office personnel, asking them to describe curricular purchasing decisions and the grant writing and budgeting process (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). These interviews, observations, and documents allowed us to understand many perspectives of the decision-making process.

Categories of factors influencing curricular decisions for the Thomas School District have emerged using a process of triangulation, thick descriptions, and long-term observation to analyze and understand the data (Denzin, 1978; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Seidman, 1998). We examined the data for consistencies and patterns, which would suggest

categories of factors shaping the district's decisions. During follow-up interviews, administrators and teachers confirmed or disconfirmed these categories, as we formally asked them about the processes of decision-making, and by the documents we collected, including grant applications, budget reports, and memos to and from administrators.

### **Reading Programs Purchased by Thomas School District**

For the last several years, teachers at Thomas School District have used the adopted reading program which is the Houghton Mifflin series *Invitations to Literacy* (1998). In addition, during the 2000-2001 school year, Thomas School District used funds from three grants to purchase three additional, supplemental reading programs. A Reading Sufficiency Grant paid for the purchase of *SRA/Open Court*, to be used in K-3 classrooms at Thomas Elementary. A Technology Literacy Challenge Grant paid for the purchase of *Breakthrough to Literacy* (2002) for the kindergarten and first grade classrooms. Finally, a Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Grant allowed the district to purchase *Lightspan Achieve Now* materials and software, for use in 7th and 8th grade classrooms at Thomas High School.

*SRA/Open Court*, a scripted reading basal program for kindergarten through sixth grade, provides direct instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics. This program includes basal anthologies, big books, student workbooks, and prepared lesson plans. *Open Court* has been advertised as a research-based curriculum that provides systematic, explicit instruction to teaching reading. In addition, *Open Court* provides instructional support that includes skills worksheets, enrichment and remediation activities, and professional development activities for the teachers.

*Breakthrough to Literacy*, published by The Wright Group/McGraw Hill, and is described as an individualized, balanced instructional program focused on a variety of vocabulary controlled books children read at home and in the classroom, and on computer software which focuses on the alphabet, phonemic awareness and phonics, and reading and rereading vocabulary controlled books. When purchased, *Breakthrough to Literacy* provides each classroom with five computers



and furniture, as well as prepackaged lesson plans for whole group, small group, and individualized instruction.

The Lightspan Company produces *Lightspan Achieve Now*. The central feature of *Lightspan Achieve Now* is a set of discs for use on Sony Playstations that use interactive games and activities to teach a variety of literacy skills. The Sony Playstation platform is intended to be motivating and portable, so that students can carry home a unit and a set of discs in order to work on literacy out of school. *Lightspan Achieve Now* also includes a variety of assessments, detailed lesson plans, and support for aligning the Lightspan curriculum with state standards.

### **Factors Affecting the Decision Making Process**

In order to assist us in understanding why the three reading programs were purchased, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the school community. Through these interviews we found that decision-makers purchased these programs based on low-test scores and exposure to particular materials. The factors, which influenced district officials' decisions are discussed in the following paragraphs.

#### *Response to Low Test Scores*

In general, the decision to purchase reading programs for literacy curriculum in the Thomas School District arose as a result of years of low-test scores. The district purchased new materials in response to its low-test scores, and low-test scores helped enable the district to win the federal and state grant funds that paid for the purchase of the programs.

The superintendent reported an unfamiliarity with the specifics leading to the purchase of any of the three programs documented here, but believed the staff (central office personnel and principals) primarily made decisions based on assessments of students, saying, "I think data that we obtain from standardized tests and teacher made tests and those types of things will be used religiously to make those kinds of decisions...."

These data to which the superintendent referred were translated into a need for additional reading programs for the literacy curriculum. The grant writer for Thomas School District, for example, used his understanding of the needs of the district, including poor performance on standardized tests, to write grants for the purchase of *Lightspan Achieve Now*. According to the grant writer, after looking at the test scores and studying several programs, he worked *Lightspan Achieve Now* into the grant application because "it might actually meet a need or two, and this is compared to about 20 different things." The district's definition of data, interpretation of that data, and definition of school district needs shaped the districts' purchasing decisions.

The superintendent also spoke of a need to standardize curriculum in the district. The superintendent wanted all of the teachers to be teaching with the same sets of materials using consistent methods. According to the superintendent, this would enable district administrators the ability to make judgments about individual teachers' performance. The superintendent reasoned that if all the teachers were teaching the same materials, differences in student performance between classes could be tied directly to teacher ability.

