

CHAPTER 1

Language Arts to Reach All Learners

Hometown Hero

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Growing up is a difficult thing to do. For children it is important that they have dreams to follow and heroes to emulate. Our nation is rediscovering the importance of heroes and the strength and courage of everyday heroes. We began this lesson in 2001, driven by the desire to help our students understand that heroes are not only larger-than-life figures on television and radio but also those people with whom we have contact on a daily basis. Professional athletes, movie stars, and musicians are all idolized and admired by children, from those in large cities to rural towns. Our goal is to guide the students in discovering that heroes are all around us. We want our children to realize that they

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don't always have to look deep into the night sky to find a star; sometimes the star can be found at the kitchen table, a family gathering, or even in a classroom.

Over the past seven years we have collaborated on hundreds of lessons and projects. We work hard in identifying learning standards and finding creative and meaningful ways to incorporate them into our lessons. The Hometown Hero project is a favorite. We begin the unit by asking our students the following questions:

- What is a hero?
- Can you name any present or past hero?
- Does a hero have to look a certain way?
- Do heroes need to possess certain qualities?
- Do you have a hero in your life?
- What does this person look like?
- What qualities does he or she possess?
- What heroic deeds have they performed?

Next our classes look at and read about real and mythical heroes throughout the ages. From Hercules to George Washington to Rosa Parks, we identify the characteristics and qualities of a hero. We discuss how a hero can be male or female, young or old, human or animal. We ask our students if they know of any modern-day heroes who possess similar qualities as the ones we generated. Then we ask our students if they know of any local heroes—people from our town—who perform heroic deeds or exhibit any of our identified qualities or characteristics of a hero. We list student responses and assist in making the connection that heroes are all around us.

We want our students to know that regardless of how big their house is, what kind of car their parents drive, or whether they are straight-A or straight-C students, everyone has a hero in their life. These hometown heroes may not wear capes, but they sure look like heroes to us.

The students then go on to write about our hometown heroes. Past heroes selected include moms, dads, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and yes, teachers. This assignment is loved by every student—those working above level as well as those in special education. We covered the learning standards through this endeavor, and we were

surprised by the by-products: Not only did students make academic gains, they also made emotional strides. Students realized that there are many individuals who care deeply about them, and through this project they are given an opportunity to brag about a special person in their lives. The Hometown Hero project applies to all learners because the students select the qualities he or she possesses and the heroic deeds that the hero has accomplished. There are no wrong answers as long as students justify their statements. What started out as a lesson to cover certain learning standards has evolved into a super self-esteem builder.

We let our students know that what they are about to create is something that will be treasured forever, that the words they place on the paper before them will be stored away for many years to come (a super-motivating message). The biggest challenge for many students is selecting a hometown hero for the essay. Luckily it's a challenge not because our students don't have people to choose as heroes, but rather because the students don't want to hurt the feelings of other heroes by not writing about them. We overcome this obstacle by letting the students know that the other people are true heroes, too. As proof we tell students that instead of being hurt, the people they don't select will display qualities of a hero by being overjoyed that the student's essay made someone so happy and proud. We also encourage students to write a second Hometown Hero essay as a possible solution to this problem.

At parent conferences we display the students' essays. We have had parents come in for conferences with tears in their eyes and smiles on their faces. It is a fantastic way to begin talking about the strides their sons or daughters have made in our respective classrooms.

Reading the First Day

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He stood in the computer center of my primary classroom looking around with uncertainty and maybe even fear. His eyes darted to me while I talked with a parent during our Open House. School would be

starting in a week, and this was the big night to come and meet your teacher and see your classroom. I smiled at him, and there was a brief hint of a grin.

As I walked over to meet my VIP (very important pupil), he looked somewhat like a deer caught in the headlights. I could tell he really wasn't sure how he was supposed to respond. I bent down to where we could be eye to eye and asked his name. He responded rather timidly. I asked him what he liked to do and what he hoped to learn this year. I will never forget those great big brown eyes looking at me and his quiet voice saying, "I don't know how to read. I want to learn how to read."

After another question or two I found out that he thought he was supposed to know how to read to go to first grade. He was very apprehensive about not knowing how to read, and I could tell he was afraid he would never learn to read. I took his chin in my hand, looked directly into his eyes, and said, "I guarantee on the first day of school you will be able to read something." He looked at me again with those enormous dark brown eyes, smiled, and said, "Promise?" "I promise," I assured him. With the solemn vow that passed between us I knew that I had to make certain he would be able to read something that first day of school. I also knew that other parents had been listening, and I could tell they were skeptical about my promise.

The first day of school arrived, and I welcomed all twenty-four of my children to the classroom. Some of them had attended the Open House, and we had met; others were seeing me for the first time. Six-year-olds have a way of remembering promises, and my little guy was no exception. He came in, wished me a good morning, and found his seat. I could tell he was just waiting for me to teach him to read. We waded through all those first day of school preliminaries, and the parents left. I told the class that I had made a promise to one of their classmates—that he would be able to read something the very first day of school. I knew I had to hook them all and begin that slow process of teaching them not only to read but also to love to read.

