

# CHALLENGING SCHOOLS

## CASE STORY

### Literacy the Skill, People the Key: The Transformation of John R. Rogers High School

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JOHN R. ROGERS HIGH SCHOOL, Spokane Public Schools, Spokane, Washington

One of our teachers was at the city golf course in our neighborhood where he heard another golfer scold his partner for leaving his car trunk open. He said, “Don’t you know this is Hillyard?” He went on to joke, “What do you call a kid who has a 2.1 GPA and has only been in jail four times? – A Rogers valedictorian.” The golfer continued, “There hasn’t been a two parent family east of Division Street in 25 years.” These comments characterize the stereotypes in Spokane about the school we love.

John R. Rogers High School sits in the center of northeast Spokane, in an area known as Hillyard. Within this section of our city exists the highest poverty zip code in the state of Washington. North of the river and east of Division Street housing prices plummet. Our school has a 79% Free and Reduced lunch rate among our students and the other 21% are not much above that line. Nearly 20% of the students have IEPs, 40% are students of color, about 10% of the students are English Language Learners from various locations around the globe. There’s an estimated 50% of our students having experienced some kind of trauma in their lives and 33% living with layers of trauma. Hidden in those percentages are the real day to day lives of our students who are experiencing trauma in so many ways, struggling to keep up academically and maintaining some semblance of control. That being said, our students are wonderful in every way. They take pride in their school and consistently rise to the challenges set before them. Prior to our school reform, we didn’t always give kids the chance to show us how wonderful they are. This story is about our journey toward improvement.

Over the years student achievement suffered. Rogers consistently scored the lowest of high schools in town on state student achievement and from 2006-2009 our graduation rate hovered between 50-55%. We were designated as a failing school and the Seattle Times characterized it as a “dropout factory”.

The first decade of the 21st century was very difficult for the staff. Student behavior seemed out of control, kids and staff felt unsafe. A complete remodel construction project for the school created a sense of chaos and disorder. The staff felt unsupported by the administration with trust and morale at an all time low. Faculty turnover was close to 20% a year. Herculean efforts to work with our kids seemed to get nowhere. It seemed to reinforce that old adage regarding the definition of ‘insanity’; doing something over and over again and expecting different results. Things had to change.

When the newly remodeled school opened in 2008 there was a sense that a corner was turning. The new building was the pride of Hillyard and the students seemed to pick up on that and treat the building in kind. In 2010, Lori Wyborny became the principal. We qualified for a School Improvement Grant (SIG) and began the process of righting our ship.

The staff took a collective sigh of relief when she was named the principal. Through her leadership she set audacious goals for her students and staff alike. Her passion for and commitment to our students was contagious. She quickly rebuilt trust where there was little. The sense of urgency and moral imperative to give our students every opportunity to move out of poverty and move toward success, in all of its meanings, was deeply felt by all. Her laser like



**Marty Robinette** taught Social Studies for 26 years at Lewis and Clark High School before going into Administration. He has been an Assistant Principal for the past nine years, four years at North Central High School and five at John R. Rogers High School. Marty is a lifelong resident of Spokane. He has been married for 40 years, has three grown children and one grandchild.



focus on the quality of instruction and raising student achievement gave the staff the sense that it could indeed be done.

The SIG has us focus on our on time graduation rate, but the underlying issue behind that data point was that our students had some significant deficiencies in their basic academic skills. This was evident in many ways. One of the most glaring pieces of data that we received from assessments was when our district's middle school 8th graders took the Readi-Step test from College Board assessment which measures reading, writing and math skill. The difference in scores was alarming. The middle schools feeding into the affluent high school on the 'South Hill' were 30 percentage points higher than the students feeding into our school. Our preliminary research said that the best way to combat such gaps was through literacy.

The burden of literacy seemed to always fall to the English department. Due to the work they do everyday they were keenly aware of our students' deficiencies and worked to address them. Mike Dewey, the English department lead shares his journey in taking on this challenge.

