

Promising Practices Newsletter

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Spotlighting promising practices from the Making Schools Work Conference

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Every Day Students Are Lit: Engaging ELA Instruction

By Diane James

The best way to improve writing, speaking and vocabulary skills is through literature. Studying literature also teaches students about their past, other cultures and broadens their horizons and view of the world. It entertains too!



But not all students like to read. “We know that students don’t wake up in the morning and say “yay, literature,” says Vernitria Rice, an English language arts teacher at Southwest Dekalb High School in Decatur, Georgia. However, engaging ELA instruction can ignite a curiosity and interest in reading.

Rice uses captivating projects, student competitions and literature circles in which small groups of students gather to read, discuss

and engage in critical thinking. Through this cooperative learning experience, students debate ideas, share experiences and deepen their understanding of books. A bonus is that struggling readers gain access to grade-level materials and realize that reading is fun!

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Literature Circle Grouping

“A lot of students don’t care about their own grades, but they don’t want to let their peers down,” says Rice. That’s why grouping is important and effective in literature circles. It must be strategic and intentional. In the general level classes, Rice applies heterogeneous grouping in which students of more diverse abilities are placed together. There is always at least one student in the group who is very motivating and reads on grade level to help the rest of the group. Rice uses homogenous grouping in her advanced classes as all students have similar abilities and read on grade level or above.

Literature Circle: Differentiation

Literature circles must be differentiated. In Rice’s classes, students must read three books from an approved list. Accelerated and AP students choose their books, but in her general level class, all students read the same book, and each group becomes an expert on one section of it. They discuss the book together and do activities to share with others as preparation for class assessments.

Once a week, students gather in literature circles to complete exercises related to selected texts and complete study questions. Students have about three weeks to complete the book, culminating in a project.

Another part of her differentiation process involves how students access books. They enjoy an array of options, including an electronic version, a hard copy from the classroom, library or media center, or a YouTube audio recording. Rice says her 10th-graders sometime FaceTime each other while listening to a recording. She’s delighted that even those who could not read on grade level knew what was happening in the book because they were listening and engaging with their peers.

Products and Projects

Rice shares the following group projects and procedures that get and keep students engaged.

1. Assign each group a series of chapters from a novel and require them to create a visual representation (storyboard or Google slides) of the events in the chapters.
2. Identify 10 vocabulary words: define and share in a sentence.
3. Use text connections.
 - a. Text to text — Compare to something you’ve read before.
 - b. Text to self — Compare to a personal experience.
 - c. Text to world — Compare to a world event.

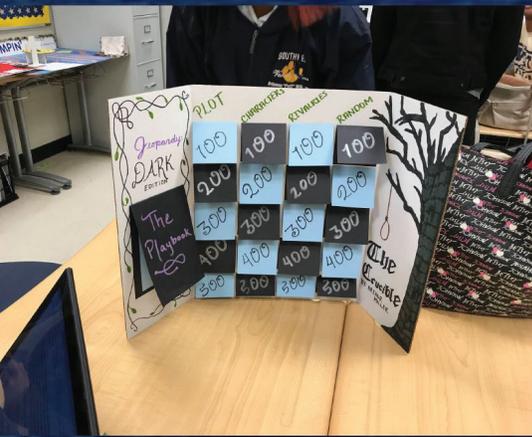


Vernitria Rice, English language arts teacher, Southwest DeKalb High School

Choose one of the following projects to complete with your literary circle members.

Project Option	Project Description
iMovie Book Trailer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create your own book trailers that communicate the key details of the plot (60 to 90 seconds).• Introduce the main characters.• Communicate one or more of the key themes.• The tone of the trailer should complement the tone of the book.
Character Instagram	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create an Instagram account and profile for the characters from the book you’ve read.• Post photos, memes, quotes, etc., that the characters would post.• Follow and be followed by other characters from the book.• Justify your choices with inferences and textual evidence.
Character Playlist	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create a playlist with at least three songs that represent four characters from your book.• Make a CD cover that includes a list of these songs and CD cover artwork that represents your character.• Write a justification and analysis for each song to be presented.
Scene Script and Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Select a pivotal scene from the book you’ve read.• Refashion the scene from prose to drama by writing a script (complete with a character list, stage directions and dialogue).• Perform the skit for the class (3 to 5 minutes).

