



The Reading Forecaster

FALL 2013

President's Message

By Becky Bard, Co-President, Portland Reading Council

Common Core State Standards? Check. New adoptions for reading and writing? Check. More students than you've ever taught? Check. Oh, and parent conferences with a new emphasis on HB2220. Double Check! Just thinking about keeping everything in check right now is making me dizzy!

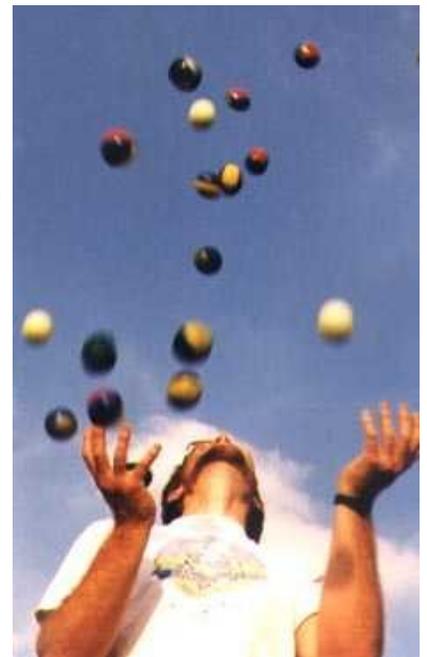
It's no wonder that educators can feel out of balance right now! There seem to be more demands on our time and abilities than ever before. That's why we at the Portland Reading Council wanted to present this issue of *The Reading Forecaster* to you now so that you can take a look at all the balls you are juggling and make some sense out of them.

Balance is a funny thing. It only exists when there is equal weight put on each individual piece. But the truth is we never really put equal weight on everything we need to accomplish. As soon as we put a little more focus on that new reading curriculum, we automatically put less emphasis on our class newsletter. Then, as we are working on the newsletter, we put the curriculum aside again. And then we're off to learning how to best use that set of iPads in our school. We never actually achieve exact balance because there is always something that needs more attention. We may have a lot on our plates, but each time we take something off, something else quickly replaces it.

The pleasant irony is that this imbalance that we are living through is actually propelling us forward and forcing us to learn and grow. How much did you know about Common Core State Standards two years ago? How much more do you know now? And what do you think your understanding of it will be in a year or two?

That wobbly feeling of imbalance can be uncomfortable, but it is necessary for us to know where we need to focus our energies and propel our professional lives. Think about the very beginnings of your education life. Raise your hand if what you are doing today is exactly what you were doing the day you began your career. What lessons have you learned throughout the years that affect what you do today?

This issue of *The Reading Forecaster* is dedicated to helping you navigate the sometimes shaky ground of teaching so that you can, for a brief moment, feel a little more balanced. It will be a fleeting moment, that balanced feeling. But know that between those moments, you will be growing as an educator. We here at the Portland Reading Council look forward to feeling a little out of balance with you this year as we learn and grow together.



Issue
Theme:

*Finding
Balance*



Toward a Balanced Diet in Literacy Assessment

By Dot McElhone, PhD, Portland State University

In recent years, changes to educational policies at the federal, state, and local levels have shifted the balance in classrooms toward an increasing emphasis on assessment. The current process of implementing the Common Core State Standards offers us a valuable opportunity to reflect on our assessment practices and to consider how we might move our instruction forward fueled by a balanced diet of assessment data.

Well-intentioned efforts to serve students by ensuring that every student's progress is monitored over time have led to a heavy reliance on screening or interim assessments (Valencia & Hebard, 2013). Although not actually mandated by law, the universal screening procedures commonly used as part of Response to Intervention implementation serve a valuable purpose: they can *identify* struggling students. They cannot, however, tell us *why* a student struggles or what processes and strategies she uses as a reader or writer.

These interim assessment measures are necessarily quick and efficient to administer and score. They typically involve short probes of oral reading accuracy and speed (two of the three components of oral reading fluency) or take multiple-choice formats. Some are produced by districts or commercial publishers and may



actually be mislabeled "formative" assessments. These tools can play an important role in robust assessment systems, but cannot generate the rich, multifaceted data on students' literacy processes and practices that best informs instruction, including placement in particular intervention programs.

