

Snapshot #16

Staff Development to Improve Student Writing Performance: East Orient Elementary School

by Jocelyn A. Butler

RESEARCH FINDINGS

East Orient Elementary School's work to improve student writing performance is guided by findings from the effective schooling research. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory publication, *EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS*, describes those findings as follows.

Relevant research-based practices at the CLASSROOM level include:

1.1 INSTRUCTION IS GUIDED BY A PREPLANNED CURRICULUM.

- Learning goals and objectives are developed and prioritized.
- Instructional resources and teaching activities are identified, matched to objectives and student developmental levels and recorded in lesson plans. Alternative resources and activities are identified, especially for priority objectives.
- Resources and teaching activities are reviewed for content and appropriateness and are modified according to experience to increase their effectiveness in helping students learn.

1.2 THERE ARE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING.

- Teachers set high standards for learning and let students know they are all expected to meet them. Standards are set so they are both challenging and attainable.

Supportive SCHOOL level research-based practices include:

2.3 THE CURRICULUM IS BASED ON CLEAR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES.

- Learning goals and objectives are clearly defined and displayed; teachers actively use building curriculum resources for instructional planning. District curriculum resources are

used, when available.

SITUATION

Part of the two-school Orient School District in Gresham, a suburb of Portland, Oregon, East Orient Elementary School is located in a community that includes extensive agriculture and a number of landed suburbanites who commute to the nearby city. A major feature of the Orient community is the presence of the most nursery stock in a single concentrated area in the United States.

The school staff of 21 certified teachers serves a student population of 386 in grades 4-8, with one teacher for every 18 students. Classes for all five grades take place in the same building. There is a small, growing population of ethnic minority students, many of whom have no experience in school and who arrive unable to speak English.

Grades 4, 5 and 6 are organized as self-contained classrooms with a single teacher and opportunities for work with district specialists in specific areas (music, etc.). Students in grades 7 and 8, on the other hand, have a school day divided into eight periods with eight different teachers in a junior high school configuration. In the junior high classes, first period is a few minutes longer each day for attendance, lunch count and announcements.

CONTEXT

East Orient Elementary School has been focused on improving student performance since the school began applying the research-based school improvement process ONWARD TO EXCELLENCE (OTE) in 1984. Using the process, the school collected data on student performance, used the data to select schoolwide goals to improve that performance, and adopted instructional practices tied to the goals.

Their first OTE goal concentrated on improving student reading scores, and from 1986 to 1989 student reading performance showed steady, significant improvements. Much of the effort for reaching this goal revolved around staff involvement in decision making and in professional development work to change instructional practice.

Following success in improving student reading performance, the school then turned to writing, adopting an OTE goal to improve student writing performance as measured by analytical writing assessments administered at the time, at various grade levels, by the state, the county and the district. Work began on a writing goal in 1987.

Also in 1987, East Orient successfully applied for a grant from the Oregon Department of Education's "School Improvement and Professional Development" program funded through House Bill 2020 by the Oregon Legislature. In the application, the school built on work in the area of student writing performance, citing improved student writing skills as a main goal. East Orient received a grant of \$21,000 -- \$1,000 for each full-time certified staff member -- to be used for professional development opportunities for staff that would contribute to their meeting stated goals.

With experience in moving toward improvement goals and funding for staff training, East Orient began to focus on four goals:

- **IMPROVING STUDENT WRITING PERFORMANCE:** "By spring of 1989, 75 percent of the students at each grade level tested will achieve a mean performance equal to or greater than 3.6 on a scale of 1 to 5 in all six areas as measured by county and district analytical writing assessments."
- **COMPLETING STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS TO IMPLEMENT AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO WRITING:** "By spring of 1989, 100 percent of the language arts staff will demonstrate an integrated approach to writing instruction. A variety of new strategies will be applied to classroom instruction across the content areas."
- **IMPROVING STUDENT ATTITUDE ABOUT WRITING:** "By spring of 1989, 90 percent of East Orient students will demonstrate an appreciation of writing as measured through an attitude survey. Throughout the year, students will participate in fun writing activities. Teachers will succeed in motivating students to write their best."
- **INCREASING TEACHER COLLEGIALITY THROUGH PEER COACHING AND PLANNING:** "By spring of 1989, 100 percent of staff will participate in team planning sessions, 50 percent of staff will make informal presentations at faculty meetings, and 30 percent of staff will present to teachers of surrounding districts."

