SUPERFRIENDS UNITE!
Bell Multicultural High School Teachers
Take on the Stanford Achievement Test
District of Columbia Public Schools
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Introduction

“It’s been a long time coming, but I know…a change is gonna come.” Those are the words of soul singer Sam Cooke, and while he is not from Washington, D.C. the words of his song apply to the schools here. After little fanfare Superintendent Paul Vance and the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) have reorganized nine “failing” schools. All 500 of the employees of those schools will have to reapply for their jobs. It is rumored that all nine schools will now be run by a for-profit educational company.

What does “failing” mean? First among the reasons stated for the reorganization of the schools is “stagnant or declining student achievement” (Moreno, 2001). That achievement is measured in large part by the Stanford Achievement Test, the standardized test of choice in DCPS. The test is in its ninth edition and will be referred throughout the rest of this paper as the SAT-9. The fate of these nine schools shows that the schools in our district face “high stakes testing.” The high-stakes are of special concern to the Bell Multicultural High School community due to the large percentage of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the school.

This paper will outline Bell Multicultural High School’s approach to improving its standardized test scores. In particular, it will focus on the school-wide approach to dealing with the SAT-9, as well as the individual approaches taken by six teachers (aka, the Superfriends). This paper is a product of weekly meetings in the Superfriends’ hideout, the Hall of Justice, otherwise known as Room 120A, where the group frequently found itself griping and brainstorming about the SAT-9. After the section on individual approaches, the conclusion will overview the results of this year’s testing at Bell Multicultural, as well as recommendations for tackling the SAT-9 in the future.

The Story of the Stanford-9

_How it works._ The Stanford Achievement Test is a standardized, norm-referenced test taken by students across the nation, including Arizona, California, Pennsylvania, and here in Washington, D.C. The test measures achievement in reading and mathematics through multiple-choice questions. A “norm-referenced test” is a test designed to “rank” students along a scale of achievement based on predetermined levels of achievement. School districts in turn use the test scores to compare students within a school district as well as to compare school districts with one another. It is important to keep in mind that on any given norm-referenced question, only about half of the students will respond correctly to any given question (Kohn 2000).

The levels of achievement are as follows: “below basic”, “basic”, “proficient”, and “advanced” (see appendix A). It is not clear exactly how each level of achievement correlates to grade-level achievement for the district’s schools, but a student who scores proficient in both areas of the test would probably be classified as performing on grade level.
The Stanford 9 breaks up both reading and mathematics areas into several skill categories (see appendix B), and while it does not rate the level of performance for every area, it does rate each student’s level of achievement for “total reading”, which includes vocabulary and reading comprehension.

History. The SAT-9 was created by the Harcourt Brace Company. In 1995, the company gathered 200 teachers representing several content areas, grade levels, and school demographic variables (such as race and income) to create the test (Harcourt Brace Educational Measurement 1997). Over three days, the teachers participated in standard setting meetings during which they examined every question on three different levels of the test. The teachers made judgments about how students at three different levels of the test should perform on each question. It was these teachers who helped to decide the “cut off points” for the advanced, proficient, and basic levels of performance.

DCPS has administered the test since the fall of 1997. In order to select the test, the school district assembled a number of the city’s educators to choose between a number of standardized tests. These educators, including the Bell Multicultural principal, selected the SAT-9 as the best test, given the criteria that DCPS required for its test.

Among other factors which appealed to that group was the open-ended portion, which could be used as a more performance-oriented, standards based assessment; DCPS may administer that portion of the test in the future, but, at the moment, only administers the multiple choice portion of the test. DCPS states on its website that the test “measures how much [the students] have learned during the year – where students are doing well and where they need more help in order to meet the system’s standards.” It goes on to state that the results show in which areas instruction has been successful and where it needs improvement [http://www.k12.dc.us/dcps/home.html].

Who is tested? For the purposes of the test, students are divided into four categories, Levels I-IV. DCPS determines the level at which to test each student using the Language Assessment Scales Test (LAS). All Level I students must take the SAT-9 test and receive no special accommodations, while Level II and III students take the SAT-9 test with few accommodations such as longer testing period. Level IV students do not take the SAT-9 test. Only the SAT-9 scores of Level I students count toward the evaluation of the school.

Who is Bell?

School Demographics. Bell Multicultural High School is located in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Northwest Washington, DC. Of its 604 students 37% are freshman, 25.5% are sophomores, 19% are juniors, and 18.5% are seniors. Sixty percent are Latino, 20% African-American, 10% Asian, 7% African, and 3% are Caribbean. Over 20 different languages are spoken by the students and over 95% of Bell students qualify for the free or reduced lunch program making it a Title I federally funded school.
High Stakes in the DCPS and Bell Context

The standards-based education reform movement has serious implications for students who are ELLs, particularly with regard to wide-scale assessment. DCPS mandates that each school move 10% of those who score Below Basic to a score of Basic, 5% from Basic to Proficient, and 5% from Proficient to Advanced. Because of Bell’s past low scores, DCPS required Bell to adopt a reform program. Bell has adopted the America’s Choice reform model of academic content and performance standards. Legislation such as Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) dictates that standards and assessments apply to all students, including those who are ELLs (Menken 2000). Beside the language matrix and portfolios teachers keep on ELLs, the SAT-9 is supposed to ensure that these students make “adequate yearly progress.”

With this new emphasis on the inclusion of all students, performance by ELLs on assessment can greatly affect the positive or negative evaluation of the teacher, principal, school or district. The SAT-9 scores by classroom, grade levels and schools are aggregated to measure “how a school is doing.” Test scores have an impact on DCPS principals’ evaluations and their annual contract renewal is based in part on a formula involving SAT-9 test scores. Teachers must also show their SAT-9 plan and portfolio during the PPEP (Professional Evaluation) conferences. The SAT-9 this year carries even higher stakes for students—shaping major decisions such as 15% of their course grade (if met goal of percent of improvement from pre and post test), after-school instruction, promises of class trips, promotion to the next grade, summer remediation for students scoring Basic or Below, placement of ELLs into preparation classes, and graduation.