I found my new dry erase markers in all eight colors and began to write on the chalkboard, in red marker, the word *red*. I turned and asked the children, "What word do you think is up here?" My young man raised his hand and said tentatively, "Red?" "You are exactly right!" I said with a smile. "Now give me a high five!" I then proceeded to write

each of the six color words in their respective color: blue, green, yellow, black, orange, and brown. And then I decided I would have to write the word *white* in black. I pulled this off by telling the children I was writing this color word in the opposite color and hoping that they remembered what *opposite* meant. I found out very quickly that they certainly did remember when several of them shouted out, “White!” I looked over at my new student, and he had a smile on his face that would light up a room. I knew I had piqued the interest.

It wasn’t long before our curriculum specialist walked in to meet the children. I told her that my students could already read. She played right along and asked me to prove it. The children were in their glory at that minute. The color words were still on the board, and the children read them in unison. She turned to them and said, “I can’t believe you all are already reading! I am so excited that we have such smart boys and girls at Indian Hills!” I told her that I had made a guaranteed promise the night of the Open House to one of the students and that I knew I had to come through. The children’s confidence levels began to climb that day. I found that the color word activity on the first day of school is the hook that catches the children and makes them feel confident to tackle learning to read.

Another confidence builder with my students is being able to read to the principal, guidance counselor, curriculum specialist, or secretary. These folks do a great job of encouraging and promoting reading. I choose a child that I know has been struggling and is doing an exceptional job and send the child to read to whomever is available. The adults listen, applaud, hug, and give a treat to the child. I want every child to be able to go to the office and read for someone before the year is over. This simple activity doesn’t cost anything but a little time, and the rewards for my students come back tenfold.

I recently had a parent ask me what I had done to her child. My stomach did a flip, and I could not think of a thing that I had done to help this child because she is already a good student and very well behaved. I answered, “I don’t know. What have I done to your child?” She answered, “All she wants to do is read. She didn’t even want to pick up a book before she came to your class. Thank you so much and please keep up whatever it is you are doing! It is wonderful to see her enjoying reading and wanting to read.”

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The most rewarding part of teaching first grade is knowing that when my students leave my classroom, they can read; they take with them a skill that no one can take from them.

Helpful Tips

■ I echo-read the story the first day it is introduced. I read a sentence at a time adding voice and following punctuation. I think that by modeling the correct form of oral reading the children will follow suit.

■ My students love to buddy-read. I team a pair of students: a good reader and a student who may be struggling or just needs a little help.

■ Peer tutoring is a lifesaver at times. I use peer tutoring in math, also. Sometimes all it takes is a child explaining it to a classmate for the concept to become clear. I see rewards in this for both students. The student doing the tutoring is reinforcing the skills he or she has learned, and the student who is struggling is benefiting from help from a peer.

■ Student-made sight word vocabulary flashcards help to reinforce learning. The students love making their own cards. By writing the words, students become familiar with the way the word is spelled and how each letter sounds. Our local print shops donate scrap card stock, which makes perfect flashcards.

 **Using Technology With Struggling Readers and Writers**

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As a Title 1 reading teacher, I was constantly challenged to find new and innovative ways to motivate my at-risk students to learn to read and

write. Because many of my students came from homes where reading and writing were not modeled and lacked success in reading and writing, most of my students did not view themselves as readers or writers. I knew that to teach them these skills I would have to help change their attitudes about themselves and their abilities. The Authors in Residence project began with my desire to change the perceptions of my young, struggling learners. The knowledge that reading and writing are connected skills led me to find a way to encourage writing as a door into reading. With these students struggling in reading and writing, I also needed to find a way to motivate them in these areas. I knew that I had a monumental task to accomplish.

I wanted to give my students real audiences to write for, thus viewing themselves as authors. Out of this desire, I designed a program called Authors in Residence, which had several goals:

1. One goal was to team my academically at-risk students with published children's authors for a collaborative writing project taking place on the Internet and through e-mail.
2. Another goal was to have these students use Internet research skills to research their writing topic and author.
3. The third goal was to strengthen students' letter-writing and communication skills through the use of e-mail with their authors.
4. The fourth goal was to enable students to strengthen their creative and informational writing skills.
5. The final goal required the students to publish their work on a Web page on the Internet.

I knew that if I could help students meet these goals, they would become lifelong readers and writers.

To help students meet these goals, I recruited published children's authors, my rationale being that my students would be strongly motivated to read and write stories when provided with authentic opportunities to interact with published authors of children's books. I began by searching the Internet for authors of books with which I was familiar. I wrote and invited several of these authors to volunteer their time to

help with the project. I was delighted when many authors accepted the opportunity to mentor struggling writers.