To serve all students well and balance our assessment efforts, we must reach beyond interim assessments in two ways. First, rather than basing instruction and placement decisions solely on data from one or two interim assessment tools (taking the *direct route* from screening to instruction or placement) (Johnson, Jenkins, & Pescher, 2010), we should take low interim assessment scores as indications of a need for follow-up *diagnostic* assessment. Second, we should ensure that our overall assessment system, including formative and diagnostic assessments, addresses multiple facets and processes of literacy (not just those component skills that are easily probed or quantified). We cannot know what our instructional objectives and approaches should be with struggling readers and writers until we develop balanced, multifaceted profiles of their strengths and needs.

For example, two third-grade students might be reading at the first-grade level for very

different reasons. Rosalie might have a wide vocabulary, a strong understanding of how stories are structured, and useful strategies for visualizing and remembering information from texts read aloud, but she might struggle to move past letter-by-letter decoding as she identifies words. Porter might call familiar words quickly and accurately, but struggle with unfamiliar words due to his limited vocabulary knowledge, and he might also struggle to comprehend or recall the events in narratives. These two students might earn the same score on a timed multiple choice reading assessment, but they have vastly different patterns of strengths and needs and require different instructional supports.

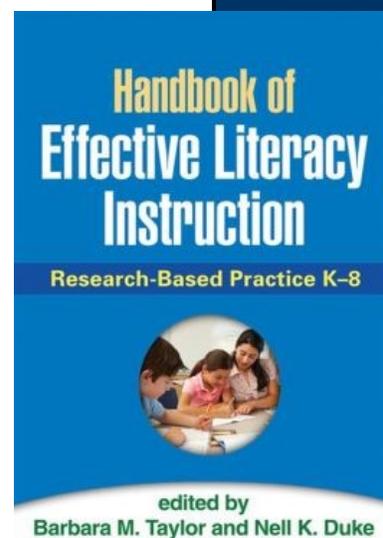
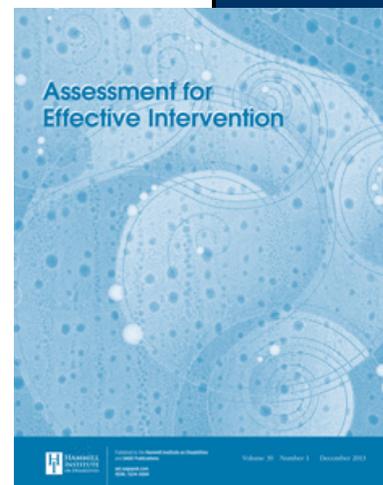


As you move into another period of intense curricular change this year, consider taking stock of your system of literacy assessments. You might examine the array of assessments on your “plate” and ask:

- Does my system include a balance of interim (screening, progress monitoring), diagnostic, ongoing formative, and summative assessments?
- Are multiple domains of literacy (reading, writing, speaking, listening) represented in my assessment system?
- Do my diagnostic and formative reading assessments enable me to understand what a student is *doing* as a reader and to examine students’ comprehension, fluency (accuracy, speed, and prosody/ expression), decoding and sight word knowledge, phonological awareness, concepts about print, language comprehension, vocabulary, knowledge of text structure, and knowledge of strategies and purposes for reading?
- Is most of my assessment “plate” filled with one kind of tool or assessments focused on one aspect of literacy (e.g., oral reading accuracy and speed)?
- What assessment tools might I add or remove to create a balanced system that can fuel powerful, student-centered literacy instruction?

References

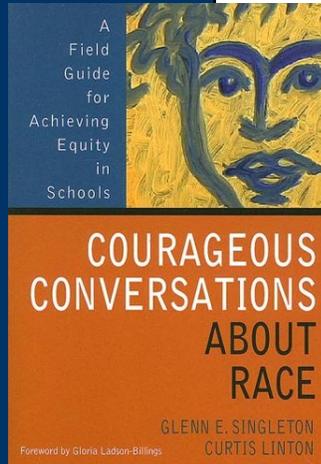
- Johnson, E.S., Jenkins, J.R., & Petscher, Y. (2010). Improving the accuracy of a direct route screening process. *Assessment for Effective Intervention*, 35(3), 131–140.
- Valencia, S. W. & Hebard, H. (2013). Classroom literacy assessment: Strategies for informing instruction and monitoring student progress. In B. M. Taylor & N. K. Duke (Eds.). *Handbook of Effective Literacy Practices*. New York: Guilford.



Balancing the Scales: Equality vs. Equity

By Jody Rutherford, Portland Public Schools

As a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) in the Equity Department of Portland Public Schools, one of my roles is to facilitate the two-day *Beyond Diversity* training, a workshop that is the entry point for PPS staff into the racial equity work that our district committed itself to even before the school board adopted our [Racial Educational Equity Policy](#) a little more than two years ago.