To meet these goals, a wide variety of professional development activities were organized during the 1988- 89 school year:

- A three-day June inservice for language arts teachers with a language arts consultant who presented a model for whole language instruction, integrating speaking, listening, reading and writing in both expressive and receptive strands. Teachers learned instructional methods and techniques for this integrative approach and received extensive materials for classroom use. This consultant returned several times during the school year to observe, provide technical assistance and give sample lessons to increase use of this approach.
- A follow-up half-day session at an October staff retreat with another language arts consultant offering further techniques for whole language instruction, with particular emphasis on writing instruction.
- Mini-grants to individual teachers to attend one and two-day seminars, conferences and workshops with writing-related content during the year.
- Collection of resources on writing instruction, providing teachers increased access to professional literature in the area.
- Four full days of team planning during the school year to increase teacher awareness of and skills in a "writing across the curriculum" approach. One group of teachers met one day in July to follow up with discussions and planning for applying the language arts consultant's approach in their classrooms.
- A spring retreat focusing on writing response groups and cooperative learning techniques for teaching writing.
- Refocusing the peer coaching program to emphasize writing instruction, particularly teacher behaviors that enhance the students' "writing disposition" (favorable attitude about writing).

In addition to new activities, ongoing teacher development activities were continued, again with a stronger focus on student writing performance. Two ongoing teacher groups continued their work: the "Student-Focus Group" in which teachers met monthly to analyze and solve instructional problems of targeted individual students, and the "Pedagogical Problem Solvers," where teachers examined alternative instructional techniques. Tuition reimbursement, minigrants and leave programs were also continued.

The staff development programs resulted in major changes in writing activities in the school:

- The integrated approach to writing instruction led to emphasis on the publication of student writing and the creation of a Publishing Center for use in individual classrooms. The Center is a cabinet containing binding machines, writing materials and various paper colors and types, a mobile cart that moves from room to room as student projects are ready for final preparation. Language Arts teachers were trained in "Bookmaking" at a special inservice and work with students to design and complete publications. A parent volunteer now staffs the Center, increasing availability and shortening timelines from first draft to final product.
- Another publishing activity for students involved founding a quarterly literary magazine written, edited and produced by students, from copy and artwork through word processing of final copy to be sent to the printer. The magazine averages about 70 pages of student writings.
- Students now are producing a monthly newspaper featuring student writing and artwork and fully prepared by students.
- According to staff surveys, student attitudes about writing have changed, and staff are far more likely to become involved in innovative instructional approaches. There has been a drop in staff absenteeism accompanied by an increase in professional leave being granted for learning at meetings or through staff exchanges.

The combination of the school's current emphasis on improvement with significant staff development funding allowed East Orient to make an intense effort in one instructional area. A number of changes resulted, and the school was able to meet its goals:

- The student performance goal was met: by spring of 1989 the average school score on the analytical writing assessment had increased from 3.4 to 3.53 on a 1-5 scale.
- School language arts staff have now enthusiastically adopted a whole language approach to writing instruction.
- Student attitudes about writing appear to have changed dramatically, especially evident in interest in the publication of student work.
- More teachers spend more time working together to solve instructional problems and learn new instructional methods and techniques.

PRACTICE: WRITING WORKSHOP FOLDERS

Mrs. Mary Day's class of eighth graders is organized into small groups for the two-period language arts block each day. Students are at paired desks reading, writing or quietly discussing their work together.

Each student in the class is responsible for maintaining a folder which contains a spiral notebook, mimeographed forms, lists and special information on the front and back. Items in the folders include:

- Rules for using time in class: how students work together and separately to complete assigned tasks
- List for keeping track of the books that the student has read
- Spelling list of words to learn
- Mini-lessons of sample work
- Individual goal sheets on which students list personal language arts goals, e.g., "improve

vocabulary using vocabulary lists," "take more risks in writing," etc. (goals are handed in to the teacher and checked periodically)

Also contained in the class folder is a separate folder specifically for writing and containing:

- Rules for the writing workshop approach used in the classroom: how to get organized for writing tasks, the steps toward completing a final piece, etc.
- Lists of a variety of sample sentences for models of writing approaches
- Spiral notebook for recording assigned work. In one quarter of the year students make columns in their notebooks in which to record new vocabulary words, quotes and ideas, thoughts and questions that could be useful in their writing. In another quarter, students write letters back and forth to others in the class. Notebooks are picked up and checked by the teacher once a week.
- Spelling lists
- Skills lists: what students need to work on in their writing, e.g., "use of apostrophes to show ownership," etc.
- Titles of finished writings, those that have been edited, reviewed, revised and completed
- Writings in progress, including stories, book reports and essays on which the student is currently working. (All students complete book reports that focus on their reactions to the books, not on plot summaries. Book reports are then made available to other students who are looking for something new to read and write about.)

In another part of the classroom, students each have an assigned file in which they put final copy of their written work. During the language arts workshop, students move freely about the room to find materials as necessary and consult with the teacher on individual projects, using the folders to store their work. Folders keep students organized and allow students and teachers to monitor progress toward completing assignments.

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