Bell’s Past Performance

In the first three administrations of the SAT-9, Bell witnessed two different phenomena: fluctuation in the reading scores and consistent improvement in math scores. Only 31% of students scored “below basic” in reading in the Spring of 1997, Bell’s first administration of the test. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the number of students who scored basic jumped to 50%, perhaps because 1997-98 was the first school year in which the school system prepared students to take the test. Unfortunately, the improvement did not carry over to school year 1998-99; in the Spring of 1999, those scoring “basic” in reading dropped to 42%. At the same time, math scores continued a steady rise, starting with a miserable 4% attaining “basic” in the Spring of 1997 to 36% achieving that level in the Spring of 1999. At the same time, the percentage of students scoring “proficient” moved from 0 to 9.
Before looking at the 2000 and 2001 scores it is necessary to consider the approaches which the six individual teachers in this study took to improve the scores of their ELLs. The next part of the paper explains their approaches in detail.
Bell’s Whole School Approaches to the SAT-9

*Parent Meetings.* Using the idea that awareness precedes improvement, one of the methods Bell used to improve the Stanford-9 Achievement tests scores was to attempt to make sure all parties involved were aware of, and understood “what is the Stanford-9.” This involved signs in the hall, daily announcements to students, sessions about test anxiety, drill sessions in classes, mandated SAT-9 components in classes, and most interestingly, parent education sessions.

At several of the Parent-Teacher conference days and by special invitation in the evenings, the Principal held informational sessions in attempt to educate the parents of the reason for, and importance of, the upcoming Stanford-9 examinations. These hour long sessions were conducted in English and Spanish and consisted of

1.) helping parents to read the individual student test results,
2.) impress the importance of improvement on our Stanford-9 test results,
3.) provide brief overview of the content of these tests,
4.) encourage parent involvement in preparing students to take the assessment tests.

The meetings consisted of approximately 20 parents at a time lead by the Principal explaining the above four topics. Examples of the reading comprehension section were shown to parents, along with an overview of the other types of testing sections. At the conclusion of the sessions parents are given a short 5 to 10 question practice test to work together with their students. Each student is supposed to return the completed test to the Principal the next day. According to the Principal, the return rate was near 100%.

This seemed to be a big step to try to tie parents into the improvement of standardized test scores. Throughout the meeting parents asked many questions and it was obvious that many of them had no previous understanding of these tests. For such a short session, this seemed to serve as a good introduction. However, one observer left one of these meetings wondering how much of this introduction some of the less educated parents (the majority of Bell parents) left understanding, and how much this process furthered the intimidation felt by these parents.

Working Toward a Professional Learning Community.

Teams get results. ~Katzenbach and Smith 1993

Unfortunately, teacher isolation is one of the most obvious realities of a teacher’s life. We must acknowledge that schools would perform better if teachers worked in focused, supportive teams. “Virtually every research study on the topic has found this to be the case” (Fullan 1991, p. 132). Bell is divided into clusters or houses—the PREP house for ninth grade, and MESH (science, math, technology focus), MCA (arts), and Business for the upper classmen. These houses are intended to mirror college preparatory programs but also encourage faculty collaboration.

As a school, the faculty of Bell realized that this collaboration was still an ideal. In the attempt to foster collaboration and to answer some big questions, such as “what about teaching to the test—or to the vast array of America’s Choice standards being
adopted?” and “What really works in getting SAT-9 test results and how do we measure what works?,” the Bell faculty met in cluster or grade level team meetings to identify and then solve particularly difficult instructional and learning problems. Basically, we wanted to work in small groups to improve professional performance. This was the first year of using the Professional Learning Communities, also called Whole Faculty Study Groups, and the Focused Walk or Walk Through approach. We had previously used the Critical Friends method of sharing student work and getting constructive feedback. Professional Learning Communities and Focused Walks are an effective extension of the Critical Friend process.

Professional Learning Communities are characterized by (Schmoker 1999; Murphy & Lick 1998):

- Informed, meaningful teamwork/focused collaboration: 4-6 teachers working as a collaborative team rather than individuals,
- A team leader who is a coach and a mentor or leader that is scheduled by study group members to facilitate the meeting, record recommendations in the log and set the action agenda (rotates among all members with shared responsibility for success),
- Classroom instructional improvement centered on the needs of the students,
- Non-invasive, regular observation and feedback on classroom teaching,
- Regular team meetings to support whole-school improvement,
- Clear, measurable goals
- An active commitment to on-going learning—shared mission/goals, vision, and values,
- Planning together, providing support,
- Collective Inquiry—a question drives the solution methodology,
- Active experimentation, testing ideas,
- Regular collection and analysis of performance data,
- Data used to drive and direct continuous improvement,
- Reflection on results.

Professional Learning Community Study Group meetings are (Schmoker 1999; Murphy & Lick 1998):

- Aimed at the professional development of the members,
- Have an action plan that is the group’s agenda,
- Are driven by member needs,
- Recognize all members as being equal in status and responsibility.