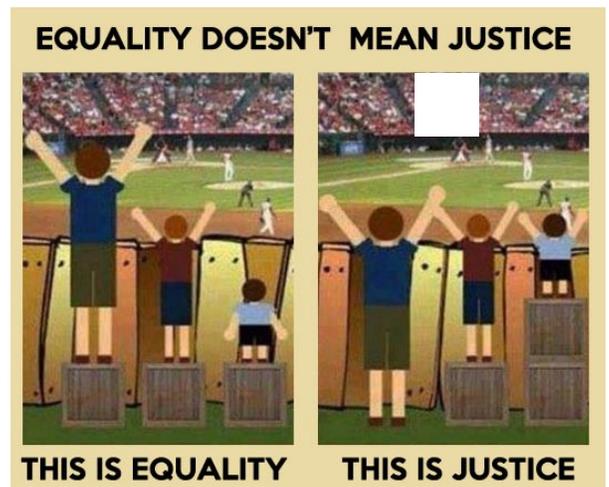


In the course of the training, we share a couple of research-based assumptions that underlie the need for having *Courageous Conversations About Race*, which is not only a book title but a protocol for having conversations about the intersection of schooling and race. One assumption is that we can't address racial disparities in achievement, discipline, graduation rates, etc., without dealing with race; another assumption is that a teacher transmits his or her culture primarily and the subject matter secondarily.

When I first read *Courageous Conversations about Race* in early 2008 and then participated in the *Beyond Diversity* training later that year, I felt like I was seeing my school and the classrooms I was in (in my role as an instructional coach), as well as everything else in my life, with new eyes. Having been raised to be "colorblind" and to believe that everyone is "equal," I had been trained to avert my eyes both from the advantages that accrued to me as a white person

and from the barriers that were placed in the way of people of color. I'm not going to go into all the ways my perspective changed during those first couple of years, but I *will* recommend a great [blog post](#) by a woman named Jamie who does a really good job of laying out how really *seeing* race—in particular, seeing one's own race as a white person—is a game-changer.

"But what's wrong with the concept of equality?" you might wonder. "Isn't that just another word for 'balance'?" The problem with equality is that it doesn't go far enough to correct the racial disparities I mentioned earlier. No, for that we need equity. As a colleague of mine likes to say, equality is handing out a pair of size eight shoes to everyone in the room; equity is handing each person a pair of shoes that's exactly their size. Another way of saying it is expressed in [this meme](#) that recently made the rounds on Facebook. Just substitute the word "equity" for "justice" and you get the picture.

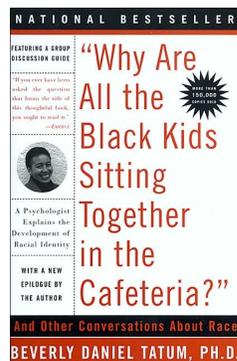
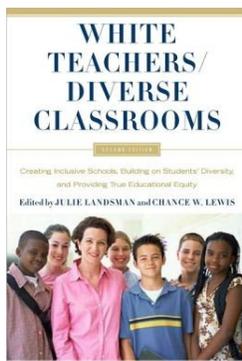
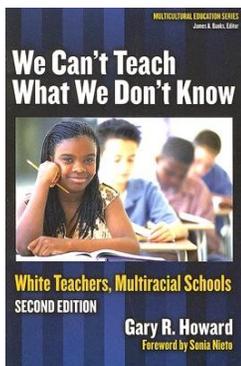


I'd like to suggest another meaning for "balance," one that is taken from the arena of finance. This weekend I heard Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings at the [Teaching With Purpose Conference](#). She has written and spoken before about how the so-called achievement gap is really an "[education debt](#)." In short, the idea of a gap puts the blame on students while framing it as a debt puts the onus on the adults to "begin to pay down this mountain of debt that we have amassed at the expense of entire groups of people and

their subsequent generations.”

