

Building a learning community at C. P. Squires Elementary

How does a school with 100 percent FARMs students and 86 percent ELL students consistently make AYP? Title I facilitator Patricia Katzman shares her secret for high achievement at a high-needs school: everyone is a learner, everyone is a tutor at C. P. Squires Elementary in North Las Vegas, Nevada.

“There’s no shame, no embarrassment, no one is singled out,” Katzman says of the afterschool program. “Peer learning is so motivational. Even the teachers are learning things that filter down into their classrooms.”

About 200 of the 800+ students at Squires—most of them high-needs ELL students—attend its afterschool program. Reading Together runs during all five tracks, with virtually every student taking part as tutor, tutee or both at one time or another. Having everyone participate is a real team- and community-building exercise that results in something very like an old-fashioned one-room schoolhouse, she says.

“The thing that is exciting to me about Reading Together is that we’re seeing really good gains. It hasn’t hit a plateau, but is continuing to show progress,” Katzman says. R2 students are progressing much faster than she expected, with an average annual Dibels gain of 32 (as calculated by her in-school Math Together students!).

Reading Together is one of a combination of strategies—swimming, pizza, Disney on Ice—that Squires uses to motivate students. The key is to attach Learning Together tutoring



to another funding source, Katzman says. Squire’s 21st Century grant pays for the incentives and activities that keep attendance and interest high.

Katzman also sees an impact on the teachers trained to facilitate Reading Together. “When the lessons get to Phase II and III, the tutors learn to use this academic language that even some of the teachers didn’t understand. They’ve learned a lot from leading the program, and are using it in the classroom.”

SPRING WRITING CONTEST

Give your students the opportunity to reflect on their tutoring experiences and give yourself a leg up on recruiting next year’s tutors and tutees—ask your students to write about what it means to be part of Reading Together or Math Together and mail us copies in their original handwriting by Friday, May 2. Every child who sends an entry will get a prize, and the winning tutor and tutee receive \$50 gift certificates for books. The prompts:

Tutors: Write a letter to praise your tutee for the growth made. Be specific about the progress you have seen.

Tutees: Having a tutor has helped me by....

Newly confident tutors make teachers proud!

This issue includes lots of tips (see p. 4) for keeping students engaged, but even teachers need a boost after the long winter months. Here’s what two coordinators had to say about Learning Together:

Yesterday our tutors met and tutored their tutees for the first time here at Indian Bend. Let me tell you, it was the single most rewarding educational experience that I have ever had the privilege to be a part of. Both Kristine and I were so pleased and proud of what was happening in the two classrooms that it choked us up.

It was especially meaningful for me because I have taught all of the fifth and sixth grade tutors for either homeroom, math or reading. I watched my prior students that had been in my very low reading groups—students that had so much trouble believing in themselves and ever having confidence in their reading abilities, etc.—working confidently and successfully with their new assigned younger students. They also displayed love and respect, while they worked with their reading “buddies” (they made a decision to call them that instead of “tutees”). The third- and fourth-grade tutees will also benefit immensely from this program as well.

I just wanted to let you know how grateful we are here at Indian Bend that we were able to get this program funded. Please let the parties know that worked so hard for this goal that their efforts will be paying off in a multitude of ways.

Doris A. Gonzalez
Kristine Hendren
Indian Bend Elementary
Paradise Valley USD, AZ

Word of Mouth

We don't achieve literacy and then give children literature; we achieve literacy through literature.

Charlotte Huck

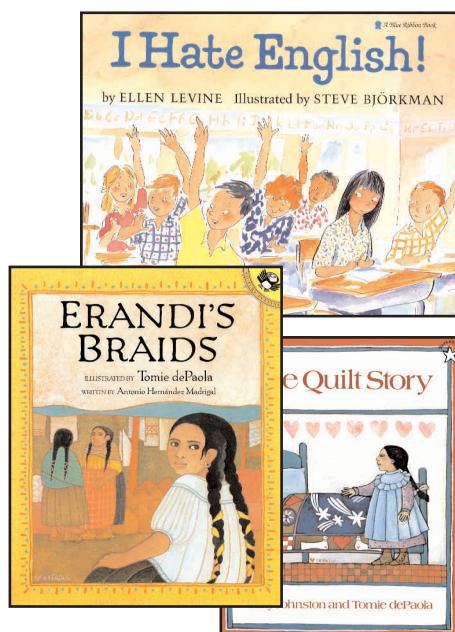
Authentic literature provides models and motivation

Authentic literature is not just for strong readers or gifted students. Researchers believe it benefits readers at all levels, including struggling students (Chomsky, 1978; Morrow, 1992; Pinnell, Fried, & Estice, 1990) and English Language Learners (Larrick, 1987; Rigg & Allen, 1989). Authentic text provides natural language that serves as a model, enriches vocabulary, excites the imagination and motivates students to read. Research also shows that when different types of students at various grade levels are offered authentic literature, achievement is higher and they have more positive attitudes about reading and writing (Cohen, 1968; Morrow, 1992; Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989).

