

The “Write” Track: Effectively Leading Your School to Incorporate Writing in Every Classroom

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Currently, 42 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the Common Core State Standards (NGA). Minnesota adopted the ELA standards, but not the math. Within the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts, there are specific writing standards that have been a traditional focus for the English teacher. In addition to this, writing standards are provided for History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. This shift from writing typically being an “English classroom issue” to preparing all content teachers to teach writing is an issue for administrators specifically at the high school level. Additionally, administrators and teachers must strategically plan how to give writing instruction more time and focus each school day. A high school example of writing across the curriculum, and how to implement the model are described to offer some suggestions for leaders who want to focus on writing.

1. A Writing Tale

As a new literacy coach at a rural Kentucky high school in 2007, writing was the number one priority for improvement. At that time, writing was evaluated in two ways: a cumulative writing portfolio scored during the spring of the senior year, and a timed on-demand writing test administered in the fall of the senior year. School began in August, and students were tested in September. It is also important to note that the writing scores had the most room to improve (to state it another way the school’s writing scores were always their lowest reported score). So, in less than four weeks a writing revolution needed to occur. A quick interview of the English department determined that teachers were indeed teaching writing skills, but there was no plan to

prepare students for the upcoming assessment. Ultimately, all students (9th -12th grade) needed more writing instruction, but the immediate priority was the senior class.

The first step was to make sure that all students had access to the same information. This involved the literacy coach visiting all senior English classes, and other courses that had a high enrollment of seniors. The school was on a block schedule at that time, which meant that not all students were enrolled in senior English in the fall (this situation could not be remedied until the following year). The literacy coach presented a graphic organizer, the state writing rubric (for evaluating all writing tasks), and sample prompts (See Appendix A). In the senior English classes, the literacy coach directed students to mock score writing samples and with rationale released from the state. Entering the fall on-demand writing assessment, all students had multiple opportunities to practice and analyze writing.

The next step was to apply this model to all grade levels and all departments. This ensured that students would not arrive at their senior year without thorough writing preparation and practice. This model was then expanded to the writing portfolio development. At this point, the writing instruction moved beyond the English teachers. All teachers were tasked with incorporating more writing into their assessments. Once a week teachers began meeting with the literacy coach to analyze the writing that students were creating in their classrooms. Teachers identified areas that were needed for improvement (grammar, spelling, idea development, etc.) and went back to their classrooms with ideas for mini-lessons to help students.

The results after that first year of a strategic writing plan were promising for the high school. Prior to the paradigm shift, 6% of the students were performing at the proficient/distinguished level. Proficiency was considered meeting the standard, and a distinguished performance was considered performing above the standard. One year later, 15%

of the students reached the proficient/distinguished level. After five years, over 30% of students had reached the proficient/distinguished level. All of this progress was prior to the common core implementation, but these same principles for leading a writing program at the high school level can be applied today.

2. The Write Idea

The above example of a writing program implemented across the curriculum can be accomplished with a strategic plan and appropriate follow-up and accountability. The first step in implementing the common core writing standards in all classrooms requires a plan. Teachers will need additional time to plan, develop, collaborate, and calibrate their writing lessons. As an administrator it is important to remember: “People often resent change when they have no involvement in how it should be implemented. So contrary to popular belief, people don’t resist change—they resist being controlled” (Blanchard 213). Working with department chairs, team leaders, or a literacy committee to develop a plan will allow teachers a voice in the change process. Those being asked to change need to be involved in planning the change, which in this case will impact all stakeholders (Blanchard 213).

The next step is to evaluate your writing practices and to do a writing-needs analysis. This step is vital because change initiatives can fail if people’s concerns with change are not surfaced or addressed (Blanchard 230). This could involve a brief survey of all teachers to determine their student’s writing strengths and weaknesses. It is also important to determine each teacher’s comfort and confidence level on presenting, grading, and giving feedback on writing. Additionally, your team will be able to prioritize their writing goals by setting short-term (writing activities that could be completed on a weekly to monthly basis) and long-term goals (writing activities that will build and could be evaluated yearly).

After you have gathered information, the next step is to put the knowledge in action. It will be important to schedule professional development to support your teachers in this writing endeavor. If you do not have a staff member that can lead the teachers, and provide feedback/support, then you could reach out to your district, state organizations, or local colleges for assistance. The key to success with writing professional development is the follow-up. If this information is only presented at the beginning of the year—then it will not be a priority. However, if you follow-up throughout the year then teachers will have the support necessary to implement writing on a regular basis.

The actual classroom implementation follows your strategic writing plan and teacher preparation. Once students experience quality writing in all content areas, this will become a habit. This process will not happen overnight, and will take teachers being consistent and administrator's providing support. Administrator support could take the shape of classroom visits to see student writing, posting student writing pieces throughout the building, and on the school website.

After implementing writing across the curriculum, there will need to be accountability in place to ensure fidelity. The idea behind writing across the content areas is that everyone is implementing writing in their individual classrooms. Utilizing planning meetings, release time, professional development time or after school meetings to talk about writing is one way to ensure this is truly a school-wide program. Teachers can bring samples (high, medium, and low) of their writing assignments. This will allow dialogue between teachers on trends across your building, or areas for improvement. A school-wide writing policy is also a way to ensure that everyone is aware that writing is required and monitored in all content areas. The writing policy

can specifically list timelines for implementation, as well as how writing will be monitored throughout the year.

The final step is not actually final. In order to have a successful writing program, you have to make adjustments. As previously mentioned in the rural high school example, the writing success came before the Common Core. With the adoption of the Common Core, the school quickly realized they had not focused on writing arguments (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1). The English teachers developed a plan to work on argumentative writing from 9th-12th grade by increasing the depth of the writing each year (just as the NGA designed the common core to be implemented). Then, the plan for argumentative writing was shared with all the content teachers. Naturally, several teachers from other content areas saw how they could also implement argumentative writing into existing assignments. Through communication and planning, argumentative writing is an area that the students at the rural school will master through practice and feedback.

3. Further Application

Successful leaders recognize that change is not easy, and changing your school writing practices will mean adapting and adjusting for everyone. Prioritizing your writing needs, implementing your plan, and planning for accountability will help ensure your change in the writing program is successful (Blanchard 236). Ultimately, educators recognize the importance of emphasizing writing skills to prepare students for college and careers, and the common core provide standards to guide classroom practice. The final piece in improving the student writing in your school is a strategic plan. With the ideas and suggestions for implementation, leaders can be prepared to move their student writing forward.

Bibliography

Blanchard, K. *Leading at a Higher Level*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press, 2010. Print.

Common Core State Standards Initiative. "Standards in Your State," 2016. Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

Appendix A

Sample Writing Prompts

Prompt A: Historical essays and biographies provide many examples of individuals overcoming adversity. Based on the biographies and essays we read in class, write a speech to present at a community event on building character in today's youth.

Prompt B: Write an article for the school newspaper outlining the steps to follow to secure a part-time job.

Prompt C: Reflect on an event in your life that led to you learning an important lesson.

Develop a narrative that explains the event with specific details.

Prompt D: The local school board is reviewing current policy on cell phone and device usage in schools. Prepare an essay to voice your opinion on student usage of cell phone during the school day.

Prompt E: Many times character relationships evolve and change in literature. Select a story you have recently read that demonstrates an example of characters' evolving and their relationships changing. Use examples to explain how the change in the relationship impacted the story as a whole.