



Belleville West High School | 2014 Grand-Prize Winner

Program Description

Provide a high-level description of the current program and its overall impact on preparing students for the demands of the 21st century. (Limit: 500 words)

Critical thinking, communication skills, knowledge of media and technology, creativity, and collaboration are all important 21st century skills. However, the most important 21st century skill is really one of the oldest and most enduring skills: literacy.

According to a 2004 report by the National Endowment for the Arts, titled "To Read or Not to Read," the ability to read is one of the strongest predictors of future success. As that report states, pleasure reading is an important component in building literacy: "There is a linear relationship between how much someone reads for pleasure and how well they do on reading comprehension."

Earlier this year, author Neil Gaiman delivered a speech titled "Why Our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading, and Daydreaming." Addressing literacy in the 21st century, Gaiman stated, "Literacy is more important than ever it was, in this world of text and email, a world of written information. We need to read and write; we need global citizens who can read comfortably, comprehend what they are reading, understand nuance, and make themselves understood." And to create more literate citizens, Gaiman offered this advice "The simplest way to make sure that we raise literate children is to teach them to read, and to show them that reading is a pleasurable activity. And that means, at its simplest, finding books that they enjoy, giving them access to those books, and letting them read them."

With those words, Neil Gaiman could have been describing our Community of Readers program at Belleville West.

Armed with extensive data on the connection between reading for pleasure, comprehension, and overall performance in school, careers, and civic life beyond, the English department, working in partnership with the school's two librarians and school administration, launched a Community of Readers to increase student pleasure reading and literacy.

In the fall of 2010, starting with that year's freshman class, we worked to create a Community of Readers, immersing students in books and texts, and challenging them to read a million pages for pleasure over the year. As each class advanced, we extended the program to new incoming students, so that this year all 2,200 freshmen through seniors now reap the rewards of the program.

The program gives students time to read, access to a variety of high-interest reading materials, opportunities to share what they read and understand, and a framework to pass along their enthusiasm by challenging each new incoming class of freshmen to join them in reading a million pages.

Each year of this program we have witnessed significant developments in the habits and skills of the students, as well as significant gains in state reading assessment scores. This year, our senior class cohort who launched the program in 2010 is on track to read more than five million pages of pleasure reading by graduation in May. That is approximately 10,000 pages per student over four years and doesn't include the numerous novels, shorts stories, plays, poems, articles, and textbook chapters that students read as class assignments.

Judges' Notes:

The entry does a good job of showing how literacy is a fundamental 21st century skill and how students engage in critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication within their program. There was strong evidence of these skills in both video and narrative.

Program Details

Objectives/Outcomes: Explain how the program objectives and outcomes specifically address the following Challenge criteria: (Limit: 800 words)

- Critical thinking
- Communication
- Creativity
- Collaboration
 - Between students
 - Among librarians, teachers, specials and/or administrators
 - Outside of school and in real-life engagement with community of industry

The foremost objective in the Community of Readers program is to generate enthusiasm, motivation, and passion for reading in our students. Once students develop intrinsic motivation to read for pleasure, most of the other program's objectives fall into place. In establishing a Community of Readers, the objectives were to:

- *Foster a love of reading.*
- *Increase the amount of pleasure reading completed by our students.*
- *Provide students with greater access to texts and with greater choice of texts for their pleasure reading.*
- *Increase the significance and visibility of reading across content areas.*
- *Encourage critical and creative thinking about books.*
- *Facilitate greater communication among students about books, reading, and their pleasure reading interests.*
- *Build stronger relationships between students and teachers through shared pleasure reading.*
- *Increase digital literacy of our students, using pleasure reading as a platform to introduce book blogs, book-sharing sites, e-books, author visits, etc.*
- *Encourage students to engage with the greater community through reading.*
- *Increase the standardized reading test scores of students.*

Judges' Notes:

Well-rounded list of objectives and outcomes directly relates to the Challenge's 21st century skills criteria.

Strong collaboration outside the library and classroom, and across diverse groups.

Highly student-driven.