Decision Making Cycle

Once the decision is made that the whole-faculty study group will be put into place at the school, the whole faculty works together in decision-making and data collection. The process for decision-making is balanced so that faculty feel that they have ownership rather than having to respond to a top-down directive. A decision-making
cycle (Murphy 1997) for school wide change through whole-faculty study groups that we have used at Bell is outlined below:

1. Where are we and where do we want to be?  
   Look at district mission and goals & school mission and goals.  
   For Bell, we considered:  
   - Standards—America’s Choice Reform Model  
   - 10-5-5 SAT-9 target (moving 10% of students who scored below basic to basic, 5% from Basic to Proficient, and 5% from proficient to advanced)

2. Decide on professional development activities and methods for needs assessment/colling data.  
   Needs Assessment and Data Collection at Bell:  
   - SAT-9 Fall and Spring Scores  
   - Mini-Assessments  
   - Walkthrough/Focused Walk Data  
   - Critical Friends Data  
   - Study Group Action Plan Results  
   (discussed in the scenarios below)

3. Collect and analyze data—Analysis of a wide range of data and indicators describing the status of student learning and the learning environment.  
4. From the data, generate a list of student needs.  
5. Categorize and prioritize student needs.  
6. Organize groups around same student need or different student needs.  
7. Each group designs an Action Plan that specifies the content or curriculum of the study:  
   a. State the general category of student need  
   b. Define the specific need and what teachers will do in the study groups to address those needs:  
   c. Data indicate that students need to… (list needs)  
   d. Therefore, in the study group, teachers will… (list plans using action verbs)

8. Each group implements a cycle of taking action, collecting data, evaluating, and adjusting the plan.  
9. Whole faculty evaluates the impact of study groups on student performance.

Scenario 1: Ninth Grade Level Study Group Meeting Agenda

**Desired ends.** Increase in achievement on the SAT-9 and decrease in negative student behavior.  
**The means** to those ends by the ninth grade study group meetings included the following:
- Administrators and teachers attended training on integrating curriculum and behavior management (performed by outside consultants);
- Case studies evaluating the needs of individual students shared by the teachers;
- Given resources for SAT-9 preparation;
- Learned the Critical Friends and Focus Group models of collecting data and improving instruction;
- Administrators expected the group to use the models frequently throughout the year;
- Teachers met weekly for about an hour in study groups of about five or six members to jointly plan and practice lessons for SAT-9 practice and to perform case studies;
- *Data analysis* of the following: examples of student work, standardized test results, results of mini-assessments mimicking format of SAT-9, distribution of student grades and promotion and retention rates, attendance, discipline referrals and suspensions (how many and why), and amount of independent reading.

The degree of change, for a first year, is dramatic. There was a significant impact on test scores, yet the change reached beyond that arena into the culture of the school.

**Results**
- Comparing spring 2000 to Spring 2001 SAT Reading scores for the ninth grade, below basic decreased by 12%, basic increased by 11%, proficient increased by 1%. In math, proficient increased by 9% and advanced by 2%.
- Taught specific comprehension strategies;
- Consistent behavior plan & shared instructional goals across content areas;
- Consistent portfolio presentations across content areas;
- More systematic assistance to first year teachers;
- Sharing of student work;
- Examined scores and created consistent mini-lessons;
- Examined rubrics in all content areas;
- Shared independent reading practice ideas (seminars, DEAR, content articles);
- Outdoor leadership program established;
- Collaboration with social services and counselors;
- Ongoing small collaborative group formed;
- Thinking in terms of shared issues not “my classroom” or “my subject.”

From participating in these study groups, we realized that we were learning a process of collaboration and communication. This process was bumpy and we have much to learn. For next year, we recommend the following:

**Needs**
- Rethinking of schedules and staffing patterns to create blocks of time for teachers to plan and work together. *Ideas*: early release/assembly schedule, teaching assistants to cover classroom, use of teams of parents or partners, meet during part of faculty meetings, use equal staff or professional development days;
• Stipends or compensation;
• Teachers share this mission—in order for the process to work, all members need to be committed to it;
• Align focus walks with curricular objectives,
• Training at the beginning of school year to increase awareness and educate on its purpose.

Scenario 2: Support Staff/Counselors Study Group Meeting

Desired End: to define what SAT-9 means to the students, dispel misinformation regarding the SAT-9, combat test anxiety.

After meeting in their study group, the counselors decided and acted upon these means:

• Select teachers for an after-school SAT-9 preparation program;
• An interactive lesson for mentor teachers to educate their mentees on the myths and facts of the SAT-9;
• Construct a poster contest for students to create a slogan or positive image about the SAT-9 test;
• Create a T-Shirt Design relating to the after-school program or SAT-9;
• A comic book-like mini-lesson on filling out the answer sheet for standardized tests; question awareness, narrowing the odds/elimination, and time awareness;
• SAT-9 Power Homework Practice activities for SAT-9 developed by DCPS and given to students and parents;
• Two creative mini-lessons for mentors/mentees on 1) identifying and defining test anxiety and its symptoms, a crossword puzzle, and 2) self assessment of level of anxiety (using a questionnaire scale) and beginning to identify methods to reduce levels of stress.

Results
• Math and reading SAT-9 preparation courses offered two days a week after school with two teachers and, on average, 13 students;
• Significant increased class assessment scores;
• Increased discussion of the standardized test reality (not sure of the perceived effects on test anxiety);
• Collaboration of support staff with content teachers and mentors.

Scenario 3: Frequent, Collective Assessment

A team of ninth grade English teachers came together to review the fall SAT-9 Reading results and selected content areas of greatest difficulty to the students. As grade level teams, we agreed upon skills to be taught and assessed in the areas of reading and math, and set the goal of assessing student progress incrementally. By reviewing past copies of the SAT-9 and other test preparation materials, we quickly developed a small but representative handful of passages and questions to develop
short-term assessments and subgoals similar to the SAT-9. We administered them weekly and, after each mini-assessment, conducted an item analysis—together as a ninth grade English team—in which we discussed problems or areas where students were notably strong or struggling.

