10 Ways to Promote a Culture of Literacy

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A principal offers strategies to create a love of reading and writing schoolwide.

If we could boil down all of the overwhelming challenges schools face in promoting literacy to a single disheartening statistic, it might be this: As students age from elementary school to high school, the majority of students who previously read for enjoyment give up the practice (Scholastic, 2015). Simply put, as student grow up, they read less.

At Hutchison, our faculty talks in grade-level teams and departments about how to instill literacy as a value across the entire school for every student. The result is common expectations that students encounter again and again as they age. What follows is a summary of our philosophy in 10 steps.

Steps to a Literacy-Friendly School Culture

1. Publicly celebrate reading.

When teachers hear the word *celebrate*, they sometimes groan, picturing classroom parties and award ceremonies. At Hutchison, we believe that small celebrations are most effective. For instance, many of our teachers post students’ reading lists (and sometimes their own) outside their classrooms, including categories like “what I’m reading now,” “what I want to read,” and “what I recommend.” The result is a continuous stream of book sharing. The practice also proves to students that even principals, coaches, and math teachers read. A bulletin board featuring book covers of class favorites can prompt similar dialogues about books.

2. Create classroom libraries.

The benefits of classroom libraries, especially for disadvantaged students with limited access to books, are well established (Neuman, 1999; Routman, 2002). For all students, it’s an investment worth the time and money, but only if teachers treat the library as more than a set of books.

Teachers of any subject can create a classroom library. The trick is stocking it with high-interest books from a variety of genres, talking about the books, and giving students time to read. In most schools I visit, classroom libraries are limited to younger grades, but there’s no reason why high school students can’t swap out high-interest titles at the same time they’re reading *The Scarlet Letter*. All reading is good reading, and validating students’ interests is a key to fostering lifelong reading habits.

3. Share your word walls.

Like classroom libraries, word walls are most effective when they’re not static lists, but rather dynamic and interactive tools that allow students to study how language works. Instead of sticking the word *binomial* on a poster in math class and expecting kids to memorize the definition, our teachers break the word into its parts. What other math words include the prefixes *bi-*? (*Bisect* is one.) Such play with word wall terms (and matching and pairing parts of words on the board or wall) creates pattern recognition.

Even better, word walls can cross classroom boundaries. Hutchison’s 7th grade teachers share a Google document that contains Greek and Latin roots, prefixes, and suffixes that arise in their classrooms. Using that document, teachers collaborate on vocabulary and provide multiple exposures to specific word parts (for instance, for the prefix *bi-*—*biology* and *biennial*). Today, you can find interactive word walls in all of our subject-area classrooms.
4. Make time for collaboration.

Collaboration takes time—a precious resource in any school setting. If we don’t devote planning time to working together, however, we’re squandering another valuable resource: teacher creativity.

The 6th grade constellation project is just one of several examples. Once our teachers started actively searching for ways to link practices, literacy connections flowed more regularly into all classrooms. For example, a biology teacher included a fictional dystopian novel in her instruction and discussed the ethics of cloning. Our 7th grade team constructed a study of “food deserts” in our city, students wrote newspaper articles about issues related to food and lab reports about food preservation in science.

5. Get students talking.

Literature circles, book talks, inquiry projects, presentations, fishbowl discussions, interviews—there are innumerable methods for getting students talking about what they read and write. All of these activities put students’ thinking at the center. High-level questioning and thinking are particularly valuable to help students digest, comprehend, and summarize what they read. Even more important, few novice readers can master the difficult skill of synthesis without making verbal connections between ideas and concepts, and even fluent readers can benefit from this process.

At a more basic level, if students aren’t talking about books, they’re probably not getting excited about books. If they’re not sharing what they’re writing, they’re missing the most important and omnipresent audience: their peers.

6. Read and write across content areas.

When content-area teachers tell their language arts colleagues how they’re incorporating reading and writing, wonderful connections happen. An English teacher might be thrilled to teach informational texts about science or to discuss the nuances of language in math word problems.

In a culture of literacy, students view all members of the school community as equal owners of language, including every adult in the building. No one is spared from valuing words, just as no language arts teacher should ever undermine the work of colleagues by complaining about math.

7. Value disciplinary literacy.

"Current thinking about literacy places reading and writing in its rightful place, firmly rooted within each discipline," writes ReLeah Lent (2016, p. 1). This approach means that literacy practices enter content-area classrooms when they make sense for that subject area and when they augment students’ learning. A science teacher may choose to have students write poetry, but arbitrarily instructing students about the elements of a sonnet may not be effective within the context of the course. (Introducing some technical aspects of writing may be best incorporated in a language arts classroom.) if we first value the pedagogical content knowledge of all teachers, discussions can then ensue about how literacy should evolve in science, math, social sciences, arts, or world languages.

8. Provide authentic writing experiences.

For too many students write for an audience of one—the teacher—while others who may have written audience-focused work in the younger grades find themselves suddenly restricted in high school. It’s as common for students to lose their love of writing as it is for them to lose their love of reading—no wonder, when writing becomes a task and so seldom a craft as students age.
Schools abound with audiences. Writing and mailing letters (for instance, to authors of students' favorite books), reading work aloud, sharing it with parents, or looking for external means of validating student writing (publications, school websites, and contests) are all practices that encourage a writing community. One teacher at my school has students write letters to themselves, which she then delivers by mail the next year. It's an authentic and meaningful writing exercise—one that students remember vividly year after year.

9. Invite browsing.

If you picture most libraries, you probably envision row upon row of neatly stacked titles. Now picture a large bookstore with displays, tables where book covers are visible, and "employee picks." In writing about classroom libraries, middle years expert Laura Robb (n.d.) suggests that displays can pique student interest, invite them to explore genres and authors, and entice readers. One Hutchison middle school teacher uses a "book flood" activity to achieve these ends. Every so often, she greets her students at the classroom door and directs them to tables that include stacks of high-interest books. For the next 15–20 minutes, students peruse and pass around as many books as they can—reading titles, examining covers, and making notes about the books that most interest them. Then, students share and discuss their notes with others at the table. This activity stimulates discussion, interest, and shared investment in a culture of reading.

10. Promote reflection and goal setting.

Want students to read and write more? Help them understand what "more" means, why more is valuable, and how to reach goals in small steps. Students might research the benefits of reading. (As an example, a 7th grader recently told me she wanted to double her reading minutes because she'd seen studies that high-achieving students read more.) It's more important, though, to focus on students' accomplishments and encourage further reading and writing using praise and the norms of the community.

The greatest mark of success in any reading program is not whether a student finishes a certain number of books, reads the most complex texts, or scores high on a standardized test. It's setting a student loose and seeing him or her reach for the next book.

The Literacy Lifeboat

In a passionate defense of authentic reading experiences in schools, Kelly Gallagher writes that "we are killing readers, and in doing so, we are moving students farther away from those skills that 'expert citizens' need to lead productive lives" (2009, p. 116). We can throw lifelines after drowning students in the form of test preparation and remedial intervention, but if we don't foster an intrinsic desire to read and write, no student will bother grabbing hold. Building a culture of literacy in your school isn't just the equivalent of building a lifeboat; it creates a better mechanism for keeping kids onboard in the first place.

References