A walk around our campus, through the halls before school, through the cafeteria during lunch, into a classroom after a quiz, or in the library any hour of the day will find students absorbed in the pages of a book, debating theories about characters in the latest hot novel, writing critiques of new books online, and trading favorite titles with one another. These are not just a few book-loving students. Almost every student at Belleville West carries a book for pleasure reading in his/her backpack at all times.

Students develop creative projects about the books they read, which are displayed in the library and in classrooms throughout the school. Students discuss and dissect what they are reading with their peers and their teachers in casual clusters after school, in classroom literature circle assignments, and in the school's book club. In these ways, critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration grow naturally from our focus on literacy.

Although the Community of Readers program focuses on the importance of pleasure reading, students engage in critical thinking when teachers ask them to discuss, debate, and write about the books that they read for pleasure. Students employ critical thinking skills every time they respond to assignment prompts that probe for deeper understanding, such as, "If this book had included one more chapter, what would have happened?"

Through the Community of Readers program, students enhance their skills in verbal communication, written communication, and digital communication. Over the past four years, the number of casual conversations about books has increased exponentially on campus. Students participate in formal projects that combine their love of books with strong speaking skills. They prepare oral book presentations for their classes; share books with classmates in speed-booking assignments, a riff on the 90s trend of speed dating; and discuss books in literature circle assignments. In English classes throughout the department, students write extensively about the books that they read. These writing assignments range from formal papers, such as literary analyses of character, theme, style, or symbolism, to more creative pieces,

Judges' Notes:

Critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration are clearly defined in the objectives of their program, and they have given concrete examples of how these objectives are being met in a wide variety of activities.

such as journals, poems, and reviews. Because of this program, students are not only reading more, they are writing more.

The Community of Readers program also includes a significant digital communication component. Students write online book reviews that appear in *Destiny*, our school's online catalog. They write book critiques on class Moodle pages. They write, film, and edit book trailers for their favorite novels. They maintain accounts for online book sites like Goodreads and Shelfari. They participate in visits with young adult authors like Mike Mullen and in Skype visits with Chris Crutcher, Ellen Hopkins, Matt de la Pena, and Alexander Gordon Smith. In all of these ways, students gain crucial skills with 21st century digital literacy. Students use new media to develop book trailers and book blogs about their reading. They developed original ideas for school and library book displays, including a display inspired by the DVD rental service Redbox, which the students called "READbox," and a display inspired by Instagram, which the students dubbed "Readagram." They wrote and enacted scenes from new books for their classmates. They created posters for hypothetical movie versions of favorite books. They wrote journals, letters, and email correspondence from the perspective of characters in books. They decorated classroom doors and walls with quotes about reading. They created music-filled, high-energy videos to celebrate their success as readers and to inspire a passion for reading in others. One young student was so inspired by her pleasure reading that she wrote and published her own novel!

Program Details

Methods/Strategies & Action Steps: Provide specific details on the methods/strategies that were used to implement the program. List the critical action steps that were necessary for success. (Limit: 1,000 words)

The most important strategy used in our reading program was the Million Page Challenge. In 2010, the English department challenged incoming freshman, approximately 600 students, to read at least one million pages for pleasure by the end of the year. Class reading assignments would not count toward this challenge. Each English teacher made the commitment to provide his/her freshmen with class time each week to read for pleasure, with regular access to reading materials, and with the freedom to choose books of interest to them.

English teachers then set about motivating their students to read, some of whom were struggling readers, reluctant readers, and had never finished an entire book in their lives. Teachers read aloud to their classes, talked about their own favorite books, showed online book trailers, shared short articles about the value of reading, screened online interviews with young adult authors, made efforts to match individual students with books tailored to their interests, read and shared new young adult books, carved time from their busy classroom schedules to make room for independent reading, and spent their own money to build classroom libraries filled with the most desirable titles. Perhaps most importantly, they read with their students-- establishing a Community of Readers one classroom at a time.