Much like the federal government, our educational institutions have some accounts to balance. The first and second conditions of the Courageous Conversations protocol instruct us to begin by keeping the conversation “personal, local, and immediate” and intentionally focusing on race. What that means to me is that each of us as educators must be personally committed to engaging in this conversation in order to discover together how to pay down the mountain of debt. I invite you to check out the resources for further study and join me on this journey. You can reach me at jrutherford@pps.net

Recommended Resources for Further Study



Books

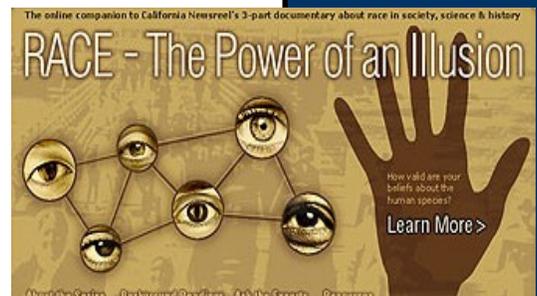
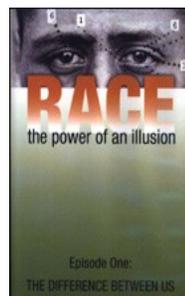
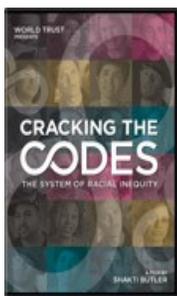
Howard, Gary. *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, 2nd edition. New York: Teachers College Press, 2006.

Landsman, Julie, and Chance Lewis. *White*

Teachers/Diverse Classrooms: Creating Inclusive Schools, Building on Students' Diversity, and Providing True Educational Equity, 2nd edition. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2011.

Singleton, Glenn, and Curtis Linton. *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press, 2005.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.



Films

Cracking the Codes: The System of Racial Inequity. Dir. Shakti Butler. World Trust, 2012. <http://crackingthecodes.org/>

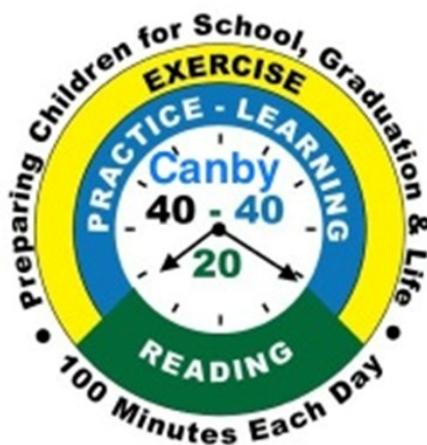
Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible. Dir. Shakti Butler. World Trust, 2006. <http://world-trust.org/films/>

Race: The Power of an Illusion (3 parts). California Newsreel, 2003. <http://newsreel.org/video/RACE-THE-POWER-OF-AN-ILLUSION>

40/40/20 at Home: A Case Study from Canby School District

By John Steach, Ed. D., Canby School District Superintendent

Last year, Governor John Kitzhaber launched the Oregon Education reform effort centered on his goal, titled 40/40/20. This goal states that starting with the 2025 graduating class, 40% of Oregon's students will go on to receive a 4-year college bachelor's or advanced degree, 40% will complete a 2-year college associate's degree or meaningful postsecondary certificate, and the remaining 20% will, at a minimum, graduate high school ready for college and/or a career.



This is a lofty goal, considering Canby School District's current graduation rate is 82.9% - well above the state average. Making this more difficult, the state graduation standards will continue increasing for at least the next two years. In spite of this challenge, we firmly believe that the Canby School District's goal of graduating 100% of our students is attainable.

To this end, work is in progress to adjust our content and teaching methods to align with new college and career-ready expectations. In addition, our continually improving use of and access to instructional technology allows us to individualize instruction and better meet the needs of every student.

However, for any school district to reach the state's 40/40/20 goal, we need parents to adopt their own personal 40-40-20 goal for their children. This 40-40-20 goal is to ensure all children spend 40

minutes per day exercising, 40 minutes per day practicing or learning, and 20 minutes per day reading or being read to.

This personal 40-40-20 can result in our children being healthier, happier, and more successful in academics. So we are urging parents to take on this challenge and commit to 100 minutes each day, preparing children for school, graduation, and life.

How to Accomplish 40/40/20 at Home

A week after this post about 40/40/20 was published, a teacher saw a young student doing jumping jacks while in line at the grocery store. He called to his mother, "I'm working on my 40 minutes of exercise!"

Not all parents and their children will know how to accomplish that goal, especially in literacy. What follows are resources that provide strategies that can help parents help their children with literacy away from school:

- Choose "[good fit](#)" books for young readers. Check out this resource for more information.
- [Help your teen build literacy skills](#). This resource outlines ways families can promote literacy from early childhood through teen years.
- [Motivate your child to learn](#). Good motivation is key to success and parents can develop motivation in their children.