From the sequencing content mini-assessment, we learned that our ELLs (English Language Learners) students were strong in strategy awareness, use of graphic organizers, explicit detail questions, and recreational documents. They struggled with textual documents, implicit detail questions, and questions that used different words than those in the passage or questions that combined too many sequential steps. From the analysis of the initial understanding/literary terms mini-assessment, we learned that the students had difficulty with passages that required prior knowledge or content knowledge such as history or science. Also, those with stronger English language skills consistently scored higher on the mini-assessments. From these, we implemented more practice in the challenging areas as well as worked with science and history teachers. Such a strategy of frequent, collective assessment allowed both teachers and students to work toward the goal throughout the year rather than at the end when it is too late to help.

**Scenario 4: Focused Walks—Method for Low-risk Monthly Assessment**

For our grade level meetings we identified a learning need in either reading or math, that all members of the grade level team agreed was important. We then brainstormed a strategy that all agreed upon and designed a protocol to collect information based on interviews with students through a focused walk. The steps we followed were:

1. Select a grade level team facilitator.
2. Grade level team members share the results of the most recent assessment and discuss what the weak areas are, the skills that students are having the most difficulty with. The skills are from those we have been working on in preparation for standardized testing. For example, our English I team focused on diagnosing comprehension strategy use and finding the implicit main idea.
3. Complete action plan (sample below).
4. Select the one skill area that everyone agrees students are having difficulty with and one that is important for students to master. It could be something that was already taught and assessed but is still a challenge.
5. Identify the possible reasons for the students’ confusion—what exactly is it that they are having a hard time with—based on teacher observations.
6. Carefully explore a variety of possible strategies to address this based on teachers’ proven practice or discussion of a research-based strategy.
7. Commit as a team to experiment with the new strategy and be ready to report on student impact at the next meeting.
8. Agree upon setting up a process where team members can visit each other’s classes to ask students questions about their work as it relates to the selected goal and strategy. (Focused Walk)
9. Develop a set of questions to be asked of students which will help to determine how well the strategy has worked in improving student mastery and understanding.
10. Set a date for the next meeting.
11. Set a date for the focused walk.
12. Summarize what was observed on the focused walk and what the team did to address the needs of the students and improve instruction. Include suggestions for the remainder of this year and next year.

Our ninth grade FEP team focused-walk questions and summary of observations are available for review (see contact information in appendix). Grade and subject level team notes from various content areas serve as a model for replication or adaptation.

**Scenario 5: Critical Friends or the Tuning Protocol**

**Method of Looking at Student Work to Collect Data and Review Classroom Practice to Support Student Performance (Allen et al., 1999).**

As a whole faculty, during professional development days, we used this process of collegial dialogue first developed by the Coalition for Essential Schools at Brown University. Critical Friends (fellow teachers) can be used in three types of reflective occasions: 1) peer visits of classrooms and discussions of student work; 2) tuning process (see attached); and 3) consultancy process. The basic format for facilitating collegial dialogue is the same for each: facilitator overview/introduction, presentation of work or issue, clarifying questions, examination of work, feedback/discussion by participants, presenter reflection, and debriefing. The tuning process deals with a document (lesson plan, rubric, nine week plan or syllabus) and consultancy deals with an issue. A team of 6-12, across grade levels or content areas, looks at a presenting teacher’s set of student work for example, sharing the specifics about the assignment, including rubrics. The teacher shares the context for the work and a focus question (something he/she would like the team to consider or help with; an area in which they welcome feedback). Participants examine the work and ask clarifying questions with the presenter listening. After all feedback is offered, the teacher may reflect uninterrupted on the feedback and answers questions brought up. Then a debriefing on the process takes place.

Initial feedback indicates that the process needs to be used more consistently yet is efficient. The meeting has an end and closure and the issue or document is considered in a new light. The process puts defenses at rest as it promotes a positive collegial atmosphere. New teachers report that the feedback provides valuable insight into best practices and analysis of why something did or did not work.

**Professional Learning Community Conclusions**

Valuable first steps were taken in improving student achievement. According to initial analysis and calculations of spring SAT-9 scores, we should have met a minimum of three targets we set for the year with the 10-5-5 plan for each grade level and in both Reading and Math SAT-9 content objectives (moving 10% of students who scored below basic to basic, 5% from Basic to Proficient, and 5% from proficient to advanced). Most teachers are committed to this process, recognizing the value of Professional Learning Communities/Whole Faculty Study Groups--a crucial mechanism
for collaboration, sharing of best practice and ideas, breaking the isolationism, vehicle for change and improved performance. And now, after this first step, we are learning how to implement whole faculty study groups more effectively for sustained improvement. (Also see Scenario 1: Ninth Grade Level Study Group Meeting Agenda for further needs.)

In addition, if we measure results by local collective change--by creating a positive learning environment and collaborative professional culture in which the staff is working together as teacher leaders on one set of organizational goals—then we have succeeded in this as well.
Bell’s Approach to Reading

The America’s Choice New Standards are part of a reform model chosen by Bell Multicultural High School with the intent of raising the school’s standardized test scores. The same standards apply to English Language Learners as well as native speakers of English. America’s Choice emphasizes performance standards, which explain what the student is expected to do as well as how good it should be.

Among the performance standards are two reading standards that became a school-wide initiative. The first reading standard (E1a) states, “The student reads at least twenty-five books or book equivalents each year. The quality and complexity of the materials to be read are illustrated in the sample reading list. The materials should include traditional and contemporary literature (both fiction and non-fiction) as well as magazines, newspapers, textbooks, and on-line materials. Such reading should represent a diverse collection of material from at least three different literary forms and from at least five different writers.” The second reading standard (E1b) states, “The student reads and comprehends at least four books by a single writer; or four books in one genre, and produces evidence of reading that makes and supports assertions, draws texts together, makes perceptive connections, and evaluates elements of the author’s craft.”

