

# Think big. Teach smart.

## by REGIE ROUTMAN



I have just returned from a weeklong teaching and coaching residency in a diverse school where teachers and the principal are poised to take a big leap in their thinking, teaching, and assessing. Seeing what's been possible for all students as writers and readers has begun to cause a seismic shift in beliefs and practices. In just one week, teaching and learning have accelerated, students and teachers are more joyful, and some students who were thought to be low performing have outperformed those labels.

Think big and work backward from there. Instead of thinking of all the literacy pieces that need to be put into place, teachers at the school are putting students' interests, needs, and potential first and making curriculum more relevant for their students. Teachers are beginning to think big and teach smart by simplifying the work, getting to the essence of what's most important across the curriculum, and making more of the work authentic, meaningful, and personal. As well, they are beginning to take the long view while focusing on short-term gains.

## Thinking Big Schoolwide

A culture that supports shared learning, shared beliefs, and ongoing collaboration is the first step to thinking big schoolwide. Such a culture is embedded in an ongoing Professional Literacy Community of formal and informal conversations, collaboration, and coaching throughout the day. That is, teachers and the principal meet for professional study; view, discuss, and analyze exemplary literacy practices; plan, try out, and apply those practices with support; examine and analyze student work; use summative and formative assessments to celebrate gains, note needs and next steps, and move learning forward across a whole school (Routman 2014).

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In schools where all students achieve, trust levels are high; teachers collaborate throughout the day; teachers and principals have the know-how of excellent instruction; teaching and learning are authentic; strong principal leadership and teacher leadership coexist; tasks and lessons are authentic and related to real-world purposes—as much as is possible—and students know, understand, and value the purpose of the lesson. In every school I have worked where worthwhile literacy and learning achievement gains have been sustained, embedded Professional Literacy Communities are

the culture and daily life of the school, and focus is on students and student learning, not standards.

Of course, we teach with the Common Core State Standards in mind but not as a prescription. We implement the ambitious and worthy CCSS but as a framework and guide for what students need to know and be able to do—and what we as educators need to expertly teach and assess. I keep a double-sided, laminated copy of the CCSS anchor standards in reading and writing close by and keep my focus on those big ideas. I know that if I adeptly address these big ideas, the skills will be embedded.

Not to be minimized, in schools that think big, we create an “I can do it!” environment for our students as well as teachers. Our vulnerable students especially need to know by word and deed that we believe in them and will do everything we can to ensure their success. For that to happen, we have to be respectful of all students' background and cultures, fully present and alive in the teaching moment, and knowledgeable enough to deal with the unpredictable nature of teaching and learning.

## When we think big and teach smart, we:

- **Raise expectations.** Adults in the school believe and act upon the belief that it's possible for students—and teachers as well—to achieve on a high level if we provide a safe and trusting climate; relevant and challenging curriculum; necessary supports for all learners; first-rate texts and resources; and expert instruction and feedback that move learning forward. We also ensure that we provide adequate demonstrations and shared experiences before students are released to “try it out” on their own—what I call The Optimal Learning Model. Acting upon raised expectations also includes applying the language of effective feedback, that is, using respectful and specific language that focuses first on celebrating students' strengths and intentions and what students are attempting to do before moving to what needs improvement.
- **Prioritize.** Readers read and writers write. If we want students to be readers and writers, they must spend most of their time each day in sustained reading and writing of meaningful texts. We work backward from there: sustained time to read and write is the priority, and we ensure that happens and that choice is built in. We try to schedule daily writing for younger students in the morning because they have more energy then, as writing—unlike reading—can require more effort; the child does not generally have a text to view as an intermediary support. We use guided reading only as a means to an end, that is, guided reading is where students are doing most of the work and we are quickly checking to ensure they can apply the strategies and habits of readers that we have been teaching. That is so when students are on their own as literacy learners, which is most of the time, they are successful problem solvers who can direct their own learning.
- **Make the work authentic.** We teach and investigate what's worth knowing; our curriculum and texts are connected to real-world purposes and genuine inquiry. Resources used to support the instruction are of excellent quality, and align with established beliefs and practices. Teachers check for understanding before, during, and after the lesson and make adjustments, as needed.



As well, we embrace the reading-writing connection and notice, name, discuss, and apply what authors do as writers and what readers do as thinkers to understand and engage with text.