Help your child succeed. These resources from the Oregon Department of Education include [12 strategies parents can use to help their child succeed](#).

***How Children Succeed: Curiosity, Grit and the Hidden Power of Character* by Paul Tough**

Book Review by Joan Flora, Canby School District

In *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough asks hard questions:

- Why is the achievement gap widening between middle class children and children living in poverty?
- What effect does poverty have on children?
- How does constant worrying change human brains?
- Which part of the human brain is most impacted by early stress?

What I learned from Tough's book:

- Poverty and IQ aren't alone in causing the widening gap. Tough examines non-cognitive skills and character as possible routes out of poverty.
- Early life stress negatively impacts the prefrontal cortex in children's brains; that's the area deemed critical for self-regulation of both cognitive and emotional functions.
- Character--perseverance, self-control, gratitude, optimism, curiosity and conscientiousness--is teachable and learnable; it also has a strong influence on academic achievement.
- Early attachment parenting training for parents in poverty is a game-changer and can positively impact children's sense of well-being: "When the children were two years old, 61 percent of the ones in the treatment group had formed a secure attachment with their mothers, while in the control group, only 2 percent of the children were securely attached" (39).

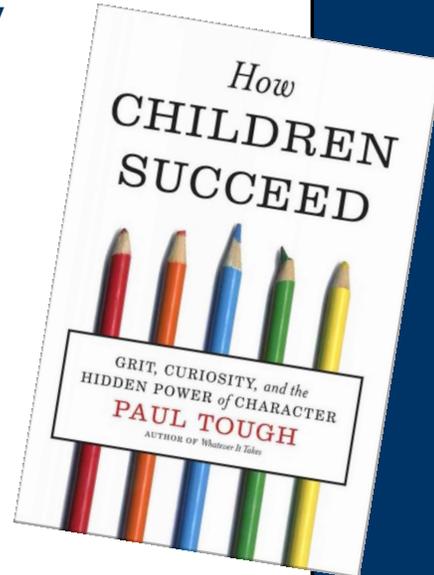
Favorite quotes:

"When you are bombarded by poverty, uncertainty, and fear, it takes a superhuman quality to provide the conditions for a secure attachment" with your child (37).

"Unlike a subpar vocabulary, anxiety-producing parenting can be undone with a relatively minor intervention" (41).

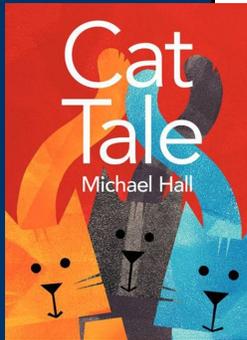
Why is it important for educators to read this book?

- Schools can positively impact character development, which positively impacts future success.
- Children from all socio-economic levels can benefit from lessons in perseverance and grit.
- Children from all socio-economic levels will experience stress. Tough makes a case for teaching children to identify and examine stressors while learning from them so they can move forward.



Books! Books! Books!

by Barbara Head, Youth Librarian, Multnomah Public Library

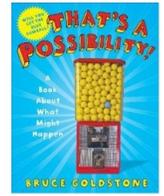
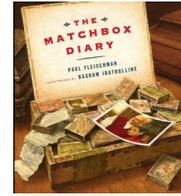
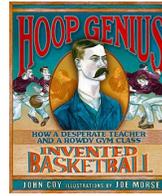
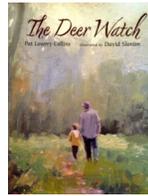


Cat Tale by Michael Hall (grades 1 – 3)

"They train a duck to duck a shoe. They shoo a truly naughty gnu." Michael Hall celebrates homophones and homonyms in this brightly colored picture book.

The Deer Watch by Pat Lowery Collins, illustrated by David Slonim (grades 1 - 4)

A young boy spends a special day with his father on a tour through dunes and woodlands in the hopes of seeing a deer. A lovely read-aloud for a quiet winter day.



Hoop Genius: How a Desperate Teacher and a Rowdy Gym Class Invented Basketball by John Coy (grades 1 – 3)

Faced with an unruly gym class, an inventive teacher gathers two peach baskets and a soccer ball, creates a list of rules, and invents the modern game of basketball!

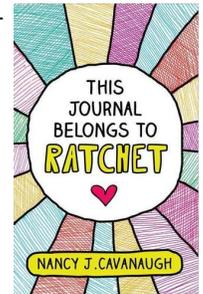
The Matchbox Diary by Paul Fleischman, illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline. (grades 1 – 4 & up) A diary of saved objects preserves the memories of a now-elderly man. The matchboxes create an oral history for his grandchildren. Fleischman's tender story suggests a wealth of nonfiction tie-ins related to immigration, poverty, creative writing, art and more.

