



# LITERACY GETS *a* MAKEOVER

## ENGAGED LEARNING BOOSTS STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AT MICHIGAN HIGH SCHOOL

By Richard E. Wood and Helen L. Burz

**T**he high school was in the bottom 5% of schools in Michigan, the principal had been replaced, and the school had just received a grant to improve student achievement. The staff read *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001), everyone was in a professional learning community by department, the school and district administration were deeply committed to improvement, and yet no one could articulate the teaching actions necessary to improve academic performance in a systematic manner.

The school is E.A. Johnson High School in Mt. Morris, Mich., near Flint, where the city has felt deeply the impact of the area's economic decline. The student popula-

tion is 72% free and reduced lunch.

The staff was willing to make the changes necessary for success but needed more than a book study. Many of the structures for professional learning were in place, such as opportunities for collegial dialogue, capacity building, and a focus on data, all conducted through department-based professional learning communities.

The staff needed to analyze, summarize, prioritize, and personalize the Common Core State Standards. They also needed to model, discuss, analyze, and implement research-based classroom instructional practices aligned to the Common Core.

These changes required scheduled monitoring and support. Finally, staff needed to assess student achievement, focused on proficiency in the Common Core, in a manner that provided feedback for further instructional decision making and improvement.



Photos by KITTY BLACK

At E.A. Johnson High School, the staff was willing to make the changes necessary for success but needed more than a book study.

### CLARIFY THE VISION

As consultants, we saw the need to clarify the school’s vision for success, the Common Core State Standards, and what the changes look like in very explicit terms.

During our first visit to the school, we conducted a walk-through with the principal and assistant principal, looking for indicators of effective instruction in two categories: getting ready to learn and strategies for learning.

The data we collected was discouraging. Many students had their heads down on their desks, there was no evidence of engaged learning or literacy strategies in use, and there was no evidence that students knew the learning outcome.

However, there was clear evidence that the responsibility for learning was with the teacher. The teachers were working harder than anyone else in the classroom. The staff was very committed but didn’t know what to do differently to get a different result.

We created a plan for professional learning: All English language arts teachers would meet monthly and focus on the writing process, while all non-English language arts teachers, except mathematics teachers, would meet monthly to focus

#### E.A. Johnson High School

Mt. Morris, Mich.

Grades: **9-12**

Enrollment: **600**

Staff: **40**

Racial/ethnic mix\*:

White:	<b>77%</b>
Black:	<b>20%</b>
Hispanic:	<b>7%</b>
Asian/Pacific Islander:	<b>&lt;1%</b>
Native American:	<b>&lt;1%</b>
Other:	<b>16%</b>

Limited English proficient: **<1%**

Languages spoken: **English, Punjab**

Free/reduced lunch: **72%**

Special education: **13%**

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\* Some students report more than one race/ethnicity.

**SUMMARIZATION DATA**

Department	Percent of students by proficiency level							
	Advanced		Proficient		Partially proficient		Basic	
	October 2011	May 2012	October 2011	May 2012	October 2011	May 2012	October 2011	May 2012
<b>SOCIAL STUDIES</b> main idea	8%	58%	26%	32%	25%	8%	41%	2%
<b>SCIENCE</b> main idea	3%	49%	9%	37%	29%	11%	59%	2%
<b>NONCORE</b> main idea	17%	60%	24%	33%	29%	5%	30%	2%
<b>SOCIAL STUDIES</b> supporting details	6%	51%	20%	29%	37%	15%	37%	5%
<b>SCIENCE</b> supporting details	31%	37%	17%	43%	35%	14%	17%	6%
<b>NONCORE</b> supporting details	7%	21%	24%	49%	31%	26%	38%	4%

on developing literacy skills in their classrooms.

From January to May 2011, professional learning focused on understanding and implementing the Common Core and effective literacy practices for learning. During 2011-12, the staff assessed the effectiveness of the strategies implemented. The English language arts department concentrated on implementing Common Core writing standards 1-3 (products) and 4, 5, and 6 (audience, purpose, and process), while the remaining teachers focused on implementing Common Core reading standards 1 (citing evidence from text), 2 (summarizing text), 4 (vocabulary in context), and 10 (reading and viewing a

wide range of texts). We led the staff through a process to summarize and prioritize these reading standards.