The school implemented sustained silent reading (SSR) in all classes every day, thus hoping to raise reading scores on the SAT9. The teachers were asked to allow students to read independently at the beginning or end of every class, and the teachers were asked to also participate in independent reading.

Effective Silent Reading. The language teachers already provided time for independent reading, however the content teachers received minimal information for implementing silent reading. Most teachers at Bell, even language teachers, do not have a classroom library. The school library is slowly acquiring a wide selection of young adult reading material. Many students did not bring books to class, and several students did not properly select books. Many teachers were hesitant to allow silent reading because of the urgency of teaching content. In order to properly institute SSR, some guidelines must be established.

1. Teachers need to create a safe and supportive environment.
2. Students and teachers drop everything and read.
3. Each student should select his/her own book, magazine, or newspaper. No changing during this period is permitted. All materials should be chosen before the SSR period begins.

Will sustained silent reading raise Bell students’ test scores? Jim Trelease, author of the New Read Aloud Handbook, cites many examples of schools that succeeded after implementing independent reading. One such example is Soloman Lewenberg Middle School in Boston, Massachusetts ranked last among twenty-two middle schools in reading scores. The school instituted daily sessions of reading aloud to students as well as sustained silent reading, and four years later the school’s reading scores were first place in the district (Trelease).
Smith and Supanich (1984) tested a group of 456 company presidents and reported that they had notably larger vocabulary scores than a comparison group of adults did. 54.5 percent said they had made an effort to increase their vocabulary since finishing school. Half of the 54.5 percent mentioned reading as a tool to increase vocabulary, and only 3 percent mentioned the use of vocabulary books.

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) compared the reading skills of 210,000 students from 32 different countries. The IEA found the highest scores among children who were read to by their teachers daily and who read the most pages for pleasure daily. Children who had SSR daily scored higher than those who had it only once a week. The evidence for reading aloud and SSR is clear, yet many students are neither read to nor experience SSR in the classroom.

Furthermore, free reading almost always proves success on tests of reading comprehension, vocabulary, writing, and grammar. More reading is linked with better performance on tests of reading comprehension, but more workbook exercises are not. Picking up word meanings by reading is more effective than intensive vocabulary instruction (Krashen).

Individual Superfriend’s/Teacher’s Approaches

Many Questions, Few Answers:
Improving ELL Reading Comprehension through Student Question-writing

Cosby Hunt, Social Studies Teacher

46, 39, 21… The scores on my students’ quizzes and tests looked more like homeruns hit in a single baseball season (by one player) than academic scores out of 100. I realized early on in this academic year that the students in my first period Advanced Placement United States History class had serious problems reading and understanding our textbook. The students especially struggled with the multiple choice questions. We couldn’t simply avoid multiple choice questions: 50% of the Advanced Placement exam in US History consists of multiple choice questions. Furthermore, the standardized test used to assess individual student and whole school progress, the SAT-9, consists entirely of multiple choice questions. There seemed no choice but to take the multiple choice beast on directly.

First, an introduction to the class: The year began with thirteen students who had been recommended to what the school calls an “elective course”, although none of the students I asked said that they themselves had actually elected to be in the class. All but three of the students speak English as a second language, and all of those English Language Learners (ELLs) speak Spanish as a first (native) language. By the time we took the SAT-9 test in early April, the number of students in the class was down to 8; four ELLs and one Fully English Proficient (FEP) student had decided that they could not handle an advanced placement class. In some of the cases, I encouraged the
students who dropped the course to seek other options when I saw that the student did not have the academic ability to manage the college-level work necessary in an AP class. At the time I am writing this paper, it looks as though two of the eight will not pass the class for the year and one, possibly two, students will get an A for the year. The rest will fall somewhere in the middle. I have changed students’ names at the end of the paper for the sake of confidentiality.

To get student quiz and test scores at least to the middle of the 0-100 scale, I turned to the school’s reading coordinator, Ms. Tennison for help. The idea was simple: if the students could become successful writing multiple choice questions in class and for homework, they might have a better chance of answering them correctly under test conditions. Ms. Tennison had developed question templates which address the different SAT-9 skill areas in which the students are tested. Those templates provide teachers with examples of initial understanding, interpretation, and critical thinking questions (those interested in the source of those templates will have to contact me)

Between January and June, I would assign the students a reading and instruct them to create questions about the reading using the template. Because my social studies department chose initial understanding and interpretation as the two SAT-9 individual reading comprehension areas on which we would focus this year, I instructed students to focus on writing those kind of questions. According to the handout Ms. Tennison gave me, initial understanding questions “assess the student’s ability to read accurately and answer literal level questions”. The hand-out says the following about interpretation questions: “[Interpretation questions require students} to be able to discern implicit details or ideas in their reading. Implicit details and ideas are not directly stated and are difficult for students to find. Inferences (about implicit details) are the best guesses we can make based on the information available to us.”

Most of the time I would assign each student a certain amount of initial understanding and a certain amount of interpretation questions to write. Overall, the students wrote around fifty questions total about the readings we did during those months. I have included examples of the question templates below. After each question, the students provided four or five choices.

**Initial Understanding (Specific Detail)**

*In this (selection/story), (title/name) is the name for (Name of the person, character, or event) (verb) on all these EXCEPT*

**Initial Understanding (Action, reason, sequence)**

What did (name of person, character) tell (name of other person/character) to do first? (Person, event) did/did not (action) because …

*According to the author, all of the following statements are true of (something/someone) EXCEPT…*
Interpretation (inference)

(Person/character) can best be described as…
Which words in the selection let the reader know that (person/character) (action) ?
The (type of reading) takes place during…

Interpretation (make/support a conclusion)

In this selection, there is enough evidence to show that …. After reading this passage, you may conclude that…

At the end of the story, (name of character/person) probably felt...