## MIKE DEWEY

I am currently in my 19th year of teaching, 10 of which have been at Rogers High School. Prior to coming to Rogers, I taught at Manson High School in Manson, Washington. Manson is a rural, predominantly Latino school district with approximately 700 students K-12. I was very comfortable there but moved to Spokane for family reasons. I landed a job at Rogers which was easily the city's poorest high school with an infamous reputation for violence, disrespect, and low academic achievement. A school of 1,500+ students, it is a far cry from Manson.

Upon my arrival in 2006, I found that the reputation was rooted in reality. The school was in chaos. At New Teacher Orientation, there were roughly 30 new teachers on a staff of about 100. That was a huge red flag. Why were people leaving? I soon learned why. I was assigned to teach four sections of Freshman English and one section of Sophomore English on an alternating block schedule with 100 minute periods. 100 minutes!?! After the two-day honeymoon period at the start of school, things began to unravel. Students openly defied instructions, swore, talked about inappropriate things and looked at me like I was crazy if I asked them to do anything. Other teachers were facing the same struggles. Some literally spent their afternoons crying. I was beaten down too and actively sought another profession, but was advised by my principal to hang in there and take a part time leave of absence. It was the right advice at the right time.

At about this time, our new remodel and addition to the school was completed. For the first time since the school was built in 1932, the people of Spokane invested in Rogers High School. What a difference! It boosted morale of teachers and students and created a sense of hope and better days ahead. We also had a change in leadership in 2010. Our new principal, Lori Wyborney, was irreverent, outspoken and unequivocally committed to the students and staff of Rogers High School. Right away, she executed the philosophy that less is more. She instituted a manageable common instructional framework that we still use today that guides what we do on a daily basis. It's brilliant in its simplicity; as a result, teachers use it. After a couple of years of this, things were improving but something was still missing. Students were generally compliant but not engaged.

What was the root issue? As a staff, we determined that the problem was skill-deficits in our students, especially in reading and writing. Consequently, we implemented a school-wide literacy initiative with the end-goal of being common in our strategies and terminology and also providing students with ample and intentional reading and writing practice. This initiative has produced quantifiable results, but I believe we have only scratched the surface.



Mike Dewey has been teaching for 19 years, 10 of which at Rogers High School in Spokane, WA. He teaches English and AP Capstone, and is currently the English Department Head. Mike's wife Tami is an elementary school teacher, and they have one son, Blake. When he's not teaching, Mike enjoys reading, golfing, and hiking.

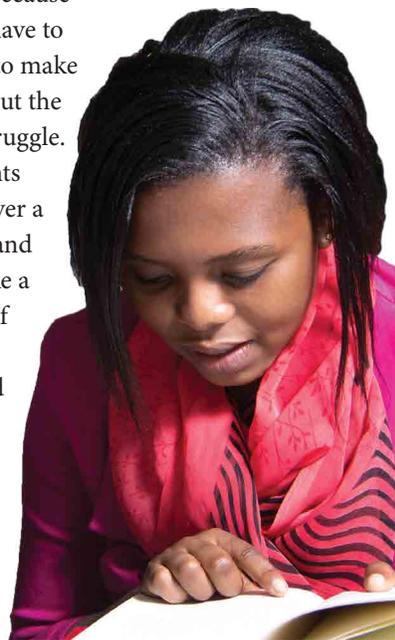
The process seemed so simple and logical. If students are going to get better at reading and writing, they have to read and write often and repeatedly access strategies that aid them in the process. Over time, they will improve. Why hadn't we done this before? I believe it was fear. Teachers were afraid to collaborate because they didn't want to be exposed for being ineffective. Lori acknowledged the fact that we were all struggling and gave us the freedom to move forward in a safe environment.

