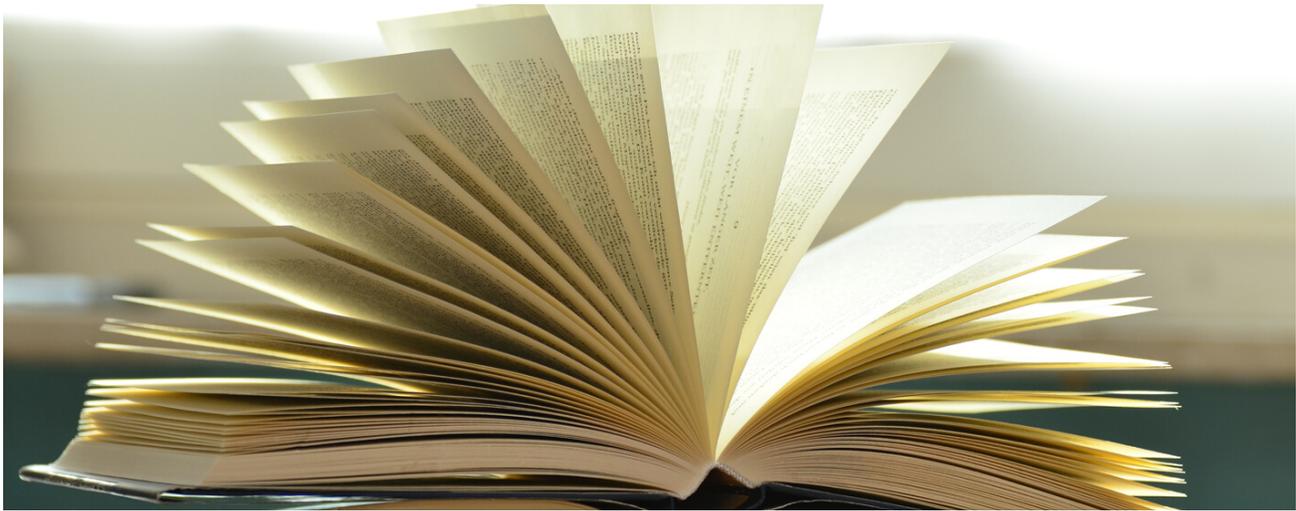


# NJLA INSIGHT

*The Official Newsletter of the New Jersey Literacy Association*



IN THIS ISSUE

**REASSESSING YOUR  
WHY**

**THE JOY OF TEACHING**



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## President's Message

*by Dr. Kenneth Kunz*

Dear NJLA Members,

Happy New Year!

At NJLA, we so look forward to sharing ideas with you related to our 2020 literacy vision and next steps for advancing literacy. As I look back on the beginning of this school year, we have had such a fabulous time connecting with so many of you at various literacy events throughout our great state. As an ILA Board Member, you can imagine that it brings me great pride that our own state ranks #1 when it comes to student achievement. Of course, we all know and are committed to the fact that we have a long way to go to ensuring that all students have the tools and instruction to become well-equipped readers and writers.

*(Continued on next page)*

## President's Message (Cont'd)

If you haven't seen the latest position statement from ILA, our work on behalf of readers isn't about touting one approach or program over another: it's about a commitment towards our teachers, comprehensive literacy approaches, learning from schools and communities that are achieving their goals, and civilly engaging in discussions to improve outcomes for our learners. As my colleagues Maureen Hall and Dr. Rachel Lella have concluded with me, please don't forget joy. As we support the fact that every child has a right to read, we must do so with a reminder that our kids are special and need to be part of highly engaged learning communities.

With this in mind, I invite you to connect with NJLA throughout the new year! Check out [njliteracy.org](http://njliteracy.org) and connect via Twitter (@NJLiteracy) and Instagram ([newjerseylitassociation](https://www.instagram.com/newjerseylitassociation)). Let us know what amazing work you are doing in your schools, or what you may need help with!

Wishing you peace, health, and happiness,

Kenneth Kunz



The NJLA Board, affiliates, and friends pose for a photo at the annual holiday celebration.

## Do You Still Have Your WHY?

by *Lindsay Bernero*

It is now midway through the school year. We as teachers are in the thick of it. SGOs, PDPs, lesson plans, observations, and routines have taken over. We are overwhelmed and tired by the end of the day. We have given 120% each day. However, with all this, we do this for one reason. CHILDREN. We joined this profession for that one reason.

I love children. I love teaching children. I often find myself explaining to teachers and parents that I wish I had been taught the way I teach. I love making an impact on student learning. It makes me happy when I take students for 40 minutes of reading and they jump up and smile to come with me to their session. It is all about the vibe you give to your students that can cause them to be engaged. Engagement equals achievement.