That's a Possibility: A Book about What Might Happen by Bruce Goldstone (grades K - 4)

Goldstone explores the concepts of possibility, impossibility, probability, improbability, and certainty. Concepts are deftly illustrated with brightly colored photographs.

This Journal Belongs to Ratchet by Nancy J. Cavanaugh (grades 4 - 6)

Ratchet chronicles her daily life in a series of writing exercises from her homeschool workbook. Far from rote, Ratchet's voice and writings about fitting in and finding friends will appeal to a wide variety of readers. Great examples of poetic forms, personal essays, memos and more.

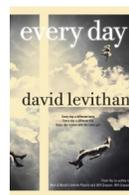
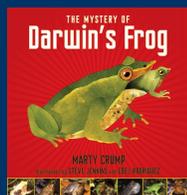


The Mystery of Darwin's Frog by Marty Crump, illustrated by Steve Jenkins and Edel Rodriguez (grades 5 - 7)

Crump's book combines history and biology with striking photographs and collage illustrations to tell the story of one of the world's most unusual frogs.

Hero on a Bicycle by Shirley Hughes (grades 5 – 8)

Compelling characters bring to life this story of one family's dangerous resistance to the Nazis in a small Italian village.



In the Shadow of Blackbirds by Cat Winters (grade 8 & up)

Against a backdrop of staggering losses in WWI and the influenza epidemic of 1918, Winters' novel explores the popularity of the spiritualist movement and the desperate need of a grieving population to believe the impossible.

Every Day by David Levithan. (grade 9 & up)

Sixteen-year-old "A" inhabits a different body every day, developing his/her own moral code along the way. All is well until "A" falls in love. Fans of John Green will enjoy this compelling read.

Ask Penny



by Penny Plavala, School Improvement Specialist for the Multnomah ESD

Dear Penny,

I keep hearing bits and pieces about the Smarter Balanced Assessment. What details can you share?

Belinda in Beaverton

Dear Belinda,

Oregon students will be tested on the Smarter Balanced Assessment during the last twelve weeks of the 2014-15 school year in grades 3-8 and 11.

There are four types of questions on the English Language Arts assessment:

- **Selected Response:** multiple choice
- **Constructed Response:** short answer
- **Technology Enhanced:** audio or video clip embedded in test; students click on sentences in a text, drop and drag items into a graphic organizer, etc.
- **Performance Tasks:** read/view/listen to several sources of information, answer three questions, and then write an essay or story

All of these item types are available for teachers and students to view on the Smarter Balanced Assessment practice test: <http://sbac.portal.airast.org/practice-test/>

Directions for viewing practice test:

- At the link above, go to the bottom of the page and click on green "Practice Test" box.
- The sign-in page is already loaded with "Guest." Click "sign in."
- Select a grade level and press "yes."
- In the upper right, select G ELA.
- Click through three more pages selecting "start my test."
- You must answer the questions in order to advance to the next page.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Penny

Penny Plavala, Literacy Specialist
pennyplavala@gmail.com

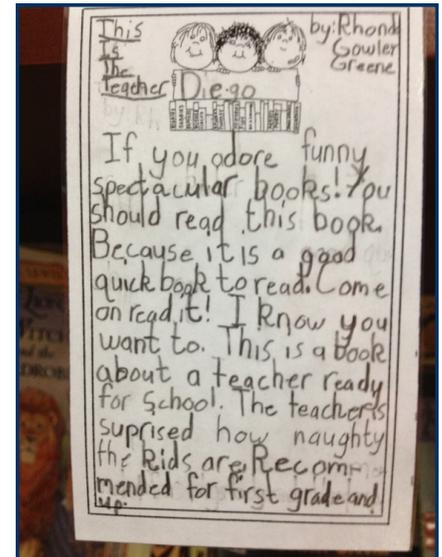
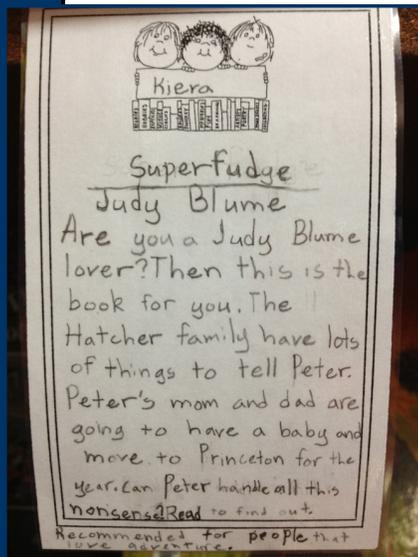
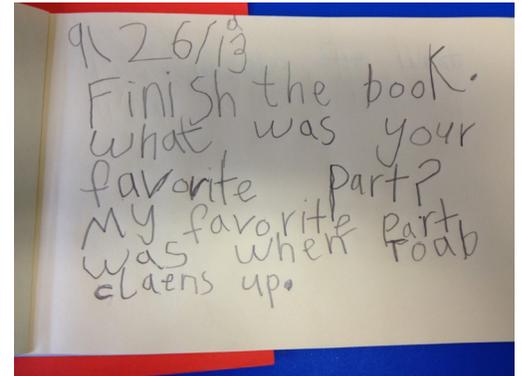
SNAPSHOT FROM ELEMENTARY