The students developed a rapport with their author, and together they collaborated, using e-mail, on a piece of writing to be published on the Web. Students also spent time on the Internet researching writing ideas. Through daily and weekly e-mail exchanges, a brainstormed list of ideas developed into a rough draft, which went through countless revisions, and, through collaboration, was transformed into a publishable piece of work. The students then worked to publish the piece on the Internet. By the end of the project, the students were proficient in using e-mail, had strong Internet research skills, were capable of producing a basic Web page, and were readily searching for new books to read.

Some of my students continue to e-mail their mentor author, and teachers in other grades comment about the motivation my former students have to read and write. My experience with having students collaborate with children's authors on their own writing has taught me that the only way to make reading and writing meaningful for some children is to connect the skills to real-world applications and experiences.

Helpful Tips

This project can be easily replicated in other classrooms by teachers willing to search out authors or other content experts who can work with students in needed areas. This project does not need to be limited to authors of children's books; it could also include journalists, college professors, and content specialists, such as meteorologists, archeologists, and astronomers. The options are endless. I would suggest that teachers find mentor experts in whatever field they are teaching or in any area of need. The learning experience becomes extremely powerful when, for example, a meteorologist gives expert advice to science students who are analyzing the weather and making weather maps.

This project has enabled me to see the power of the Internet as a teaching tool to motivate and inspire students. The Internet is a conduit for authentic learning with real-world purposes.

Using Physical Movement to Motivate At-Risk Students to Read

Carla Hurchalla
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Because many of these students are struggling in class, they find alternative, disruptive behaviors in which to engage. These disruptive behaviors make the cycle of nonlearning worse: The more students engage in inappropriate behaviors in class, the less they attend to instruction. I taught one group of six-year-olds who were particularly active and interested in engaging in inappropriate behaviors. I decided that, since they were on the move physically, I would incorporate their movement into instruction.

I developed activities that required physical movement for all aspects of reading instruction. I created hopscotch boards and used the Twister game, writing sight vocabulary words and simple sentences in the squares and circles. I had students create letters with their bodies. I photographed the letters, and then we used the pictures to spell their vocabulary and sight words. We created cheers, chants, and songs to go with words and stories. I took beach balls and wrote sentences on the balls. Students enjoyed tossing the ball to their friends and reading the sentences that their fingers ended up touching when they caught the ball. I even wrote sentences on strips and put them in filled balloons. The students then had to sit on their balloons to pop them and read their sentences. I used sidewalk chalk to encourage the students to respond to what they read. They loved having the opportunity to draw on the sidewalks of the school as a response to the literature they had just read.

Through physical engagement in reading, my students were much more focused and interested in learning to read. My experience with this group of students taught me to look for the behaviors my students exhibit and then find a way to channel their behavior into positive learning activities.

Helpful Tips

When looking for ways to make learning activities more physical, be aware of safety concerns and take necessary precautions to establish safety routines. Also, if an activity is planned that may be excessively noisy, inform your neighboring teachers as a courtesy.

 **Educating One Child at a Time**

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As a nominee for Indiana's 2002 State Teacher of the Year award, I was required to submit a portfolio to the selection committee. I moved easily from section to section until I reached one requirement that left me thinking for quite some time. I had to write a one-page, double-spaced, one-inch-margined message to the teachers of America. If I had only a small amount of space to try to communicate with all teachers what I felt was an important message, what would I say? I considered many options and then decided to focus on something that I felt helped me become a better teacher.

It Begins . . .

I am a collector of quotes. I keep them posted all around me to serve as reminders of the person I want to be. I happened upon this quote from Stephen Covey (1990) several years ago, and it has consistently provided me with inspiration:

As a teacher, as well as a parent, I have found that the key to the ninety-nine is the one—particularly the one who is testing the patience and good humor of the many. It is the love and the discipline of the one student, the one child, that communicates love for the others. It's how you treat the one that reveals how

you regard the ninety-nine, because everyone is ultimately a one. (p. 197)

I initially loved this quote because it helped me with that one child who demonstrated particularly difficult behaviors. His eyes seemed to dance, and he seemed to be always in motion, always asking questions, and always smiling. I loved him right from the start, but I also knew that he took much of the energy I needed to keep our classroom orderly and productive. His name was Michael. I can easily remember his name. I remember it because I seemed to say it over and over again. In fact, his was the first student name I learned well on the very first day of school.

I'm not sure why this quote jumped out at me from the pages of Covey's book. The school year was going well, and Michael was not presenting any major challenges to a productive classroom. But I thought of Michael immediately as I read those words. I must have known that I was getting an edge to my voice or showing that I had tired of constantly redirecting Michael. Something in me knew that something just wasn't right.

When I read this quote it reminded me to think before I responded to Michael or interacted with him or even said his name. I came to realize that it didn't matter how nice I was to the other students; how I treated Michael conveyed how I regarded them. I wondered what they thought about how I felt about them. I knew that I loved all of them and easily told them so, but did they know that? Was I sending mixed messages? It was a powerful lesson for me.

