



The Partnership Community

News from and about the teachers, facilitators, and coaches working in CELA's Partnership for Literacy to improve students' achievement across the grades and subjects.

Inside this issue:

<i>Creating a Culture of Literacy</i>	1
<i>Fostering a Literate Classroom</i>	1
<i>Connecting the Community: Hudson's Book Festival</i>	2-3
<i>Building the Professional Community</i>	4

Creating a Culture of Literacy

One of the pleasures of the Partnership for Literacy is watching schools and classrooms become more alive to learning — helping teachers grapple with questions about what literacy is, what knowledge and skills their students will need to lead fulfilling lives in the 21st century, and how they can prepare those students to be successful; then watching those teachers employ new instructional strategies that engage and support students to become stronger critical and creative thinkers,

readers, writers, and speakers as they learn new content and then apply it to new situations. From classroom to school corridors and beyond, the environment becomes charged with renewed buzz and energy.

All this is satisfying, but does it matter? Yes, say those who've studied the relationship between school culture and student performance. While a single teacher may inspire students, only a coherent program has a profound and lasting effect on student performance over time. And the overall

climate of a school must be consistent with and supportive of what is taking place in classrooms. Thus creating a culture of literacy throughout the school — and into the broader community — not only sends the message that literacy matters, but it also supports and strengthens instruction.

In this issue we offer a few glimpses into some of the steps Partnership schools are taking to create that supportive culture of literacy.

JIA

Fostering a Literate Classroom

April Ordway

Last year I taught fifth- and sixth-grade students (all boys) with emotional disabilities. These boys struggled with the academic and social demands of school. They were all reluctant learners, primarily due to their previously negative school experiences. In order for me to show these students they could be successful, it was necessary for me to tap into their interests and be very creative in my lesson delivery and assignment choices.

One way I did this was to take advantage of the fact that my students were always telling jokes. To build off that interest, I used *Tall Tales and Other White Lies* by Zora Neale Hurston to teach them about hyperbole. I read the book aloud and we discussed some of the tall tales from it. We discussed hyperboles, and the students brainstormed some of their own. Many of the students referred back to the jokes they commonly tell, changing them to fit within the parameters of no insults, no

names, and always school appropriate. In the end, the students created a class book with illustrations of the hyperboles they had written.

With these and other engaging assignments, I created a language-rich classroom in which students willingly spoke, read, and wrote. By coming to know them and their interests, I was able to let my students have fun with language. While doing so, they were learning — and, finally, feeling successful as literate beings.

For more about April's classroom and how she uses fun with language to create a culture of literacy in her classroom, see Vol II of NY-SUT's *Educator's Voice*: "Engaging Special Education Students in Higher Levels of Literacy:" http://www.nysut.org/cps/rde/xchg/nysut/hs_xsl/educators-voice_12334.htm.

Connecting the Community: Hudson's Book Festival

*Johanna Shogan
Janet Angelis*

On May 16, 2009, Hudson held its first annual Children's Book Festival, the culmination of years of efforts and activities to boost interest in and levels of literacy in the schools. On that day 50 authors were on hand to talk with visitors and sign books. The event was held in the middle school gymnasium.

The articles on pages 2-3 are drawn from an extensive interview of the Festival's primary organizers, Middle School Literacy Coach Lisa Dolan and then Assistant Principal, Maria Suttmeier.

Had it been a school day, people would have been complaining: "It's too hot in the gymnasium! The lines are too long!" On this hot Saturday in May, however, not one cross word in the Hudson Middle School gymnasium.

Participants were amazed at the number and variety of authors and activities. Every child was engaged! People were delighted to be a part of the excitement! It didn't matter how sticky it was waiting in line, they were thrilled with their books! Grandparents with grandchildren, parents and children, teachers in Hud-

son Book Festival T-Shirts. Everything was perfect!

In looking back at that day a few weeks later, Lisa Dolan, Hudson Middle School's Literacy Coach and one of the organizers of the festival, nodded and said simply, "It was good for Hudson."

It was good not only for Hudson. It was good for the children. It was good for the teachers and for the authors and for the book vendor. Lisa thought again and said, "It was good for the community."

Both school staff and community members wanted to be part of this event. Dianne Ricci had volunteered to handle all exhibitor arrangements.

Krissy Williams even came from her graduation ceremony at a college in Albany. Authors, too, were positive and have been blogging about their experiences ever since on the Hudson Book Festival website, hoping to return next year.