Literature Circle - Board Games



Rice's students created a board game based on novels they've read. Pictured left to right: *The Crucible*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Raft Jumpin' for Huckleberry Finn*.

Board Game Project and Competition

Students compete with other groups at the end of the year by creating a board game of their favorite book. The game must contain game pieces, trivia cards and instructions. The game should give players a good understanding of the novel's plot, characters, setting and theme.

"These presentations are a big deal. You have to wow me," maintains Rice. Students have buy-in because they have a choice, and they want to win. Even the students who didn't read the entire book will read enough for the project. "Reading is reading, that's what I've come to resolve," says Rice. "They definitely become engaged with these projects."

Contact: Vernitria Rice, Vernitria_V_Rice@dekalbschoolsga.org

Build an Anti-bullying School Environment

By Jahana Martin, SREB

School provides a space for students to learn, grow and prepare for adulthood. A healthy learning environment helps them to achieve success, but bullying threatens the physical safety and mental wellness of students and can negatively impact their educational trajectory.

Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths...that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social or educational harm, according to the [CDC](#).

Identify the Behavior

It is not always easy for educators to identify when a student is being bullied. "A lot of times you don't even know what's happening. You may not realize it because you're teaching," says Jennifer Talarico, professional development specialist, instructional support services in mathematics and DASA trainer at New York's Orleans/Niagara BOCES. New York's [Dignity for All Students Act](#) protects students from harassment or bullying in public schools.



According to Talarico, the most common types of bullying are:

- **Physical** — hitting, punching, shoving, kicking, pinching, spitting, tripping, taking or breaking someone's property
- **Verbal** — name-calling, teasing, inappropriate sexual comments, taunting and threatening to cause harm
- **Social/emotional/relational** — social manipulation including spreading rumors about someone, intentionally excluding others, telling other students not to be friends with someone and embarrassing someone in public
- **Microaggressions** — subtle, indirect, brief, everyday exchanges, verbal and non-verbal, that send messages to certain individuals that because of their group membership, they have little worth
- **Cyberbullying** — harassment or bullying that happens through any form of electronic communication like cell phones, computers and tablets, and includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false or mean content about someone else

There are many ways students are cyberbullied. This includes **trolling** (the deliberate act of provoking a response using insults or bad language on online forums and social networking sites), **catfishing** (when another person steals your online identity, usually photos, and recreates social networking profiles for deceptive purposes) and **sexting/sexortion** (the sending, receiving or forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photos through text messages or email. Sextortion involves threats to expose a sexual image to make a person do something or for revenge or humiliation).

Other types of cyberbullying are **happy slapping** (an extreme form of bullying in which physical assaults are recorded on mobile phones or digital cameras and distributed to others), **voting and polling degradation** (allowing others to vote online for categories that are deemed highly embarrassing such as ugliest, fattest, dumbest, most sexually promiscuous, etc.), **flaming** (online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language), **fraping** (when somebody logs into your social networking account and impersonates a child by posting inappropriate content in their name) and more. It may be difficult to spot cyberbullying because students use apps that educators may not know about.

Recognize the Indicators

Educators can help prevent bullying by recognizing early warning signs of students who are being bullied *and* students who bully. Students who are being bullied may have unexplainable injuries, lost or destroyed personal property, frequent headaches or stomach aches or fake illnesses. They may suddenly lose friends, avoid social situations and exhibit self-destructive behaviors as they lose interest in school, says Talarico.

Students who bully are increasingly aggressive and often get into physical or verbal fights. Typically, they are concerned with popularity, have friends who are bullies and could have unexplained money or belongings, Talarico adds.

Bias and privilege often play a role in bullying. Many times, students face bias-based bullying, which is physical, verbal, social or cyber-based threats directed toward a minority population based upon race, ethnicity, religious belief, gender or sexual orientation. It includes a systematic abuse of power that is characterized by intentionality, frequency or showing prejudice against someone or something usually in a way considered to be unfair.

“Educators sometimes need to step back and understand biases including their own to recognize bullying when it occurs,” Talarico explains.



Privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it's not a problem to you personally, maintains Talarico. “Students sometimes get bullied (or bully) because of a privilege that they have or a privilege that they don't have, and that's often difficult to see at first,” she adds.

Help **STOP** Bullying

Let's Talk

Dignity Act Coordinator Name

Email

Phone Number

Room #

Dignity Act Coordinator

SOMEONE WHO YOU CAN TRUST



If you see or hear something...

