

Literacy-Rich Instruction Gets Results in Two Kentucky School Systems



SREB

High Schools
That Work

Kentucky schools' focus on strategic unit planning using Literacy Design Collaborative across content areas helped lead to:

- Tichenor Middle School being named a “High Progress School,” meaning it is among the top 10 percent of schools in Kentucky showing the most rapid growth;
- King Middle School shifting from “Needs Improvement” to “Progressing,” missing “Proficient” by two points; and
- Mercer Senior High School moving from “Needs Improvement” status to “Proficient,” going from a 39 percentile ranking to a 77 percentile ranking in just one year.

Students Change Their Outlook on Reading and How They Learn

Tichenor Middle School Erlanger/Elsmere School District

“When you think about it, LDC (Literacy Design Collaborative) and MDC (Mathematics Design Collaborative) are just good instruction,” according to Bryant Gillis, principal of Tichenor Middle School (TMS) in Erlanger, Kentucky. To make that “good instruction” pervasive across content areas and grade levels, TMS partnered with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the Kentucky Department of Education to make building literacy-rich instruction an essential part of the school culture.

Gillis says the change in instruction has been dramatic. “We were looking at changing the whole climate of the building. When I first came to the school, we had to pay because we went over our allotted paper copy amount. We were using a lot of worksheets. Now, students are reading and then writing about what they’ve read. I observe students highlighting and marking up their papers in science and social studies classrooms on a consistent basis — even in the math classrooms. Our students have learned to read actively to understand word problems and better navigate their textbooks. That is all coming from the LDC work,” explains Gillis.

Nicci Magee, an eighth-grade English/language arts teacher at TMS, has always maintained high expectations for her students. Now, after completing LDC modules, her students’ expectations for themselves have risen. “The students have to analyze texts to complete their assignments, and learn how to read for the most important information to complete the task. This has totally changed their outlook on reading, and I know it has changed how they learn in science, social studies and in English/language arts classes,” says Magee.

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Reading and Writing Scores Soar

King Middle School Mercer County School District

Terry Gordon, the principal of King Middle School (KMS), says LDC has impacted instruction by changing the way teachers plan. “Our staff is doing more meaningful, collaborative planning as they design tasks and create modules. Our students are doing higher-order levels of reading and writing. Test scores are now above the state average,” notes Gordon. While he is happy with the rise in exam scores, he also sees an important shift in the types of assignments students are completing. “Students are now using critical thinking skills by forming opinions and backing up their assertions with evidence from the text. Teachers expect more from the students than from the portfolio prompts we used previously. Students are enjoying the process too,” explains Gordon.

Gordon believes good timing is one reason LDC has had such an impact at KMS. “Our school has struggled with writing. We had never been above the state average. We could not continue doing what we have always done, because it was not working,” Gordon and his leadership team saw the new English/language arts and literacy standards as opportunities that could lead to lasting change. He says the new standards meant, “We needed a schoolwide change in our approach to literacy.” In LDC, he saw an approach that went along with their plan to increase rigor in the school.

To make this approach work, Gordon made sure to select the right people, and provide the time needed for deeper levels of planning. He chose teachers from each content area and each grade level to receive the initial training. The expectation was that these teachers would work with both their grade-level and content-area teams. Gordon emphasizes the importance of giving teachers the time needed to complete the work. “By having the right folks and giving them time, we could then expect our staff to do the work with LDC. This year, our district has given us paid time after school to allow our teachers to work in their departments. By doing so, we expect our department teachers to work together to dig deeper in their department standards using LDC.”

Knowing that his teachers were dealing with a myriad of new initiatives and programs, Gordon kept the process reasonable. He states, “We worked mainly with the tasks the first two years as we began the process. Keep in mind that teachers across Kentucky and other states have a lot on their plates right now. I understand that and did not push the modules until we had data to see results from our efforts.” After the first year, KMS’ writing scores were above the state average. The second year, scores were static. To Gordon, “that was evidence of the need to push the use of LDC modules by those who feel out of place teaching writing. This year we are making a concerted and intentional effort to move our staff to teaching LDC with modules included.”



To sustain and spread the work, KMS constantly celebrates success. “Our reading scores have risen each year. Our writing scores are above state average for the second year. We had a first and second place NASA essay contest winner, and we had the best conservation essay contest submissions ever as a school,” says Gordon. This type of success makes capacity building much easier. “Now that reluctant teachers are seeing the success of others, the use of LDC has taken off. We see only great things ahead for our students when it comes to reading and writing.”

Students Demonstrate Deeper Learning Using LDC

Mercer High School Mercer County School District

While teachers recognize the importance of strong literacy skills, content teachers are often concerned that literacy-focused modules will take precious time from content standards. As some teachers began to develop modules and witness students' growth in mastering content, their mindset begins to change. For example, Mercer High School social studies teacher Andrew Ashford demonstrates that well-developed modules, using complex texts to build literacy skills, can deepen learning. "My focus has become more aligned with developing students' analytic skills and applying them to primary sources to teach concepts rather than using more traditional Q & A note-taking sessions."

Ashford does not lose sight of his content. "When planning, I ask myself the question, 'How do these documents and assignments teach students what they need to know to think more critically and understand how and why the world works the way it does,'" says Ashford. He is impressed with the results. "A majority of students are more articulate in their writing skills and are able to recognize point of view, bias and accuracy when interpreting various texts and visual sources." This change can be attributed to well-developed modules that require greater student accountability and developing their own understanding and interpretation of materials.

Partnership with SREB

Erlanger and Mercer Counties partnered with SREB to support teachers through LDC training. According to Principal Gillis of Tichenor Middle School, "The SREB coaches did a great job coming back in the school, setting time lines, and saying — 'OK, let's try it here, let's start here.' Now it's taken off across the curriculum. We've been very pleased with the guidance and what's been going on. Some of our teachers were invited to present at the LDC national conference in Charlotte last summer."

SREB support does not end when teachers develop and teach their modules. Currently, Magee is working with SREB coaches to highlight the connections between Kentucky's new evaluation program, Professional Growth Evaluation System (PGES), and instruction using LDC. "We're taking components of the PGES and showing how they match the LDC module and how, by teaching with LDC, we are becoming exceptional teachers." SREB coaches continue to support Magee's great work. She explains that now, "we're looking at our modules and developing them and finding ways to improve our tasks and mini-tasks to ensure everything connects."

If you would like more information about SREB's LDC and MDC training, email Gene Bottoms at gene.bottoms@sreb.org or call (404) 875-9211.

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DECEMBER 2013

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