

The Teens for Literacy Project: Middle School Students Inspiring their Peers and Communities about the Value of Literacy

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Introduction

The "Teens for Literacy" program showcases and celebrates the achievements of the middle school student leadership team at East Broad Street School in Savannah, Georgia. This program provides a platform for students to motivate their peers and their communities regarding the importance and value of literacy. The program also encourages students to consider postsecondary education and their future careers. Dr. Allen Berger founded the program in 1989 at Miami University (Ohio) to help inner-city school children improve their reading and writing skills (Berger & Shafran, 2000). He also introduced "Teens for Literacy" at Armstrong Atlantic State University in 2011. Today, Armstrong Atlantic State University sponsors the program in the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System in downtown Savannah. The university collaborates with a designated school liaison at the partnering school to facilitate the program, and a student leadership team of seven -to- twelve students generates ideas for promoting literacy to their peers and communities. The university team works with the students to apply their ideas.

Literature Review

Motivation is considered to be a key element of success in education (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). In addition, reading skills, in particular, are critical to students' success in school and are necessary to succeed in society.

Research has documented that difficulties in learning to read affect students' engagement, motivation, and connections to school (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In their motivation-engagement model of reading development, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) set forth contextual variables that influence motivation and engagement among students. These variables include teacher behavior and support (autonomy, praise, and involvement), instruction, coherence and connection to students' interests and experiences, text choice, student collaboration, evaluation practices, and goals. Teaching practices and context affect motivation to read among elementary school students (Gambrell, 1996) and the motivation and engagement of students in secondary schools (National Research Council and the National Institute of Medicine, 2004). This mindset extends to providing students with numerous opportunities for writing throughout the day. Fisher and Frey (2013) note that "writing cannot be limited to the literacy block if students are to succeed" (p. 96).

Motivation strengthens students' potential for greater literacy achievement. Reschly (2010) discussed how reading interventions are a critical strategy to prevent students from dropping out of school and help them to achieve academic success. Data indicate that intensive early reading interventions positively influence students' reading skills and lead to lower rates of grade reten-

tion, reduced numbers of placement in special education, and higher rates of school completion. Difficulties with reading have been shown to interfere with students' motivation and engagement at school and with overall learning.

Brainstorming Sessions

Our sessions began with a "literacy enrichment minute" to gather student ideas on a topic. The students generated ideas about why literacy is so important in their daily lives. I asked the students to brainstorm answers to the following question: "What is literacy?" the figure (see graphic organizer below) displays the students' responses recorded as they exchanged ideas. Students felt that literacy was important "to get a good job...for everyday life...learning something new...to understand the world around us...for social studies, math, spelling/language, test taking, reading, writing, to (know) how to follow directions/vocabulary...how to follow sports players..." In addition, the students noted, "reading is major part of college" and "If you cannot read, you might be cheated/not understand a contract." The students clearly articulated important reasons for reading and writing.

I next posed the following question to students for discussion: "How can we excite our classmates about reading and writing?" Students had a range of exciting ideas that I recorded, including "pep rallies, drama club/plays, school newspapers, book fair, news report, t-shirts, visual on-line books, draw about story/visualize, poetry, and