Interpretation (infer meaning from context)

The word ____________ in this selection means...
The phrase, “__________________”, refers to...

Interpretation (understand/interpret main idea or theme)

One theme of this (type of reading) is…
What is the main idea of this reading?
Which of the following would be a good (alternative) title for this selection?
Which statement best summarizes the selection?
What is paragraph # ___ mainly about?

Interpretation (Understand/interpret reasons and outcome)

According to this (type of reading), (name of character/event) (verb) because…
(Name of character/event) (verb) for all of these reasons EXCEPT…
Why did (name of character/person) (verb) ?
Which of the following is most likely the reason for…
Observations

From the questions I collected, I was not surprised to find that my students were most comfortable writing initial understanding questions. Those questions represent the lowest level of reading comprehension since the answers are explicitly found in the reading. Initial understanding questions are therefore the easiest to understand and to write. For example, in a reading about the famous Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, one student wrote,

What was Scopes’ occupation?

a) judge  
b) science instructor 
 c) police officer  
d) priest

Students also favored inference questions which required understanding of "words in context", identifying a word meaning based on the context surrounding the word in question.; we practiced that skill several times over the course of the year. Jill wrote this question following a reading about Chicano immigrants to the United States in the early part of the 20th century:

The term earnest in the second paragraph [on] page 328 means…

a) smart  
b) capable 
 c) educated 
d) strong

Unfortunately, no correct synonym for earnest actually appears in the answer choices -- an error made more than once by students writing this type of question. It seems that Jill was not earnest enough to look up the definition in the dictionary.

On a basic level, my students still struggle at times with basic conventions of English such as subject-verb agreement and the proper use of parts of speech. For example, Kelly wrote the following in June about a movie review we read about “Pearl Harbor”:

Why does the author believe that ‘Pearl Harbor’ is the best piece of popular?

I’m not sure to what extent Kelly’s inability to recognize that “popular” is not a noun means that she would be unable to answer correctly written questions about the article.

Results
After an inconveniently longer wait than usual, our school’s Stanford-9 scores finally trickled in. Scores for only seven of the eight students are available because one of students in the study was absent on the day of the reading test. Not all of the information is available at the moment. For example, the scores provided do not break down student scores within the individual reading comprehension categories. Thus, it is not clear how much the students’ scores for initial understanding and interpretation questions improved (if at all). The data available is useful nonetheless. Each student’s scaled “reading comprehension” scores improved (on an average of 10.2 points). None of the students improved from one total reading performance level to another, however. In fact, the performance level of one student (Jill) decreased from last year to this year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT</th>
<th>'00 READING COMPR. (SCALED SCORE)</th>
<th>'01 READING COMPR. (SCALED SCORE)</th>
<th>SCALED SCORE CHANGE</th>
<th>'00 TOTAL READING LEVEL</th>
<th>'01 TOTAL READING COMPR. LEVEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MARTY</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>+5</td>
<td>BASIC</td>
<td>BASIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIGI</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>+9</td>
<td>BASIC</td>
<td>BASIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KARINA</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>+12</td>
<td>B. BASIC</td>
<td>B. BASIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMON</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>+13</td>
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<td>PROFICIENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARIA</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>+33</td>
<td>B. BASIC</td>
<td>B. BASIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JILL</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>-15</td>
<td>BASIC</td>
<td>B. BASIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CINDY</td>
<td>697</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>+17</td>
<td>BASIC</td>
<td>BASIC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total reading scaled scores do not appear on this chart, but the students (except for Jill) improved their scaled score by an average of 19.1 points. Vocabulary accounted for the majority of that improvement. Student vocabulary increased an average of 29.4 points. Perhaps most encouraging of all was the increase in vocabulary performance levels: five of the eight student’s improved from one performance level to another in that area. Improving student vocabulary was not an intended outcome of the year’s action research, but it is a welcome one. I imagine that year-long exposure to the AP textbook played a part in this improvement.

Reflection

Of course I am pleased by the improvement students showed on the SAT-9 reading section. I have little idea how much of that improvement is a result of the time they spent in AP US History class or the time spent writing questions about the readings. Despite the improvement, the same question continues nagging me: “Did the students do badly on multiple choice questions because they don’t fully understand the questions or because they simply don’t know the content?” ESL students being assessed for their reading comprehension do better answering questions on topics with which they are familiar (Peretz, and Shoham, 1990), so I cannot use the excuse that students were not at least somewhat familiar with the topics they were being tested on. In some cases, we had spent two or three weeks studying a topic. At the same time, however, the students may not have been at all familiar with the topic of their reading passages on the SAT-9.
The cross section of content knowledge and reading comprehension would be primary source documents. We spent extensive time reading and analyzing documents written by the historical characters who lived events – everything from Thomas Paine’s “Common Sense” to Margaret Sanger’s arguments for the birth control pill. When answering questions about those readings, students could combine prior knowledge of the topic they already had with their understanding of the reading right in front of them. It will be interesting to see how these students do on the final exam for the course in which they will have to analyze a few primary sources after a year’s worth of practice.

I feel confident that the students would do well were they faced with just about any randomly chosen, historically oriented reading passage the SAT-9 might offer. But how would their comprehension of a randomly chosen passage about, for example, butterflies in Timbuktu be? I do not know.

