



Strong Starts: Turning Summer Reflection into Intentional Literacy Planning

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As summer begins, many teachers find themselves balancing two important needs: the need for rest and the desire to prepare well for the school year ahead. Curriculum changes, classroom setup, assessment planning, literacy expectations, and the countless details that come with teaching can quickly create the feeling that there is always more to do.

However, strong literacy instruction is rarely built through doing everything at once.

More often, it is built through clarity, consistency, intentional preparation, and sustainable instructional practices implemented over time. Research on instructional improvement continues to emphasize the importance of focused goals and manageable systems rather than attempting large-scale change all at once (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; NSW Department of Education, 2020).

The goal is not perfection. The goal is to create a strong, sustainable start that supports both teachers and students throughout the school year.

Reflection Matters

Before reorganizing materials or creating new plans, it is valuable to first reflect on the previous year.

Consider questions such as:

- Which literacy routines created the strongest student engagement?
- Where did students experience the greatest success?
- Which areas required additional support?
- Which instructional practices felt most effective?
- What created unnecessary stress or inconsistency?

It is easy to begin planning by looking for something new. Reflection helps us pause and consider what is already working before deciding what needs to change.

Reflection helps teachers move beyond simply adding more and instead focus on the instructional practices that truly had the greatest impact on student learning.

In many cases, the most meaningful improvements are not dramatic changes. Often, they are small adjustments that strengthen clarity, student engagement, and opportunities for meaningful thinking throughout the literacy block.

Reflection is more than a personal exercise. It is a professional practice that helps teachers make stronger instructional decisions. Research on reflective practice suggests that teachers who intentionally analyze instruction and student responses are better positioned to refine their teaching and improve long-term implementation (Schön, 1983; Edutopia, 2024).

You Don't Need to Do Everything

One of the biggest mistakes teachers make when planning for a new school year is believing they need to improve everything at once.

New curriculum materials, instructional initiatives, assessment expectations, and professional learning opportunities can quickly create a long list of goals. Before long, that list becomes overwhelming.

Every teacher has experienced the feeling of arriving at October with good intentions but not enough time to sustain every new idea. This is why focused planning matters.

The reality is that meaningful improvement rarely comes from trying to do everything. It comes from identifying the practices that matter most and implementing them well.

One reason sustainable planning matters is that both students and teachers have limited mental capacity for managing information and tasks. Cognitive load theory explains that when too many demands compete for attention, performance suffers (Sweller, 1988). While this concept is often discussed in relation to students, it also applies to teachers. Overly complicated systems can reduce a teacher's ability to focus fully on instruction, observation, and responsiveness during lessons.

Instead of trying to overhaul everything at once, focus on creating systems and routines that can realistically be maintained over time.

Sustainable literacy planning might include:

- consistent discussion routines,
- clear small-group structures,
- predictable student response opportunities,
- intentional read-aloud planning,

- meaningful vocabulary routines,
- and manageable assessment systems.

Research and classroom experience consistently show that students benefit most when high-quality instructional practices become part of everyday classroom life rather than isolated activities or occasional events.

Small Practices Create Big Impact

Research and classroom experience continue to remind us that small, consistent instructional practices often create the strongest long-term results.

Daily instructional habits matter:

- how students discuss text,
- how they respond during lessons,
- how routines are introduced,
- how teachers provide feedback,
- and how opportunities for thinking are embedded throughout instruction.

Students benefit when classrooms feel predictable, organized, and purposeful. Clear routines reduce cognitive overload and allow students to focus more fully on learning. When students know what to expect, they can devote more attention to reading, writing, discussion, and comprehension rather than spending mental energy trying to manage uncertainty about procedures or expectations.

Consistent instructional structures also support teachers. Clear systems reduce the pressure of constantly reinventing lessons or routines and allow teachers to focus more intentionally on student learning.

We often look for the next strategy, program, or resource. Yet many of the strongest gains occur when effective instructional practices are implemented consistently over time.

Preparation Reduces Overwhelm

Intentional preparation during the summer can help create a calmer and more focused beginning to the school year.

Preparation does not need to be complicated to be effective.

Simple steps can make a meaningful difference later:

- preparing reading response templates,
- organizing small-group materials,
- developing high-interest book lists,
- creating student observation tools,
- planning discussion prompts,
- or identifying literacy routines for the first weeks of school.

Research on summer learning suggests that students can lose academic progress over extended breaks, particularly when consistent reading opportunities are limited (Cooper et al., 1996). Thoughtful literacy preparation before school begins can help teachers establish stronger instructional momentum early in the year (Panorama Education, 2025).

When materials, routines, and expectations are prepared in advance, teachers can spend less time managing logistics and more time focusing on instruction and student learning.

Rather than trying to prepare everything, focus on the materials and systems that will have the greatest impact on student success during those critical first weeks of school.

Planning Forward: Simple Steps for a Stronger Start

Intentional literacy planning does not require rebuilding everything at once. Often, the strongest preparation comes from identifying a few high-impact areas and planning them well.

As you prepare for the upcoming school year, consider focusing on these simple planning steps.

1. Identify Your Priorities

Determine which literacy practices or routines deserve the greatest focus this year.

- What do students need most?
- Which instructional routines created the strongest results?
- Which areas need greater attention?

Avoid trying to improve everything at once. Focus creates clarity.

2. Establish Predictable Routines

Consider how students will:

- transition into literacy instruction,
- participate in discussion,
- respond to reading,
- engage during small groups,
- and receive feedback.

Clear routines increase instructional time and help students focus on learning rather than procedures.

3. Prepare Key Materials Early

Simple preparation can reduce stress once the school year begins.

Consider organizing:

- reading response templates,
- small-group materials,
- observation tools,
- discussion prompts,
- and high-interest texts.

Prepared systems help teachers focus more fully on instruction rather than constant organization.

4. Plan for Student Thinking

As lessons are designed, it is important to consider how students will actively process learning.

- Will students explain their thinking?
- Discuss ideas with others?
- Return to the text for evidence?
- Apply learning in meaningful ways?

Learning deepens when students actively think about, process, and apply content rather than simply complete tasks. The goal is not just task completion. The goal is to build understanding.

5. Choose One Area for Intentional Growth

Rather than overwhelming yourself with multiple goals, identify one meaningful literacy focus for the beginning of the year.

Research on goal setting suggests that focused, realistic goals are more likely to be sustained over time. A clear area of focus provides direction and helps teachers monitor growth throughout the year.

Moving Forward with Purpose

Summer planning is not about having every answer before the school year begins. It is about entering the year with greater clarity, stronger systems, and a clear understanding of what matters most for student learning.

Most teachers already have effective practices in place. Summer planning is often less about finding something new and more about strengthening what is already working.

The strongest literacy classrooms are not built in a single day, week, or professional development session. They are built through intentional decisions made over time—decisions that support student thinking, engagement, and growth.

As you prepare for the year ahead, consider this final question:

What is one literacy practice that could make the greatest difference for your students this year?

Start there.

Small, thoughtful steps taken with purpose can create meaningful results for both teachers and students throughout the year.