Every now and then one of our books goes out of print, or has such a delay in printing or shipping (many really do come on a slow boat from China!) that the title has to be replaced in Reading Together student kits. We welcome your suggestions for replacement books, keeping in mind the following selection criteria:

- **Developmental Appropriateness.** Determined by examining concepts and general complexity of the texts.
- **Student Appeal.** What books get a response from the students in your classroom?

- **Literary Quality.** We look at *The WEB*, *The Horn Book Magazine*, *The New Advocate*, *Book Links*, *The Reading Teacher*, *The Journal of Reading* and others.
- **Cultural and Social Authenticity.** Students should be able to see themselves and others as their cultures really are. Au (1993) calls this culturally conscious literature or literature that accurately reflects a group's culture, language, history, and values.



Reading Together was built around three libraries of high-quality books, but ordering from 19 different publishers means we sometimes have little control over inventory. We understand changing books sometimes causes coordinators inconvenience, though we try to minimize it and make the transition as seamless as possible. Let us know if you have questions!

Research by Nixon-Ponder shows that authentic literature sparks an interest that workbooks and basals cannot, fosters critical-thinking skills and develops a love of reading.

"When I Was Young in the Mountains" prompts student memoirs

If time permits, Reading Together coordinators may extend their programs to give students the chance to reflect on one or more of their favorite books in the student kit. For example, Cynthia Rylant's *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (Grade Three) provides an excellent springboard for writing memoirs, a high-interest project for all students, notes Tobey Bassoff in *How to Use Authentic Literature as a Model for Writing Memoirs with ELL/ESL Students* (Article courtesy of Teachers Network):

One of my favorite series as a child was *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery. In the series, Gilbert tells Anne that to be successful as a writer she needs to write about what she knows. When faced with one of my toughest ESL classes yet, I remembered this advice and I found my way to the most successful writing project I have ever done with ESL students.

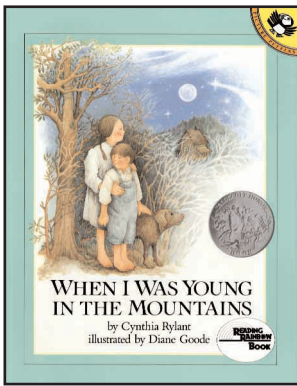
Each year, I host publishing parties in which families and community members help us celebrate students' finished writing pieces. Usually, the first event is held two months after the school year begins, which is ample time to have two or three pieces published. However, when I began this school year, early writing assessments showed that the majority of students had no concept of capitalization, punctuation, or grammar rules in English. To make matters worse, they didn't know the rules in their native language either. While many of the students were reading between first and third grade levels, they had little to no experience writing. After a moment of disbelief passed, I remembered Gilbert's advice and sought to have the children write about what they knew best: themselves.

I knew that the students had to see models of good literature first, and then be taught how to use that literature as a springboard for their

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own writing. In Cynthia Rylant's book, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, a young girl recounts growing up with her grandparents in the mountains. Rylant's book jumped out as an ideal model for students to create their own memoirs. I began by reading the book to them several times. Drawing on their knowledge of story maps and reading comprehension skills, I helped them unpack the meaning behind the story and the author's purpose. I then introduced them to the idea of creating their own "When I was young in..." books.



I made multiple copies of the books available for student use and the students and I designed a workshop routine for writing our books. The routine looked like this:

1. Mini-Lesson by Ms. Bassoff
2. Writing Time
3. Sharing Time

During mini-lessons, I taught grammar concepts from the book. I also used the book to talk about organization and voice in writing. Our writing time included generating a list of our most significant childhood memories, preparing drafts, editing our work, and illustrating our books. Sharing time consisted of conferring with classmates to clarify our ideas, reading our books, and offering advice to each other about our ideas. Even I participated in the project!

The results were amazing. Students, from learning disabled to gifted, participated with an eagerness I've

never seen in early writers. They begged me to stay in for recess to work on their stories, which they were especially excited to share with their parents and extended families. Rylant's repetitive format offered them an approachable way to tell their own stories of growing up in Toluca, Mexico or Juarez, Mexico. Not only did I learn about the students and how challenging many of their lives were and are, but I also watched them gain basic writing skills in a short period of time.

I directed them to use resources like writing guides, dictionaries, and thesauruses, which further helped their language skills. The students came to love Rylant's book and more than that they LOVED telling their own stories, which had meaning for them. As they studied the literature, they became wildly curious about the structure of other Rylant books. Questions that popped up included: "Are all books written this way?" "Why did Rylant choose to write the book this way?" "What are some other ways we could tell our stories?"

In addition to being a powerful learning experience for ESL learners, the activity was differentiated for the few students in my class that were advanced in writing and for the two students who had severe writing disabilities. Gifted students worked on strengthening their writing by using the concept of figurative language: personification, similes, and metaphors. I also encouraged them to use synonyms to refine their stories. For the two students who had writing disabilities, I had the students dictate their first few ideas. Then, I modeled how the sentence should look in terms of spacing and capital letters. Once they were comfortable with the pattern, they wrote their stories down sentence by sentence.