To foster enthusiasm at the beginning of the program, teachers offered small incentives – bookmarks, buttons; pencils – as individual students reached certain page totals. As the program developed and students found books that hooked them, such extrinsic rewards were no longer necessary; pleasure reading simply became a part of the culture.

At the end of each grading period, teachers reported the reading totals for their classes. Because teachers provided time for students to read in class, regularly engaged students in conversations about their reading, and developed small assignments to accompany independent reading, we felt confident numbers were reported accurately. By May, students far exceeded our expectations, reading a total of 1,414,571 pages for the year.

The English and library staffs decided to recognize the students' success with a day of reading celebration. The celebration is now an annual event on our campus. Freshmen were rewarded with brightly colored "I Read" t-shirts. The senior-level media students created a video in honor of the freshman class. The library served snacks and sponsored reading-related activities. The English department presented students with free books to keep them reading over the summer. Community members donated e-readers to raffle to the students. The day concluded in a Skype visit with author Ellen Hopkins, whose Crank series was one of our students' favorite reads that year.

Judges' Notes:

Very clear timeline of action plan and framework for measuring success.

Evidence of high engagement, increased motivation -- commitment and passion throughout entire school!

This program is ongoing and sustainable long-term – a program any school could replicate, no matter the amount of resources available.

Judges' Notes:

Community effort – went outside the walls of the school to find support for the program.

Ongoing collaboration across diverse rules. It truly became a Community of Readers!

The following year, we extended the Million Page Challenge to both the sophomore and freshman classes. The enthusiasm of the sophomore class, participants in the original challenge, helped to motivate the new freshman class. That year, each class easily surpassed the million page mark. This year, which is senior year for our original million-pagers, all four classes are participating in the challenge. Reading is now a firmly established part of our school community. Social studies teachers make time for independent reading in their classes, science teachers make pancakes for the annual reading celebration day, teachers in all departments display posters with their current pleasure reading outside their classrooms, and the library is a hub of activity from the time it opens before school until closing time in late afternoon.

Time. Access. Choice. These are the strategic tools we provided to our students through the program. Students had time to read. Students accessed reading materials through the classroom libraries and the school library. In addition, the library developed e-book collections, FollettShelf and TumbleBookCloud, for digital access. Students explored personal reading choices and interests in the school library and classroom libraries' diverse, reflective, high-interest fiction and nonfiction collections. With time, access, and choice, students built a passion for reading. With these tools, they became more excited about books and literacy became, and will continue to be, a centerpiece of our school.

At the start of each new school year, teachers send a letter to parents providing information about the challenge and the Community of Readers program; encouraging parents to promote reading and discuss books at home. Our school's new parent-student-teacher compact specifically asks parents to make time in their home schedules for pleasure reading. Parents and community organizations have donated money to help defray the cost of author visits and reading raffles, and our school has partnered with a local grocery store to earn money for the program each time parents shop at the store. This was truly a program that accomplished, and continues to accomplish, a lot with only a little. Each year, the library and the English department devote part of their small budgets to the program, primarily through the purchase of new reading materials; parents and community organizations help support our annual celebration. For a very small price, our students made major gains in both their literacy skills and their love of reading.

In the 21st century, literacy continues to be a fundamental skill for school and career success. The data we collected over the past several years demonstrates that immersing students in text advanced their literacy skills. Our school's 2013 testing information, based on the ACT and the Prairie State Achievement Examination used by the state of Illinois, displayed significant increases in students' reading scores. Overall, reading scores showed a 12-point increase, with even higher jumps for males, African-Americans, and low-income students.

At the school level, we assess the reading skills of each freshman class by administering the STAR reading assessment three times each year. At the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year, 27% of our incoming freshmen were reading two or more years below grade level; by the end of the year, only 16% of students were reading below grade level. At the beginning of that same year, 35% of our incoming freshmen were reading a year or more above grade level; by the end of the year, 50% were reading above grade level—an increase of 15%.

Judges' Notes:

They recognized academic measurement was important in addition to engagement.

Have shown evidence of improvements at both the individual student level and across the school. The program and its impact are highly visible in the school and community.

