

LITERACY ENRICHMENT

W. J. KEENAN HIGH SCHOOL
COLUMBIA, SC

“**R**eading is to the mind, what exercise is to the body. As by the one, health is preserved . . .; by the other, virtue—the health of the mind—is kept alive, cherished, and confirmed” (Joseph Addison). Educators at Keenan High School understand that reading should be practiced every day, and so they changed the school schedule to allow more time for reading.

Now, each day includes a 30-minute period for reading. To begin, students took the STAR Assessment—a computer-adaptive test of reading skills—in their English classes. The students’ scores determined if students were reading at grade level. Students whose skills were below grade level attended classes focused on vocabulary development and reading comprehension strategies. Those at or above grade level, read novels and focused on literary analysis (e.g., identifying characters, plots, and themes). All parents were asked to ensure that their students read 20 minutes each day at home.

Because all students participated, it was necessary for all teachers of all subjects to be involved, too. This met with initial resistance, but professional development helped all teachers feel prepared to encourage students to read, think, and write to increase their literacy skills and their love of reading. To ease teachers’ concerns, the school’s literacy specialist designed PowerPoint presentations for each day’s lesson and distributed them school-wide.

During the 30 minute reading time, teachers gave short introductions to the day’s lesson and, then, students read and recorded their experiences in a log. For example, one month centered on poetry, with each day focused on a different aspect and a specific poet. For example, poetry’s connection to human emotions featured the poem *Fire and Ice* by Robert Frost. Students were guided, “As you read today, look for an emotion shining through

your story or poem. Describe those feelings in your literacy log.”

Students retook the STAR Assessment in winter and spring and moved to different groups based on their growth. An administrator pointed to improved scores on the end-of-course exam in English 1 as evidence of the hoped-for results of this practice. Keenan High School serves 678 students in grades 9 through 12. Almost all student (95.8%) are African American and over 70% are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. These factors do not determine whether students become good readers, but good reading skills determine student success in school.

The school also encouraged strengthening literacy skills by inviting students to engage in original writing and reading. At one event titled *The Spoken Word*, original compositions were read by the authors. 20 student writers read short works to an audience of 170 of their peers and some family members. The literary works ranged from insightful political commentaries to creative writing to deep personal reflections, indicating students’ ownership of difficult ideas—just as education was intended.

Literacy is an important goal for student success at just about every school in the country. Keenan High School students loved the extra time each day to lose themselves in their favorite books or selected literary works. Changing the school schedule to accommodate more reading and emphasizing reading at home every day clearly communicated to students the importance of reading as a life skill.

Latayna S Williams
Assistant Principal
Latayna.williams@richlandone.org

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READING & LITERACY