Ultimately, though, this quote has inspired me in many other ways. For example, it is a reminder that the one child is each and every child who walks through our door each day—each with differing gifts, needs, abilities, and developmental levels. It is our job as teachers to meet each student where they are and work from that place to provide what that one child needs to be successful on any given day.

We do not work in a one-size-fits-all profession. With standards and accountability, we may feel that we are being told to create cookie-cutter classrooms, but that is not the case. While our student outcomes may be standardized, how we get to that place is not. It is our challenge to customize our instruction to the needs of our children so that each of them has the opportunities that he or she deserves.

It would be impossible to meet the challenge of providing for the needs of each child without the willingness to change and grow as a professional. We must continue to seek out new understandings of best teaching practices and embrace differentiated instruction to meet the needs of the one child while educating all children.

It is also important to treat each other as the one. We must recognize and value the gifts and needs of those around us, see each other as professionals, and believe that we are the experts in the field of education. We must nurture and care for each other and for ourselves because we, too, are ultimately a one.

Helpful Tips

- Avoid calling out a student's name to redirect attention or correct an action. While this may seem like something every teacher should already know and practice, a difficult student can cause us to use strategies we know are not appropriate.

- Do a reality check every once in a while. While you're driving home, think back on your day. Did you have an edge to your voice while speaking with a certain student? Did you have as many positive interactions with a child as you did negative interactions? It's OK if you don't like your answers. The important thing is to make a conscious effort to do it differently tomorrow.

- If you have tried all of your tricks with a difficult student and have no strategies left, ask for help. Some schools have a behavior support team that may be able to help you come up with a plan for your student. You may want to investigate initiating a behavior support team if your school doesn't yet have one.

- Learn as much about differentiated instruction as you can and use what you've learned to meet the individual needs of your students. Students who are engaged and feeling successful demonstrate fewer discipline problems.

Reference

Covey, S. R. (1990). *The seven habits of highly successful people*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Using Assessment to Drive Instruction

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Our school is a school of poverty. That means that enough of our students qualify for free lunch that we feed all of them without charge. We also feed them breakfast. In the summers and during school breaks, we make sure that there is someone who will meet them in the school park to offer lunch to them. Our families are, for the most part, members of the working poor. They usually do not rely on public assistance for their income, but their paychecks do not stretch far enough to provide for all of the necessities of life. Poverty is a part of most of their lives. And it affects them in many ways.

We depend on federal dollars through Title I to fund many of our programs. We are in a time of increased accountability for schools, especially those that rely on federal funds. Ours is a schoolwide Title I school. We don't differentiate between identified Title I students and other students. They are all considered Title I students—students who are at risk for failure without intervention. Our students need more than a sit-and-get model of classroom instruction, and all students deserve the opportunities provided by quality, focused instruction based on the needs of the individual students and the academic standards to which we are held accountable.

There never seems to be enough time in the day to do all that is required of us as teachers. And now a yearly test will show whether or not we have accomplished the daunting task of providing all things for all students. The outcomes for every student are the same with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. What more do the legislators want? We already work hard—very hard. What we need is to work smarter. We need to make every moment count.

When I first began teaching, I conducted whole-group lessons, and then I tried to meet each individual child's needs through conferencing in reading, writing, and math. I found that there were not enough minutes in the day or week or month to keep up. After analyzing their reading tests, I found there were students with similar needs. I knew that while some of my students were still trying to get a beginning, middle, and end (in that order) in their writing, there were some students who were ready to experiment with a variety of writing techniques. I am afraid that I held back presenting more difficult concepts until I was certain that everyone was ready for them. In a school such as ours, the time when everyone is ready might never come.

If you try to teach everything in a whole-group setting, you will be presenting information that some students already know and information that other students are not ready to process. In any event, you are reaching only a small percentage of your class. This may lead to frustration and lots of reteaching when you assess what you thought you had taught. It slows down instruction for everyone, and those who need more support will probably not get the concept the second time around either.

One way to work smarter is to use a variety of assessment tools to help you plan small-group and individualized instruction based on student needs. There are a variety of assessment tools and organizers available for you to use. Schools, districts, and textbook publishers use a variety of diagnostic and assessment tools for reading comprehension. Many professional books, especially those about reading or writing workshops, are filled with ideas for organizing flexible small groups.

The important thing to remember is that you need to dedicate a specific time and create a schedule for teaching specific content areas. All of those tools and organizers can provide more frustration than organization if the attempt is only halfhearted. For example, make a commitment to a specific number of minutes dedicated to a writing workshop each day. If the school day is shortened, stick to your time for writer's workshop. If other things come up, take that flexibility and put it somewhere else. Commit yourself to the time you've set for writing.

