

Fairfield Public Schools
MILL HILL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
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Dear Families:

As I had mentioned in my first newsletter, I will use this forum to inform you of the work we do and familiarize you with the terminology that you might hear from teachers and your children.

We determine the needs of our students with the analysis of the data obtained from our benchmark assessments, primarily in reading and mathematics. At your upcoming conferences, you will undoubtedly hear such terms as iReady, Spelling Knowledge, Letter ID/Sounds, Concepts About Print, Math Fluency, and Fountas and Pinnell Benchmarks. Students in every grade level aside from kindergarten were assessed at the end of last year and this information is used along with and assessments at the beginning of this year to determine learning needs of students. The data includes informal assessments of learning gained from such things as conferring with students, observational data, and small group lessons.

These benchmark assessments are part of our comprehensive Scientific Research-Based Intervention (SRBI) plan. Essentially SRBI is a systematic approach to ensure effective progress monitoring, differentiation of instruction, and intervention when needed. SRBI is Connecticut's title for what is nationally known as Response to Intervention (RtI). The federal definition of RtI is the practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to the student needs and using learning rate over time and level of performance (response data) to make important educational decisions.

RtI/SRBI consists of three "Tiers" of high-quality instruction. Fidelity of the high-quality core curriculum program is an essential component as is regular progress monitoring. Universal screening assessments, along with any additional means of progress monitoring, provide the data to determine the individual instructional needs of the students. The tiers provide the systematic approach to monitor progress of students and intensify interventions, if necessary. This is an incredibly brief summation of the essentials of SRBI, but more information can be found on the Connecticut State Department of Education's website: http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/pressroom/SRBI_full.pdf

The staff reviews data individually, then at grade level meetings, and finally as a school-wide team. The School Improvement/Data Team reviews and analyzes all of the school-wide data, looking for trends. We then look to exploit areas of success and address any concerns through a variety of ways such as targeted professional development, coordinated supports and models for teachers, as well as direct supports for students. This team consists of grade level teachers, special education teachers, a speech and language pathologist, school psychologist, a math/science teacher, language arts specialists, a special area teacher, instructional improvement teacher, and me. This team deals with trends and an analysis on a school-wide basis. Our School Improvement Plan is not a static document. We make adjustments, if necessary, based on consistent reviews of data. You can find the most recent version of our School Improvement Plan on our website.

Our grade levels meet to do the same level of analysis, but through the lens of their respective grade levels. Grade level meetings meet once within the five day rotation and plans are established to meet the needs of all of our learners on that grade level.

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Individual teachers determine the students who may be in need of additional support or enrichment and relay this information to the Early Intervention Process (EIP) Team. If a student's plan requires the student to leave the classroom for support, the student's parents will be notified. The EIP structure allows teachers to refer students they are concerned about, based on data and classroom performance, for additional academic support. Teachers, specialists, and I brainstorm techniques and strategies to help them meet the needs of individual students. A child can be referred to this process for academic, social, or emotional issues.

Additionally, all students will receive Progress Reports at three points throughout the year. The first progress report will be handed out on December 12, 2014.

Along this vein, I have attached an article from the July issue of *ASCD's Education Update, Volume 56, No. 7, When the Screen Goes Blank: Helping Students See What They Read*. It contains some interesting insights to help children read for meaning, particularly through visualization.

Please do not hesitate to contact your classroom teacher or me with any questions about your child's current level of progress.

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Update

When the Screen Goes Blank

Helping Students See What They Read

Strong readers create mental images to aid comprehension, but students don't always "see" what they read, especially if the text is complex. Use these tips to help students turn words from the page into movies in their minds.

