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Teresa M. Dye

Julie L. Bianchi

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# Spreading the Word: Introducing MELAF and the Content Standards in our District

ARTICLE BY TERESA M. DYE AND JULIE L. BIANCHI

## Introduction

I'm not sure if MELAF came to Hillsdale or Hillsdale went to MELAF. I'm not even sure how the twelve teachers and administrators from our district became the MELAF core team. I do know that we first read the new content standards and benchmarks about six weeks before the 1994-95 school year. In those six weeks that followed we researched, consulted, and learned that the content standards are just different words for best practice instruction. Once familiar with the content standards and convinced of their educational value, the core group knew that project success would depend on the help of all of our colleagues. A group of twelve could not make the world change — but a unified district has the strength to do just that.

I have to be honest. Hillsdale Community Schools should not be considered an educational Eden. Like most districts, it faces annual financial concerns, some instructors are entrenched with out-of-date texts and methods, and some students don't find the academic spark that inspires. However, like most districts, we showcase administrators and instructors possessed with a genuine vision for our district and our students. For many dedicated staff members, MELAF happened to fit into this vision. It became another tool we could use to support and learn from each other, research new material, learn from other professionals, and produce improved, authentic units. The content standards were congruent with our established district beliefs. Adopting them was the easy part. Work was ahead.

The core group, knowing the quality and validity of the project, worked to enlist the

support of the rest of our educational community. Without them, overall success is almost impossible. Believe me, our district includes our share of skeptics. The core group explaining the MELAF target at times met the same grief from our colleagues that a child would, who is trying to convince his father that there is a brontosaurus in the back yard:

"Really? How nice. How big is it? Wow, that's pretty big. The neighbors saw it too? Great. Well, you go play with your new dinosaur friend, I'm going to watch the game."

How else would we expect our colleagues to react? With so much educational jargon that washes over us every year, what made the MELAF project different? Showing that MELAF was different and enduring became the core group's goal for the 1994-95 school year. We demonstrated that MELAF-inspired language arts methods are BEST PRACTICE and not disposable, plastic-wrapped activities.

What follows are the approaches our core group took in not only defining MELAF and the content standards, but showing our educational community — i.e. colleagues, students, parents, public — what they looked like when implemented. If it is true that change is both painful and difficult, and it is true that there is strength in unity, then it is also true that a unified group can bring about positive change in a very humane way. As you will see, support and guidance are the keys to making our substantial change.

## Orientation

Our core group felt very uncomfortable about being perceived as the "select few" who would know about the content standards and benchmarks. We were concerned because our



entire district had been chosen as a demonstration site, and yet only twelve people were in on the actual workings at the state level. So, we decided that we needed to begin networking. We needed to introduce our colleagues and support staff to the words ... MELAF, content standards, benchmarks, and best practice.

The core group broke down into teams of four and went into each of the schools in our district during the August Teacher Orientation Days. At this time each member of the team addressed one of the following questions: What is MELAF? What are the content standards? How will MELAF help my school? How will MELAF help me as the teacher?

At the end of the discussion many questions were asked and answered as a means of starting a MELAF dialogue and building a community. However, we knew that spreading the word could not end with this thirty minute introduction.

### **Dusting Off the Curriculum**

The Hillsdale curriculum is written for the most part by teachers who make up curriculum committees. The committees meet about every other month to discuss current issues in our areas of expertise. The Language Arts Curriculum Committee and the Reading Curriculum Committee teamed up this year to learn about the MELAF content standards. At the first meeting a MELAF director and our resident language arts mentor, Dr. Dick Koch,