Organize your workshop or dedicated teaching time into manageable pieces. For example, dedicate a number of minutes to a mini-lesson presented to the whole group, a number of minutes to small-group writing lessons, and a number of minutes to individual student conferences in

your writing workshop schedule. If you wish to have a time for sharing, be sure to build it into your schedule and honor it every day. Again, there are many structures for a writer's workshop. Take a look at examples from some published works and make them work for you and your classroom.

To meet the many needs of your students, every instructional period needs to have many opportunities for instruction. Effective planning for this instruction must begin with assessment. I have used assessment to plan whole-group, small-group, and individualized instruction, and I describe my method in the following paragraphs.

Using an assessment tool (a test, a reading assessment, a piece of student writing, etc.), create a chart with your students' names down one side (a basic class chart). Across the top, list the skills or concepts you expect to see in the work. You might want to have a prepared checklist with grade-level state standards for writing, a list of skills and subskills for a mathematics concept, and a list of reading strategies you expect to see (all on different pages, of course). As you assess each student, choose no more than three areas to work on and place a checkmark under those skills.

Ideally, you should identify skills and concepts that the student is very close to achieving. There should be some indication that the student has at least some idea of the concept or is approximating it in some way. For example, one of my state standards is that the students will use dialogue in written stories. If a student is attempting to use dialogue in writing but is not doing it effectively or not using it to move the story along, I check "uses dialogue" next to the student's name on the class chart.

The key is to then use the assessment tool to plan instruction for the next few weeks. If you find that most of your students did not demonstrate a concept you've been working on in class, you may need to develop a short series of whole-class mini-lessons to address that skill or concept. In the best scenario, you'll identify skills or concepts that only a handful of students need to work on, which guides you to create small, flexible groups. You'll also be able to pinpoint specific skills and concepts to make your individual student conferences more focused and productive.

In this time of increased school accountability, we seem to be testing students all the time. I hear teachers complain about the requirement to assess student writing four times per year with a rubric and recording

the scores on a form that no one looks at later. If that is the only use of that assessment, then it is a waste of instructional time. If, however, that assessment drives instruction and helps a teacher plan focused lessons, it is a great tool—one that should not be limited in use to four times per year. Our district now also requires us to use a standardized reading assessment tool several times a year. What a shame to waste this opportunity to plan instruction that we know our students need. If we are just following the steps of a basal textbook, we don't know if the concepts we are teaching are concepts that our students are ready for at that time or if they even need to be taught to the whole group.

Using assessment to drive instruction is working smarter, not harder. It allows us to build more opportunities for instruction into our day. It encourages us to look at each child and what the child can do as opposed to what he or she can't do. It allows us to scaffold instruction, to build on what a child knows to take them to the next level of learning, so that they can meet the standards to which we are all held accountable (Vygotsky, 1978).

Helpful Tips

- Visit your local teacher supply store or go online to peruse and purchase some professional books on setting up a reader's or writer's workshop. The same ideas can be used to successfully set up a mathematics workshop.
- Experiment with a variety of forms to record your assessments. The process of reflecting on the student outcomes of a particular unit of study will help you build whole-group lessons, focus your instruction, and plan your end-of-unit assessments.
- Assess often so that you can catch areas of concern early and clear up the students' confusion.
- Spend some time with other teachers, developing assessment tools, recording instruments, and creating ways to make flexible groupings successful and meaningful.
- Visit classrooms that have effective workshops in place.

Reference

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Motivating Middle Schoolers

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Most people are aware of how difficult it is to motivate children in school, especially when it comes to lighting the fire within middle school students. It is not considered cool for seventh and eighth graders to enjoy school assignments. It is a rare instance when a middle school teacher finds a project that sparks thirteen-year-olds' interests. It was by chance that I discovered such a project, and the motivation that this project sparked was truly amazing.

It all started when my assistant principal came to me, the student council sponsor, and asked me to get the student council involved in landscaping the cement patio recess area. Up to this point the students only had a small covered walkway to hang out at during recess. The assistant principal was able to secure funds to have a thirty square-foot cement slab patio poured and a metal roof installed to cover it. The area was very dull and boring to look at. The assistant principal wanted to have flowerbeds created around the patio to add some color. I thought this would be a great idea. After doing some thinking about it, I decided to turn it into an eighth-grade class project.

I am an English teacher, and it is not intuitively apparent how landscaping could fit into the English curriculum. Most people would associate this type of project with science. I did in fact have a few parents inquire as to why I was having the students complete this project in my English class. After I informed parents and students how this project incorporated English, science, and math, most agreed that this would be a worthwhile project to further their child's education. When I first told the students about it, they weren't too thrilled by the idea. It wasn't until I told them that they would get a day out of class to actually plant the flowers that they perked up and took interest in the project.

I invited a local landscaper to class to talk about the planning that goes into landscaping a yard. To my surprise, the kids listened attentively and asked some good questions. This was my first inclination that the students were going to get into this project. The landscaper offered his time and assistance to us throughout the project, and he really enjoyed working with the kids as well.

