

Snapshot #3

Improving Writing Skills River Mill Elementary School

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

The methods used by the River Mill Elementary School in Estacada, Oregon, to improve student writing skills are supported by findings from the effective schools research. Identified in EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1984), those research findings include:

At the CLASSROOM level:

1.2 THERE ARE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING.

1.4 INSTRUCTION IS CLEAR AND FOCUSED.

1.5 LEARNING PROGRESS IS MONITORED CLOSELY.

1.12 INCENTIVES AND REWARDS FOR STUDENTS ARE USED TO PROMOTE EXCELLENCE.

At the SCHOOL level:

2.1 EVERYONE EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING.

2.3 THE CURRICULUM IS BASED ON CLEAR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES.

2.6 LEARNING PROGRESS IS MONITORED CLOSELY.

2.9 INCENTIVES AND REWARDS ARE USED TO BUILD STRONG MOTIVATION.

2.10 PARENTS ARE INVITED TO BECOME INVOLVED.

2.11 TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS CONTINUALLY STRIVE TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS.

SITUATION

Estacada, Oregon, a town of approximately 2000 people, is located about one hour's drive from Portland. For years its population was primarily engaged in logging and small-scale farming. Because of a decrease in the region's lumber industry in the 1970s, unemployment rates are well above state averages and times are difficult for many residents. A third of the elementary students participate in a free lunch program. School levies are not always passed, and there have been attempts to recall members of the local school board.

Estacada has no significant minority population. There is, however, a growing "second population" of white collar workers tied to Portland for social and business affairs. This group has brought a new affluence to the town, but exists largely apart from the older residents.

CONTEXT

River Mill Elementary is one of the Estacada School District's three elementary schools. It enrolls 340 students spread evenly through grades one to six and has a low student turnover. The school has been participating in the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's ONWARD TO EXCELLENCE (OTE) program of research-based school improvement for several years. River Mill has been working on three schoolwide improvement goals: problem solving, the development of self-esteem and the improvement of writing skills.

Student performance in writing had been a concern to the school even before the district instituted OTE. Teachers had done summer study, the district's language coordinator attended a training session on the assessment of student writing and this topic was frequently discussed at school faculty meetings. However, it was not until the spring of 1985 when only 26 percent of the students passed the new Estacada Writing Assessment Test that a program of direct action was taken. The results of this test provided the stimulus for rethinking student writing goals and for mounting a well-planned, concentrated improvement effort. One year later when the Writing Assessment was readministered, the figure for passing students had risen to 54 percent.

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PRACTICE: IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS

The improvement of student writing skills at River Mill began with the decision to create the Estacada Writing Assessment. The faculty was led through this process by an outside consultant, an English professor from Portland State University, who was experienced in the development and scoring of holistic writing tests. This consultant also presented a number of teaching ideas and stimulated faculty interest in writing improvement in a variety of ways.

The administrators and curriculum leaders of the district were generally familiar with the holistic approach to teaching and assessing writing and had agreed that this was the approach they wanted to try in Estacada. The approach requires teachers, students and evaluators to consider a piece of writing as a whole--a single, integrated, unique expression--rather than as a collection of parts to be subjected to a separate analysis and evaluation for spelling, grammatical usage, construction, etc. In this approach, the teacher makes a subjective assessment of the adequacy of an individual piece of writing as a whole. The key question asked is, "Is this writing competent?" Competency is loosely and subjectively defined, and much is left to the discretion of the individual evaluator.

The consultant brought holistic writing and assessment materials and led a group of Estacada

administrators and teachers through exercises designed to develop a local version of these materials, the "Estacada Writing Assessment." This group decided to use a numerical scoring system:

- 1 = incompetent writing
- 2 = improved but still not competent performance
- 3 = competent writing but still in need of improvement
- 4 = competent in all respects.

The consultant provided samples of student writing, called "range finders," which she felt fell into each of these categories and these samples were discussed extensively by the group. From these discussions and from an examination of many examples of student writing, the group arrived at some loosely-defined criteria for acceptable writing competence which they would use in further assessments. Among these were:

- a pleasing flow of ideas
- adherence to the topic assigned
- development of the topic in a logical, convincing and imaginative manner
- support of major ideas with appropriate detail
- validity and inherent interest of the ideas expressed
- clarity: organization which does not interfere with the expression of ideas
- spelling, grammar and usage which do not interfere with the expression of ideas

The group decided that all papers would be assessed by two readers and the two scores would be added together, with five points out of a possible eight representing reasonable competence (a passing grade). Five people from this group (the superintendent, the curriculum coordinator, the language arts administrator, the consultant and a building principal) determined writing topics for the students and evaluated all 1800 papers produced for the first districtwide student writing assessment in the spring of 1985. Only 26 percent of students received a passing grade on this assessment.

