

Vol. IX
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“High Stakes Testing”

***Achieving Success on
Iowa Test of Educational
Development.....***

*by Spirit Lake High
School Reading
Committee*

***Is It Good For the Kids?
Why Tests Aren't Enough.....***

by Gene R. Carter

***Persistent Issues In The
School Curriculum.....***

by Marlow Ediger

Déjà Vu All Over Again.....

by Douglas G. Schermer

From the President.....

by Kristine Condon

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***Achieving Success on
Iowa Test of Educational
Development***

~ by Spirit Lake High School Reading
Committee

In the past, Spirit Lake students have taken the Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED) with no vested interest in demonstrating as a group just how much they have grown as readers, mathematicians, and scientists. For the prior school year, only 69% of the class of 2008 was proficient in reading. Due to the actions implemented this year, our class of 2008 (junior class) went from only 69% of the students proficient in reading to 92% of the students being proficient in reading. Similar growth was noted for this class in the math and science subtests as well. How on earth did one class of students with few changes in the student population manage to show such growth in such a short time?

The Spirit Lake High School faculty believes this growth is due to a focused goal found in action plans that were determined via consensus. These action plans focused on implementing research-based testing strategies that are described below.

Focused Goals Embedded in an Action Plan

At the beginning of the 2006-07 school year, the high school transitioned to a new principal unfamiliar with the school's culture. In prior years, the school had not been focused on the variables associated with group testing performance. But for this year, the faculty took a consensus-styled approach to attacking this problem. Through faculty discussions and committee work, three main goals were determined and embedded in action plans that helped improve the test-taking climate, the school's reading culture, and general goal-setting strategies. These three action plans were faculty-designed and faculty-authorized to give support for its faithful implementation.



Test-Taking Strategies

Instead of burying the students with two days of testing at about two and a half hours apiece, the committee decided to spread out the testing over five days, with only one major subtest administered per day. The test-taking happened during the late morning at a time which brain research states is optimal for superior student performance. In addition, the students were placed in small groups with the same teacher proctoring the test each day. All faculty members had a group of students to proctor, so from core academic to vocational instructors, all faculty members were involved with the test administration. And finally, we made sure that all faculty were familiar with a good test-taking strategy, “reading the questions before reading the passage.” This strategy was communicated to the students and it helped the students to focus on reading the passage with a purpose, which in the end, improved their reading comprehension.

Dot to Dot Consequences

It’s unfortunate, but students sometimes don’t take the test seriously. Instead, they dot-to-dot pretty patterns and submit these as answers for the tests. Usually, this test-taking strategy results in far less proficient students. So this year, teachers on the reading committee designed a “reading plan” that

proactively addressed this negative test-taking strategy. This plan addressed any students who were not proficient in reading. These students were given interventions that would help increase their reading comprehension level. Some interventions were:

- required reading class,
- supplemental reading assistance through Skills Tutor,
- use of Scholastic Reader.



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Communication

The faculty and the reading committee had many opportunities built into the school’s calendar and schedule to work out the details for the action plans. This provided for clear communication that led to better implementation of the plans. The action plans were presented to the Board of Education. But the most important communication piece was that the principal went to all

required English classes for freshmen, sophomores, and juniors and communicated the seriousness of the ITED’s. The principal’s presentation included a discussion of what is currently happening to school districts where the students are not making adequate progress for their reading and math goals and what will happen to students who are not proficient in reading (see “**Dot to Dot Consequences**”).

Evaluation

A final piece in this whole process is evaluation. During a February professional development day, the faculty analyzed the students’ answers for all of the questions. This will help us understand in what areas the students need to improve their skills or content. Also, we celebrated the students’ outstanding performance (all grades) at a pep rally and cake reception. It let the students know that they had done an outstanding job on the tests and that we appreciated their efforts on the test. The other important aspect of the evaluation piece will be our efforts to improve the scores even more. For the upcoming year, our faculty will focus on increasing motivation for all test takers and seeing an improvement in our scores for all students, not just the ones who are non-proficient. After all, our statistical data for the ITED’s shows us that a junior who is

Achieving Success - continued from page 2

proficient in reading can only read at the seventh grade level. This in itself is not the final goal for any high school. Instead, we want to get all of our students to the 60th percentile level, which would then have our students reading at the eleventh grade level, a far better goal for any high school.

The Spirit Lake High School Reading Committee is very proud of the great accomplishments of the faculty and students and we look forward to improving our work in the near future. We welcome any input from the Iowa ASCD Educational Leadership readers about what we can do

differently, or inquiries a reader has about the steps we took. Best of luck to all of our Iowa schools in improving the students' performance on the ITED's, making Iowa one of the best states in our nation for public education.

The "Spirit Lake High School Reading Committee" consists of a team of teachers, administrators, and AEA personnel. They are from left to right:



Jackie Ohl, AEA 8 Reading Consultant; Kathy Kleen, Biology Teacher; Jedd Sherman, Spirit Lake High School Principal; Marcy Toews, Sophomore English Teacher; Elaine Greer, Guidance Counselor; Jan Donaldson, Junior English Teacher; Tina Sherrill, High School Teacher-Librarian; and Melinda Hardin, Freshman English Teacher. Not pictured are Emily Schaefer, AEA 8 Building Representative, and Ranae Sipma, Curriculum Director.

The committee initially met almost daily, utilizing a common planning time, to brainstorm ideas on how to meet our building reading goal. The committee operated under a consensus-style method to focus on the goals and action plans. Once the action plans were determined, it then just became an issue of following through on the action plans to achieve the goals created by the committee.

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