

Creating a Reading Community

Leah Early, October 15, 2018

With my teaching day ending, I reset 28 desks and wiped disinfectant over desk tops before entering grades into the computer and heading home. That was the plan; but then, I saw a half sheet of notebook paper, rolled, twisted-tightly and stuck into a seam, between the wood and metal of one desk. The note read: "Please teach me to read." I never found out who left the note. Did it matter? I got the message. The question was how?

Four English teachers read the note and shared their own experiences of students with poor reading abilities. Together we wondered how young people could go to school eight years in the United States of America and not be able to read. Alarming! And yet, we witnessed daily Latino students struggling with English reading and writing. We moaned over our own limited knowledge of teaching reading. After all, we were high school teachers. Others were to have done that job. And finally, we allowed ourselves to sit with our options. Over the course of a quarter, we created a plan of action.

What follows are some of the directions we took in teaching high school students to read. This account includes in bold type a few tactics, events, surprises, challenges and results we encountered in creating a fully functioning reading community.

First, we wrote **a proposal letter to the high school principal and vice-principal** stating concern for the low reading skills of our high school students. We proposed beginning in this way:

- English teachers will test reading skills each fall within our own classrooms without interrupting other classroom curriculums like math, chemistry, and social studies.
- Should a student take the reading assessment and score at college level reading, that student will not be asked to take the test again. They read competently.
- Any student reading below his or her grade level by two grades will be required to use

his/her elective for a remedial reading course called Reading Lab.

- As soon as a student's skills improve to grade level or above, he/she will be released from the Reading Lab (mid-semester, if it turns out that way) and be given full course credit for the Reading Lab. With that success, the student will be available for another elective course of the student's choice.
- Administrators will plan for two fewer English classes a semester, while adding two new Reading Labs to the class scheduling for next year.
- English teachers agree to absorb the increase of student numbers per class in regularly scheduled English classrooms. (In other words, all five teachers were willing to do whatever needed to be done to make this program work. If it meant that a class of 25 students became 34 students in size for the sake of making room for the new labs and competent readers, we were willing.)
- English department will purchase six classroom sets of **a standardized reading assessment**.

School administrators approved the proposal and aided in its enactment. During the last week of the school year, the English teachers distributed **Summer Reading Lists** by grade levels with the challenge to read at least one book over the summer and be prepared in the fall for a written or oral book report.

In the fall, all the English teachers **administered the reading assessment** during one designated week. The tests were scored; and we had our statistical starting point. Scores fell into three groupings:

Group 1 contained 25% of the student body from grades 9-12 reading at college level. They were competent readers needing "good reads" to instill life-long reading habits and enjoyment.

Group 2 made up 26% of our students throughout grades 9-12 reading at grade level—at various grade levels. These students required monitoring and structural support for continued reading improvement toward college level reading.

Group 3 composed the remaining 49% and majority of our students reading below their present grade level. Within this group were students with 3rd and 4th grade reading scores. Also in Group 3 were most of our English as a second language learners. This group of students deserved our most strategic and focused efforts. Notably, 10% of the English as a second language learners were in Group 1.

I cannot overstate just how much knowing these groups and numbers steeled our resolve, invigorated our spirits, and focused our directions. The English teachers huddled before OPEN HOUSE to write “**our English Department spiel**” to be shared with parents. Each of us articulated our emphasis on reading for all students, even honor students. All five of us delivered a version of this message:

“We want every young person who graduates from our high school to enjoy, if not love reading! We ask for your help by considering a few questions with your family:

- *Is there a reading spot in your home—a comfortable, quiet space with good lighting for reading?*
- *Does your child see you read newspapers, magazines and books?*
- *Do you share interesting stories or information that you read with your children?*
- *Are books given as gifts in your family?*
- *Do your children know you think reading is important and fun?”*

Please take this list of books we will be reading in English during the coming year. Join us, if you will, in reading (perhaps rereading) some stories that have become classics in schools across our nation.”

From the beginning, it was clear we were not taking on this challenge alone. We received support from the district language arts curriculum adviser, University of Nevada Reno’s Teacher Education Department, and other educators who knew of helpful reading resources.

Meanwhile, for two 9th grade classes, I created a two-week **Speed Reading** unit to be included in the fall semester curriculum. I included ideas I had gleaned from English teachers in other schools in our district who managed creative remedial reading programs. Reading speeds and comprehensions began moving. With a few helpful tools, students’ reading improved. *Now, if we only had some really high-interest books for these hungry minds*, I thought.

At a school basketball game, a Lion’s Club member introduced himself to me. Several neighbors had told him about the high school’s focus on reading. He was wondering, almost apologetically:

“Do you need any assistance with your literacy program?”

“Yes, yes, YES!”

“How does **\$15,000** sound?”

“Timely and fabulous! Boy, do we need new youth books with high interest and space adventures. That is the new trend in book publishing. And, we are dreaming about a reading lab.”

He was happy to find a local effort for his club’s literacy project and we were more than delighted to partner with him in writing a proposal the club endorsed.

Now, the Daring 5 (my name for the five English teachers) began.

Phase I: Scouting for “**good reads**”. We visited our nearest Barnes and Nobel bookstore and picked sales assistants’ brains, conducted Internet research dives, and listened to students, parents, and community readers who recommended book titles. We made our list.

