

Winter 2014

The Secondary Desk: Beating the Odds: Madison High School's Tremendous Gains on the OAKS Reading Assessment

Peter R. Thacker

University of Portland, thacker@up.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://pilotscholars.up.edu/edu_facpubs



Part of the [Secondary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Thacker, Peter R., "The Secondary Desk: Beating the Odds: Madison High School's Tremendous Gains on the OAKS Reading Assessment" (2014). *Education Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 21.

http://pilotscholars.up.edu/edu_facpubs/21

This Newsletter Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at Pilot Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Pilot Scholars. For more information, please contact library@up.edu.

Secondary Desk

**Peter Thacker,
University of Portland,
Chair**



Beating the Odds: Madison High School's Tremendous Gains on the OAKS Reading Assessment

How does a struggling school make great gains in reading? This fall I read a front-page story in *The Oregonian* (Betsy Hammond, 9/10/14) on the decline of scores in high schools across the state. What struck me was the by-line that lauded Madison High School's bucking the trend and making positive gains in a year when high schools across the state made no gains. Intrigued, I decided to spend a day at Madison asking teachers what made the difference.

Knowing Madison's literacy coach, Santha Cassell, I was able to set up interviews with several English teachers to investigate what turned out to be a series of significant gains beginning in 2012 on the OAKS reading assessment. State testing was done in the sophomore year through 2010. In that year only 50% of Madison students passed the reading exam. The state moved testing to the junior year in 2011, and in that year 60% passed, though there is no way to clarify whether this change was due to student maturation, test changes, or other reasons. However, both these "failing" percentages suggested a student population of unengaged readers, in need of motivation for acquiring the literacy skills all need to navigate life and become full participants in a democracy. What is heartening is the year-to-year growth in reading demonstrated by Madison students. In 2012, 68%, in 2013, 72%, and in 2014, 78% passed the test. What brought on this compelling rise in literacy prowess?

At the core of Madison's practice was a school-wide coordinated effort taken on by many teachers across the disciplines to understand the core principles of reading for meaning, ironically the same skills necessary for all types of problem-solving, academic, on the job, and in everyday interactions: setting a purpose, predicting, questioning the text, connecting to what one already knows, and using the full context: title, sub-headings, pictures, graphs and one's own background knowledge. Teachers also have more consistently been focusing on the use of evidence to back up assertions, essential for critical reading, writing, and thinking. PLCs often honed in on these skills. Teachers collaborated to build stronger practice.

Also significant was a commitment to twenty minutes of daily SSR. I have seen SSR well and poorly implemented. Teachers need to take this practice seriously and make sure students use the time wisely. Santha was clear that teachers took to the practice, and all four teachers I interviewed believed that SSR had had a positive effect on student success. Students became willing readers.

In conjunction with efforts across departments, three English teachers, Santha, Brady Bennon, and Ben Grosscup, were given the responsibility to work with juniors below the OAKS cut score. These teachers approached students about helping them on both test-taking and general literacy skills as an extra-curricular activity. They opened their rooms to students on professional development days, during lunch and SSR. About fifty took them up on the offer last year. The day I interviewed these teachers was a parent conference day. As I interviewed teachers, students were voluntarily working on writing work samples; my interviewees were busy almost full-time advising students and scoring their essays. The mood was up-beat and hopeful.

(continued on page 18)

Secondary Reading

(continued from page 17)

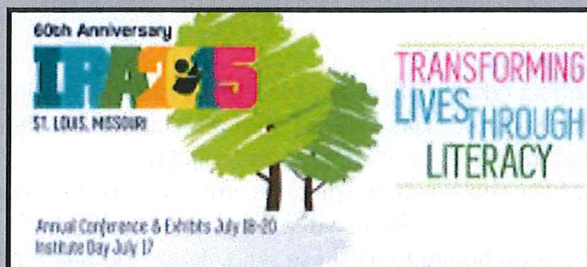


What did these teachers do day-to-day to supplement their coursework, helping students to improve their literacy skills and pass the state assessment? They reinforced the skills mentioned above. They taught students to write margin notes on the tests, practice versions of which they ran-off to allow for active dialoguing between text and reader. They believed in their students and taught them to approach the tests with confidence built on growing competence. Almost all these students grew on their test scores; most passed the tests, increasing each year the percentage of passing students.

Before I left Madison, I dropped in on Steve Musaeus, the dean of the English Department, a teacher I have long admired from afar for his rigorous, engaging teaching. He's one of those legends in PPS. He reminded me that beyond the strategy teaching, we have learned across departments that English teachers continue to have a large role in student growth. Why? Because English teachers help students focus on the meaning in the text and understand authors' intentions. But, even more important, English teachers infuse students with the understanding that stories are filled with life lessons. Why else read?

What a combination: a coordinated cross-disciplinary focus on literacy skills, a small team of teacher-leaders who focus on the most vulnerable of students, the strugglers, and English teachers that inspire students to seek the most important questions and answers to life's realities and mysteries. For a formerly "failing" school, almost eighty percent of students passing reading tests is quite the accomplishment. May we all re-commit ourselves to collaboration in search of student growth, not only in test scores, but also in becoming more confident, life-long learners.

Postscript: Because of seat-time legislation, Madison was forced to forego SSR this year. Of course, all schools are also moving to Smarter-Balanced Testing. Santha is concerned that both these factors may undo the gains that Madison has made toward bringing all students into the literacy club. Let us hope that this will not be the case.



International Reading Association's Annual Conference

July 18-20, 2015

St. Louis

<http://www.reading.org/annual-conference-st-louis>

Amazon Shopping Helps ORA

ORA is now part of the AmazonSmile program. When you shop at Amazon, 0.5% of the purchase price of eligible products is donated to our organization. Go to AmazonSmile <https://smile.amazon.com/>, login and choose ORA as your charitable organization. To make it easy, we have made a link on the ORA Webpage using the AmazonSmile button. We will automatically receive the donation after your shopping is complete. Thank-you for helping us get started with this new program and - Spread The Word - to friends, family and co-workers.



Kristi Miller, ORA Treasurer