As of today 2016, I am the English Department Lead and teach Advanced Placement Literature. I see first-hand the results of this commitment to literacy and common-practice in my classroom and throughout our department. Five years ago, we had a lot of students in AP English classes but very few were successfully passing the AP Exam. Our pass rate was only 15%. Last year, our pass rate was 40%, certainly well-below where we want to be, but also a dramatic improvement from where we were.

This is not a result of anything I've done alone or in isolation. We have 9th, 10th, and 11th grade teachers who have committed to common strategies, goals and assessments and push their kids hard to develop a mindset of grit and perseverance. One of our 9th grade teachers spearheaded a push to create a commonly used writing rubric. It is extensive and encompasses all parts of an essay. The beauty of it is that it's flexible. Teachers don't have to focus on every element every time; instead, they can focus very specifically on areas such as thesis statements or logical transitions, depending on their needs. Four of our 9th and 10th grade teachers collaborated to create a rubric that would clearly define the elements of writing that was critical at this stage of a student's learning. Some of their strategies involved making students perform timed-writes regularly and offering very specific feedback. The 11th grade AP teacher also embraced the idea of consistent practice and expected students to write dozens of in-class essays throughout the year. Now, when students come into my AP Literature class, they know what good writing looks like, they know how to talk about it, and they know how to sit down and grind out an essay.

We still have challenges. For example, my English department is not yet collaborating with other departments. If we are really going to do this, we have to do it together. We are not yet sharing what we've done with other teachers and getting their feedback and building upon our work, and we are not asking what they are doing that we could learn from. There has also been some resistance by English teachers to the literacy initiative in that they feel like they are being told what to do when they already have effective strategies. In my own AP class, we don't get the volume of reading done that I'd like because students have difficulty comprehending complex text. We have to slow down and collectively talk ourselves through the text to make connections and draw conclusions. They can write well about the text if we've discussed it. If we haven't, most of them still struggle. The next step from here is to intentionally give more students practice with reading complex text for a specific purpose over a period of four years. We have to find ways to engage them and make them believe that their hard-work over time will make a difference, not only in their grades, but also in the quality of their lives. Ultimately, we all want the same thing: students who have the skills to be successful beyond high school and have the belief that they are in charge of the direction of their futures.

While the English Department was doing their work, other departments were also changing their practice. Carol Kaplan, science teacher, demonstrates the challenges teachers had with



skill gaps that existed in many of our students and how science teachers worked to fill those gaps. Carol's passion and commitment to our students demonstrates the heart and soul of our school.

## CAROL KAPLAN

I have been teaching full-time since 2003 at John R. Rogers High School in Biology, Physical Science, Chemistry, honors and advanced Biology. Rogers' science department has always been a strong supportive group. We have encouraged each other to be the best we could be in a challenging environment.

It has always been evident that Rogers' students did not perform as well and had many challenges both socially and educationally than students from other high schools. The students struggled with reading complex text, reasoning through a problem and writing their thinking down. Their skills and language level were just not as high. There was trauma in their lives and you could see in their eyes the baggage that many of them carried.

When I first came to the science department, we asked ourselves, what can we do to increase student skills, especially around science. The students needed content specific reading strategies to tackle the level in which they were being asked to read and write. We reached out to the administration and to the English department who gave us strategies such as CRIS, outlining, and summarizing (Creating Independence Through Student-Oriented Strategies). These were fine but we were teaching these strategies in isolation in the Science department. Even the expectations of how to write a good problem, hypothesis and conclusion were inconsistent between department members. We cared deeply about our kids but the range of language skills was so evident we knew they needed more support. It did not help that our school was not a safe place. Behavior expectations were posted on the walls but kids weren't being held to them. I loved teaching here but it was tough in the classroom. I was spending as much energy managing behavior as I was teaching content.

