

## Building a Schoolwide Independent Reading Culture

Although one goal of all reading instruction is to develop independence, explicit instruction in reading strategies and skills helps grow strategic readers. So, although it's true that we should provide time within the school day for students to just read for the sheer pleasure of reading, we also need to provide explicit instruction on strategy application and have students practice as they read independently in self-selected text.

In fall 2013, Scholastic Book Fairs partnered with eight schools from across the country to develop and strengthen their own independent reading cultures while serving as models for other schools. This partnership was called the Model Independent Reading Schools Project with schools located in New Jersey, Washington, Texas, California, Maryland, Minnesota, Florida, and Michigan. Schools were chosen as a representative sample of the vast diversity within our nation's schools—underserved, affluent, suburban, rural, and urban.

### Research

Historically, research on independent reading has produced mixed results (Shanahan, 2006; Manning, Lewis, & Lewis, 2010), but literacy leaders attribute this to models of independent reading that have little or no structure. Independent reading that offers guided choice, that teaches children how to select books that are on an appropriate reading level for them, and during which teachers confer with students yields positive results (Kuhn et al., 2006; Moss & Young, 2015).

One of the biggest concerns educators have is that students are not motivated to read the required work assigned in class (Wagner, 2008). Yet researchers have shown that when students are motivated to engage in independent reading for intrinsic reasons like enjoyment, involvement, curiosity, and challenge, as opposed to the extrinsic reasons of grades, rewards, and competition, their reading comprehension increases (Cox & Guthrie, 2001; Guthrie, et al, 2006).

When students' reading purpose is to learn and to share their knowledge with others, their motivation and time spent reading increases, which ultimately results in improved academic achievement (Swan, Coddington, & Guthrie, 2010). This type of reading requires using strategies in order to reason, identify key points, organize information, and gain conceptual knowledge.

Through explicit, purposeful instruction, these strategic readers learn to understand difficult or complicated text, integrate information from multiple sources, write explanations, and share this knowledge with others.

So, how can a school build a culture where *all* students in *every* classroom grow as strategic readers who truly enjoy reading and engage in reading practices both in and out of school daily?

## A Whole-School Independent Reading Culture

The first step in developing a strong school culture of independent reading is to think about three broad areas:

- What happens within the whole school to promote a strong independent reading culture?
- What can each teacher do to ensure a strong independent reading culture exists within each classroom?
- What can the school do to promote independent reading at home, and what tools and resources can the school provide to help families achieve this goal?

## What Should a Strong, Schoolwide Independent Reading Culture Look Like?

A visitor to the school would see a purposefully planned environment for reading with various spots in the school filled with books, comfortable seating, and book displays with interesting texts.

There would be book studies or professional readings for all staff to generate common understandings and beliefs about independent reading and professional learning opportunities for enhancements to instruction. In professional learning community (PLC) discussions, teachers may talk about how to build stamina, identify upcoming book talks linked to a unit of study, or describe how to teach a focus lesson on citing evidence from the text during student discussions.

Educators would establish schoolwide expectations for the number of minutes students need to read daily or the number of books students need to read within the year. Also, many school events would take place throughout the year to keep students motivated to read; for example, celebrity read-alouds, parent literacy nights, book swaps, and book fairs.

As the visitor walks down the hallway, she would see charts, tables, and student work displayed on walls throughout the school that tell a rich story of independent reading. Volunteers would work with students as they practice their independent reading in books that students have chosen.

Access to books is at the forefront of a number of research studies on students' reading growth and progress (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Duke, 2000; McQuillan & Au, 2001); therefore, students and their families would have many opportunities to buy or receive books to build their home libraries. Finally, to provide equity within the school, the quantity of books in each classroom library would be the joint responsibility of schools and individual teachers.

## Inside the Classroom

Now that the visitor to the school has seen what a school with a strong reading culture looks like, she is ready to examine what goes on inside each classroom. The visitor may first notice a significant collection of books with a variety of genres, varying reading levels, and a good balance of nonfiction and fiction books. Just like the various spots for reading seen throughout the school, there would be various spots in the classroom set up with comfortable seating, books and iPads® for reading, and listening stations.

It would be obvious that effective rituals and routines for independent reading were established because students were using book talks about self-selecting books of interest and creating excitement for books. The teacher would be using an interactive read-aloud to engage a small group of students in actively thinking about a particular comprehension strategy. During the visitor's 20-minute classroom visit, all students exhibited strong stamina for reading as evident by their full engagement in good reading habits. When the teacher finished with the small group instruction, she conferred individually with a student, assessing his progress and finding out more about his interests in a variety of genres.