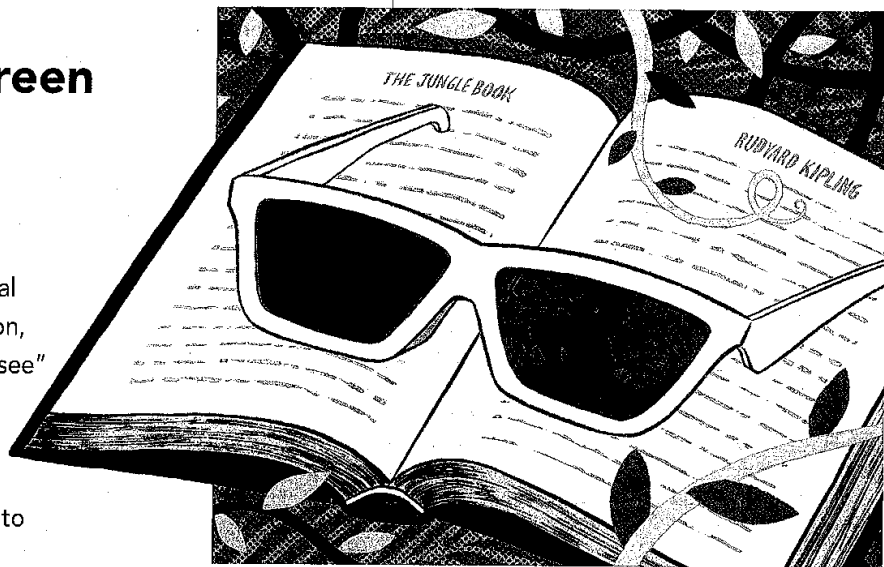


ILLUSTRATION BY DONALD ELL

Einstein said, "If I can't picture it, I can't understand it." Your struggling readers can relate. Literacy experts know oral and written comprehension is dependent on our ability to see, or make mental images of what we read. Through visualization, readers not only picture what's happening in a text, says Rowland Reading Foundation's Kathy Barclay, but also are more likely to recall specific details.

"When kids are visualizing, they're not just following the words on the page," notes teacher and *Book Whisperer* blogger Donalyn Miller. "They're immersed in the world of the story, working their way through the text. They're in a state of flow."

"Strong readers do things to actualize the story world," adds Jeffrey Wilhelm, a professor at Boise State University and the recent author of *Enriching Comprehension With Visualization Strategies*. "Visualization is [a] prerequisite to what strong readers do." Even with nonfiction texts, Wilhelm's research shows that strong readers create mental models to navigate the text.

Nothing but Words

On the other hand, poor readers don't do any of this, Wilhelm confides. "They don't have a connective and reflective dimension to their reading that cues them to draw on prior experiences to visualize the text."

For example, Wilhelm recalls a student reading a passage about baseball who couldn't visualize who would be calling a player out during a game. "I asked Marvin, 'What are you seeing in your mind?' And he said, 'Nothing but words,'" Wilhelm relates. Despite playing baseball himself, this student couldn't apply his life knowledge to help him visualize an umpire.

Students who have weak imaging abilities are "seeing the trees, rather than the forest," Barclay says. "They're not getting the whole picture, and that interferes with their comprehension of the whole."

Diane Lapp, a professor at San Diego State University and the author of two forthcoming ASCD books on close reading

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for grades K–5 and 6–12, recommends asking a broad question, such as simply “What’s this text about?” to gauge whether students are focusing on minutia rather than main ideas.

Alternately, if the teacher asks students to draw a picture of a story or nonfiction piece after a read-aloud and the picture has very few details, that’s also a sign of weak imaging. “Kids may have learned to decode, but they don’t understand that reading is [about] making little movies inside your mind, adding all the details,” explains Barclay. Miller agrees: “Kids might be following the words on the page, but when we ask them what happened, they can’t retell or describe it in any way.”

“Visualization is absolutely necessary to basic comprehension of stories and informational texts,” says Wilhelm. “Without it, kids don’t have an experience of the text that they can connect to . . . or reflect on.”

Framing Through Inquiry

“As teachers prepare for an upcoming lesson,” Robert Marzano writes in his November 2013 *Educational Leadership* column, important questions to ask are, “What mental models do I assume that students already have, and what is my plan for students who don’t have them?”

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The academy will focus on the four essential elements of *HIT Teaching*: school and classroom culture, establish the purpose, gradual release of responsibility, and formative and summative assessments.

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Simply asking students progressively deeper questions about the text is one way to help them see what they’re reading. Use student answers as formative information about what they are able to conceptualize and visualize, and then use that information to determine what your next question will be, Lapp advises.

“When I asked Marvin, ‘What [does] this character look like? What’s the setting? What’s he doing?’, then he could begin having an experience with the text through visualizing and participating in the story world,” says Wilhelm. Those visualizations become a bank of resources readers can draw on as they encounter increasingly complex reading tasks.