In 2007, the department looked closer at what we were doing to improve scientific literacy (reading and writing) in Science. We posted learning targets, used the backward planning model of Understanding by Design by Wiggins and McTighe, used interactive notebooks, a common instructional framework and a host of engagement strategies with little impact. These were helpful to track learning of the content but students still were not progressing on the skills of scientific literacy. In the meantime, there seemed to be no end to behavior problems; there was distrust between the administration and faculty. I hung in there, but seriously thought about leaving the profession. The relentless struggle with student management, lack of academic progress and the unsafe learning environment made Rogers High School a difficult place to teach.

In 2010 there was a change in administration. Lori Wyborney came on as our principal. Her administration team began by tasking everyone to build meaningful relationships with their students, hold the students to high rigor and expectations and that set a new atmosphere for Rogers. As a champion for our kids she made it clear it was our duty to do more for our kids and find a way to challenge them to improve. Literacy was the key to academic improvement, increasing test scores and changing graduation rates.

This shift in administration helped me shift in the way I taught science. In the 2010 -11 school year, I was able to change my focus to a new program of teaching Biology from Project Lead the Way (PLTW) Bio-Medical. This is a national program associated with a local university to build real STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) skills to high school students. In this training, my co-teacher Kristole Roseburrough and I saw a new



**Carol Kaplan** is a Science Teacher at Rogers High School in Spokane, Washington. Carol is a Lead Teacher for Project Lead the Way in Bio Medical. She has 13+ years at John R. Rogers and 25+ years teaching science in Spokane Public Schools.

level of rigor that our freshman students were being asked to achieve. This entailed more reading at a higher level, writing more, and better reasoning skills. We continued to ask the questions of, “How are we going to get our students to handle this curriculum?” Literacy was our answer. We pushed our students to read the text, discover the vocabulary that was needed, used interactive notebooks, did career journals that were relevant to real world jobs and projects that made the students show their understanding through writing, visual presentation, Socratic seminars and scientific research papers. We collected evidence of their writing and evaluated not just on content but on specific literacy skills. With the help of instructional coaches, administration and our department head, we collaborated not only on instructional strategies but also on how we could make learning more relevant to our students who had very little knowledge of the Bio-Medical field. As a result we saw more student engagement and fewer behavior problems.

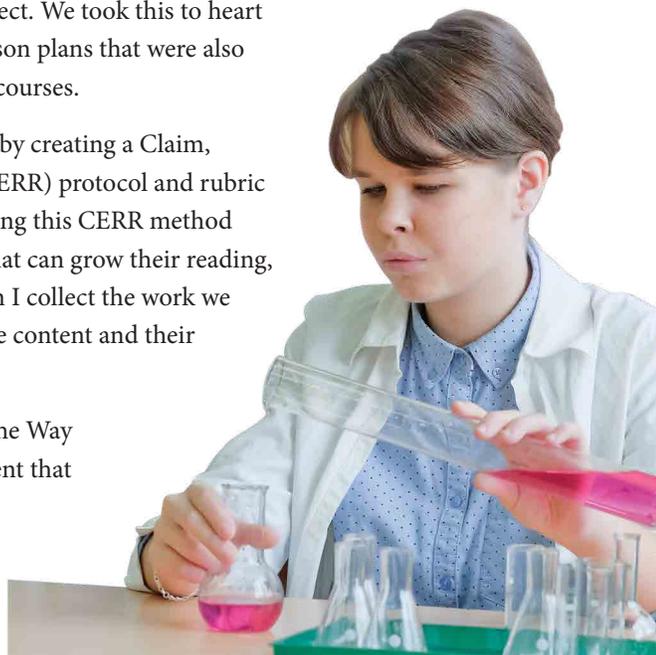
Project Lead the Way is a four year program for Bio-Medical students. Courses start with Principles of Bio-Medical Science engaging students with a death of a person, some forensic work and relevant disease topics to discover what might have killed the patient. Year two is Human Biological Systems which is anatomy physiology of the body done with case studies. Year three is Medical Interventions which has a family which they follow and looks at the latest interventions in science. They do microbiological work, design their own experiment, PCR and DNA work. Year four is Biological Innovations.