I also do not know that there is much that I can do to help students who do not read enough at home with their reading comprehension skills. I do know that there’s little hope for them on content-based multiple choice questions unless they study on their own. Cassy (who skipped school on SAT-9 reading day and on the day of the AP US History exam) and Maria very rarely read the textbook on their own. It was also Maria and Cassy who spent the least amount of time doing the question-writing activities. Nevertheless, Maria made the most drastic improvement in her vocabulary and overall reading comprehension scores on this Spring’s SAT-9 test. Go figure. Melvin made less improvement when compared to the others, but I have heard that test scores improve more begrudgingly at the higher levels. Melvin was already scoring at the top of the class and simply had less to improve.

Jill, poured over that book taking notes throughout the year, but she did so inconsistently, and I fear, she did little more than copy the notes word for word from the book. One multiple choice question strategy we practiced, process of elimination, doesn’t work for a students like Jill, Maria, and Cassy who don’t have the content knowledge to understand which choices to eliminate. On cannot make an educated guess without a degree of (content) education.

While most of the students in the class struggled to different degrees as the year went on, Cindy rose to the occasion. She was consistent in her work and seemed to benefit from the class in more ways than just her test score improvement. It is no surprise that she made the second most improvement in both vocabulary and total reading comprehension (behind Maria).

Would I use the question-writing method again? Absolutely. Whether or not the exercise boosts reading comprehension scores on the SAT-9 (and there’s nothing in my class results to show that it doesn’t), it does force the students to approach the reading in a more analytical way. Students rarely complained about the technique – perhaps because they felt that the exercise was “easy”. From the mistakes students this year made phrasing questions and answers, I see I will have to help students in the future overcome some basic errors like the ones shown previously, and such help would only help ELL students that much more to see how English is constructed.
“Ms. Mitchell, Do we have to?”
Student Motivation During Test Preparation
Shayla Mitchell

Introduction
“Ms. Mitchell do we have to?” I guess they don’t have to, but the answer is always a resounding, “yes of course we do.” Work. It is the hardest thing for my students to do, especially when it comes to the Stanford 9 test. The question they always ask me is “why?” However, the answer never seems to satisfy the question, in my mind or theirs. Why the Stanford 9? How do my students benefit from this test? How do I teach them to take the test? Are the things that I am trying to teach getting through to my students? Are they even important? The Stanford 9 is something that must be done to graduate, or so it is said, and regardless of how I may feel about standardized tests all of my students must take it and it is my duty to prepare them for it. I will look at how my students respond to my lessons to help them gain certain skills on the SAT 9, I will also try to examine whether this class felt that the skills we worked on were in any way helpful to them for things other than the SAT 9.

Composition
All of my work will be done in my third period sheltered World History class. There are fifteen students on the role, three of which rarely show up to class. I have a nice mix of African, Asian, and Latino students. I also have one African American student. There are six girls and nine boys. They are all in the tenth grade with the exception of one, who is a senior. We meet during the third period which lasts from about 11:30-1:55, with a 45 minute lunch break from 12:25-1:10

Class Dynamics
As I mentioned above this a sheltered class, well mostly sheltered. I have one student in the class who’s first language is English, although his presence was lacking during the first quarter, his contribution to the class when he was there was notable. Most of my students have a solid understanding of the English language when spoken however; the written language was difficult for them. Reading and writing in English are two things that this class has had difficulty with. The students’ ability to speak to me and to understand my direction to them was, at first, very misleading. I began to feel that if they could understand what I was asking them to do then they could also do it or, at least, attempt to do it. This was not the case, many students understood that I had asked them to read the in the workbook and then make a chart of the things that they found out about explorers, for example, but were not able to read the material well enough to create the chart. They were, however, deceptively good at making things appear to be easy. When I went around to the work groups many students would say, “we know what to do Ms. we have to read and then make a chart.” I encouraged them to keep going and told them they were doing well.
As a first year teacher one of the most difficult things for me to discover was that each classroom has its own personality. Being able to adapt to that is one of the most critical parts of making the classroom work. In this particular class I have about two students who do very little work, but are there on a regular basis. One of these students, Juan, is from El Salvador and is in the 11th grade. The other student, Kevin, is from Nigeria and is also in the 11th grade. From the beginning of the year Juan and I had problems working out our relationship, he did not want to talk back and I needed him to be quiet, especially at the beginning of the year. Kevin never really posed a management problem, outside of extreme silliness. Nothing was ever really serious to him, which later proved to be difficult for me.

How Did I Prepare Them for the Test?

Teachers were asked departmentally to develop questions for tests that were to be administered to students on a biweekly basis. These tests would cover the subjects, identified by the Stanford 9, that we a department choose. Our choices were based off of which subject we thought our students had the most trouble with. In my department we choose our subjects based on what classes we taught. I teach World History and we choose to work on initial understanding and critical thinking.

I began with initial understanding. Usually these questions are the first questions asked after a passage. They are general facts about the passage; where, who, what, and when questions. Initial understanding questions may also involve sequencing the passage. One only needs to have skimmed the reading in order to answer an initial understanding question. My class had a very easy time with these questions, with the exception of putting things in order on a chart or graph. They were unable to effectively place events in the order that they occurred in the reading even when given one of the times in the sequence. In spite of there failure to sequence events, they did very well on the practice test we were told to make up and give as a department. The class as a whole felt that initial understanding was easy and they understood how to identify an initial understanding question based on the manner in which the question was asked. Does this mean that they would then do better on the SAT 9 because they knew how to identify an initial understanding question? Does knowing how the questions are asked in any way help one to find the answer any faster or better?