In addition to questioning the text with a teacher or buddy reader, Miller says teachers can encourage students to stop and ask “Does this make sense?” more frequently than they would on their own. “As adult readers, we do this with some automaticity. But for kids, if they are trying to make sense of a text, they can’t blaze through an entire chapter before they stop and reflect on it.”

Kids need to know that the purpose of reading, above all else, is comprehension, Miller insists. And they need to know that when their understanding breaks down, they can apply strategies such as slowing down, rereading, and focusing on areas of confusion to restore it.

Focusing the Senses

To add dimension to what students are reading, Barclay asks them to enlist all five senses. “It’s one thing to say ‘picture in your brain what I’m reading,’ and it’s another to say ‘use your five senses.’” Barclay will read a richly detailed passage aloud, and ask students to imagine the words as a movie they could step into by inquiring, “What would you see, smell, or feel?”

“I ask students to listen for words that help them picture what the author wants them to notice,” she explains. She might even use a picture or actual object as a visual aid, and model out loud what she notices about it.

One of the things Wilhelm noticed in his research is that kids who couldn’t visualize hadn’t been read to or couldn’t remember having picture books read to them. They had missed that formative, early practice of connecting images to text. Adding picture books or graphic novels to the curriculum in conjunction with more traditional texts not only underscores that reading involves visualizing, but also establishes that it’s okay to use a visual text in support of a verbal text.

As students develop descriptive vocabulary and become more adept at visualization, the teacher can remove the visual aids or ask students to use prior



ILLUSTRATION BY DONALD ELY



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"Kids have a rich body of experience that can be pulled into the classroom; it just may not be experience that's always been valued in the past," Miller continues. "[To] connect their world to the new world we're trying to show them through text, we have to have a jumping off point somewhere."

Playing a Role

Some students need to see themselves in a text to be able to grasp the concepts. One student Wilhelm studied would imagine herself as the scientist's apprentice when reading science nonfiction. Wilhelm noticed that he also does this when he reads. "I rehearse what the information means for me, and I imagine using it." Wilhelm calls this "creating a context of immediate use."

Wilhelm works with students to construct learning experiences that require and reward students who visualize and use what they've learned in a real context. This does not have to be limited to nonfiction texts. For example, he's working with a class reading *Romeo and Juliet* through the lens of the central question—what makes or breaks relationships? "So no longer are you just doing the play . . . you're reading *Romeo and Juliet* as a way to think through your problem," Wilhelm explains.

Taking Notice and Action

"Good readers expect to visualize, and they do things that help them visualize," says Wilhelm. Before readers can effectively do this, Wilhelm believes that students must understand the things to notice in a text, and what to do with what they notice. This requires not only prior experiences they can draw on to enliven a text, but also a meta-cognitive awareness that allows them to select a strategy to help visualize the text.

"When you send students back into the text to find supporting details, you're teaching them to go back and chunk a text and read closely, and those details help you create a picture in your mind," says Lapp. As students progress and refine their mental images with details and organizational structures, Lapp says they're building the kinds of interactions with texts that make them "not just an owner of information, but [also] an expander of information." **EU**

—LAURA VARLAS

knowledge to fill in details. "The more senses you involve, the more you experience the text, which means you're also able to recall more about it because concepts move from short-term to long-term memory," Barclay notes.

Building the Background

Sometimes gaps in vocabulary cloud our ability to picture a text. "You and I know 15 words for *green*, but a 3rd grader doesn't," Miller explains. Identify a few select words to preteach before a reading. If the list of words that students need to understand to grasp a text is too long, then that's a sign the text is a bad match for your students. Also, Miller notes, more abstract genres, such as fantasy and science fiction that contain a lot of world building, may be difficult for students to visualize at the beginning of the text. Spending more time at the outset to root students in strong visualization of those alternate worlds—through inquiry, guided imagery, or role-playing—is time well spent.

With informational texts, strong imaging relies on background knowledge that comes from reading multiple texts on a topic. Miller draws from videos, images, and artifacts as sources for students to "read" a breadth of texts on an informational topic.

Analogies can also build a strong bridge between what's familiar and unknown words or new concepts, Miller adds. "Half my kids have seen *Frozen*, so if I can build a good metaphor between something they might see in popular culture and what we're reading in a text, they can visualize it because they all have that background."