This course takes what the students have done the past three years and allows them to research and design an experiment, run the experiment, write and present their results at a STEMposium put on by Washington State University, Spokane. In order to be able to reach the fourth year level, Kristole and I had to push scientific literacy so when the students started reading research papers, they had the skills to handle them. These students now are working with scientists from Jubilant HollisterStier, a bio-medical firm, in Spokane. My students are tackling real medically based problems that are asked of college seniors.

In 2012, because of the SIG grant and the focused effort on Literacy as a Rogers’ staff, I felt that we were beginning break through and merged with what we were doing in PLTW and science. The staff was given tools to teach students how to read any text but all staff had a more consistent message and method that would help students approach a text no matter the subject. We took this to heart and imbedded it into everyday lesson plans that were also consistent throughout the Rogers courses.

We expanded our work in literacy by creating a Claim, Evidence, Reason and Rebuttal (CERR) protocol and rubric to better address lab write ups. Using this CERR method has helped the students see how that can grow their reading, writing and reasoning skills. When I collect the work we have rich conversations around the content and their writing.

John came into my Project Lead The Way freshman class. He was a shy student that would listen and try most of the time. He found he loved the science but hated to read or



write. In his first semester, he would do the labs but his write-ups were very far from meeting standard. He just would not use even complete sentences because this was Science not English. With encouragement, trust, practice and consistent expectations, John saw growth in his ability to write and read more complex text. He also saw success in the understanding he was gaining in content. In his 4th year, he was more confident, seeing success in all his courses, challenging himself with an AP class and ready to get a problem to solve from Jubilant HollisterStier. The problem was overwhelming at first, but I could see in his eyes that he had determination to research and test his hypothesis. As the year progressed, he was able to articulate his problem and the possible solution with ease. He dove into writing his technical scientific lab report with corrections and refinement. He was extremely nervous about presenting at the Spokane STEMposium, but he had prepared well. John received one of the highest scores and was presented with a \$1000 scholarship for WSU. If you had asked him if he could of accomplished this his freshman year, he would have laughed. John is going to WSU and majoring in Biology. He was a typical student at Rogers but found out that he could gain the skills to be literate so he could reach for his dreams.

Today I have 13 students like John in my fourth year of Project Lead The Way. They have learned to trust me and I have built a relationship with them. I know their dreams and the hurdles that they have overcome thus far in their lives. They have built the skills to tackle any text, write a scientific lab report, use the scientific language that is necessary to share their projects with others, they have become self-motivated learners and have learned how to reason through a problem. They can explain with confidence what they are trying to solve. Many of these students are from different cultures, differing economic levels, speak two or more languages, have jobs to help their families, are leaders in the community and are all going to college next year. These students still have trauma in their lives and deal with poverty but they have built skills and a vision for themselves. I have to remember that this is a process that starts when they come in my door. If we have a consistent message from every professional here at Rogers, build relationships, use consistent teaching strategies, give rigorous relevant content and ask each student to grow in their literacy ability, our students will be well prepared to reach for their dreams in the future.

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The task of lifting our student’s literacy skills to a level that prepares them for post high school education needs to be shared amongst the entire staff. The genius of our principal needs to be recognized. She consistently presents at every opportunity our school mission; that all students graduate on time, meet or exceed state standards in reading, writing, math and science and graduate college and career ready. This hasn’t changed in five years and likely won’t for many years to come. If you are a part of our school, you are a part of our mission. She strategically empowered teacher leaders to recognize the problem of practice and begin to grapple with solutions. Our department’s instructional leaders attended a Teacher Leadership Conference in New Orleans in the fall of 2013 sponsored by Bill Daggatt’s organization, The International Center for Leadership in Education. The impact on these staff was inspiration and as a result they formed a Literacy Committee. We had begun a schoolwide effort to increase academic vocabulary as a first step to assisting the skills of our students but it was clear a deeper dive needed to take place to get real hands around the full scope of ‘literacy’.