Maria Suttmeier, then assistant principal at the middle school, now district assistant superintendent, was another festival organizer. Her eyes sparkled as she said, "These kids were treated to something they had never known existed. It was just great how they went from having cotton candy to going in and looking at books to interacting with a clown. It was simply the best thing that could have happened to them."

What Made the Festival Possible

The Book Festival was not just a high point of the year, though; it was an integral part of a strong fabric of literacy that teachers and administrators in Hudson Middle School had been weaving over time. Many individuals and groups added threads to that fabric, each initiative contributing to the creation of a new, more literate culture in the middle school. For example,

- The administrative team established a safe and orderly environment.
- Leaders of both school and district recognized the

need to focus on literacy— not just in curriculum and instruction, but throughout the day and the school.

- They focused especially on underperforming students and closing achievement gaps.
- Outside experts, including the Partnership, supported teachers to change instruction and to work together to improve curriculum.
- Some teachers volunteered to be first to try new instructional approaches.
- Most teachers who held back kept open minds and

eventually joined their "early adopting" colleagues.

- Leaders like Maria (see related articles) worked with partners in the broader community to serve the needs of children both in school and out.
- New York State, which had identified the middle school as a school in need of improvement applied pressure to change and offered support.

As described in the articles on page 3, within five years, the school has changed in tangible ways, with the Book Festival a manifestation of that change.

About the Authors:

Janet Angelis is associate director of CELA and the Partnership for Literacy.

Kathy Nickson taught English in Amsterdam and as a Partnership facilitator has supported literacy coaches in Amsterdam. This year she will work in Queensbury.

April Ordway is in her second year as a special education teacher in Hudson Middle School; she is a member of the Partnership for Literacy.

Johanna Shogan taught English in Bethlehem and as a Partnership facilitator works primarily with teachers in Hudson, Lansingburgh, and Queensbury.

The Changes Begin — in Classrooms and Beyond

Johanna began working with the Middle School in 2005. After our first institute, teachers were asking for guidance in learning to talk less and have kids talk more. They wanted to know how to adapt reading and writing strategies to diverse abilities; how to connect talk to writing; how and when to use scaffolding – and then remove it; how to get students to become independent learners; how to prepare students for state assessments.

So, with the focus firmly on student performance, the work began. By late October, students were showing more interest in reading, the result of using reader's marks and responding to more open-ended questions. Bit by bit, individual teachers got students to do more reading, more writing, more discussing.

In the second year, after a schedule change gave participating teachers time to occasionally work in small groups to share their experiences, they began to feel that they were a part of something larger than their own classrooms. And we could see the change: Student writing appeared on bulletin boards inside classrooms, each piece different from the next. Then these classrooms began to creep outside their doorways; soon student work was hanging in other parts of the building. Now all students were surrounded by their own and/or classmates' literate work.

Other teachers noticed and asked to participate. Skeptics (that *their* students could produce this work) became less skeptical and joined their colleagues to learn how.

Teacher conversations also began to change. During an institute that included work of William Carlos Williams, Lisa Dolan and Ralph Burch, who had worked alongside each other for more than twenty years, discovered their mutual love of poetry. They began sharing poetry they enjoyed and used in their classrooms. This was no small change.

And while Johanna worked with teachers to change classroom instruction and foster a professional community, a group of teachers and administrators, supported by a consultant, began the work of realigning the curriculum. They sought to select more relevant texts and identify common themes that could intersect all areas of study throughout the year.

And there was a whale, "Booker," named by two sisters, ages 8 and 10. All children were invited to submit names for the whale, and the winner(s) chosen by drawing from the names submitted on line. The prize was \$100, which the sisters spent on books at the festival.

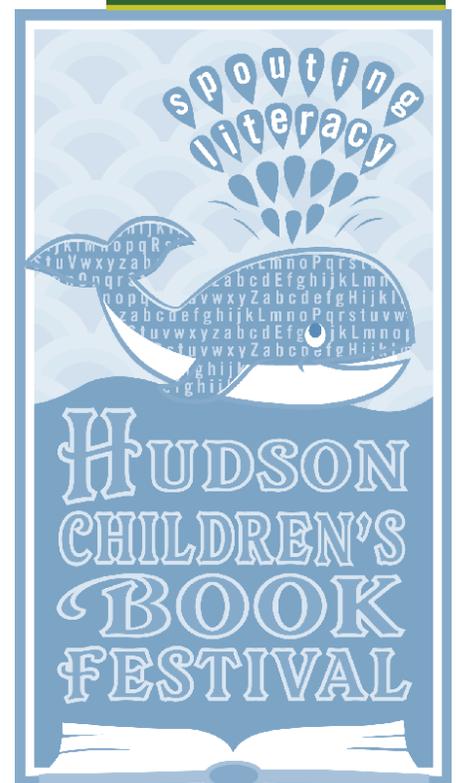
Bridges to the Community

Both teachers and administrators also initiated activities that brought school and community together to support literacy. For example, In February of 2007, fifth-grade teachers Margaret McCornock and Cindy Van Alphen worked with a local arts venue to present their students' work in an evening performance. They projected a video clip of a classroom discussion that held the audience spellbound. Next students read poetry they had composed, and throughout the auditorium student poetry, essays, and art work were on display.