I was around eight years old when I first went to work with my mom. She was an occupational therapist at a private special education school. I walked in and fell in love. I fell in love with bulletin boards, crafts, learning styles, and the students. I saw teachers LOVE and FOSTER learning even in the most severe cases. That was when I knew I wanted to become a teacher.

Over the past 15 years, I've endured many emotions in the school settings. It wasn't until recently at an EdCamp that I was asked the question, "What is your why?" I think it is so important to create a positive environment and have caring staff. Making sure staff are involved outside of school, such as going to dinners, joining school committees, and attending other social gatherings can enhance this feeling of community. Creating that culture of community and belonging can trickle down to the students in our schools showing them that they are our WHY? Continue to push through this year, everyone. Stay positive, and never forget your WHY!

## The Joy of Teaching

by Maureen Hall

Let's talk about the joy of teaching. Yes, I understand and am a proponent of stamina and rigor in the curriculum, but lately I'm infusing joy into everything I teach. Penny Kittle has long been one of my literacy heroes. In her book, *Write Beside Them*, she urges teacher to introduce students to new formats that might seem intimidating by 'writing beside' a published author. Last year I decided to do just that. First I tried it with middle and high school teachers on a professional development day. The results were jaw-dropping. Many people, adults included, believe that in order to write poetry one must be . . . a poet. How exciting it was for them to see that they already possessed this ability!

Once I saw the incredible value of this lesson, during which every teacher in the room vowed to use the same poem with his/her students to let them get their feet wet in poetry, I moved the lesson down to middle school students, who also accomplished wonderful poetry! I was truly stunned with their work, once we had presented a lesson about poetry (It doesn't have to rhyme; it can be written quickly and later revised, etc.) and read the poem alongside we would write. Since I always caution teachers that, if they are asking their students to write a particular assignment, they'd better have written it themselves, the teachers were prepared to place their own poems 'beside' the poet's originals, thereby proving that this could be done.

I have since used this method more times than I can count; it has been successful every time! I generally use poems that I met in Penny's books, although I have recently gone rogue and chosen a few of my own newer favorites. When the stage is set, the poem read with passion by a teacher or by me, and the teacher's (or my) own attempt demonstrated via ELMO or on the SmartBoard, when teachers have created a risk-taking and safe environment for experimentation in writing, children will write. What a joyful lesson!

I'll share a couple of secrets. The very first poem used with teachers also came with a template to use when students write. This was *Where I'm From*, by George Ella Lyons, and the template can be found at: [www.sausd.us/cma/lib/Centricity/Domain/I am From Poem](http://www.sausd.us/cma/lib/Centricity/Domain/I%20am%20From%20Poem). If you google that, you'll also find analyses of the poem and several videos. Other successful attempts have been tried using *Old Barn*, by Richard Greene, and *Trees*, by Amy Ludwig VanDerwater, who also has a wonderful poetry blog, *The Poem Farm*. Today I'd like to share with you just one example of a poem written beside *I am From*. This particular

This particular entry comes from a tiny little school in northwestern Jersey and was written by a fifth grade boy. It's my current favorite!

**I am From**  
by Shawn

I am from wooden chairs,  
from Chlorox wipes and Dawn.  
I am from the hill in the backyard,  
(steep, rocky, frozen to fly a sled down).  
I am from tomato plants,  
tall, gripping onto the fence nearby.  
I'm from Thanksgiving parties and clumsiness.  
from Dana and David.  
I'm from crowded football fields and cheer competitions,  
from, "Quiet down five decibels," and "SHAWN!"  
I'm from a rushing family, running here, driving there.  
I'm from Easton and Ireland,  
warm mashed potatoes, steaming corn.  
From survivors of immigrants, arriving to America, from the  
potato famine.



The last few lines are missing, but this kid gets an A+ in my book. And I'm moved by his writing, which I know he did on his own; I was there. So my recommendation is to have your students try 'writing beside' poets, and then to move up to writing beside book reviews, essays, and who knows what? I can almost guarantee you'll enjoy the experience.

For younger students, try using the book (or look online) for *The Best Part of Me*, by Wendy Ewald. You'll find lots of Scholastic material to go along with this one, and when we used it in a third grade classroom last year we took close-up pictures of the body part and printed that with the poetry for a wonderful bulletin board. Kids can do amazing things, and this is the joy of teaching!

**COMING SOON!**  
**NJLA CELEBRATES STUDENT AUTHORS**  
**K-8 2020 WRITING CONTEST**

*DETAILS FORTHCOMING.*

**We want to hear from you!**

**Let us know what you are up to in the world of literacy  
education. Contact us via social media or email!**