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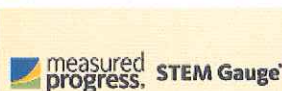
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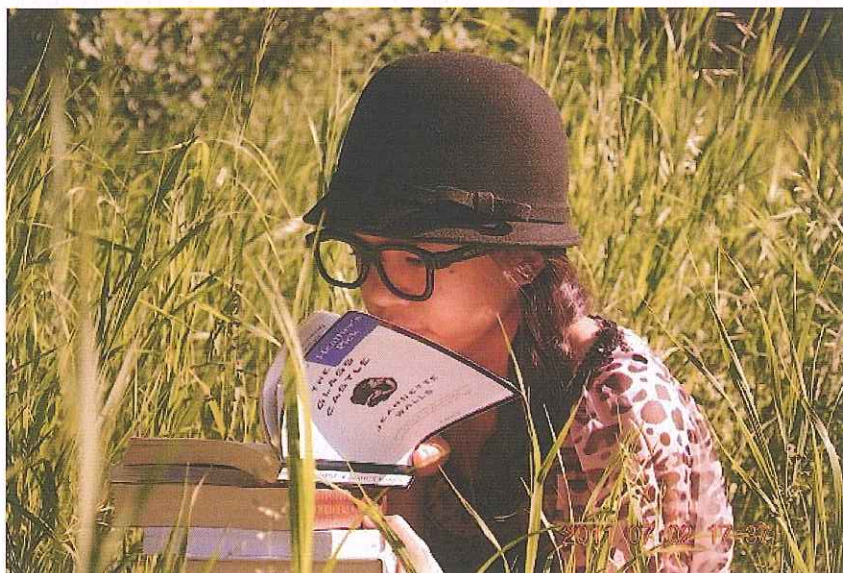
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Four Steps to Transform School Culture Through Summer Reading

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By Leticia Skae

May 3, 2017

In my first week as an English teacher at an urban high school in the Nashville school district, I learned my department had already agreed that summer reading would only be assigned to the AP and honors students. It was my understanding that over the years, students had done less and less summer reading, to the point that teachers became frustrated and stopped assigning it. Though I wrinkled my face at this idea, I understood my colleagues' frustrations—and since I was new to the school, I decided not to speak up yet.

Many of us have experienced it: the point when you want to throw your hands up in the air, signaling defeat, because you simply can't engage your students. But after a few months spent reflecting on the dynamics of my school, I realized that this kind of rationale, where teachers assume "some kids" just can't or won't do the work necessary to succeed, was unacceptable. It was having a detrimental effect on students and the school as a whole.

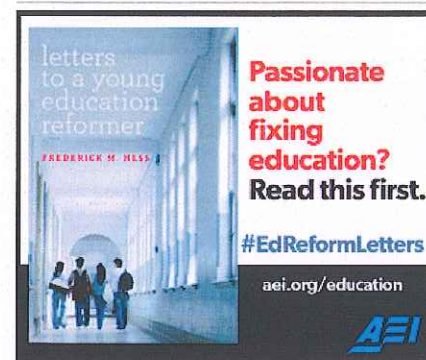
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You see, as a Title I school nestled in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of an urban district, our school struggled to address a "haves" and "have-nots" dichotomy. In our neighborhood, most parents sent their kids to private school, and the rest went to our school to engage in diverse learning experiences with predominantly poor urban students. We needed help unifying our curriculum and raising standardized test scores for our neediest students.

That's where I came in. With a master's degree in education focused on teaching and learning in urban settings, I was hired to fill a void at the school. My task was helping the school better educate the urban student population—a critical and complex undertaking. As I do with any project in life, I started small. My first goal was to convince our department that standard classes needed summer reading, as students in these classes were the ones who most suffer from the "summer slide," the research-backed phenomenon in which students, especially from low-income families, lose some of the achievement gains they made during the school year. I explained that a little progress was better than none. Even if just a few students did the reading, it would still be an improvement over previous years, when no students did the reading. With a little persistence on my part, my colleagues agreed, and this was the start to our school's educational and cultural transformation.

These are the four major steps we took to create a summer reading program—and a school culture—that served all our students:

1. Purposeful Planning. Simply assigning the summer reading wasn't enough. I prepared a detailed mini-unit, asking students to create visual representations of recurring themes they noticed in their summer reading and to cite evidence to support their analysis. Most importantly, students knew they were expected to read the books carefully—paying close attention to setting, characters, and plot—as there would be a test coming up within the first two weeks of school.

2. High Expectations. When one of my students complained that she chose to join the school pathway where I taught English because it was considered "easy," I responded, "I apologize for that being the pretense my academy gave off, but I'm here to change that." I never knew the true impact I had on that student until years later, when she came to her little brother's graduation and hugged me, mentioning that she was in her last year of college to become an English teacher—all because I had pushed her thinking.