I first had the students do research. We spent several days in the computer lab researching plants that would thrive in our south Louisiana climate. The research tied in well to my English curriculum. I'm a big proponent of using technology whenever possible in the learning process, so after completing the research, each student compiled what he or she had found into a PowerPoint presentation. The research also connected to the science component of the project. For math, the students measured the area to be landscaped and figured out how much soil, fertilizer, and mulch the flowers needed. The students also had to draw to scale a design of their flowerbed and indicate where the plants they chose would be planted.

The students first whined about having to do all that work, but when I told them that it wasn't just busy work and that they would actually be planting the flowers, they felt like their work had a purpose and meaning. They got into their research. I knew that learning was taking place when the kids came to school and told me things like, "I told my mom that she needed to plant Indian Hawthorne bushes on the side of the house because they grow well in the type of soil we have." Those types of comments are the ones teachers like to hear; it means the students are thinking about what they are learning.

After completing the research, the students were anxious to start planting, but first we had to raise money. The students, with my guidance, coordinated two fundraisers at school. One was a slipper day, where students paid a dollar to wear slippers to school for a day. This event raised a little over \$500. The second fundraiser was a carnation sale for Valentine's Day. The students sold carnations for a dollar each. Kids and teachers bought carnations for friends and family members. Heart-shaped tags were made for the students to write a message to their friends. A few students volunteered their time after school the day before Valentine's Day to tag all the carnations that were sold. On Valentine's Day I delivered the carnations around school. The

carnation sale raised about \$700, giving us a total of \$1,200 to spend on our landscaping project.

Once the money was collected, we had a budget to give to the landscaper, who then purchased plants for us. We had crepe myrtles, azaleas, Indian Hawthorne bushes, miniature gardenias, river birch trees, and begonias to plant. The landscaper donated his time to prepare the flowerbeds and soil for us. When the beds were ready, I took each class out to plant some of the flowers. At the end of the day, the students stood back and admired their hard work. The assistant principal also ordered tables and benches for the new patio. As a tribute to the eighth graders' hard work, we purchased a marble stone engraved with *Class of 2002*. The stone was placed in the middle of the flowerbed.

Teenagers of today are regarded as lazy and unmotivated. This project affirmed that, when given the chance, teenagers can prove responsible. The eighth graders took so much pride in their work that even after the project was complete they took great pains to ensure the flowerbed was kept clean and in good condition. They were so adamant about the maintenance of the flowerbeds that if they caught anyone trespassing through the flowerbed or littering they verbally chastised the careless person, whether student or teacher. This policing behavior illustrates that with proper motivation teenagers can be responsible and respectful of others' property.

All of my students enjoyed this project because it addressed all learning styles. The visual and auditory learners did well with the research and PowerPoint presentations. The tactile learners did well with measuring and planting. They had fun doing this project, and many of them forgot they were learning in the process.

The great motivator in this project was that the students could see the payoff. After seeing the eighth graders' work, the seventh graders began asking me in the hall what they would do next year for an eighth-grade class project. Even though the landscape project was a lot of work, I thought that if the students enjoyed it so much and learned something in the process, then the planning and work was worth it. I ended up writing and getting a \$2,000 grant—the Unsung Heroes Award sponsored by ING Northern Annuity—to continue the landscaping project. The class of 2003 will be landscaping the front yard of campus, learning and having fun through it all.

Helpful Tips

■ The teacher should carefully plan and consider all aspects of this type of project before beginning it. The first year we did this, I planned for things as they came up. Planning this way caused some confusion. The following year was better since I knew what to expect and where I wanted to go with the project.

■ The second year of the project I designed a Web quest for the project. This allowed me to completely turn it over to the students from the beginning, and they did all of the work, even contacting the nurseries to buy the plants. I even had a parent volunteer to pick up the plants from the nursery. Of course, the Web quest required me to create and find useful Web sites beforehand, but it was well worth the time and effort. The second year ran smoothly without any problems.

■ I recommend sending a story about the project to the local newspaper. The students love seeing their names and work in the paper.

■ A motivating project such as this doesn't have to be a landscaping project. Any project that allows students to see the results of their work and have fun while working motivates them, no matter their age. A project like this answers the age-old question, "When will we ever use this stuff?"

Inspiring a Reluctant Reader

Patricia Kammeyer
Antwerp, Ohio

Inspiring a reluctant reader is one of the primary challenges—and rewards—I meet in my classroom each year. Each fall, students who have not yet learned to love the power of the written word walk through my doorway. I begin to lay the foundation that will lead to a love of reading on the first day of the school year.

I firmly believe, and best practices dictate, that all elementary-age children need to be read aloud to on a daily basis. This is one of the most

important keys to changing a reluctant reader into a voracious reader. Children who have not mastered the mechanics of reading cannot enjoy the experience of reading; they struggle so hard to make sense of each individual word that they cannot relate meaning to the words. These children may be word callers, but they are not mature enough in their skills to be called readers. These students need repeated, positive experiences with reading to bridge this gap.

