

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

November 12, 2003

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: W. P. Wagner Instructional Focus: Reading Comprehension

ORIGINATOR: John Beaton, Principal, W. P. Wagner High School

RESOURCE  
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INFORMATION

W.P. Wagner is a school of science and technology. The acronym F.I.R.S.T stands for First in Research Science and Technology, a designation that is the focal point of our school and one of which we are very proud.

Our underlying goal at Wagner has always been to improve the academic achievement of all students and to have every student achieve to his or her best ability. When we began the task to determine our instructional focus, our administration and Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) were adamant that we only select an instructional focus area that would have an application for all teachers and all students in all subject areas. The process was slow and arduous. After considerable deliberation amongst department heads, our ILT, and district consultants we agreed that reading comprehension would be our instructional focus. In hindsight, the process to determine our instructional focus was as valuable as the outcome. Instructional focus dialogue was well underway within the staff. At our September 2002 staff meeting, we were able to word-smith our instructional focus statement to be:

"STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AT W.P. WAGNER WILL IMPROVE IN ALL SUBJECT AREAS BY FOCUSING ON READING COMPREHENSION"

The goal of our strategic reading program is to develop students' understanding and use of strategies to enable them to broaden their prior knowledge, improve their comprehension, and enjoy their reading experience.

Our next step was to determine in the vast scope of reading comprehension where to begin. Our ILT, in collaboration with Carolyn Lewis, Language Arts Consultant, agreed that a Think Aloud strategy would be the umbrella for learning new strategies associated with reading comprehension. This strategy allows the teacher to model reading processes that good readers use and the ways that good readers think. Teachers model strategies that students can use to activate and build on prior knowledge and show that they interact with text. The Think Aloud strategy was the focus of our two-day professional development retreat last October. Carolyn Lewis, together with Karen Belter and Lisa Robertson, two W.P. Wagner teachers, taught the Think Aloud strategy to the staff. Teachers were provided time to plan subject-specific lessons incorporating the strategy and practiced their delivery to other teachers, thereby reinforcing the importance of reading comprehension in every

teacher's classroom. All teachers came away from the professional development experience feeling competent to apply the new strategy, one that could be implemented the very next day. Principals and instructional focus facilitators could immediately see teachers practicing the strategy with their students as they participated in a school walk-through at Wagner the day after our retreat.

Our ILT provided subsequent lessons to refine and investigate other reading strategies that fall under the Think Aloud umbrella. Checking for understanding strategies, split page notes, pre-, during, and post-reading strategies were introduced to all students during our Reading Advisory (RAD) classes. RAD classes provided an excellent vehicle for dissemination of reading comprehension information and gathering interim measures of success. Students were exposed to modeling in all their subject areas from teachers using the same Think Aloud strategy. Students had many opportunities to practice the Think Aloud strategy for themselves and begin to understand the importance of reading comprehension in all their subjects. Teachers are much more aware of the difficulties students are having with vocabulary in their subject.

Reading comprehension and instructional focus work have become the focal point of our staff meetings. Each department is given the opportunity to share their instructional focus work and to learn from each other. The staff collaboration taking place at Wagner has teachers sharing ideas and strategies, developing units together and marking student work together. There is a collaborative and co-operative spirit among the staff, which is very supportive and helpful to our students.

Another initiative we implemented to help improve student achievement resulted from the district's results review retreat our department heads attended last year. They planned an intervention strategy for our identified at risk students. A review of the students' English reading scores and their grade nine HLATs was conducted. The information was shared with their parents and it was explained that improvement in reading comprehension could result in improved success in all subject areas. Forty students were provided with an alternate day reading program to help improve their overall reading comprehension abilities and grade level equivalency. RAD teachers provided support to ensure these students were reading appropriate materials. All students and teachers were engaged in uninterrupted reading every Monday and Tuesday. On Wednesdays, RAD teachers presented instructional focus lessons that supported reading comprehension. It was great having every student receiving the same information, and observing the progress we were making on reading comprehension.

The result of all the hard work by the students and staff at W.P. Wagner has resulted in our best diploma results to date. We are very proud of our excellent course retention and completion rates.

This year's professional development focus was on formative assessment with an emphasis that assessment for learning is a best practice for all teachers. Teachers had an opportunity to share their learning assessments from their subject related areas. Our ILT recently attended the district workshop on formative assessment and is already planning an information session for the next staff meeting. By working together collaboratively and focusing our efforts on best practices and reading comprehension, we will continue to improve to obtain our goal of improved achievement for all Wagner students.