Beth McGibbon, a veteran social studies National Board Certified Teacher, provides a fresh set of eyes on the work we have done so far. She voluntarily transferred to our school from another high school in Spokane because she liked what she heard was going on. Here’s her story.

## BETH MCGIBBON

In early June 2015, I drove two miles east down Wellesley Ave from the school where I began my teaching career in 1990 to the school on the other side of town, John R. Rogers High School. I was meeting Lori Wyborney, principal of Rogers, to discuss if I would fit in with her school's vision and with the social studies department. Over the past nine months, this school and Lori were frequently in the news showcasing the positive changes that came to this "Challenging School." I wanted to be part of this change.

After an hour discussion, I asked Lori if I could walk around the school and get a feel for the building and the school's culture. As I moved from hallway to hallway, purple posters with gold letters displayed inspiring quotes about the importance of literacy. One poster read "Every man who knows how to read has it in his power to magnify himself, to multiple the ways in which he exists, to make his life full, significant and interesting," Aldous Huxley. As a former literacy coach, I was hooked and wanted to be part of this school's literacy focus. Yes, this change would be a new adventure for me both personally and professionally. I had taught at the same school for 25 years, a school with a very different demographic. I was a teacher leader in my old school, but I knew as I walked the hallways of Rogers High School it was time to make a change and positively contribute and grow in this school's culture of literacy.

Most teachers are nervous the night before a new school. Well, I was very nervous the entire week before the school year. What did I get myself into?

I taught five sections of world history to 140 very diverse sophomore learners. On the first day of school, I proudly and naively told my students that I taught at another school for 25 years and came to Rogers High School because I wanted to be part of the positive change their school had made. They did not know me, nor my reputation. It took several weeks for me to gain their trust and respect. It was a rocky start.

Fortunately, an instructional coach and the school-wide literacy focus helped me navigate this transition. In addition to posters that communicate the value of reading in the school hallways, every classroom displays posters outlining reading, writing, listening and speaking targets. I used these targets to guide my lessons. More importantly, I used the common school wide R.E.A.D (Recognize and number paragraphs, Explore and circle key terms and important points, Author claims: underlined, and Draw a box around new or unfamiliar words) and annotation strategies to align my lessons using a common language to help my students. I wanted to support the hard work the Rogers' staff has done over the past five years and learn from it. During the first week of school, I modeled how to use these literacy strategies in a social studies classroom. I got big push back from my students. "Why do we have to read? This isn't English!" and "You are the only teacher that makes us do this (referring to text annotation)." I replied, "Really? I am the only teacher?" I thought I was doing such a great job building relevancy. The candid, and often harsh, student feedback told me otherwise. My classroom management was tanking.

My third period class was my greatest challenge. Twenty-eight lively students with a wide range of skills make up this group. They like to disrupt and are very good at it. In addition, they can be very demanding and require a lot a coaxing to get started. In September, several hands would be raised and I would run around the room trying to meet students' needs from "I don't have a pencil" to "did I do this correctly." Rogers' students needed a lot more scaffolding than I was used to providing. They were not working as independently nor as cooperatively as I was accustomed to. Each day I felt that I spent more time managing students than achieving my learning goal. I was exhausted, defeated and needed help, so I requested that an instructional coach work with me. This was the best decision I made.



**Beth McGibbon**, National Board Certified Teacher, has taught social studies Spokane Public Schools since 1991. This is her first year in at John R. Rogers High School, a Title One School. She teaches social studies, primarily world history to sophomores.

