

[Home](#)

Reading and Writing Aren't Just for the English Department



0 comment Posted 07/03/13 Last updated 07/03/13

July 3, 2013 - 3:55pm | [Rex Babiera](#)

Recent Comments

No comments have been made yet

Abstract:

Several years ago, Principal Mark Thomas and his staff at Northview High School realized their students needed more help reading. Thus began a school-wide focus on reading, beginning with fostering and facilitating student choice, which has already had some positive results.

“I still have a lot to learn about the reading process itself,” says Mark Thomas, principal of Northview High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “Yet the greatest undiscovered asset we have is to set up our daily instruction to focus on reading and writing and speaking. The best improvement in student achievement starts with doing a lot of reading and a lot of writing and a lot of speaking.”

A few years ago, Mark and his staff noticed a pattern in their students’ scores on the ACT test. They saw many cases where a student’s performance lagged in the last ten questions of the test. Guessing patterns showed up and misses increased. Thomas says, “We concluded that many times it was because they hadn’t been able to get there because they don’t read successfully. The ACT is a reading test.”

Thus began a school-wide focus on engaging more students in reading, beginning with fostering and facilitating student choice in what they read. According to Thomas, “We are trying to immerse them in the concept of enjoying reading so that we can build stamina for reading from there.”

This past year, the entire English department participated in professional development from Penny Kittle, author of *Book Love*, to develop practices in Reader’s Workshop and choice reading. Teachers learned strategies to foster students’ ability to choose an appropriate text they would like to read, to ensure daily individual reading time, and to provide regular conferring with every student.

In his classroom observations, Thomas has already seen an increase in the number of students reading around the entire school.

“At the beginning of class,” he says, “you’ll find our English teachers walking around, checking in with three or four students, asking them what they’re currently reading, finding out what they like about it and what they need help with—basically keeping a log. It’s work trying to connect to the individual student and find what they like while trying to steer them to things.”

Teachers are also using book talks and asking students to lead book talks to help deepen these connections.

What if choice reading practices were to occur in every classroom of the high school?

“Sometimes people—teachers and students—feel like reading and writing are the domain of the English department,” says Thomas. “Part of my role as a leader is to create a culture where reading and writing and literacy do not just reside in the English department. When our students struggle in science or social studies, for example, it is likely a reading issue or a comprehension issue.”

To that end, there will be a second cohort of teachers from other core and non-core areas who participate in the Reader’s Workshop and choice reading professional development next year. Thomas says the English teachers will become mentors to the other departments “so that we can continue to build this reading and writing culture.”

Guided practice and collaborative learning are a part of Northview High School’s instructional

model. Thomas and his staff have worked hard to increase the amount and depth of student talk in classrooms. “The one who is doing the talking,” says Thomas, “is the one who is doing the learning.”

Thomas wants to apply what his staff is learning about students working together to their own professional practices. “I always believe the greatest solutions are going to be in our teachers,” he says. “The more we can create shared ownership, the more we can create collaboration, empathy and compassion for each other, the sooner we can increase student achievement.”

One of the biggest challenges that the school has in building this culture is that there is not enough time built into the schedule for teacher collaboration. Thomas believes that “one of the greatest things that a teacher or administrator can do is reflect on our practice.” Yet “for the most part, teachers are collaborating and reflecting with each other on their own time.”

However, Thomas is already seizing an opportunity provided by the renovation of the high school building. To reduce isolation, teachers will have private office space in new teacher workrooms, which will also provide areas for teachers to collaborate.

“We will create space for shared work, data walls, and putting up information,” he explains. “Teachers will be around each other more and they can look at each other’s work.”

Thomas wants Northview High School to become a professional learning community, and he sees building students’ academic stamina through increased reading and writing as something that every teacher can relate to and benefit from. He is doing whatever he can to promote professional dialogue and collaborative work on reading and writing strategies across content areas.

“What I’m noticing is our students are willing readers,” says Thomas. “And now they are becoming eager readers.”

[Log in to rate this as...](#)

[Inspiring?](#)

[Insightful?](#)

[Useful?](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Press](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

