

Wynantskill

Union Free School District

APRIL 2017

New Approach Improves Student Reading

Gardner-Dickinson's youngest learners are making huge strides in reading this year due to a new approach that places a reading specialist in kindergarten and first grade each day.

Spending at least an hour in each class, Andrew Newmark works with students in small groups, reading with them and assessing areas where they need help. The additional support also provides teachers the same opportunity to work more closely with students.

"Every student rotates through me then their regular teacher so they get a double dose of small group instruction," explained Mr. Newmark. "Small group instruction is the most effective instruction. We try to do that as much as possible."

Guided reading time typically starts with students rereading a book they are familiar with to build their confidence and fluency. It also gives educators an opportunity to evaluate how reading strategies are working for a student.

Students then move on to work with words, using magnetic letters or dry-erase boards to build words and make word analogies. "That gives students a better sense of language and how words fit together in different spelling patterns that create words," explained Mr. Newmark.

A new book is then introduced to students. Teachers first review vocabulary that students may struggle with and make reading engaging by asking students their predictions about the book or how it may connect to their lives. As students read, their oral reading accuracy and comprehension of the text are evaluated and strategies to strengthen these skills are provided.

Mr. Newmark also provides opportunities for teachers to further develop their own teaching craft. He models guided reading lessons and discusses best practices and strategies to teach all young students to read.

"The more we can collaborate, the more we can talk about each student, the more we can know about each student, the better we can help each student. That's been a huge part of their success," said Mr. Newmark. "The best part of the job is seeing how well students are doing."



Principal Mary Yodis explained the new teaching approach came out of discussions with teachers on how the district could improve students' reading and writing skills. Instead of bringing an outside person to provide professional development, Dr. Yodis said teachers preferred to work with Mr. Newmark.

"Mr. Newmark's knowledge of literacy acquisition is phenomenal," said Dr. Yodis. "He has studied and put into practice, the best strategies to teach young learners to read and write which provides such a benefit to our children as well as the teachers who work with him."

The results have been impressive already, said Dr. Yodis. Almost every kindergartner and first grader is reading at or above their grade level.

"All the research shows that providing early reading interventions in kindergarten and first grade makes substantial contributions to the reading achievement outcomes for all students," said Dr. Yodis.



Food Services Program Recognized for Excellence

Wynantskill UFSD's Food Services program received high marks from the NYS Education Department's Office of Child Nutrition this year during a routine audit.

Representatives of the Office of Child Nutrition examined all aspects of the school's cafeteria program, explained Food Service Director Lori Audi, from how food is prepared and served to reviewing ingredients and recipes to ensure the school is meeting nutritional requirements.

"Not only did we pass with flying colors but they indicated this was one of the cleanest and friendliest kitchens they have seen," said Superintendent Dr. Thomas Reardon. "This did not happen by accident. The results of the audit are a testament to the commitment of Lori and Tina (Albert) to provide a solid breakfast and lunch experience to our school community each day."

Library Research Project Engages Students

Ask a Gardner-Dickinson 6th grader about their Demigods research project and you'll get an earful.

"I was really excited to research as much Greek mythology as I could," said student Isabella Marte. "We had to research the god's appearance, their personality, and their image on a notecard. I chose Paen, he is a satyr, which is a half-goat, half-man. He created the pan flute and the word panic actually came from him because he liked to jump out and scare people sometimes."



What made the library project particularly engaging for students was the opportunity to create their own demigod, particularly after having just read "Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief" in their English Language Arts class.

"That's why this demigod project wasn't like any other project. I really liked how you got to pick one god and just with the evidence and the information you found out about her or him you got to make your own new character," explained Lauren Czubek, who created a demigod named Pearl. "I gave her a seashell that she clipped onto her belt that would call all of her dolphins, which Poseidon used to get her mother Amphitrite."

Theresa Crawford was so excited about the project she created twin demigods and had a hard time stopping. While most students wrote a page about their demigod, Theresa kept writing.

"I kind of took part of my story from 'Percy Jackson' because there's a centaur in the book so I put a centaur in my story so it really blended together," said Theresa. "My goddess was Hera, and I really liked her because she was beautiful. My two kids were Victoria and Rosealina. When I was little, they were my favorite names because I thought they were beautiful so those names came just right to me."

Library Media Specialist Linda Fecura was amazed at the stories students came up with. She said that part of the project engaged students and aligned with their English Language Arts class.

"The project was all about connections. It enhanced their reading and understanding of 'The Lightning Thief,'" explained Ms. Fecura. "They totally loved it on their end because there was a creative component. I wanted them to internalize the knowledge and produce something unique on their own."

That point was not lost on Ryan Strang, who noted he's read about mythology for years and was excited to research Hephaestus, the Greek god of blacksmithing and fire.

"When I heard we were doing this I got real super excited," said Ryan. "It was kind of like a new boundary for me because it's something I don't usually get to do. When I read my books I'm always the one reading the connections, I'm not the one making the connections. That's why it wasn't like any average paper that you sit down and write. This was all out of your brain, but like an exciting part of your brain."

The excitement students had for the project and the researching skills they gained impressed Principal Mary Yodis, who noted students learned to use technology effectively, find reliable sources of information, and the proper way to cite those sources.

"I find it remarkable how much they are learning and how much they love it. They're using technology and research tools to create their own demigod based on their ELA and Social Studies content," said Dr. Yodis. "As I enter the room the students yelled things like 'Oh Dr. Yodis, please come and look at my Demigod. Do you want to see what I'm writing about?' They were completely engaged and very proud of their final product."

Students Explore Creative Writing in New Class

A new Creative Writing class is offering 8th graders an opportunity this year to explore different writing styles.