My students weren't used to rigorous coursework, so I enforced my expectation from day one because I had faith in them. For instance, my students' first assignment of the school year involved the summer reading. I encouraged students who had read the book to progress with the assignment. I divided the new students and the students who had chosen not to read into groups, gave them the book to read in class, and assigned them reading comprehension reviews for chapters of the book. Their homework was to continue reading, while the rest of the class worked on summer reading extension assignments. This was the perfect blend of differentiated instruction and implementation of high standards.

3. Persistence. True change takes time, so one must never be discouraged when things aren't perfect at the beginning. The first year we mandated summer reading for all students about 50 percent of my students did the reading. I felt like this was a win. Remember, 50 percent is much better than zero percent. By the second year, word had spread and previous students warned new students about how, "Mrs. Skae don't play!" That year, I had roughly 70 percent of my students complete the summer reading and the paired assignments. The next year, 90 percent of my students did the summer reading.

With the rise of students participating in summer reading, another trend appeared as well. Our standardized test scores rose every year, and for two years in a row, my course,

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English II, topped the district. Overall, the department's literacy score improved as well, further proving that when we raised our expectations and improved our teaching, all of our students could succeed.

4. Celebration. Engaging, creative, and collaborative lessons made the students feel like the work was worth it, and I always praised them for doing their best. For instance, my student Harmonie once struggled with English and told me she didn't think she was smart enough to be proficient on her end-of-course exam. After reviewing the data and showing her that in previous years she had shown steady growth, she felt inspired to do her best for the upcoming exam. When the results came back, she ran to me and hugged me and we took selfies and tweeted about her amazing progress. A simple tweet meant the world to her.

I knew the summer reading implementation struggle was all worth it when our students began showing signs of motivation without prompting, like celebrating their improvement on the end-of-course state tests. I was especially proud when one of my student athletes came to me one day and said, "Mrs. Skae, I never used to really like reading, but the books you gave us made me think. I went and got the sequel to this book from the library."

Whether my students were checking out a book from the library, improving test scores, or pursuing successful careers, I could tell that one small push had transformed their lives in meaningful ways. They went from viewing themselves as "less than" to believing they were "capable"—and this is an attitude my students will carry with them as they continue to learn and develop new skills, in school and life.

Leticia Skae is a 7th grade ELA teacher at MLK Magnet school in Nashville, Tenn. She specializes in diverse and urban education and earned a master's degree in education from Vanderbilt University. She believes in all students' potential to learn, and she is an advocate for teacher retention and teacher empowerment in the current educational system. Leticia has participated in many teacher-leader fellowships and served as a story ambassador with the [Center for Teaching Quality \(CTQ\)](#). Her most beloved things are her family, reading, writing, and tweeting, so you can catch her on Twitter [@LSkae](#).

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aradeba1

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5:27 PM on May 4, 2017

We used to do this as well—even in Pre AP and some on-level classes. We let them choose from a list of varied topics and assigned visual notes, and discussion points that they would

work with at the beginning of the next year. It was NOT a major grade AND gave them a chance to interact with a book and classmates in a non-threatening manner. Then, out of the blue, the district mandated that we no longer have summer reading for Pre AP, and definitely not On-level. Not long after that, they even decided to make it "optional" for AP students. The rationale was that it was "mean" to make the kids read over the summer. Really? "Mean?" It's been 10 years now, and I find that much has been lost in the students' preparation, focus, and ability to sustain interest in anything that is not on their smart phones. Students lose so much over a summer, that now we have to start more slowly to get them back to where they were at the end of the previous year. It's been sad for everyone; although, I'm pretty sure the kids haven't noticed. :)



mcruiz

Score: 0

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11:24 AM on May 12, 2017

Every Summer, we took our children on trips to historical places across the US. We visited museums and art galleries, and participated in cultural events and festivals. Being from Southern California, we also spent a lot of time at the beach and camping on the mountains. During that time, my children also read great books, but not necessarily from the recommended lists provided by their schools.

Maybe it is not mean to force children to read from a list developed by AP teachers (as another reader says), but it is not fair either. Summer vacation is exactly that, a vacation, and schools do not have the right to impose on that time.

I daresay that my children benefited a lot more from our family activities and their self-selected reading, than if they had read every book on those lists. I dutifully informed the school, before the start of every Summer break, that my children were not going to do the assigned readings, and challenged their attempts to lower their grades.

Like Pink Floyd says, "Teachers, give those kids a break." It's their Summer vacation!



CoraBelle

Score: 0

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12:08 PM on May 12, 2017

Embrace positive actions my friends. If Ms Skae had a strong, positive impact on her school and her students, let's stand up and say "Well done!" As teachers we receive enough negative comments and attitudes from the uninformed public. Let us take some of the energy we read about and try something out ourselves. If our mission is to make a difference we must work together.



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