The publishing party was a huge success! Volunteers and teachers who had worked with some of the students in past years cried as they read what the students wrote. Many

of them came up to me in utter disbelief at the gains the students made in such a short time. They also remarked on how excited the students were to share their work. In addition, many of the students dressed up for the party and several district administrators attended, including our superintendent.

Good old Gilbert was right, by writing about what we know, we are successful. The students learned his lesson, and so did I.

Save your Grade Two game boards

Coordinators tell us that many tutors use the "Puddles" and "Cats, Ropes & Ladders" games to encourage second-grade tutees to stay on track: "Finish early and we can play the game again!" But coordinators also tell us that the game boards are piling up. In the past, they have been included in each renewal student kit, but they just don't wear out—how long have you had the same Scrabble board at home?

In the interest of keeping our prices low and conserving resources, we have eliminated the game board from next year's renewals. They will be listed instead as part of the durable trade book library—if you order new (complete) kits, you will get game boards along with the trade book libraries. If you order renewal kits, you will no longer receive game boards. Store your game board with the trade book libraries at the end of your program.

Learning Together has not raised prices in several years despite sharp rises in paper, printing and shipping costs, and we are committed to holding the line for the 2008 – 2009 school year as well. Contact us at info@learningtogether.com if you have questions.

Phase II tips Keep the excitement going!

Many of you are finished with Phase I, or nearly so. By now, it may have occurred to some of your students that Reading Together and Math Together are *work* as well as fun. They may need some incentive to keep putting forth their best efforts, especially since many tutors have never made this kind of long-term commitment before.

In addition, if yours is an afterschool program, you also may be looking for ways to encourage parents to maintain regular attendance for their children. Below are a few tried-and-true motivational ideas suggested by other coordinators—please let us know if you have something else that has worked for you!

To motivate tutors and tutees

- Ask your principal to visit often during tutorials and praise students for their progress (and give out pats on the back in the hallway). Free, fast and super effective.
- Have tutors write to their tutees encouraging them to attend the upcoming lesson. Postcard templates are available online for this purpose; tutors can fill these out during debriefing; hand them to classroom teachers to pass out. Kids love getting mail, and teachers get another opportunity to see what's happening in L2.
- Provide rewards for students with good attendance—this can be something free, like sitting with the coordinator during lunch period, getting permission to check an extra book out of the media center or reading to a kindergarten class.
- Dedicate a tutor debriefing to discussing commitment and what it means.
- Download Progress Posters from the L2 website. Students can count down to the end of the program as they check off the

books or math passages. If printer access is limited, print out one copy to post and have tutees take turns checking off the lessons.

- Choose a "Tutor of the Week." The tutor who shows the most commitment, leadership and progress is a great choice for the first one. This tutor can be recognized during morning announcements and honored with special jobs (delivering post cards to tutees, visiting classrooms with the upcoming book to entice tutees to stay for tutorials).
- Post a photo bulletin board in the hallway. Seeing their commitment honored will have a great impact on your students—and make it easier to recruit for next year!



- Videotape students and put on the school news broadcast or show at assembly.
- Work with the yearbook club to dedicate a few pages to your L2 students.
- Tell students there will be a surprise movie or pizza day instead of a tutoring session one day—don't tell them when, just that they'll want to be there when it happens!

To motivate parents

- Ask your principal to drop by at pick-up time and share how effective the program is. Again, free, fast and convincing.
- Use the Parent Progress Forms included in the Program Materials section of the Coordinator Resource CD. Take a few minutes to make a personal note mentioning an area of improvement, and reminding them that regular attendance is beneficial.

- Invite parents to visit for a tutorial, or for at least the last few minutes when they pick up their children. Punch and cookies help!
- Be available at parents' night, assemblies or other visitation periods. It can be as simple as having lesson materials and activities displayed, or as inspirational as having a video or several tutors on hand to talk.
- Have tutors create an L2 newsletter for their parents, and tutees' parents. Share pictures and things they have written about the program.

One last note about motivating school staff: As testing dates approach, even classroom teachers may need a little encouragement to release students to pull-out programs.

- Ask your principal to mention L2 during staff meetings, and explain how it is benefiting the whole school environment as well as the individual students.
- Ask for some time on the staff meeting agenda to give a program overview, even if you did this at the beginning of the year. Teachers will be more cooperative if they understand L2 is not taking time away from test prep, but complementing what they are doing in the classroom. Ask us for a copy of the new staff orientation PowerPoint.
- Download Teacher Progress Forms from the L2 website to provide an update for each student. Share some written responses from tutors and tutees.

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Toll-free 866.921.0000
Direct 336.852.6422
Fax 336.852.7188
info@learningtogether.com
www.learningtogether.com