Elementary Snapshot

By Sarah Hagedstedt, Oregon Trail School District, Sandy Grade & Cedar Ridge Schools

As Learning Specialist at Sandy Grade School, I've had the privilege to witness an exciting three years of fine-tuning our writing instruction with the help of Regie Routman. Currently, our students are authoring pieces we could never have believed possible two years ago. Although we feel like we have a strong reading/writing connection, we will be making that stronger and focusing on close reading to improve comprehension. What follows are some ways we are looking to create a more cohesive balance in our literacy program:

- In first grade, Lesley Vermaas is streamlining her guided reading groups and providing accountability for her higher performing students. She is striving to ask higher level thinking questions rather than a retell of the book. Check out the pictures from her highest group reading a *Frog and Toad* book.
- Joyce Hyland in fourth grade has her students writing book recommendations for a wide variety and genres grace the entryway of the school so parents can see the recommendations and books while waiting to pick up their students. We're planning another shelf in the library to help students find interesting books.



- One of Sandy Grade School's identified areas of need is to help our students become better readers through incorporation of close reading techniques tied to the Common Core. I've included a lesson developed by Kate Gordon, our Title 1 Specialist, for use with fifth grade students who are studying body systems in science to incorporate reading strategies into our core content areas.

Sample Fifth Grade Lesson:

Your Endocrine System

Endocrine (say: **en**-doh-krin) glands are a little bossy: they tell your cells what to do! But that's actually a good thing. Without your endocrine glands, and the hormones they release, your cells wouldn't know when to do important things.

For instance, your bones wouldn't get the message that it's time for you to grow and get bigger. And your body wouldn't know that it's time to begin puberty, the changes that turn kids into grownups.

You have a variety of endocrine glands in different sizes and shapes located in different parts of the body. You might be surprised to learn that the pituitary (say: pih-**too**-uh-ter-ee) gland, which is about the size of a pea, is the "master gland" of the endocrine system. It makes and releases a bunch of hormones that control other glands and body functions. Tiny and tucked beneath your brain, the pituitary helps you grow big by producing growth hormone.

Your thyroid (say: **thy**-royd) gland is in your neck, and it's shaped like a bowtie or a butterfly. It makes hormones that are important for growth, and it helps you stay alert and full of energy.

Your adrenal (say: uh-**dree**-nul) glands are really important to your body in times of trouble, like when you're sick or under stress. Adrenaline (say: uh-**dreh**-nuh-lin), one of the adrenal gland hormones, gives you the boost you need if you're being chased by a wild animal or just your brother!

Anchor Standards for Reading K-5

Key Ideas and Details

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2 Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.3 Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4 Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.¹
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.8 Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10 Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

**SNAPSHOT FROM
MIDDLE SCHOOL**

How My Students Help Me Regain Balance

By Barbara Kutusz, Mt. Tabor Middle School, Portland Public School District

The start of school year found me feeling more off balance than any year in my memory, save perhaps that long ago rookie year. Some of what had me feeling off stride was unique to my situation. For the past 15 years, nearly all of my career, I had worked in a blended age middle school program where I taught all subjects to a single group of students. This year I was assigned to teach a sixth grade language arts / social studies block and three periods of seventh grade science. The sheer number of names to learn had me reeling!