When a child is read aloud to, wonderful things begin to happen. The child gets to enjoy the story in a nonthreatening manner, where all that is required of the child is to be an active listener. The risk of failure is removed, and the child can relax and enjoy the reading experience. Over time, the child makes a natural connection between reading and enjoyment. In addition, the child gets to hear you, the teacher, model what the story sounds like. The child listens to the inflection of your voice and notices that you pause and stop during the story to give clarity and emphasis to the story line. The child makes connections between the written word and the magic of a good story.

It is imperative that a variety of excellent literature be selected to inspire and hook reluctant readers. I read *Flutterby*, a book from the Serendipity series by Stephen Cosgrove, on the first day of class. This is a story about a small creature that is trying to find out who or what he is. He tries to be an ant, a butterfly, and a bee, with disastrous results. Finally Flutterby discovers he is a unique individual with a special place in the world. This is a perfect story to welcome children and let them know that they, too, are unique and accepted; they don't have to be "bees" or "ants"—just being a Flutterby is all that is expected of them. Over the next few weeks, I read more books in the Serendipity series. Each time I read, I bless additional books—I hold up a book and tell the children how much I enjoy it. This becomes the book that every child wants to borrow, even the reluctant readers.

Early in the school year, I read *Thank You, Mr. Falker*, by Patricia Polacco. The little girl in this story encounters reading difficulties and is mistreated by her classmates because of this disability. At the end of the story, it is revealed that this is the story of Patricia Polacco's life. Reluctant readers see their struggles mirrored in the author's story. The discussion and sharing that follows this selection often reveal feelings of failure, hopelessness, and a desire to be and do better in reading. When the children realize that there is hope and that reading problems

can be solved, they have reached a turning point. Before the school year is over, I have read all of Patricia Polacco's stories to my students. Each story is written in a child-friendly manner, and Patricia Polacco soon becomes a favorite author of my students. They begin to read her books independently because they know that between the covers of each of her books is an enjoyable experience.

By midyear, I find that my students are ready to graduate from picture books to chapter books. It is at this point that I read aloud a book in the Junie B. Jones series by Barbara Park. This humorous series is about a kindergarten child, and her experiences strike a chord in children as they remember their own kindergarten experiences. Because these books are written at a second-grade level, it is a good choice as a transition series between picture books and chapter books. The series allows children with minimal reading skills to read and enjoy a chapter book.

As their skills increase, children take a leap and read more difficult chapter books. *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, by Barbara Robinson, is an excellent story to read during December. Even if a child does not celebrate Christmas, he or she can enjoy meeting and hearing about the worst kids in the history of the world, the Herdmans. Elementary-age children enjoy knowing that there is good in all of us and that miracles do happen. This story lends itself to numerous supplemental activities. It is a perfect story to use with a Venn diagram, comparing and contrasting the writer of the story with one of the Herdman children. The cat is so well described in the story that it is a natural art project to have the students draw the cat. This story is also fun to have children act out for the class.

As reluctant readers become active, involved readers, it can be difficult to find a book that will challenge them and yet be provocative enough to keep their interest. John Erickson has solved this problem with his Hank the Cowdog series. Boys and girls in the classroom enjoy this series equally. The humor and adventures of Hank have children laughing so hard they can't wait to hear and then read more stories about him.

If you are willing to dedicate yourself to reading aloud to your children each day, you will find that even your most reluctant reader begins to enjoy and appreciate books. After reading the research about the importance of reading aloud, I made a firm commitment to do daily

oral reading. I have found the positive results to be worth the time and energy needed to institute this classroom change.

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Four-Block Literacy Model: Reaching All Learners

Kathleen Kessel
Dickinson, North Dakota

In classrooms across the country, no matter where you teach, instructing students to read and to become better readers is a primary goal. This goal is a very difficult task because our students enter our classrooms at various reading levels. Most classrooms have students who excel in reading and are at the top of their class, students who struggle and are below grade level, and students who fall somewhere in between. Fortunately, there is a model to teach and improve the reading skills of all students no matter what their reading level, and the model can be used in one classroom without separating students into reading groups. The model is called Four Blocks.

Four Blocks is a framework for reading and writing instruction and was developed by Pat Cunningham, Dottie Hall, and Jim Defee to help all students become successful readers and writers. It was initially used in primary-grade classrooms, but adaptations have been made to provide continued balance for the diverse needs of learners at other grade levels through middle school and beyond.

Teachers use a variety of formats to make each block as multileveled as possible to ensure additional support for students who struggle and additional challenges for students who catch on quickly.

One goal of Four Blocks is to meet individual needs of children without labeling them. Studies prove that this model is successful in improving the reading levels of all students, not just those in the low or

average range of ability. In fact, one major research project proved that those children who rank in the top 30% of the performance levels made the greatest gains of all groups.

