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Mandatory Pleasure Reading at Huguenot High School

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“The mission of Huguenot High School is to provide a high-quality education that prepares, ensures, and empowers all students to achieve their full intellectual and social potential to become lifelong learners and productive members within a global society” (Richmond Public Schools, 2020). In keeping with the mission of our school we have determined a need to supplement the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum as literacy is the foundation of learning.

At the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, Huguenot High School began a program of mandatory twenty minutes of reading. Teachers were required to bring or send students to the library every two weeks to find a book to read for pleasure. The principal chose block one on Monday, block two on Tuesday, and so forth. An administrator announced “stop teaching and read for twenty minutes” each day. This program continued throughout the 2018-2019 academic year but came to a halt in 2019-2020 with the addition of anchor texts to the English classes. This mandatory reading for pleasure is defined as “reading that having begun at someone else’s request we continue because we are interested in it” (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). These materials are usually chosen by personal interests and is considered a “creative activity” or a type of play to supplement instruction. According to Clark & Rumbold, “Reading for pleasure could therefore be one important way to help combat social exclusion and raise educational standards” (p 6). They also state that there is no age limit to when the reading needs to begin to be effective in becoming a reader or benefitting from reading.

Studies also indicate that when a child reads for at least twenty minutes a day, they are exposed to approximately 1.8 million words per year and by their sixth-grade year are testing at

the 90th percentile in reading (*The Impact of Reading 20 Mins Each Day*, n.d.). According to the study by Nagy, Anderson, and Herman, students who read for twenty minutes each day for six days had small measurable gains in word knowledge (Nagy et al., 1987, #). Results indicated that reading for pleasure was as impactful as reading for content in building vocabulary and word knowledge attainment. The United Kingdom Department of Education conducted a study in 2012 that supports the results indicated in Nagy's study (UK Department of Education, 2012). Linguist Stephen D Krashen states, "When children read for pleasure, when they get 'hooked on books', they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called 'language skills' many people are so concerned about: they will become adequate readers, acquire a large vocabulary, develop the ability to understand and use complex grammatical constructions, develop a good writing style, and become good (but not necessarily perfect) spellers. Although free voluntary reading alone will not ensure attainment of the highest, it will at least ensure an acceptable level. Without it, I suspect that children simply do not have a chance" (National Library of New Zealand, n.d.).

Krashen also explains "that time spent in free reading is more efficient in terms of language development than a similar amount of time spent in traditional instruction" (Krashen, 2006, 4). With the implementation of the additional twenty minutes daily, bi-weekly visits to the library, and reading personal choice materials, we saw growth in MAP scores for two years in a row and an increase in traffic in the library as indicated by the increased circulation statistics. Due to the closure of schools on March 15, 2020 I am only using the data from September 1 through March 15 of each year as an analysis. This data is generated from Destiny, the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) program RPS uses across the district to track library material

usage. Current data, 2020-2021, generated on February 14, 2021 is indicated with * and reflects the use of electronic anchor texts.

Academic Year	Circulation of materials	Increase (+) or Decrease (-)
2016-2017	2663	Prior to program
2017-2018	3997	+
2018-2019	5036	+
2019-2020	2350	-
2020-2021*	178	-

Students in each grade level are required to check out the assigned anchor text for use in their English courses. The number indicated above demonstrated that students are not doing this even though they have been taught how and it is required to complete their assignments.

According to Open Educational Resources, “the anchor text is the main text that will be used to teach content to your students” (Schimizzi, 2016). Last year, Richmond Public Schools (RPS) introduced anchor texts to all schools. At the high school level, our teachers began using a mixture of classic literature, such as *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, modern classics, such as the graphics novel version of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, and the new novel, *Genesis Begins Again* by Alicia D. Williams. One purpose behind a move to anchor texts is to provide students with the opportunity “to build a foundation for college and career readiness.” (*College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening*, n.d.) Anecdotally, I have found that students do not like reading books in an electronic format, regardless of its ease.

According to the Virginia Department of Education's School Quality Profile page for RPS, the Reading Performance Student Achievement Level was well below that of the state average for the last three years, discounting 2019-2020 due to the Coronavirus Pandemic (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.). The state scores dropped marginally from 80% to 78%, comparatively, RPS scores also dropped marginally but began at a much lower level, 58% to 56%. Huguenot High School's reading levels rose from 57% in 2016-2017 to 75% in 2017-2018 and then back down to 59% in 2018-19. Although there was a huge change between the 16-17 and 17-18 school years, it may or may not be linked to the additional reading for pleasure and the requirement by administration for reading daily in classes.

At the end of the 18-19 school year, there was a drop in the number of teachers bringing students to the library by the end of the school year and administration became less involved which may explain the lower numbers. The English department chairperson, Ms. Danielle Rodgers, indicated that the English department was still conducting the twenty minute reading for pleasure and she saw growth across the school as indicated by the MAP tests given (Personal communication, 2020). During the 19-20 school year, she indicated that the growth was minimal by mid-year compared to the growth the previous two years. She felt the usage of anchor texts, although studies suggest they teach students vital knowledge, did not provide time for the additional twenty minute in-school pleasure reading and she believed that was the cause of the decreased growth rate by mid year.

By looking at the state data, the department chairperson's take on MAP scores, and the decreases in library usage, I believe that the additional twenty minutes of pleasure reading was vital to the literacy of our school and that the combination of the addition of anchor texts, lack of administrative oversight, and teacher buy-in in the third year caused the program to fail. Closing

the schools in March of 2020, no reading requirements or administration of any cohesive plan to address this issue, and the lack of appropriate technology has lead to very low scores in the MAP pre-assessments given at the beginning of the current school year.

Had we continued the mandatory twenty minutes, the bi-weekly trips to the library, and administration oversight I believe the prpogram would have continued to be successful and that teacher buy-in would have followed with more communication regarding the results we were seeing. RPS is proposing a move to an extended calendar next year to battle the losses due to coronavirus school closings, lack of education during the second semester and summer prior to this school year. I believe there needs to be an extension of this program in the upcoming year to battle literacy losses across the district. This program would have worked had it been continued as research indicated there is a direct correlation between the twenty plus minutes per day, reading for pleasure, and literacy growth.

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