Do Something!

**TAKE A STAND AGAINST BULLYING,
CYBERBULLYING,
HARASSMENT & DISCRIMINATION**

**Someone you can talk to:
(Your school's Dignity Act Coordinator)**

Tools schools can use to help students report bullying

Strategies Into Action

Schools and school districts should establish policies and procedures including a code of conduct that addresses bullying. "When you have a positive school culture, bullying will not take place as much as in a negative one," Talarico says.

Students and staff should understand how to identify the early warning signs of bullying and be empowered within their school community to report these incidents.

Anti-bullying strategies can be implemented in communities, schools and classrooms. According to Talarico, **communities** can partner with schools to build an anti-bullying task force and with universities to provide mentorship to students. **Schools** can communicate clear consequences for bullying and adopt restorative practices to help strengthen relationships. In the **classroom**, educators can proactively build relationships, reinforce anti-bullying policies and initiate anti-bullying classroom activities.

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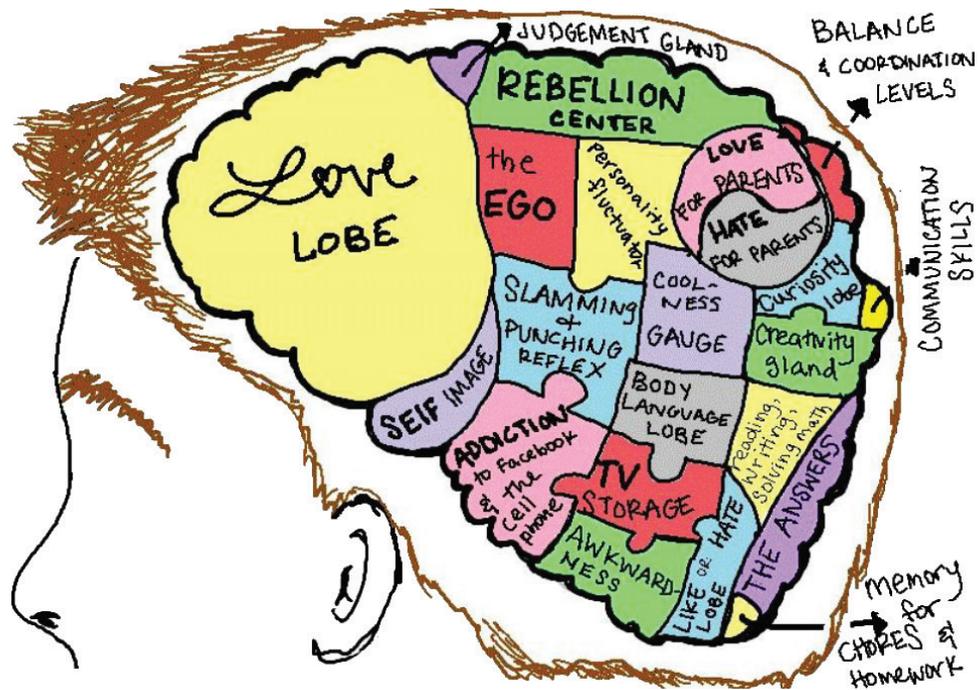
What Every Middle Grades Educator Should Know

By Susan Simpson and Diane James, SREB

Public education focuses a lot of attention on the early grades and high school, but what about the middle grades? These are challenging years for students as young adolescents experience significant developmental changes regarding their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth.

The brain of young adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14 undergoes intense changes that have significant implications for behavior and learning according to Andrew Maxey, director of strategic initiatives of Tuscaloosa City Schools in Alabama and former middle school principal.

The prefrontal cortex of the brain, which is involved in decision-making, planning, prioritizing and controlling impulses, is still developing in young adolescents. This may explain why middle schoolers are often stereotyped as being impulsive, crazy, lazy and having no self-control, notes Maxey.



But he contends educators shouldn't allow negative stereotyping to influence how they feel about their work. Instead of viewing the middle grades as frustrating, Maxey suggests teachers consider it a time of incredible opportunity. "The more you understand the humans you're serving, the more effective your decisions about them are likely to be," he says.

Four Things to Know About Young Adolescents' Brains

1. Human brains develop more rapidly during young adolescence years, and the physiological impacts of puberty have profound effects on how learning happens. With the brain and body changing, middle schoolers have a lot going on.