Many other factors that had me feeling more like a new teacher than an experienced veteran are ones I'm sure many of you will relate to. My district implemented a new and improved (?) student information system. Our email system changed yet again. A new district mandate required me to open the school year with unfamiliar assessments. And, perhaps most intimidating, the Common Core State Standards seemed to have morphed overnight from something coming down the road to something about to run me over.

I went into the first few days of language arts class with a plan to have students begin the year with narrative writing (more on that later). I knew that would be a step toward meeting a Common Core standard, and I'd used the planned prompt successfully in the past. Then the students arrived and changed my plans altogether.

On the very first day of school, students completed a short survey about their reading interests. When I asked them to share favorite books, the room lit up. Hands shot into the air, and students couldn't wait to tell each other about their favorites. At home that night I realized that, as so often happens, my students were showing me what direction I needed to head. The next day I gave them their first writing assignment: a paragraph arguing the merits of the "Best Book in the World." I knew this would also move us toward one of the Common Core standards, and it provided an excellent opportunity to teach and model how to construct a strong paragraph. Students illustrated their paragraphs with scenes from their chosen books, and we had our first classroom bulletin board decorated!

Once these short arguments were complete, I backed up and assigned the narrative writing I'd planned to start off with. If you know the icebreaker game "Two Truths and a Lie," you'll get the idea behind this prompt. Students wrote three narrative paragraphs, another opportunity to model and teach paragraph structure, two of which were true things that really happened to them and one of which was a made up but believable story. This assignment is an excellent way to focus on how details can make an imagined story seem just as true as something that really happened. Students enjoyed sharing their writing and trying to fool their classmates.

These first two writing assignments allowed me to quip to parents at Back-to-School Night that so far I had taught their children to argue and lie. Being comfortable enough to joke with the parents was a sure sign that I had begun to regain the delicate balance that makes teaching such a joy.

Essential Questions Help Connect Students to Literature

SNAPSHOT FROM
HIGH SCHOOL

By Joan Flora, Canby School District

West Salem High School students wrestle with questions of access and equity regarding the American Dream as they read John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Students examine their notions of hard work and grit as precursors to success. But are those assumptions really true? Were they ever true? The characters in *Of Mice and Men* work hard, but will they work themselves out of poverty?

Teacher Pattie Sloan wants students to understand that sometimes life circumstances overwhelm people. But she prefers inquiry over lectures, so she relies on essential questions to help students sort out their own conclusions. Two favorite questions include:

- Is the American Dream equally accessible to all?
- Are there forces in life over which we have no control?

Those two questions drive much of students' work in Sloan's classes. See The [Reading Forecaster Spring Issue](#) for an interview with Sloan and teaching partner Ressi Miller and why they link social action to literature.



Students will see the second essential question as they study *Romeo and Juliet*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Huck Finn*, and *Give a Boy a Gun*. With these guiding questions, Sloan strives to make inquiry and learning personal. A recent lesson plan on her website, [Teaching it Forward](#), pushes students to consider their neighbors:

- **How does *Of Mice and Men* reflect our own community?**

Consider:

- 59% of the students in the district are living in what is considered poverty;
- 928 students last year were identified homeless and at the beginning of this school year, 300 already have been identified.
- IMPORTANT: This is not a number: This is us!

Sloan tells her students, "As a child, I grew up in what would be considered poverty by our standards today. No one judged me because everyone in my small town was just like me. And we all worked and made it out. I don't know if that is true today, but what really helped me through the process is that no one judged me. Remember, this is not about whether you have and they don't. This is about us. Anyone could be put in poverty by the change of circumstances beyond their control."

To help students connect *Of Mice and Men* to poverty today, Sloan uses PSU's Dr. Donna Beegle's [Poverty 101 Workshop](#) and [Oregon Kiva](#). In addition, Sloan helps students answer the call to action by organizing various projects in the community. See "[Connecting Of Mice and Men to Trick or Treating for Coats, Hats, and Gloves](#)" Also, see David Sarasohn's "[Across boundaries, navigating a path out of poverty](#)" in The Sunday Oregonian, 10/13/13.

By using a small number of powerful essential questions repeatedly throughout the course, Sloan allows students to deepen, extend and refine their understanding of both literature and their community.

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Portland Reading Council

Mission Statement: The Portland Reading Council is dedicated to imparting the value of literacy, increasing the understanding of literacy and promoting equitable access to reading and writing in schools and the community. We provide a forum for teachers and community members to explore current literacy theories and practices, thus enhancing the teaching of reading and writing, and promoting lifelong literacy.

We serve teachers in Multnomah, Clackamas,
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