

From School-time to Lifetime Readers

Amherst College's admissions director, Tom Parker, recommends an early, low-cost SAT prep course: Reading to a young child at bedtime. Parker has never met a "good college candidate who was not an avid reader and the surest way to create one is to read to the child daily." The success of that strategy appears as early as kindergarten with larger vocabularies among those whose parents read to them.

All the research points in one direction: You get better at reading by reading; those who read the most, read the best. This holds true for individuals of all ages, all races, and all income levels.

Educators should strive to promote voluntary reading by students outside of school, where the great untapped reservoir of time abides. A student is inside school 900 hours a year and outside school 7,800 hours. So, let's figure out how we get them to read more during the 7,800 free hours.

Reading Aloud at the Middle Level

Becoming a Nation of Readers, issued by the U.S. Department of Education's Commission on Reading in 1985, emphasized the importance of reading aloud: "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children." The commission cited it as an activity that should continue "throughout the grades." Somehow, that recommendation fell on deaf ears in the middle grades and higher and is now being drowned out at all levels by the call for more test preparation.

What is it about reading aloud that makes it so effective, even at the middle school level and beyond?

Awareness must come before desire. Once tasted, you have a greater chance of appetite. Reading a good book to a student whets the appetite for more, especially for students who are not experiencing enough reading success to finish an entire book. It's a hook. Simultaneously, the reader becomes a positive reading role

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model. This may be new to students who typically listen to other students read haltingly in class.

Even seeing an adult read for pleasure is a rarity. Consider, for example, that less than 31 percent of today's homes receive a daily newspaper, compared to 56 percent in 1991. The category of common household objects no longer includes such mainstays as *Reader's Digest*, which is down to 5 million readers from its high of 23 million.

Most students' listening level remains higher than their reading level until about eighth grade, when the two usually converge. This means that sixth-graders can hear, understand, and enjoy stories they might not be ready to read yet. By reading aloud to them, students are exposed to good

grammar, richer vocabulary, and more complex sentences in an environment in which they cannot fail.

Emphasizing the Pleasures of Reading

A big part of the strategy to encourage voluntary reading at home is to market literature as a pleasurable experience. Human beings are pleasure-centered. We return to the music, the restaurants, and the people we like and avoid those we dislike. NAEP testing through the decades shows that succeeding generations of students (and adults) are reading for pleasure less and less often. (Yes, they're reading more text messages, but that's like saying they're reading more messages on refrigerator magnets. It hardly counts.)

These diminishing numbers coincide with how literature is presented in the classroom: The higher the grade level, the less we read literature aloud and the more we test and assess, along with increasing the workload. In other words, we end up advertising the displeasures of reading. Principals at the middle level should encourage teachers, as well as parents, to read aloud to students.

For example, principals can use school newsletters to inform parents that reading aloud should not stop at primary grades, discuss the importance of their personal role modeling, and provide reading recommendations. Teachers can model reading aloud in classrooms, essentially "selling" the pleasures of reading.

Ultimately, you want students who head straight to the local library after school, intent on borrowing the book the teacher is reading aloud in class, to find out how it's going to end. Do that often enough and you could turn those evaporating numbers of reading into increasing ones. You might even create some lifetime readers instead of school-time readers. **P**

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