

A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR TEACHER EDUCATION AND READING INSTRUCTION

A PLEASANTVILLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PARTNERS WITH STOCKTON UNIVERSITY TO STRENGTHEN LITERACY AND PRESERVICE TEACHER PREPARATION

BY RENEE ALFORD

Conundrum: a confusing and difficult problem or question. As a teacher of reading and writing, I recognize this as a typical vocabulary word my students would investigate. As a teacher of reading and writing this is also a real-life situation. When a majority of students enter your classroom reading well below grade level, and your district removes vital systems of support—such as basic skills instructors and resources in reading interventions—because of budgetary constraints, you have a confusing and difficult problem. Could a partnership that was developed years before be the answer?

Renee Alford is a second-grade teacher in Pleasantville. She is a 2018 New Jersey Exemplary Educator and the 2007 Atlantic County Teacher of the Year. She can be reached at alford.renee@pps-nj.us.

LITERACY BACKGROUND

My passion for literacy began in 2004 when I entered the Literacy Collaborative at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Balanced literacy opened my eyes to teaching reading, writing and word study immersed in the workshop model and centered around interactive read-alouds. I became certified as an intermediate literacy coordinator in 2007 and went on to work with students in third through eighth grades for a number of years.

When budget cuts forced basic skills instructors and interventionists back into the classroom at the beginning of the 2017 school year, I was assigned to a second-grade inclusion class, and quickly realized the reading needs of my students presented many challenges; the necessary, effective and explicit phonics program was missing as was the staff needed to work one-on-one and in small skill-based groups with my students. Matt Barnard, my special education co-teacher, was just as concerned and frustrated.

"We simply didn't have the appropriate resources to differentiate instruction to meet the variety of early reading needs of our students," Barnard said.

OCEANFIRST FOUNDATION MODEL CLASSROOM GRANT

The OceanFirst Model Classroom Grant came

to my attention at this time. The \$10,000 grant is designed to help teachers develop a model classroom for learning.

In order to secure the grant, I knew I had to think outside the box. How could I approach the needs of my students in an innovative way? After consulting with my principal, Teresa McGaney-Guy, we felt this was an opportunity to address the literacy needs in my classroom as well as other primary classrooms at North Main Street School. Once a reading facilitator herself, McGaney-Guy has always understood the importance of helping students become proficient readers.

"We've been struggling with cracking the code, with teaching our students how to read," she said.

A previous collaboration I had enjoyed with Stockton University School of Education while teaching middle school came to mind. Could another collaboration with Stockton be the answer? I already understood how the university students could benefit my students, but how could North Main benefit Stockton and their students?

I recalled a recent conversation with my principal regarding prospective teachers coming to interviews unable to address interventions, especially reading interventions, in the classroom. I knew this was the avenue to take.

North Main would provide the Stockton students, who themselves were preparing to be teachers, with experience and training in areas of early reading instruction, but with a focus on interventions. Once contacted, Stockton Associate Professor of Literacy Susan Cydis, Associate Professor of Special Education Priti Haria and Associate Professor of Education Shelly Meyers, gave their immediate support to another collaboration.

THE MODEL CLASSROOM COLLABORATION PLAN

The Stockton and North Main team met to refine our approach, and I submitted the grant application. If awarded, the \$10,000 grant would go toward the purchase of an explicit phonics-based program, professional development and flexible furnishings. At an event in early October 2018, I was fortunate enough to be one of the 25 grantees selected out of 144 proposals.

Now the real work would begin, but what exactly was the plan?

Originally Stockton was to provide five uni-

versity students to work with the students in my second-grade inclusion classroom. In turn these university students would be invited to attend professional development in an explicit phonics-based program, benchmark assessments, progress monitoring and running records. However, it quickly became clear to Stockton that this was an opportunity they wanted to take full advantage of and by the time I was awarded the grant the program had expanded. Stockton would now commit 10 university students (preservice teachers), to be placed into my second-grade inclusion classroom as well as a first-grade inclusion classroom.

Each Stockton student would provide 50 clinical hours. In addition, Stockton decided to hold a three-credit undergraduate Literacy Development course directly in my classroom. This began in January 2019.

By June, the commitment had grown, and Stockton now provided us with 25 university students, including 50 clinical hours, in addition to continuing the Literacy Development course. Now even more classrooms and students would benefit from the collaboration.

SITUATED LEARNING

According to Shelly Meyers, associate professor of special education, situated learning is defined as a means for preservice teachers to apply the skills and knowledge from college coursework to the school setting. Learning occurs in an authentic setting and provides students with a more holistic approach to learning as they are taught the theory and immediately put that theory into practice under the supervision of university faculty and expert mentor teachers.

Several components of situated learning are integral to the effectiveness of the model. The teaching and learning environments are highly structured, and university faculty and mentor classroom teachers are consistent in their instructional approaches, teaching research-proven strategies with integrity. University faculty and mentor classroom teachers provide support and scaffold preservice teachers throughout the teaching and learning process and offer immediate feedback so that the preservice teachers reflect and modify their methods immediately.