### *Exposure to Particular Materials*

District administrators' knowledge of the existence of particular programs and the nature of their exposure to particular programs greatly affected purchasing decisions. Administrators first learned about *Breakthrough to Literacy* during a session, conducted by the vendor, at a statewide conference sponsored by the Department of Education. At this session, the vendor told the elementary coordinator, superintendent, and other administrators from Thomas School District about the program and its materials, and showed them charts of statistics about the program's benefits.

The district decided to purchase *SRA/Open Court* in part because it had very high exposure just before they needed to spend some funds remaining in a grant budget. While several central office administrators made decisions about how to spend Reading Sufficiency funds, the grant writer was researching via the Internet a variety of curricular programs.

Because of this Internet research, he had catalogs, print outs, and flyers about *SRA/Open Court*, and loaned those to the administrators making the spending decision. As part of his Internet research, the grant writer met with the vendor for *SRA/Open Court*. When the grant writer found out that the vendor was from the same hometown as the elementary coordinator, the grant writer made sure that the two were introduced. As the grant writer said, "the product had been presented; awareness of the product had been presented." The connection between the elementary coordinator and the vendor, the flyers, and printouts all gave awareness of the product.

#### *Grant Writing Help From Vendors and Publishers*

Vendors and publishers frequently help districts write grants. This can be seen on several websites curriculum company websites, which offer support to districts when writing grant applications. The *Breakthrough to Literacy* web site, for example, invites browsers to learn about the *Reading Excellence Act*. In 2002, the *Breakthrough to Literacy* site also provided a four-page PDF document, which lists the criteria for qualifying for a *Reading Excellence Act* grant, along with the ways in which *Breakthrough to Literacy* meets or surpasses each of those criteria. The website (2002) boasts:

Grant-writing Assistance: *Breakthrough to Literacy* has prepared materials that can help your school district write a successful *Reading Excellence Act* grant application. For immediate grant-writing assistance, contact your local *Breakthrough to Literacy* sales consultant or the *Breakthrough to Literacy* national office.

At the Thomas School District, the grant writer used information from vendors' websites, particularly the *Lightspan Achieve Now* web site, during the proposal process. In addition, Thomas School District received even more direct support from a vendor. One of the grant writer's colleagues volunteered to help write the Technology Literacy Challenge proposal. As the grant writer told us, "This guy used to be my boss [in another educational setting] and he's kind of like a friend and I was asking for help writing these grants, and he helped me out." Turns out he was a *Lightspan* employee. The grant writer and vendor wrote the

purchase of the *Lightspan Achieve Now* materials into the budget for the proposal, won the grant for the high school, and purchased the materials.

The same vendor helped another local district write a Reading Excellence Act grant proposal, again securing a place for *Lightspan Achieve Now* materials in the budget, and leading to the eventual purchase of *Lightspan* curriculum. Personnel from this school district asked us to assist them in writing the same grant. One of us visited the school while the vendor for *Lightspan* assisted in writing the grant proposal.

### *The Extras*

Another factor, which influenced the district's decisions to purchase programs, was the perceived value of the materials and extras they would provide. For example, the elementary coordinator told us that she wrote a grant proposal especially to purchase the *Breakthrough to Literacy* program. Central office administrators were particularly interested in this program because it would provide five computers, including both software and furniture, for each classroom. They also liked the number of big books and take-home books that the program would provide.

The extras also influenced the decision to purchase *Lightspan Achieve Now*. The grant writer explained that he especially liked the *Lightspan Achieve Now* materials because they make use of Sony Playstations. The program would provide several game consoles, and the video game platform seemed likely to motivate students.

Vendors know that the "bells and whistles," the take-home books, big books, book bags, technology, black-line masters, posters, and bulletin board pieces that these supplemental programs provide sway decision-makers who have little time to carefully study written lesson plans, curriculum, or the research and philosophy of literacy programs. This was made most vivid when we attended a vendor's presentation, hosted at the school. Teachers and administrators gathered together to listen to the vendor, who read from a big book, stacked the trade books that come with the program into conspicuous piles, counted the number of vocabulary-controlled take-home books that would come with

teacher's manuals and handouts, displayed games that accompany the program, and then made sure that free samples of big books and book bags got into the hands of people who might have money to spend, including the principal, us, and a grant coordinator, but not the teachers or assistant teachers also attending the presentation. During the 2001 school year, the district decided to purchase materials from this vendor.

### *Money*

The unencumbered availability of money affected the district's decision to purchase programs in several ways. In one case, the fear of losing money sparked the decision to make a purchase. Thomas Elementary purchased *SRA/Open Court* materials toward the end of a fiscal year when there were several thousand dollars left over in the Reading Sufficiency budget. Since they had recently reviewed *SRA/Open Court* materials, administrators decided to purchase it at the last minute. As the grant writer said, "There was a need in the budget to spend a lot of money quick and that was one of the things that fit the bill."