Discussion to Previous Approach

Explain how your previous approach to teaching this information (identical or similar) was adapted to include 21st century skills. (Limit: 300 words)

*Previously, English curriculum was largely a reflection of the traditional literary canon. Freshmen read *The Odyssey*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Sophomores read *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Night*. Juniors read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*. Those texts are important, and our students still read those books in their English classes, but now we understand that students need to read more than just the classics. When they have some choice in what they read, and when they learn to read for pleasure, students approach their assigned reading with greater willingness and understanding.*

Teachers and library staff increased use of technology in their teaching of books and literature. Book blogs, trailers, Skype, e-books, and online reviews are now regular terms in our students' vocabulary. Previously, most teachers considered reading the exclusive domain of the English department. Reading happened elsewhere, but many teachers admitted that they lacked strategies for improving or assessing their students' reading. Non-ELA teachers now have a new mindset—are now more likely to assign reading. They've developed effective new reading assignments for their specific subjects, and teachers in all disciplines routinely encourage students to read for pleasure when they have spare minutes at the end of an hour. Strategic Reading Committee members take reading strategies back to their departments, and teach new reading skills during department meeting time.

Even the school library, which was always a center of reading and literacy, has transformed. Previously, teachers scheduled visits strictly to use computers and conduct research. Classes now visit the library regularly to check out books for independent reading. Previously we measured reading comprehension using standardized instruments like STAR and ACT. Now we also measure students' attitude toward reading.

Endorsement

Provide a statement from the school's administration in support of the program and its outcomes: From a leadership perspective, explain how this program has had a positive impact on your school/district and how you are measuring impact. (Limit: 500 words)

Creating a Community of Readers has had a noticeable impact on the students here at Belleville West High School. Because every class is now involved in the program, students all over the school are reading when they finish their work in class, during lunch hours, in the halls, and even when serving detention.

The program began three years ago when the class of 2014 entered Belleville West as freshmen. These students are now seniors who have participated in the program throughout their high school experience. They have always seen reading as a priority in our school. Teachers have always talked to them about what they are reading outside of school; teachers have always posted what they are reading outside of their classrooms; teachers have always encouraged them to get out their pleasure reading books when they were finished with their work. Students have always had the opportunity to Skype with authors; students have always talked about the latest book craze with their friends just as much as they have about the latest movie; students have always had high interest reading material available to them.

In addition, the students have always had access to the library. The library's instructional program is an important component of the independent reading culture at Belleville West. It provides the students with skills to self-select reading materials. It provides students a space and an opportunity to explore and discover individual interests using the library's carefully developed collection of books in a variety of formats.

Along with the challenge given to the students to read and keep track of what they are reading, teachers are encouraged to do the same. Teachers across disciplines are also incorporating reading strategies in their classrooms. The Strategic Reading Committee and the School Improvement Best Practices Committee are working together to provide more professional development this year; past professional development has included webinars, workshops, and faculty reading groups. In addition to instilling a love of reading in our

students and exposing them to concepts that they would otherwise have missed, this program seems to have had a positive impact on our students' reading ability. A marked improvement in reading scores was evident compared to the previous year's class. According to the state of Illinois' required standardized test (the PSAE), which was given in the spring of 2013, Belleville West showed a nineteen percent increase in the number of students who met or exceeded in the area of reading.

When students, parents, and teachers walk onto our campus, they understand that reading is important at Belleville West. They understand that reading makes a difference at Belleville West. They understand that Belleville West is a Community of Readers. Endorsed by – Assistant/Vice Principal

Judges' Notes:

Recognized "this is how it was always done before" no longer worked for the school and students, and contrasted the previous approach well in the narrative.

Acknowledged something already working well, the library, could still benefit from continuous improvement.

Innovation in measurement -- they made the connection between attitude and reading score improvements.

Judges' Notes:

Highly student-driven with strong evidence of increasing motivation, mastery of higher learning skills and literacy.

Program was integrated across library, classroom and community – with professional development support from two supportive professional learning groups.