"Situated learning is a real-world approach for preservice teachers to practice their skills and knowledge with school-aged students that

directly links college coursework to classroom practice," says Meyers.

This type of immersion into the classroom has allowed the Stockton students to learn and experience so much, firsthand, in an abbreviated amount of time. They go through the process of theory, professional learning and implementation.

This hands-on experience that is being played out in the classroom is also what is showing up on the Praxis teaching exam. More subtle and nuanced are the benefits a flexible learning environment has on students' motivation to learn and how classroom management is implemented in these whole-group and small-group lessons. Preservice teachers come to realize that things won't always go as planned; you have to be able to adapt to the moment.

A TYPICAL LANGUAGE ARTS BLOCK

Three preservice teachers enter the classroom, readily joining the students at their tables as they finish breakfast and wait for the morning announcements, catching up on anything new in their lives. This personal check-in has our students smiling and giggling with a sparkle in their eyes as the soak up this attention.

As the ELA block begins, one preservice teacher will take a student and their phonics kit to the carpet for a 20-minute phonics intervention lesson. This will be followed by some special time to read together in a student-selected independent reading book.

Another preservice teacher will take a small guided reading group. Lively conversations always follow as the preservice teacher activates background knowledge or discusses vocabulary words, allowing the students to make personal connections as they are drawn into the lesson.

The third preservice teacher will accompany a small group of students to the library to monitor progress for fluency. As they return hand in hand, students are begging for more time to read with the preservice teacher.

"My experience at North Main Street School has further shaped my outlook on the teaching profession," says preservice student Lucero Chavez. "In Mrs. Alford's class I was able to witness the tremendous impact she, as well as the environment of the school, had on the students. I truly appreciate the opportunity I had to create meaningful relationships with the students as well as learn valuable skills I can transfer to my own teaching in a future classroom."

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT COURSE

The course, embedded in an authentic setting is

designed so the university students are immersed in an actual classroom and can experience specific, focused lessons in action. They are able to observe the teacher and student interactions. They see a lesson through from anticipatory set, minilesson, guided practice, independent practice and formative assessment. They observe and support the students.

The last hour of our school day is the first hour of the preservice teacher's Literacy Development course. After the elementary students are dismissed for the day, the professors and preservice teachers debrief what they observed and then delve even more deeply into the topic.

As a follow-up, they practice what they are learning with the elementary students during their clinical hours under the supervision of a mentor classroom teacher.

Dr. Susan Cydis has recognized a difference in her Literacy Development students.



A Stockton University student practices teaching literacy with a Pleasantville student. Photo by Diane D'Amico/Stockton University.

"The students coming here are developing more confidence and competence," she says.

Dr. Cydis and Dr. Haria have also delivered modeled lessons in our classrooms. As a classroom teacher, I am now able to observe how another professional would deliver a lesson, yet another perspective. I see best practices in action and that can only help me improve my own instruction.

BENEFITS FOR EVERY PARTICIPANT

Just who benefits the most from this collaboration? Talk to any party involved and we could each make a case.

Preservice teachers are receiving invaluable, authentic, hands-on experience with exposure to the components and language of early reading skills. The professors are able to provide a real-world learning experience that allows them to teach a topic more deeply than ever before. Classroom teachers can target their interventions more precisely because they now have more hands, ears and eyes to work with their readers.

What about the North Main students?

Admittedly, the North Main students didn't recognize the bigger picture in this collaboration. However, they now have older students in their classroom every day who care about them and their reading—and who, by the way, are amazing role models for our students when we talk about setting goals for their own future. These university students help them set goals, encourage them and give them confidence. They check in on how they are feeling. The bonds they forged were stronger than I could have imagined.

Many times, a challenging student is challenging because they require more attention than you are able to provide. These Stockton and North Main student partnerships alleviated such situations. Our students created connections and relationships that motivated them, every day, to want to become better readers.

SUSTAINABILITY AND FUTURE

Our next step at North Main is to build a professional learning community (PLC) around this program, where teachers and professors work even more closely together to design and demonstrate lessons revolving around best practices in literacy. Stockton's next step is to expand this program into another elementary school in Pleasantville.

While I am grateful to an organization like OceanFirst Foundation, the beauty of this collaboration is that it doesn't rely on any dollar amount to move into the future. It does require commitment, communication, planning, organization and the willingness to mentor others.

This type of valuable programming requires a true commitment, not just at the teacher and professor level, but at leadership levels. I have welcomed Dr. Claudine Keenan, Dean of Education, into my classroom as well as leadership from Pleasantville School District and OceanFirst Foundation to see firsthand the difference this type of collaboration can make in the lives of elementary and university students.

"Teaching reading is rocket science," writes Dr. Louisa Moats, a nationally recognized authority on reading instruction. This quote says it all. There is no magic wand that we can wave over our students to make them become proficient readers. In fact, we can all be struggling readers at some point in our life depending on the demands of the text.

Research tells us that if a child isn't reading on grade level by the end of kindergarten, each year the gap increases. As a child enters fourth grade the curricular focus shifts from learning to read to reading to learn. These early years are crucial, and I am attempting to set a strong reading foundation for elementary students and university students. 