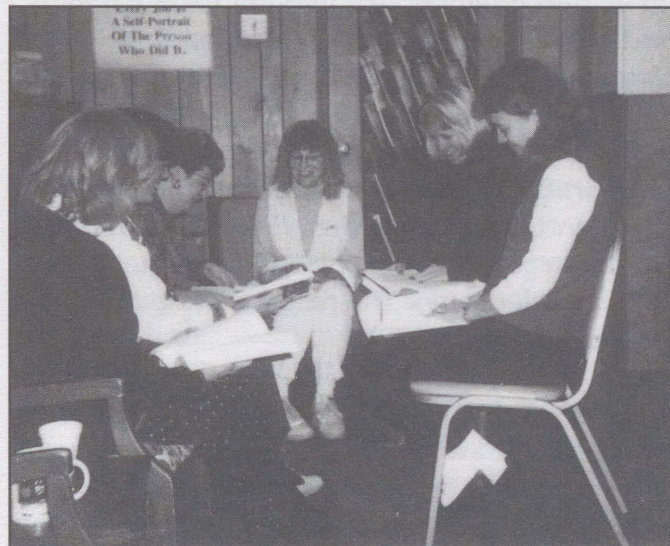
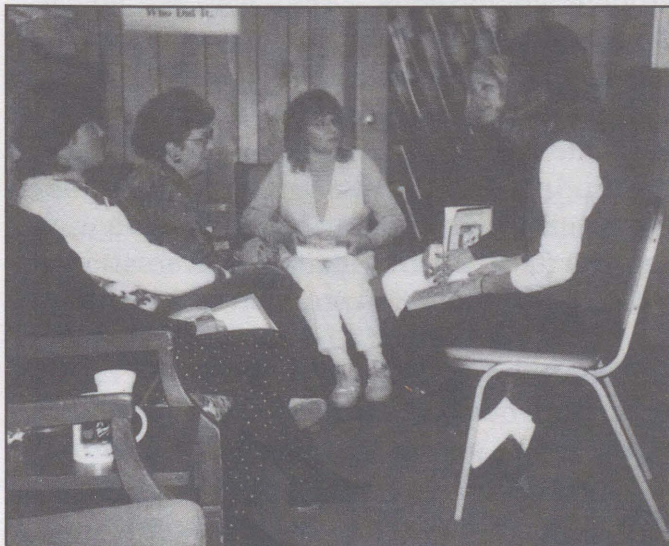
introduced the new standards to the members of both committees. He helped the committees to understand the content standards and benchmarks by answering questions and distributing a content standard survey. This survey showed the teachers where content standards were already working in their classrooms. This meeting early in the school year reinforced what was discussed in the August meetings.

### **Highlights at 11:00 — In the News and On the Radio**

The core group knew that the community had to be informed about these happenings. MELAF became the topic of many monthly district newsletter articles. The district administrators found it important enough to include a definition of MELAF in the Hillsdale Community Schools Annual Report to the Community. Also, several articles were published in the Hillsdale Daily News, both explaining and praising the MELAF project. The local radio station aired a program about MELAF by interviewing some core group members at the station.

Several core group members wrote articles published in the March 1995 issue of the *Literary Consortium Journal*, highlighting the way content standards are alive in our district. An Associated Press journalist and photographer visited Hillsdale Schools and published an article about the innovative best practice taking place. The written and spoken

## **Mauck Elementary Study Group**





word took the core group members to many places, but the effect was positive — everyone in our educational community now knows MELAF.

### **The Easiest Form of Aerobic Activity**

The walking journal is a notebook, journal, and/or folder that travels from person to person within a controlled group. The twelve core group members, for example, contributed to a walking journal that went from building to building and member to member. When the journal reached someone's desk, he would write about the activities that were occurring in his classroom at that particular time. The core group members concentrated on and explained the content standards in their work. Entries also included successes, disappointments, frustrations, questions, responses, interesting reading material, research and humor. A typical entry may look like the one written in September 1994 by Pat Ransford, a first grade teacher:

*My mind has been going like twenty racehorses lately. How should I integrate my curriculum around a theme? How do I show the content standards are being taught? How do I find the time to write in my journal? How do I carry out my reading program without the basal? How do I share MELAF in a functional manner with my teaching partners? I appreciate Rick's comments from Marion Mohr's essay that teachers "...learn to tolerate chaos in their thinking about themselves." I'm working on that!*

*I'm amazed at how all those questions I have, find answers as I interact with, listen to and observe my students. Many of those confusing puzzle pieces are finding their place. I indeed learn by doing just as my students do. After three and a half weeks of school, I am pleasantly surprised how well everything is going and flowing together. I've tried to reach out to my parents to involve them in their children's learning. The response has been terrific.*

*I finally have gathered all my courage and have taken that leap of faith I should have taken earlier. I am not using my basal this year or ever again! The reward came today as Ashley finished reading me a small copy of our*

*big book, Dog and Cat. She looked up at me and said, "I never could read and now I can read Mrs. Wishy-Washy, Wishy-Washy Day, Dog and Cat, Lost and Tie My Shoe, " Then came that beautiful smile and her whole body communicated that she felt good about herself.*

*After the rain there is a rainbow. After the struggle there is joy!*

Because of the journal, our team felt informed of district language arts activities. The walking journal is an easy and excellent means of communication for busy educators. In the Hillsdale district two other journals traveled between elementary teachers and schools. The high school English department communicated through one of its own.