After the results of this assessment were known, the faculty at River Mill School decided to place major emphasis on writing improvement. A series of discussions on this topic involving the entire faculty were held during regular weekly staff meetings. During these meetings a schoolwide goal of achieving a 70 percent passing rate for all students on the next Writing Assessment was agreed upon, and teachers were encouraged to set individual writing goals for their classes. These goals varied among the teachers, but most had both quantitative elements, focused on the number of writing assignments given and the target scores achieved, and qualitative elements concerning the types of assignments, the methods used and techniques of sharing papers and rewarding students.

Two teachers attended "Read to Write" workshops at Portland State University over the summer and shared their experiences during the intensive teacher inservice training held the week before school began in the fall of 1985. The teachers requested help in the area of improving student writing, and the district provided training by an educator from outside the district and by the district's curriculum coordinator. All staff were trained in holistic scoring, and specific procedures were established. Among these were:

- An emphasis on improving writing would be incorporated into all subject matter areas
- All students would be required to produce at least one major writing project for holistic analysis every two weeks
- At least one piece of holistically scored writing per student would be given to the principal

- so that she could check on student progress and consistency of scoring
- Where feasible, writing by the students would be exchanged among classes
- The five steps of the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing) would be displayed on a poster in each classroom and discussed, as appropriate

As school began, writing goals, writing skills and the holistic approach to writing and scoring were discussed with the students. As this was left to teacher discretion, some teachers did more than others. Often, less was explained to the younger students. Discussions of effective writing techniques and procedures continued in the weekly faculty meetings.

A Christmas story contest was arranged in December and every student was required to enter a story. These stories were judged holistically, and recognition was given to the winners in each grade. However, this judging took up a great deal of teacher time, and procedures changed for the next contest, on the theme of "Darth Vader," which took place in February 1986. Entry in this contest was voluntary. Both members of the classified staff and parents who formed part of the "Participation and Love" (PAL) volunteer group were trained in holistic scoring. They selected the five best stories per grade from among those entered in the February contest. The final round was judged by the teachers, and awards were given to the winning students.

In another writing-related activity, all students were encouraged to write their own books, both as part of class assignments and outside of class. These books and other student writing assignments were exhibited prominently in the display cases and in the halls of the school and on the walls of individual classrooms. Time was set aside when older students could read their books to younger students. Folders containing the writing of all students were kept by each teacher. Good examples of student writing were included in the school library and were available for students to check out. Students were encouraged to take their books home and share them with their families. Certificates of achievement were given to students for successful performance throughout the year as part of the school's goal of improving students' self-esteem, and these certificates were frequently awarded for excellence in writing.

The major event of the year was the Young Authors Conference held in April 1986. This was a cooperative endeavor between teachers and parents which resulted in a daylong program during which every student in the school produced two books. Students chose a theme appropriate for their age and went to an area of the school where this theme was being developed. There were activities in each area explaining or involving the theme and books to read on the theme. The students ended their participation by writing their own book on this theme. Sample themes were "Alligators," "Hats," "Cotton Candy," "Elephant Ears" and "Watermelons." At various places around the school, teachers and parents offered activities on book binding, journal writing, type faces and print styles, poetry and other topics connected with writing.

This Young Authors Conference was followed a few weeks later with a Curriculum Fair attended by parents and community members in which the results of the conference, among other things, were displayed and discussed. At the end of the year, the local Optimists' Club also sponsored a writing contest in which \$25 prizes were given to the best entrants from each grade. While this was not an official part of the school program, it illustrates the community backing and involvement spurred by the school's commitment to improving student writing.

Throughout the year, the principal played an active role in stimulating teachers and in supporting writing projects. In faculty meetings she led brainstorming and planning sessions concerning teaching techniques and encouraged teacher initiative and good ideas as they appeared. She helped keep the faculty aware of the importance of improved writing, focused on this task and working

cooperatively to achieve it. She also included samples of successful student writing on the back of the weekly parents' newsletter.

When the Estacada Writing Assessment was given again at the end of the school year, 54 percent of all students in the school scored five out of eight points or above. Further efforts to improve student writing and to increase scores on the Assessment are being undertaken in the 1986-87 school year.

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