Instead of spending time in study hall, students gather around a library table where they first read from a book and discuss the motivations of characters and how the author writes.

One week, the novel is "Skeleton Creek," a story told from two different characters' perspectives. Another week, students discuss "The Crossover," the Newbery Award winning book written entirely in prose.

After the book discussion, students try their own hand at writing in different styles. Students write fiction, poems and even a graphic novel, with the help of art teacher Jeanine Mitchell.

"We read, we write, we discuss," explained

teacher Rebecca Delaney. "What I like best is they don't think of it as work. It's so much different from what they do in class because they have free reign to write what they want."

Student Rayne Barnes noted she appreciates the opportunity to be creative with her writing and feels her writing has improved as a result of the class.

"I enjoy the freedom we have here," explained Rayne. "If you give us an idea to write about, it's easier for me than to be told exactly what to write."

Mrs. Delaney said other teachers have mentioned to her how they also notice improvement in students' writing, something she credits with how the students help each other.

"They're always willing to listen and accepting of each other's work," said Mrs. Delaney. "They value the critique. They want to get better."



Confronting Social Isolation in School

Gardner-Dickinson joined hundreds of schools across the country in February by participating in Start With Hello, a program that confronts social isolation in schools.

The program, created by Sandy Hook Promise, encourages students to reach out to classmates who may feel isolated and create a school culture of inclusion and connectedness.

“No one at Gardner-Dickinson should feel isolated,” said Principal Mary Yodis. “It’s not okay for one child to eat alone. It’s not okay for one child to have to play alone.”



The school began Start With Hello a week earlier when School Counselor Amy Murphy visited classrooms to teach students how to recognize and reach out to classmates who may be isolated.

“Start With Hello fits in perfectly with what we try to do at Gardner-Dickinson,” said Dr. Yodis. “We were able to take advantage of Sandy Hook Promise’s resources and use them for one of our main district goals, building a culture of acceptance and tolerance.”

Throughout the week, team building exercises helped students work together in small groups that were randomly assembled. Activities such as writing song lyrics, Lego building, and playing games encouraged students to interact outside their normal groups of friends.

Mrs. Murphy organized Mix It Up lunches where students had to eat with someone different. Students were given ice breaker questions to ask each other, quickly finding out that they had more in common than they thought.

In the classroom, teachers incorporated Start With Hello in their daily lessons. Fifth graders in Dan DiSotto’s class, for example, partnered up with different classmates and used icebreakers to get to know each other before working together.

“Students found they had a lot of things in common that they didn’t realize,” said Mr. DiSotto. “Even after a few days, you’re seeing students in line asking how they’re doing because they now have a connection.”

PARP Brings School Community Together

This year’s Parents As Reading Partners program not only encouraged families to read together but brought the school community together by reading the same book.

Gardner-Dickinson students read a book in March about Malala Yousafzai, a 15-year-old Pakistani girl who was targeted by the Taliban for advocating for girls’ education. Yousafzai survived a severe gunshot wound and her campaign for girls’ education globally earned her a Nobel Peace Prize.

Students not only read the book but were involved in engaging class projects based on what they read. Second graders, for example, created posters about people they admired. Fourth graders wrote letters to Ms. Yousafzai.

“I was very impressed with how teachers did something for each grade level to make it engaging for students,” said Superintendent Dr. Thomas Reardon. “It was so encompassing.”

The community was also invited to participate in the program through a community book group who read “I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World”. The book group culminated with a discussion night where they heard from guest speakers who shared their experiences living in Pakistan.

Drama Club Performs Musical

Months of rehearsing afterschool paid off for the Gardner-Dickinson Drama Club who presented the musical “The Little Mermaid Jr.” on Mar. 31 and Apr. 1.

Performing the musical’s signature songs such as “Under the Sea” and “Kiss the Girl”, the 24 students in Drama Club drew standing ovations from a packed gymnasium for each show.

This was the first year the Drama Club performed the school musical twice. Superintendent Dr. Thomas Reardon said the change worked out well, particularly because the musical typically takes place the day before graduation.

“The Drama Club really had a chance to stand on their own without so much of the focus on graduation,” said Dr. Reardon. “I’m so proud of our students. It was awesome to see such a wide range of students working so hard behind the scenes and then taking a risk by putting themselves in the public eye. That takes courage.”



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Odyssey of the Mind Team Honored

A Gardner-Dickinson team was honored at this year's regional Odyssey of the Mind regional competition for serving as a role model of exemplary behavior.

Students earned the OMER's Award during the competition held on March 25 at the Coxsackie-Athens Central School District.

"I'm proud of all three Gardner-Dickinson teams who spent months working afterschool to prepare for the competition," said Superintendent Dr. Thomas Reardon. "It was great to see our students honored for their team spirit."

Odyssey of the Mind is an international program that challenges students to use their creativity to solve problems. The event builds teamwork and self-confidence in students as they work together to create sets and perform their solution before judges.



Follow Us on Facebook and Twitter: As part of Wynantskill Union Free School District's continued efforts to improve communication with our community, the district now has a Facebook and Twitter page.

The district's Facebook page, www.facebook.com/WynantskillUFSD, now has more than 500 followers. It was launched in 2014 as a way to share stories about our students, emergency notifications and announcements about upcoming events.

The district's Twitter page, www.twitter.com/WynantskillUFSD, has more than 250 followers after it was launched last school year. It provides information similar to the district's Facebook page.

Superintendent Dr. Thomas Reardon also has his own Twitter page, www.twitter.com/GDSuptReardon, where he shares daily updates about the district and news about students, such as photos from the 8th grade class trip to Washington, DC.