Students would respond to reading using a variety of methods that included response logs, partner discussions, and student-led group discussions. When the visitor questioned a number of students about the books they were reading, they would describe the author's choices, identify key points, and make strong connections to their lives and other texts they had read.

## The Home Connection

To encourage independent reading at home, staff within the school must provide direction, encouragement, resources, and tools to help families establish good habits. In a school with a strong independent reading culture, educators accomplish this task by holding multiple family events throughout the year that both teach families how to increase independent reading in the home and celebrate independent reading successes. Research has shown the positive power parent involvement has on student academic achievement.

Access to books for families without financial means would be established. Mini libraries have been placed throughout the school community—in apartment complexes, for instance, as neighborhood book houses—to provide ready access to books.

Because about 80 percent of the achievement gap can be attributed to the lack of summer reading (Hayes & Grether, 1983), the school sets up and monitors clear expectations for students' summer reading. The school staff doesn't simply tell parents that it is important to read to children or have them read at home. Instead, they offer concrete, specific programs and suggestions on how to participate in family literacy, and they support families in their attempts. Students living in poverty receive books (six or more for students in grades 3+ and 10 or more for grades K–2) to read each summer to close the achievement gap.

## Independent Reading Best Practices Survey

Principals in each school of the Model Independent Reading Schools Project (MIRS) explained the need to enhance independent reading to their staff. Then they asked teachers to complete a teacher survey related to their understanding of key components of effective independent reading and their use within their classrooms.

Stephanie Brant, principal at Gaithersburg Elementary School in Gaithersburg, Maryland, participated in the MIRS project, and her reflection about using the Independent Reading Best Practices Survey follows.

*We administered the survey during a staff meeting and encouraged all teachers to complete it during that time. Our teachers had different reactions. The value and instructional impact of a structured and purposeful independent reading program was new; and, for some, regarded*

*as one more thing on top of already overwhelming expectations and initiatives. For others, independent reading had been something that provided a mental or therapeutic break throughout the day, an opportunity to instill calmness and quiet in the classroom. It wasn't linked to instruction or regarded as a teaching opportunity, but rather a practice that would hopefully instill a love for reading. For the remaining group, the survey was validating and provided reasonable next steps for an initiative that was gaining momentum in the school. The survey provided teachers a nonthreatening opportunity to give honest feedback about their practice and the challenges they see for their students' engagement and stamina.*

*The data we received from the survey indicated that our teachers weren't as knowledgeable as they needed to be about one-to-one conferring, using book talks in their classrooms and building and monitoring student stamina. After spending countless hours planning, we questioned how we missed and didn't consider building and monitoring student stamina. The survey results created a sense of urgency for us to teach students to engage in reading and increase their stamina.*

*For example, as a way to reach and motivate all readers at Gaithersburg Elementary School, we give book talks over the morning announcements. Although this practice motivates our students to visit the Media Center, it does not encourage them to talk more about books in their classrooms. The data we received from the survey indicated that teachers weren't implementing book talks as often as we hoped. Since gaining this new information, we have strategically taught students how to give book talks, as well as made it part of classroom literacy routines.*

*As we continue the journey of building successful independent readers, we are committed to equipping our teachers with the skills to confer with students about their use of reading strategies taught to them. After providing professional development about conferring, we plan to re-administer the survey. The results from a future teacher survey should show growth overall, but most specifically increases in teachers' knowledge and use regarding stamina, book talks, and conferring.*

*The teacher survey empowered teachers to reflect on their own practice and provided us with the information we needed to move forward. From the survey results, we were able to identify strengths along with areas of need. It created a sense of urgency and helped to get*

*buy-in from staff for specific elements of this work. Lifting these elements out of the teacher survey allowed us to streamline a professional development plan that will continue to build an authentic, schoolwide culture of independent reading.*

## Learning from Our Less-Successful Attempts

Educators have always had students practice their reading skills at home and at school, but we have not always given them opportunities to practice their skills using texts they have chosen, and we have not guided their practice to build stamina and skills to grow as strategic readers. As a result, often students cannot or do not comply with our request to read independently.

By working differently to grow readers in the host of ways described here and in other subsequent articles within these modules, we build a hunger that provides a foundation for a lifetime of reading. And reading translates to success in and beyond the classroom. When we are able to provide lots of access to good books students want to read; choice in what they read; and varied, plentiful structured and unstructured practice in and out of school, students will not only want to read more, but they will also choose to read in their leisure time.

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