Maxey says their brains are "racing down rabbit trails all the time," and it can be difficult for them to focus attention on one thing for any length of time. He maintains the attention span of the typical adolescent brain ranges from 10 to 12 minutes, and they can only handle five to seven bits of information at one time.

With this in mind, there are numerous ways teachers can leverage the potential of middle schoolers' brains. For example, structure short classroom lessons and switch to something equally challenging, but new, a few minutes later. This kind of regrouping, Maxey suggests, has a greater impact on learning than having longer lessons.

2. Scientists have long believed there is a rewiring and pruning of the brain that takes place during the adolescence years. Maxey describes it as a use-it or lose-it process in which pathways to the brain that are actively engaged remain and are strengthened, but those that are underutilized are retired.

Maxey believes teachers can take advantage of this process by giving students opportunities to engage in critical thinking and explore through project- and problem-based learning. The more they are engaged in these activities, the more the skills that they learn become hard-wired.



3. Young adolescents need to feel that they belong in school. Maxey indicates it's valuable for schools to provide structures or layers of belonging, ranging from grouping to extracurricular activities "as opposed to having students whose only connection is to the school itself."
4. There's an abundance of research about the adolescent brain and Maxey encourages educators to study and understand it and realize that most middle schoolers are not usually forgetting things, misbehaving or acting immature to annoy teachers. Their behavior is normal for their age group, he says.

Middle Schools Matter

Public education should invest as heavily in understanding research about the adolescent brain as it does in other areas of education, notes Maxey. He goes on to say, “Budgets are priority statements. If you show me a district and tell me it has a stated focus, all of my money is on early literacy or reading before third grade or for college and career preparedness. We stay silent to anything unique to the middle level,” says Maxey.

He urges policymakers — superintendents, school boards and state-level decision-makers — to give the same focus and attention to the middle grades as they do high schools. He concludes, what they are “trying to accomplish at the high school level might be more accessible if we pivot and put a strong emphasis on the middle level.”

Contact: Andrew Maxey, amaxey@tusc.k12.al.us



Andrew Maxey, director of strategic initiatives of Tuscaloosa City Schools



Pacesetter School Awards Nominations

Is your school a shining star? Tell us about it!

SREB’s Making Schools Work Conference team is seeking nominations for the 2022 Gene Bottoms Pacesetter School Awards. Outstanding middle grades schools, high schools and technology centers will be recognized at our 2023 conference in Orlando next July.

To be recognized as a Pacesetter, schools must demonstrate engagement in SREB’s Making Schools Work network by hosting a [curriculum and instruction review](#) or [career pathway review](#) in 2021 or 2022; participating in SREB’s 2021 or 2022 [student and teacher surveys](#) and/or attending the 2021 or 2022 [Making Schools Work Conference](#).

Schools must also provide evidence of taking actions to implement changes in school and classroom practices for at least one of our key practices and present a session aligned with the key practices for which the school is being recognized.

Nominations are now being accepted. The deadline to submit is December 1, 2022. [Learn more](#) and download the nomination form.

Send completed nominations to scott.warren@sreb.org.

Registration Is Open for the 2023 Making Schools Work Conference

Secure your spot today for the [Making Schools Work Conference](#). Join us in Orlando, Florida, July 18-21, 2023, for four days of hands-on professional learning and networking.

The conference offers hundreds of sessions for K-12 educators on topics like quality instruction in English, math, social studies, special education, and career and technical education. We’ll also tackle issues such as teacher retention, student and faculty mental wellness, classroom management, trauma and so much more.

Bring a team and take away classroom-tested tools and strategies that can be used right away to transform your pedagogy and increase student success.



Call for Presentations and Submission Guide

Learn more:

sreb.org/SummerConference

Contact us:

summerconference@sreb.org

Apply to Present

Are you having success in your own classroom or school in raising student engagement and achievement? Share your strategies. Apply today to present a proposal at next year's conference. Download our call for [Presentations and Submission Guide](#) to learn more about our conference objectives and how to submit a successful proposal.

The deadline to submit a proposal is November 1, 2022.



Watch and listen to the sights and sounds of the 2022 Making Schools Work Conference. Attendees share key takeaways from this year's professional development event.



Making Schools Work Conference

Orlando, Florida, July 18-21, 2023

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