### **What is that MELAF Thing?**

#### **Our Response to the Bosses**

No school program is ever successful without the support of the teachers, parents, and school board. We realized that it was important to communicate words like MELAF, content standards, best practice, benchmarks, and demonstration site to these people. It became necessary to make sure that everyone not only spoke the same language, but understood the same language. Therefore, members of our group gave presentations to the Parent Teacher Organizations and to the School Board which were well received.

#### **Teacher-Student Communication?**

The high school MELAF team members opened the window of understanding to their students. The instructors explained to every student what exactly MELAF was and how it would be affecting them for the school year. The teachers even read their MELAF articles in the pre-publication stages to their students for conferencing. An added benefit was that the students had a better grasp of what was happening. This honest approach was a catalyst for many informative conversation with both parents and students alike.

#### **On the Road Again ... The Traveling Library**

We were overjoyed to get the MELAF library last year. We were anxious to share it with the school personnel. We considered many ways in which to get these books, journals and



videos to all of our teachers. We knew that not only did these material have to be accessible, but they had to be usable as well.

Therefore, the library spent approximately six weeks in a central location in each school building. The traveling library became very successful. Many teachers took the time to read and review good research in the language arts. Much of the library material was used during weekly study groups and became a springboard for discussions.

### **Current Affairs**

Constant communication was going to be the key ingredient to keeping the spirit alive in our district. It was vital that everyone on the staff (teachers and support staff) was aware of what was happening in MELAF at the state level, as well as the local level. Consequently, the monthly MELAF newsletter was born! The newsletter gave information about the content standards, best practice, and study groups from each of the five buildings in the district and any pertinent news at the state level. This was just another way of making the entire staff feel like it was an intricate part of the demonstration site project.

### **Putting the "Professional" in the Paraprofessional**

Our Title One Educational Assistants are extremely important to our classrooms, so it became logical for the Title One Coordinator to introduce best practice and the content standards to them throughout the school year. Every other Friday became a workshop day for the Educational Assistants. The content standards and benchmarks were studied, best practice videos were reviewed and guest speakers were invited to present their programs. A very cohesive and professional team of teachers and paraprofessionals developed in the elementary schools as a direct result of these workshops. Assistants learned from the teachers AND teachers learned from their E.A.'s.

### **Study Groups to Support Your Language Arts**

The biggest impact in our district came about because of study groups. One can never

underestimate the value of study and support groups. Our district's study groups came in all shapes and sizes. Each group was established to fit the needs and wants of its members. Some groups decided to focus just on the content standards and benchmarks. These groups studied each content standard and benchmark individually and sought ways to integrate them into their existing programs. Many found that the content standards had already been an integral part of their language arts program and found ways to grow.

Some study groups evolved according to grade levels. Groups of teachers in early primary and upper primary established their own groups and began to share information, solve problems, and develop the sense of "team." The middle school used their staff meetings to discuss the content standards. At each staff meeting one Content Standard was examined and shown through a different teacher's methods. This was an excellent way for all subject area teachers to see the "good teaching" and the content standards happening in their building. Respect and understanding were the healthy products of these staff meetings.

Study groups developed a community of learners. The entire staff began to feel membership in MELAF and the demonstration site. The following narrative shows how powerful a study group can be.

### **Self Reflection — Teresa Dye**

These quotes took on new meaning for me as I began the 1994-95 school term:

*"Teachers, parents, and administrators need to be realistic about how long meaningful change (not just cosmetic change) really takes. There's often an expectation that if a district or a school makes a commitment to whole language, everything should be in place in a year."*

*"Thoughtful, slow change that occurs may not always be visible, but it is change of the highest order — stemming from greater understanding of the philosophy and the literary model of learning and reaching."*

— Regie Routman, *Invitations*, 1991

I was fresh from the exhilarating two weeks of intense study from the MELAF project. I



was excited, anxious and committed to best practice in language arts. I had a wealth of new knowledge and I was ready to dig in. I also wanted to share with my colleagues. This need to share sparked the idea for the Mauck School Study Group. Teachers became "curious" about best practice. Questions were asked ...