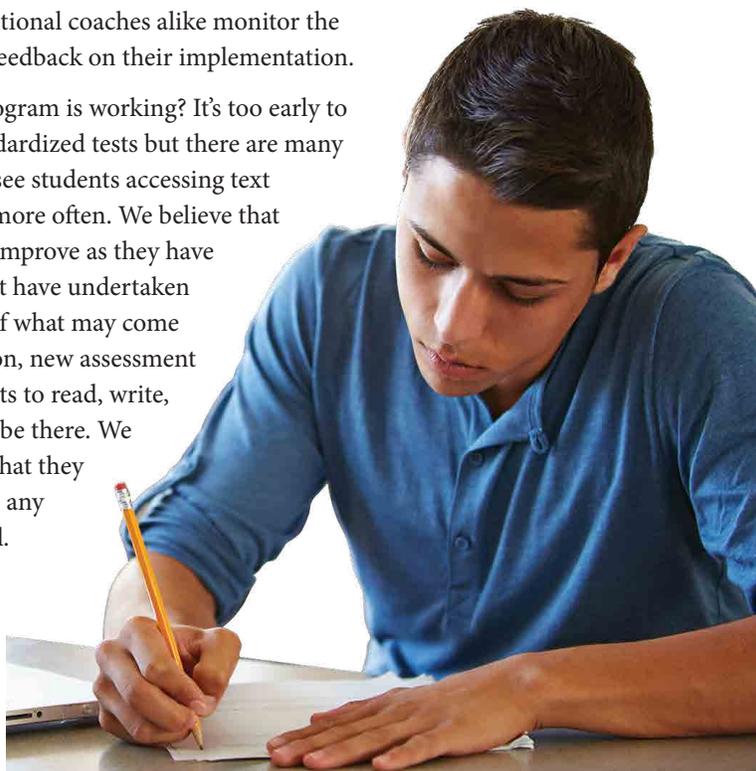
I met with Brianna, the instructional coach to share with her my concerns about classroom management and how to better meet the diverse needs of my students. For about six weeks, she came to my class weekly to observe and give very detailed feedback about learning targets, lesson design, transitions and more. She helped me see my strengths, which were content knowledge and teaching literacy strategies. More importantly, I became aware of areas for improvement, especially with my use of time and how to better differentiate my instruction. She helped me get to know the Rogers' students as individuals when she shared important data about their educational experiences and lives. She helped me get to know my students as learners when she informed me about some students' fears and frustrations.

Sean was a student who failed all of his freshmen classes, yet his standardized test scores were far above standard. Last year, his mother passed away and he rarely engaged in class activities in any of his classes. Jen got into fights regularly and works with the mental health counselor on anger management. She lived in chaos with a very sickly and abusive parent. Jason's mother requested this year that he be removed from the B.I. program and he navigated all six high school classes on his own for the first time. This information helps me not only help these students, but also ask more questions about other students and what motivates and challenges them. Once I knew more about my students' lives, I could build a trusting relationship with them, and the pushback has decreased. By November, students expected to read, write and think every day in my world history classes.

In one of our instructional coaching meetings, Brianna told me, "The work we do with our students at Rogers cannot be done by one person. We have to work together." I fully agree with this statement and see this genuine collaboration daily. Rogers' students know that there are several caring adults who want them to succeed. I still have so much to learn about how to best reach and teach my lovely students. In the meantime, I will access my colleagues and community to continue this important work.

The three teachers' perspectives regarding our need to build literacy skills are representative of the preponderance of our staff. The staff identified the problem and set out to address it aggressively through a school wide program. The two next steps were to monitor the fidelity to the program and evaluate its effectiveness. Administration, department leads and instructional coaches alike monitor the literacy lessons and provide feedback on their implementation.

Do we know whether this program is working? It's too early to determine its impact on standardized tests but there are many encouraging signs. Daily we see students accessing text more efficiently and writing more often. We believe that standardized test scores will improve as they have done for so many schools that have undertaken the same challenge. In spite of what may come from the outside via legislation, new assessment or policy, the need for students to read, write, speak and reason will always be there. We owe it to them to make sure that they can use these skills to take on any challenge beyond high school.



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