Phase II: Sampling Possibilities involved purchasing one copy of approximately 50 books. Each of us took several books, read them, and

pronounced “buy” or “no buy” in meetups we held every two weeks. We purchased several copies of books in our “buy” category and upon arrival began checking them out. We held our breaths, watched and listened. Most of the books were hits. How could we tell? Students brought their friends by to check out books they had just read. **Several WHAT A READ! Bulletin boards** appeared with student pictures plus a short statement about the books. The news about “good reads” travelled quickly; and they soon slipped into the school library.

Eventually, we discovered we had **books that disappeared**. As a matter of fact, we found out that one book, Buried Onions written by Gary Soto, consistently vanished at a rate of twelve or more copies a year. A closer investigation revealed our Latino students’ love for Soto’s real life tale that took place in Fresno, California. The story was a winner: a young man who is surrounded by poverty, trying to be straight but pressured by family revenge, makes difficult choices.

The Daring 5 had found stories that touched our students’ lives. Some touched them so powerfully that one 10th grade girl confessed: “I keep that book among my special things”. We understood for we had favorite reads among our own special things, too. Our better angels insisted that we not become missing-book police, especially since we had set these kids up for loving books. Instead, we decided to celebrate each time we found a book that we could NOT keep on the shelves.

After several years of work in the high school, we reached out to teachers at the middle school. They volunteered to test graduating 8th graders with our reading assessment tool in the spring before students came to high school. That **cooperation with the middle school** proved extremely helpful with class scheduling of Reading Lab courses and revamping and updating summer reading lists. Just as important were attitudes; many middle schoolers added enthusiasm to our growing community of readers.

An enormous boost to our efforts came from the village’s principals at the elementary, middle and

high schools. Working together they found a private foundation that was willing to fund approximately **25 teachers with Master Degrees in Literacy**. The courses were taught in our mountain community, saving participants two or more precious hours of travel time per week for the two years of the program. This professional retooling proved transforming in raising the quality of education in our community—not to mention upon the completion of the master program, the pay increases came to those 25 grateful teachers and their families. Three teachers were English teachers at the high school.

Results proved numerous. From the perspective of Standardized State Reading and Writing Proficiency testing for high school graduation, our **graduating students scored well**. In eight of the nine years that I taught at the school, 100% of our students proved proficient in both Reading and Writing. One year a young Latina, who had been with us only two years as an English as a second language learner, failed the tests.

When the Daring 5 first began to envision what might be possible, 51% of graduates read at college reading levels. Seven years later, **87% of our graduates read at college levels**. That is a 36% overall reading improvement in less than a decade. Parents were assured their children could acquire a quality high school education in this Nevada school, plus they might also find their children turn out to be life-long lovers of reading.

The Nevada school district, of which my school was a part, received a federal grant for five or six computerized reading laboratories. Our high school was **a recipient of one of those reading labs valued at \$35,000**. Conversations among educators in the district frequently led to asking our principal: “Why did your school get one of the labs; your school is not thought of as an impoverished community in our school district?” Our principal shared his response:

“Yes, you are partially correct. However, what you might not know is that this school has a student body with a wide gap between the skills of its proficient readers and non-proficient

readers. The student body is 30% Latino learners and that percent will only continue to grow in the future. It is also the first high school in our district on its own to begin dealing with reading skill disparity. Its English teachers established baseline statistics and have added to that statistical record yearly, therefore, they and our District can actually chart how reading labs such as this one impacts reading improvement. The school staff also has developed strong community support and participation. Progress has been impressive. Let's see what we can accomplish with a little cutting edge technology."

In retrospect, I'm grateful the Daring 5 managed to take on the challenge of teaching reading to high schoolers. We kept our minds open. Some of our students were in such holes that nothing was too crazy to try, besides it might work! I'm reminded of what worked for one young man named Carlos in one of my freshman classes. Carlos symbolized what happened to many students who fell in love with reading by simply trying it out—just for the fun of it.

In my mind and before I knew it, I had categorized Carlos as lazy. He was a big, sullen lump who acted as if he really wanted to be somewhere else, where he could chew on his toothpick in peace. I remember announcing homework in his class: "Tonight we will be reading Of Mice and Men,

chapters 1-2 by John Steinbeck and selecting a character for whom you will read in our "theater in the round". Thinking of Carlos and how I wanted to capture his attention, I had rented a video. I showed 10 minutes of the Hollywood feature and turned the video off. The class wanted more, of course. So, I gave copies of the paperbacks to each class member as his/her own script (so to speak). Quickly, we reset our desks in a double rowed oval. What the movie did for these kids was give them some images for their mental screens on which they attached words that they read. What rearranging the room together did was prepared us for something new and different, coming tomorrow in Room 103. The "theater in the round" format suggested students were performance art readers. They rose to the expectation.

Carlos came to class the next day ready to read for Lennie. He read the character's dialogue so convincingly that he created quite a fan base within his class. The experience was a beginning that sparked his interest in reading and improved his reading scores that year four-fold, a reading spurt greater than anyone else in his class. The next year although Carlos had moved on to 10th grade English, he frequently dropped by my room on his way home. "Hey, Ms. Early," followed by a wide smile, "I need to pick out something to read. Gotta 'good read' that I haven't read? How about this one? Yeah, this one--just for the fun of it!"