The grants themselves, and the funds provided by the grants, also shaped the district's decisions. Generally, districts receive a percentage of total grant funds for overhead and expenses. These funds, in part, motivated the district to apply for grants. Grant RFPs also shaped the district's purchasing decisions, especially when those grants tailored to particular kinds of programs. The Technology Literacy Challenge Grant, for example, provided funds for technology (hardware and software), teaching materials, and technology training to districts that could show a well-organized plan for incorporating technology into literacy instruction. *Breakthrough to Literacy* is advertised as a comprehensive program, which provides software, curriculum, and training to integrate technology into early literacy teaching and learning. Requesting funds for *Breakthrough to Literacy* increased the district's odds of winning the grant because the program came with hardware and software that met the technology criteria. The link between grant funding and the purchase of particular kinds of reading programs continues.

### *State Standards*

Thomas School District personnel also tended to be more likely to consider literacy programs that advertised themselves as consistent with the state's standards. According to the elementary coordinator, one reason that the school district purchased *Breakthrough to Literacy* was because it "matches the state components." Knowing that school districts feel pressured to purchase materials that will help them meet state standards, vendors create promotional materials claiming consistency with those standards. After we, the government awarded us a substantial federal grant, the Leap Into Literacy Center (*Leapfrog*) and The Wright Group, among others, sent us promotional materials. Many of these materials contain outlines or charts, which explicitly explain how particular lesson plans, books, or activities that come with their programs meet the state's literacy standards.

District officials seemed to be swayed by promotional materials and vendors' assurances that the curriculum they purchased aligned with the state standards for reading. However, there is no evidence that they spent time checking vendors' promises or establishing whether the curriculum would help students meet all, some, or few of the state standards.

### *State Department of Education Facilitation*

Exposure to literacy programs and connections with vendors affected the district's decision to purchase or apply for funds to purchase literacy programs. The State Department of Education increasingly facilitates exposure and connections such as these through face-to-face networking, conference presentations, and print materials describing various reading programs. The State Department of Education hosts annual conferences for educators. Administrators and other educators from schools awarded particular grants have been and continue to be required to attend the annual conference in order to continue to receive their grants.

At the conference, the State Department of Education facilitates connections between districts and vendors in several ways. The State Department of Education works with a company to facilitate registration and to handle vendor packets for the conference. Vendors are allowed to rent space to display their wares in the conference exhibition hall. In addition, the

conference schedule is arranged with time for educators to "mingle" with vendors.

During the school year 2000-2001, the State Department of Education began sharing print materials about reading programs in their *Guide to Research-Based Reading Programs*. The State Department of Education invited vendors and publishers to describe their reading programs, including descriptions of the goals of the program, results of its use, the students and special populations it serves, and vendor-selected research documenting its effectiveness. For the *Guide*, vendors created charts listing each of the state's K-3 literacy standards and the components of the reading programs which match each standard. They distributed the *Guide to Research-Based Reading Programs* to one administrator from each school but not to teachers. The Thomas School District received the guide after they had made the three purchases described in this paper.

### *Vendor-Provided Research*

Federal legislation calls for districts to purchase reading programs, which have a proven record of effectiveness. Independent research would enable publishers to make claims about the effectiveness of their programs, however, little positive independent research has been conducted on the impact of prepackaged literacy programs, and the bulk of independent research tends to be negative. Publishers do, however, provide and make claims about research that proves the effectiveness of their materials. The publishers and vendors of the programs provided research that affected the decisions to purchase *SRA/Open Court*, *Breakthrough to Literacy*, and *Lightspan Achieve Now*. Thomas acquired the research presented by vendors along with promotional materials, at State Department of Education Conferences, and by consulting the vendors' web sites.

### *Administrators*

Administrators in the Thomas School District told us that they do not regularly read academic and research journals. A few of the administrators subscribe to journals such as *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Educational Leadership*, and ASCD materials, or know that copies of

these journals are available at the central office, but, they find that their jobs leave them little time to read those journals. They are also unfamiliar with journals that publish literacy research. Their only exposure to the research base that reading programs are supposed to be built around (according to federal legislation) comes from the legislation itself and vendors' promotional materials. No one involved in the decision to purchase the three programs studied here sought out additional research from journals or books during the decision making process. The administrators who made decisions did not read much of the research provided by the vendors, let alone research on the impact of prepackaged literacy programs or research specifying the characteristics of quality literacy instruction and curriculum.