As an example, in a recent residency we connected all our reading and writing with what it means to be a champion. The Olympics had just ended and the Paralympics were about to begin. Reading and discussing carefully chosen literature, current news articles, and well-written texts on websites raised the level of thinking and engagement. Making the work current and relevant yielded great results. Each student wrote and sent a letter to someone who was a champion in their life, and most of these letters were exemplary in content, tone, and editing. The work mattered, and students took it seriously. The mother of a fifth grader who received a letter from her son wrote to his teacher and the school's principal:

As proud of him as I am, he's proud of me too. Who knew? And not often do you get to hear it. . . . Thank you for this beautiful gift. My kids have not only received an amazing education, but you have made them better human beings.

- **Embrace whole-part-whole teaching.** We begin with meaningful and whole texts in reading and writing, and we embed the explicit teaching of skills and strategies that students need to know in meaningful contexts. By contrast, when we teach part-to-whole, we embrace the misplaced hope that focusing on skills in isolation will add up to a meaningful whole. In fact, we make learning more difficult when we break it into small pieces, which is especially egregious to our struggling students and second language learners. Too many learners never see how all the parts fit together, and their achievement and confidence remain stalled. The whole truly is greater than the sum of its parts; learning is more effective, efficient, and joyful.
- **Aim for self-determining learners.** We aim for learners who self-monitor, self-evaluate, self-correct, and self-direct their own learning. Otherwise, students remain overly dependent on others and do not reach optimal performance or become fully confident and competent. We ensure learners have daily, sustained time for deliberate practice in reading and writing texts—mostly of their own choosing—to become self-teaching and to set worthwhile goals that often go beyond themselves. Note that it is not sufficient that learners can independently complete a task. Too often the tasks we give students are not worth their time and effort. I always begin my planning in any residency with this big question in mind: *How can I engage students' hearts and minds?* If I do that successfully, I can teach them everything they need to know, and they will make the effort to do the hard work needed to complete those authentic tasks.

## Coming to Think Big

For more than four decades, I've had the continuing privilege of teaching reading and writing in diverse K–6 classrooms and schools. In the last two decades, that teaching has expanded to coaching and mentoring teachers, principals, and coaches in both literacy instruction and leadership in a school-based residency model. I created that model in the mid 1990s when I realized that no one was

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demonstrating for teachers and principals and that student achievement was languishing in too many places, especially in high-challenge schools with large numbers of students of color and second language learners. We educators were often just expected to implement a new program, set of standards, or resource after minimal “training” that rarely offered continuing support and guidance with application to the classroom.

As well, when I went into schools, I was chagrined to learn that even when a whole school had done a professional book study on, for example, *Reading Essentials* (Routman 2003) or *Writing Essentials* (Routman 2008), the overall knowledge level of the staff was generally low. That is, teachers and principals could talk about reading and writing practices and skills but, most often, they lacked the know-how for what highly effective practices would look like and what productive instructional and feedback language might sound like in a classroom where learning is meaningful and accelerated for all students. The missing piece was “seeing” the instructional moves and “hearing” the language of responsive teaching so that application of effective teaching could become a reality in the classroom.





## A Residency Model for Thinking Big

A residency model provides the framework and content for embedded and ongoing professional development and raises the knowledge and expertise of teachers, coaches, and principals. The residency framework in *Regie Routman in Residence: Transforming Our Teaching* (Routman 2008, 2009, 2013) supports any curriculum and standards in place at the school or district. The end result is more effective, engaging, and joyful literacy instruction, assessment, and achievement and worthwhile change that is sustainable.

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## Final Thoughts

My current thinking and practices continue to be influenced by my students, classroom experiences, collaboration with colleagues, valid and reliable research, and ongoing reflection. Without thinking big, studying professionally, collaborating with colleagues, and being reflective and mindful about what's going well, what needs our attention, and how to best move forward, we will continue to end up on the usual educational treadmill—running in place without getting to a worthwhile destination. When we think big and are highly knowledgeable about teaching and learning, we engage our students and bring the joy and energy back into our classrooms and schools.

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**Regie Routman has more than four decades of experience as a mentor teacher, literacy coach, and leader working in diverse classrooms and schools across the U.S. and Canada. Her many books**

and resources encourage teachers and leaders to take charge of their professional learning and create effective, efficient, and joyful practices where all learners thrive. Her current focus is on raising and sustaining whole-school literacy achievement through embedded professional development.

To support that work, she developed the video-based, literacy series: *Regie Routman in Residence: Transforming Our Teaching* (Heinemann, 2008, 2009, 2013). Her newest publication is *Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success* (ASCD, June 2014). For full information on Regie's publications, PD offerings, blog, and to contact Regie, see [www.regieroutman.org](http://www.regieroutman.org).

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