On another occasion, Lisa arranged for the local book seller to host teachers in the late afternoon – and along with refreshments display and discuss titles of interest to adolescent readers.

And all during this time, Maria had been working with a variety of community groups, businesses, and social service agencies to serve the multiple needs of Hudson youth, both in school and out.

Once the school had become a community focused on the success of every student and fostering student literacy achievement (coincidentally, demonstrated by their improved performance on state assessments), she was ready to bring school and broader community closer together. In Lisa she found a partner to work with her in organizing what they hope becomes a tradition that celebrates literacy in the middle school as well as in the City of Hudson.



Partnership for Literacy

The Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA)
University at Albany School of Education, B9
1400 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12222

Phone: 518-442-5026

Fax: 518-442-5933

E-mail: jangelis@uamail.albany.edu

For more information:

www.albany.edu/cela or

www.partnershipforliteracy.org

The Partnership for Literacy (P4L) is a promise and plan for action for continuous teacher learning. It is a collaborative model for schools and districts that want to become (or become stronger) learning organizations with more engaged students demonstrating higher thinking and literacy achievement. Experience shows that such changes happen more effectively when someone from outside the district or school fosters discussion and works toward systematic change. Engaging teachers together in the intellectual work of reflecting on and analyzing current practice, raising questions for themselves and colleagues, and negotiating collective goals is key to bringing about the desired outcomes.

The Partnership is based on the Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) and others' long history of research and development into effective teaching, learning, and professional development. For information about CELA, the Partnership, or this newsletter, contact Janet Angelis, CELA Associate Director and newsletter editor: 518-442-5023, or jangelis@uamail.albany.edu.

Building a Professional Community One Book Circle at a Time

Kathy Nickson

Two years ago Fran Boyer, a respected veteran middle school teacher at Amsterdam's Lynch Literacy Academy, took the position as the school's first literacy coach. As a Partnership facilitator, I supported, advised, and acted as a resource for Fran for two years, helping her forge a path in this new educational territory of literacy coaching.

Fran is successfully accomplishing her goal of improving literacy instruction across all content areas. A second goal is to build a professional learning community to energize a talented faculty toward a more collaborative, reflective, positive culture with a renewed commitment to student achievement. To that end, she introduced Professional Book Circles and credits them with contributing to building this learning community.

The book circles are held after school, usually three meetings for a book. Participation is strictly voluntary, and the groups range in number from 10-22. Fran facilitates the meetings following the Partnership model of environment building and dialogic discussion. Through this approach, lively conversations, camaraderie and a passion for teaching and learning have blossomed.

Fran chooses books based on the needs of the teachers and the areas often discussed at faculty meetings and in the faculty room—e.g., motivation, behavior, and the lack of background knowledge and experiences. The titles Fran has chosen include *Do I Really Have to Teach Reading* (Cris Tovani); *Building Literacy through Classroom Discussion* (Mary Adler, Eija Rougle); *Fires in the Middle School Bathroom* (Kathleen Cushman, Laura Rogers); and *The Motivation Breakthrough* (Rick Lavoie). Participants change depending on the teachers' interests, although some teachers have participated in every book circle.

Building Literacy through Classroom Discussion, in particular, stimulated much discussion on the power of substantive discussion and higher-level thinking in the classroom. Eija, also a Partnership facilitator, came

to the final book circle meeting to share her research and experiences as well as hear the teachers' experiences and questions. Her expertise on connecting research to practice helped the teachers understand how and why to use the instructional strategies described in the book. Meeting the author was a special treat for the participants.

Fran's plans for this year include not only reading Kelly Gallagher's *Reading Reasons* but also blogging with him. While presenting at the Capital Region BOCES Writing Institute this summer, he agreed to have the book circle participants contact him with their thoughts and questions either through blogs or email. Teachers have already signed up for this book circle, a sure sign the professional learning community at Lynch Literacy Academy is alive and thriving.

An article by Dan King (Hudson MS) on an innovative social studies lesson, appeared in the May-June issue of "Middle Level Learning," part of *Social Education*.