### *Teachers*

Teachers were not involved in the decision to purchase any of the three programs. The central office staff made the decisions when they applied for the grants and when they made budgetary decisions. When asked if she knew who participated in the decision-making about purchasing reading programs, a first grade teacher stated, "I do not know for sure but I do know that the decisions are made at the central office. I am not sure who exactly makes the decisions." Teachers often learned that decisions had been made long after the materials had been purchased. A kindergarten teacher told us that she learned about *Breakthrough to Literacy* when boxes of materials were delivered to her classroom. The new principal did not know what the boxes were for, so the teacher eventually reached a central office administrator to ask what was in the boxes and why they were delivered to the school. Only then did she learn that she would be required to set up the five computers, attend *Breakthrough to Literacy* trainings, and teach using the *Breakthrough to Literacy* materials.

If the decision makers had asked teachers for input, they would have realized that some elementary teachers were being asked to implement three different reading programs. One of the third grade teachers stated:



"I believe strongly that the only way to make readers of children is to let them read. We have a good literature based series with lots of support material, and I just don't think we need any more programs. There's not time to do justice to all of the things that we have."

### *Summary*

The decision making process at the Thomas School District during the 2000-2001 school year was haphazard, context dependent, authoritative, and externally influenced. Central office administrators, including the grant writer and the elementary education coordinator, in consultation with the school board and the State Department conservator, made the decision to purchase and implement each of the three reading programs was by. Principals and classroom teachers had little to no input in the decision making process. While statewide initiatives impacted the process, such as the state's language arts standards, the districts' definition of its children as at-risk and language deficient and connections with vendors who effectively sold their products to the district affected it more.

### **Discussion**

We have described this process not to point fingers at the district, or to imply that their decision making process is any better or worse than that used by other districts across the state and nation. In many ways, the district's decisions can be viewed as quite rational. At the very least, officials in the Thomas School District have been working to respond to and improve their low achievement scores. District administrators listened to the advice of colleagues and vendors, they based decisions on their perceived understanding of the district's needs, they took advantage of collaboration and support offered to them by trusted colleagues, and they sought out additional funds and resources for their district.

However, the district administrators' decision to respond to low-test scores by purchasing prepackaged reading curriculums is debatable. Viewed as a response to federal legislation and federal reform efforts, the process used by the Thomas School District to make decisions about

reading curriculum indicates that reform efforts may lead to decisions which decrease teacher autonomy and lead to greater, rather than less, inequality in our nation's schools.

The district's decision-making process suggests a lack of respect for teachers' knowledge and a mistrust of teachers' skills and abilities. Teachers could have been consulted about their needs, and asked whether the existing basal system was sufficient. Teachers could have been allowed to study the variety of supplemental and comprehensive reading programs being considered, and teacher skill could have informed the decision. Instead, teachers' knowledge was ignored, and the context of each school and classroom devalued.

The language of the *No Child Left Behind Act* can encourage school districts to perpetuate the autocratic, appositional process used at Thomas School District. The *No Child Left Behind Act* aims to provide funds to districts, which commit to using "a learning system or program of reading instruction based on scientifically based reading research." Accountability measures emphasize standardized test scores over other assessments. District officials aim to keep their Title I funds. To do so, they will find themselves purchasing materials that fit (or are advertised to fit) the NCLBA criteria and which claim to align themselves with state accountability measures. The publishers of reading materials are already redesigning their marketing tools to emphasize consistency between their materials and the criteria established in *No Child Left Behind*.

We understand that to impact the decisions made at Thomas School District and other districts, we must do more than help districts do a better job choosing from the offerings that vendors provide and that we must help districts move beyond picking their materials based on where the vendor went to high school. Instead, we must work with districts, administrators, teachers, and parents as advocates for literacy education, which emphasizes children and learning over delivery of programs.

We cannot allow the research to speak for itself, trusting that grant-writers, curriculum supervisors, superintendents, and other decisions makers will find it or that vendors will bring it to their attention. According to Barth (2001), no other profession ignores the voices of its

members. Barth (1990) explained we must strive to actively assist school districts in becoming a community of learners, "places where students, teachers, parents, and administrators share the opportunities and responsibilities for making decisions that affect all the occupants of the schoolhouse" (p. 9).

Teachers and principals in the Thomas School District were not part of the decision making process. When teachers do become involved in decision-making, they seek an understanding of their roles and how they contribute to the overall effectiveness of the school and the school system (Norton, 1999). Billingsley (1993) reported that when teachers' professional expertise is recognized, when teachers are encouraged to be involved in decision-making, and when teachers are allowed to use professional discretion, then the motivation, confidence, and commitment of those teachers are boosted.

In the Thomas School District, decisions were made without teacher or principal input. These decisions did little to garner support for the initiation and implementation of these supplemental reading programs. The teachers and principals in this district did not have the buy in needed to promote the use of these supplemental programs. In fact, the teachers reported that they were not even sure these programs were even needed.

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