"What is best practice? Do I already do best practice? Can I do it? Do I want it?" Teachers were concerned that this was an idea that was here today and gone tomorrow. However, these curiosities and wanderings led people to *Invitations* by Regie Routman.

By nature, teachers want to start with the "how to's." Often you will hear a group of educators say, "Skip the theory and let's get to the activities." However, we found that in order to proceed to the "how to's" we needed the "why's." It became so important to examine how children learn in order to guide children in their learning.

Would I have begun to internalize Brian Cambourne's Model of Learning on my own? Probably not! Yet, through the weekly reading, discussion, and support from the study group, I began to see the beauty and the truth to his model. The Model of Learning gave me the foundation on which to build my language arts program. I needed to internalize the philosophy of whole language (the why's) before I could ever change.

Did everyone embrace the Model of Learning? No! It took time and a lot of patience to guide the many skeptics to this new understanding. Not everyone has joined the group of believers yet, but small victories were taking place daily because of the support group.

Diane Potok is a great example of one of those victories. Diane is a very capable third grade teacher in our building. Diane has always been considered a "good teacher" by the community. She has been very successful in the classroom with her more traditional approach. This success was the very thing that caused her to resist change. "Why mess with a good thing?" Writing workshop was her big bugaboo. Personally, she did not enjoy writing, so she did not see anything wrong with story starters and cutesy writing projects.

*Invitations* and the study group got her thinking. Many of the members had already taken the big plunge into writing workshop and we were quite enthusiastic about the process. We talked about the writing we modeled and shared with our students. The idea of sharing her writing appalled Diane! "No way am I sharing my personal thoughts with my kids!" Not only was she nervous about opening herself up to her students, but she also did not see why it would be so important. However, her colleagues continued to encourage her to give it a try, but she was determined not to get pinned down with commitment.

Then one day as I was teaching, I saw Diane out of the corner of my eye waving frantically outside my classroom door. I excused myself quickly and went to see if Diane had a problem. Diane was literally bouncing with glee in the hallway. A big smile spread across her face, and like a little kid who first learns to tie her shoes, she proudly proclaimed, "I DID IT!!"

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I shared my writing about my grandmother and the kids loved it. I couldn't believe the response from the children. It was incredible. Now everyone is beginning a piece about their grandparents!" I immediately hugged Diane...it was the only response I could give her.

Victories come in small packages, but this was a big one! Diane finally began to embrace the writing process. The study group helped her grow and gave her the courage to make this big step.

There were other victories, like Linda Wagner giving up the spelling list in favor of the word wall and Lynne Williams deciding not to order phonics workbooks. Gary Dunton, who generally stays clear of any meetings, became a valuable member of the group by offering insights and accepting suggestions. Linda Beck and I began to collaborate on a reading program based on the Wright Group. The basal was beginning to be used as an additional resource rather than the only resource. Change was occurring because we were becoming a learning community.



When Regie Routman said, "Teachers, parents, and administrators need to be realistic about how long meaningful change (not just cosmetic change) really takes," she could have been speaking to me. Did I see these changes in my school initially? No! Often, I felt that our study group was a failure. However, in retrospect, changes are becoming clear to see. In time, my patience will be as strong as my conviction for whole language, and I will celebrate each small victory, knowing our students are getting the instruction they deserve.

### Conclusion

Whew! How did it all get accomplished? It surprised even those of us contributing to these mini-projects. Most of it got done in pairs or small groups, depending on the task and availability. The key is having people dedicated to best practice, the content

standards, and student growth, who will make the necessary sacrifices to insure success in the project. There are still some members of our educational community who believe MELAF to be that brontosaurus in the backyard, but those numbers are shrinking. What is in the backyard is a fulfilling, professional, meaningful adventure that is complex and endearing. We need to keep developing and growing by inviting more colleagues into our Eden-to-be.

*Teresa Dye and Julie Bianchi are on the MELAF team in the Hillsdale Community Schools.*

### REFERENCES

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## IRA Membership Form

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