The Four Blocks model includes four components: guided reading, self-selected reading, writing, and working with words. This instructional model is based on the premise that there are four basic ways children learn to read. The use of this model ensures that all students are exposed to all four methods every day, helping to address individual learning styles and personalities of children at different reading levels within a heterogeneous classroom setting.

In the lower grades, during the guided reading block, approximately three days are spent on grade-level text, and the next two days are spent on below-grade-level text. Teachers teach and model reading strategies through various activities and lessons. In the independent reading block, students read books and materials that are at their grade level and conference at least weekly with teachers, who give them one-to-one help and instruction as needed. Students in the working with words block work with high-frequency words and learn parts of big words (i.e., prefixes, roots, and suffixes, which help them figure out word meanings), spelling patterns, and phonics and decoding skills. During the writing block, teachers use mini-lessons and model writing to help students learn skills such as grammar, usage, punctuation, parts of speech, and cause and effect. Students then spend time on self-selected writing to apply what they have learned.

Planning for Differentiated Instruction at the High School Level

Renee A. Moore
Shelby, Mississippi

For more than nine years, I have conducted ongoing classroom research about teaching Standard English to African American students. That research led me to this belief: Empowering language arts instruction is a dynamic practice. It is shaped by informed and collaborative analysis of the particular cultural experiences, strengths, and learning goals of a specific group of students within a particular community. I refer to this type of teaching practice as culturally engaged instruction (CEI).

One method I use is the personal English plan (PEP). The PEP is an individualized learning plan that I develop with each student in my high school English classes. We start the school year with about two weeks of preassessments, during which I help students gauge their abilities in reading, writing, language mechanics and usage, public speaking, and listening. We analyze this information together to develop a profile.

Next, I present a list of specific learning goals or objectives that I feel are the minimum for successful completion of the course according to state guidelines and my own requirements. Then, in individual conferences, we agree on the specific goals for each student and how these goals will be assessed. Throughout this process, there is much reading and talking about goals, success, and planning.

The students are responsible for their monitoring progress on the PEP. However, I also ask each student to select one significant adult to act as a mentor for the school year. I contact all the mentors and explain that their role is to support and encourage the students to complete their goals. At the end of each nine-week grading period, I meet with each student again as we go over portfolios to determine whether the goals have been met and to what extent. The mentors are invited to attend these meetings if possible. This is how we determine the students' final grade.

Helpful Tips

- This type of planning can be overwhelming at first, especially if you are teaching six or seven classes a day. The first school year, I only developed plans with one class, until I worked out the logistics.
- Having students work in reading and writing workshops facilitates the individual planning conferences.
- Be open-minded in developing the goals. Don't limit the students to adopting goals from the list of state objectives but help them set realistic timelines.

Here are examples of the forms I created to use with students as we develop and evaluate their PEPs.

(Continued)

26 BEST TEACHING PRACTICES FOR REACHING ALL LEARNERS

Renee Moore, NBCT					
Student Name _____ Period _____					
		<i>Goals</i>			
	<i>Pretest Results</i>	<i>First Nine Weeks</i>	<i>Second Nine Weeks</i>	<i>Third Nine Weeks</i>	<i>Fourth Nine Weeks</i>
<i>Reading</i>					
<i>Writing</i>					
<i>Grammar</i>					
<i>Speaking</i>					
<i>Listening</i>					
<i>Other</i>					
Notes/Comments:					

English III/Mrs. R. Moore <i>Nine Weeks' Evaluation</i> Verify mentor/parent name, address, phone in index card file.	
1.	What percentage of the total number of tasks has the student completed? ____ number of tasks ____ number completed
2.	Quality of the work a. Average of all scores: ____ b. Descriptive comments (special conditions, circumstances that may have affected performance): _____ _____
3.	Mississippi Curriculum Framework a. Number of objectives taught this grading period = ____ number passed = ____ b. Percentage of objectives taught that student has passed = ____
4.	Adjustments to the PEP a. Addition of personal learning goals b. Deletion or reduction of items c. Adjustment of timeline d. Specific goals for next grading period
5.	Growth Assessment a. <i>Teacher evaluation of student work.</i> Attach descriptive comments on student abilities, strengths, and needs b. <i>Student self-evaluation.</i> Descriptive comments on student abilities, strengths, and needs (use back or additional sheets as needed) 1. What have I learned in English III this nine weeks? 2. What do I know or do well? How do I know? 3. What do I need to improve or want to learn? 4. What would help me to learn or perform better? c. <i>Mentor's comments.</i> Made by ___ phone ___ personal visit ___ letter
Nine weeks' examination grade = average of items 1, 2, and 3. Items 4 and 5 must be completed before grade is recorded.	
Student Signature _____ Date _____ Teacher Signature _____ Date _____ Mentor Signature _____ Date _____	