**GETTING READY TO LEARN**

We began our work by asking teachers to do three very simple things for a month and to report back the result.

1. Post a daily agenda with learning action words.
2. Post an essential question or learning target.
3. Stop saying, “Do you have any questions?” and start asking, “What questions do you have?”

One month later, teachers reported a change happening in their classrooms. Students stopped asking, “What are we doing today?” and instead asked questions to clarify their understand-

ing. This quick win helped the staff understand the impact they have on student engagement and student achievement.

**ENGAGED LEARNING STRATEGIES**

Monthly professional learning followed with a focus on specific learning strategies linked to Marzano et al.’s (2001) research on brain theory and engaged learning, which would align with the Common Core standards in reading. We modeled, practiced, and monitored a dozen different strategies over the course of several months.

We conducted monthly walk-throughs with the principal to collect data on the level of implementation. The staff set a goal of 80% for the level of implementation in all classrooms. This was monitored through classroom observation, self-reported surveys, and examination of artifacts during our learning time.

By the end of the 2011 school year, we easily attained the 80% benchmark for implementation. It was rare to see a student’s head down on a desk. Teaching became more focused, and grades were beginning to improve. Implementation of the Common Core State Standards was paying off.

**IMPACT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

During the 2011-12 school year, we began to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies on student achievement. We determined that the most important skill students needed was summarization, which is Common Core Reading Standard 2. The importance of this skill is noted by Marzano et al. (2001), the What Works Clearinghouse (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>),

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## STAR READING ASSESSMENT COMPARISON

Percent of students reading at 10th-grade level or above

GRADE 9		GRADE 10		GRADE 11		GRADE 12	
October 2011	May 2012	October 2011	May 2012	October 2011	May 2012	October 2011	May 2012
9.9%	23.7%	21.6%	33.5%	25.3%	36.2%	45.6%	53.1%

and the *Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement* (Cawelti, 2004). Students also need this skill to write effectively without plagiarizing.

To assess the effectiveness of what we were doing, we selected several data collection points. All students took the STAR reading test quarterly. In addition, all 11th-grade students took the ACT, and all students took a quarterly summarization performance assessment.

Three departments participated in the performance assessment: social studies, science, and noncore classes. Teachers gave all third-hour classes the same content article or editorial from *USA Today* or other similar sources. Students read the article and wrote a 40- to 50-word summary. Teachers brought these summaries to the monthly professional learning session and scored them using a common rubric. Teachers then analyzed the data and developed a plan for improvement as identified in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

The first data collection in October 2011 was a sobering experience for all teachers (see p. 40). The results were not encouraging, but the conversation they generated was very encouraging. Because of the early win teachers had experienced setting the stage for learning and the impact the learning strategies had on student engagement and grades, staff knew they could make a difference in the summarization data.

During the next three quarterly data collections, student performance began to rise dramatically (see p. 40). So did reading assessment (see above) and ACT data. At each meeting, departments discussed what was working in their classrooms and began sharing across departments.

They saw themselves as not only a professional learning community but also a community of learners sharing effective practices and evaluating their results through action research and collegial dialogue.

While the STAR reading test provided information on student achievement, the driving force for improvement came from the performance data teachers collected. Teachers owned the performance results because they saw the direct link between what they were doing in their classrooms and student achievement. No longer in the bottom 5% in the state, the school has risen to the 55th percentile.

### NEXT STEPS

At the start of the 2012-13 school year, staff met to review and align the curriculum with the Common Core State Standards. They understand the importance of writing in improving student achievement, and they developed a plan to incorporate writing in all classrooms. We taught, modeled, and assessed a common writing process with clearly identified learner actions in all English language arts classrooms. All non-English language arts classrooms are ready to implement this process and require its use in all writing assignments and assessments.

The district's middle school replicated the process during the 2012-13 school year. The high school teachers now face the daunting task of sustaining and improving upon the results seen during the year before and maintaining their focus on the learner outcome of literacy for all. Knowing that the district has made systemic improvement a priority provides encouragement as they move into the new school year.

Teachers in all classrooms understand and implement the Common Core. Staff is working collaboratively, professional development is focused on student achievement, and literacy is a common conversation in all departments. Students can discuss the impact of summarization in their learning and how writing is improved through working with a clearly defined process. The school is becoming a community of learners.

**The first data collection was a sobering experience.**

### REFERENCES

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