

Student-generated literacy initiatives

Professor Allen Berger founded the Teens for Literacy program in 1989 at Miami University of Ohio to help inner-city school children improve their reading and writing skills. He began with three inner-city schools and as the years progressed Teens for Literacy was in more than 50 schools in southwestern Ohio. When he relocated to Savannah, GA, a few years ago, he shared the concept with the faculty at Armstrong.

Throughout the 2012–2016 school years, Teens for Literacy student leaders have created a range of meaningful student-generated initiatives in order to encourage reading and writing throughout their school community.

For example, they have produced multiple editions of schoolwide newspapers. Articles have included an advice column, highlights about school events, book reviews, research about visiting authors, reading and study tips, original poetry, and teacher interviews. Students also personally distribute the newspapers to peers. They visit each classroom, introduce themselves as being members of the student literacy leadership team, and share a brief preview of the articles included in each edition.

The newspaper offers a valuable platform for students to encourage their classmates to submit writing to the library's writing contests, attend the local, nationally recognized Savannah Children's Book Festival, share video book trailers, attend area family literacy events, and garner support for school programs.

In addition, the students launched a blog with original book reviews to promote summer reading and researched and introduced select Savannah Children's Book Festival authors to their school community. They also established a pen pal exchange with students in Haiti, participated in writing conferences with a local author, served as reading buddies to students in younger grades, and started an annual schoolwide poetry initiative, culminating in Poem in Your Pocket Day, held during National Poetry Month each April.

Literacy, acted out

A recent project was the writing and drafting of literacy-related play vignettes

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that were presented at two schoolwide assemblies. The Teens for Literacy student leaders decided that short plays would be a valuable tool to highlight the importance of literacy in our everyday lives. I provided the students with a Readers Theatre script about the components of a play (setting, dialogue, stage directions, and costumes) to activate their background knowledge on the genre before they began drafting.

The activities they performed were wide ranging and included the following:

- ✦ Making an ice cream soda following a recipe in a cookbook
- ✦ Assisting Grandma with cooking her homemade gumbo from scratch while reading her special recipe
- ✦ Sharing the "top 10 reasons to read"
- ✦ Presenting creative study tips to prepare for an exam
- ✦ Reading the newspaper to learn the results of a local basketball game
- ✦ Reading Eric Carle books to a younger sibling and explaining the author's unique style of illustrating books
- ✦ Explaining the process of creating the student-generated newspaper

These play vignettes were empowering, as the students wrote scripts to exemplify the importance of literacy for their peers. As the students listened, they were exposed to authentic conversations about everyday literacy practices in action.

The play vignettes illustrated how children understand their literate lives through movement and dramatization. The purpose was to encourage Teens for Literacy student leaders to serve as reading mentors to their peers as they meaningfully reflected upon the power of literacy in their daily lives through active learning.

Sharing the play vignettes with peers and teachers provided a valuable forum for students to present their work, view themselves as critical readers, and increase their peers' motivation and interest in literacy. With the current emphasis on the use of technology to engage students, this project served as a powerful reminder that "old school" methods can also be quite empowering.

Establishing reading and writing identities

This student leadership project makes strides toward helping all students assume the identities of lifelong readers and writers.

The program showcases meaningful projects and authentic collaborations that motivate students to become aware of the myriad of possibilities that literacy presents. Most important, the significance of including the school community as a whole and encouraging students to continue growing as readers and writers is key to the program's impact. ✦

For a sample of student scripts from the literacy play vignettes, visit literacyworldwide.org/vignettes.

ILA 2016

Anne Katz will be a speaker on the Literacy and Social Responsibility Special Interest Group panel titled, "Activism for Lunch: The Growing Genre of Social Justice Literature," on Sunday, July 10. For more information, visit ilaconference.org/iplanner.