



Literacy at Hartford Public High School

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Where We've Been

School Year 2002 – 2003

The focus for this first year was on reading across the curriculum. Using the book Helping Middle and High School Readers, the staff worked in small discussion groups, examining various teaching and learning strategies across the curriculum.

Among the topics covered were metacognition, accessing prior knowledge, inferencing, and vocabulary development. We learned that struggling students—of whom we have many—have limited vocabulary, are unable to read strategically and actively, and demonstrate poor motivation and a lack of confidence or avoidance behavior, all stemming from too much reading failure. The recognition that these descriptions apply to many of our students was the impetus for the start of our on-going literacy initiative.

The various sessions during that first year acquainted teachers with the research behind the push to reading, and provided opportunities for discussion and the sharing of successful strategies. Stressing the importance of vocabulary in all areas, the staff noted that the following concepts were crucial:

- Introducing key vocabulary
- Activating students' prior knowledge
- Examining relationships between words
- Pointing out roots, prefixes, and suffixes
- Modeling a think-aloud process
- Using graphic organizers
- Using word maps
- Linking new words to words already known

School Year 2003 – 2004

In the second year of the initiative, the emphasis shifted from reading to literacy, a term that encompasses both reading and writing. As a school-wide expectation, all students were expected to write on a daily basis in each class. This writing often took the form of bell work: a short writing assignment that was content specific. At various PD sessions during the year, teachers shared with their peers strategies and practices that worked. Among these were recipes, templates for writing a

response modeled on the CAPT Reading for Information subtest—a graduation requirement for all students beginning with the Class of 2006, and scoring rubrics.

In addition, the staff discussed the use of context clues as a portable skill that enables students to determine the approximate meaning of a word by the way it is used in a particular sentence. Asking a student to look up a word in a dictionary is often a futile exercise, for words have multiple meanings and a student with poor reading skills would be hard pressed to pick to correct one. Being familiar with the various types of context clues—as well as with the important transition words that join ideas and clarify their meaning—allows students to work with text that contains words that are not in their normal vocabulary.

The gains across the board on the Stanford post-test reflect the hard work of many staff members who saw the literacy initiative not as an add-on to their regular lessons but rather as a way of providing students with a set of tools that would enable them to work through their readings in a more confident and effective manner. Clearly, it is not business as usual. Everyone who approached the literacy initiative with professionalism and the long-term interest of their students at heart can be reassured that their efforts paid off, that their students improved their comprehension and vocabulary skills, and that our young people have taken significant steps to becoming better readers.

Remember: the instruction we provide must help students

- Become aware of the other contexts in which a particular strategy could be transferred;
- Have repeated opportunities to practice the strategies in a variety of situations; and
- Be assessed to ensure that the strategy has become part of their regular learning repertoire.

We've come a long way since we began with the literacy initiative two years ago. The success that we've demonstrated does show, however, that we can make a difference in our students' reading ability.