Critical thinking was the next topic tackled. This proved to be the most difficult to explain to them and to create questions for. The students could not comprehend the meaning of most of the questions. Sometimes it was the way the question was asked or the fact the question wanted an opinion, as long as the opinion fit the multiple choice answers provided. The students often wanted to look in the reading for the answer, when it was not immediately recognized frustration set in. They did not know how to interpret a story or to draw conclusions from a story, at least not when asked on the practice test I gave them. This general frustration lead to poor behavior and a lot of whining on the part of most of my students, “Ms. We did this already. We do this English.” It was around this time that Juan began to really act up. He would stand up about 2 minutes before the bell rang for lunch, while I was instructing, and begin to get ready to leave. He would then tell me that it was almost time to go and that I should hurry up so that they could leave. He walked out three times without being excused.
The situation began to be bad enough for me to request a conference with his mother. The transition from initial understanding to critical thinking was not a smooth one; could Blooms Taxonomy have anything to do with this?

Juan was not the only one whose attitude turned sour in those last days before the test; his was just the most extreme. Another young man would tell me that he knew this stuff already, and the rest of the class would chime in with him. This was odd for third period; they never complained and always wanted to know new things. They asked questions they listened and took notes, unlike most of my other students they thought what I was saying was interesting; at least that is what they said. For them to complain, I knew something must have been wrong. They kept telling me that they wanted to learn about World History not about the Stanford 9. We trudged through it, though I lost some students during that time. Physically students were not there and mentally, well mentally who knows where they were. They were not getting what I was trying to teach them, and their dissatisfaction showed.

After the Stanford 9

Besides a feeling a relief the students seemed to feel positive about their performance on the test. After taking the test I asked them how they felt they did, the vast majority of the class told me that they felt they did well. I asked if they used any of the skills they learned in class to answer the questions, they told me honestly that only remembered what an initial understanding question was and nothing else. One student said, “Sorry Ms. but I don’t remember a thing from the tests we took.” They also said that some of the questions were too hard and they did not finish every section because they couldn’t finish the reading passages.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The dissatisfaction of my class with themselves and, I feel, with my inability to effectively teach them Stanford 9 skills, lead them to misbehave in class and may even have lead them to feel that they could not accomplish the skills needed to pass the test. At this I begin to wonder what our actual goal should be as teachers. Should we strive to teach them what is on the test? Is that really what is most important? Knowing how to answer an initial understanding question did not help the students in my class to write an essay or to take any test that I gave them. In fact the only time I heard a students regurgitate something that had obviously been said to him by a teacher was when one student told me that Enlightenment thinkers wrote persuasive essays to the people and that is the reason why the French revolted. It rare that a student remembers the terms for the style of writing they are doing or test they are taking. Why, then, was it so emphasized in our school? The answer is simple; in order to have a system of accountability you must have justifications for all that is done. That is to say, who will be to blame for not teaching students about initial understanding and how will we know that the students learned what they know in this class. The only way to do quantify that is to make sure that teachers have been told what they must cover in that way accountability can be measured. Through all of this the students loose.
In my class it was the students who lost. The attempt of the teacher, myself, to satisfy the powers that be lead me to try to teach a student who had mastered initial understanding to then jump ahead and master critical thinking skills. What was I thinking? One of the basics of graduate school was Blooms Taxonomy. I knew then and certainly believe with my heart that there are steps to understanding and deep thinking. If I focus on teaching students how to take the test then I miss the steps. To follow Blooms would take time, perhaps more than the district would allow, but it would be worth it. A working practice would be one that tried to incorporate the steps that students must go through in order to learn new material. This practice would include how to teach students at every level of understanding. This is very important to the teacher of an ESOL class, since many of the students will have difficulty understanding the language and its' usage. By finding out what level your students are at on a particular scale and then moving them up on that same scale to the next level, could be a more conceivable method, the student will learn a new way to think about thinks and they may just learn. After all, what the student has learned and is able to do is exactly what the Stanford 9 is trying to decipher.

Worksheets vs. Projects
Two Different Approaches to Teaching Math

Brian Nussbaum, Mathematics Teacher

At Bell entire classes have been dedicated toward “improving our standardized test scores,” yet the method assigned to the teachers for doing this is based out of very little research and more out of tying in good sounding phrases in acts of desperation. One of the methods to be used was a “team teaching approach,” “connecting English and Math instruction,” “an English and Math teacher working in conjunction to create a cross-curriculum project-based learning environment.” It sounds great, but unfortunately the explanation of such a class ends at this point, and I am left to carry these lofty goals without further instruction or curriculum.

Given this vague description, it was up to me and my co-teacher to design our course. Because I was to ensure that all 46 objectives were covered in the 4½ weeks (spread over 9 weeks) that I would work with the students leading up to the tests, this time was spent mostly through drill and practice worksheets which demonstrated “Stanford-9 like problems.” These mini-units were arranged topically (algebra/functions, graphing, patterns….), and short cuts for finding the best answer the fastest were stressed with little explanation for the rational of such problems. (see examples) This was basically a test-taking shortcuts class. Accompanying this drill and practice approach were two projects that attempted to link together the English and Math materials being taught.

Following the Stanford-9 tests taken in the beginning of April, the stress was removed from the course, and much more flexibility was allowed. As a result the class was taught in a very different way for the second half of the semester. All of the math
components were taught entirely through projects. These projects were based on utilizing Stanford-9 skills, but more importance was placed on understanding and applying these skills than how to answer multiple-choice questions. (see sample project)

Reflections

I was a bit disappointed with the quality of work produced during the projects. I have no doubt that learning took place, but the vast majority of the students did not produce acceptable work.

Near the end of the semester, the students were surveyed on their opinions about the two styles of learning. It was not surprising that a majority of students preferred the "worksheet method," most citing "it’s easier" as the reason. However, a surprising number of students expressed appreciation for the projects as well. Students were especially appreciative of the opportunity to learn to use Microsoft Word and Excel (not exactly Stanford-9 preparation, but learning just the same).

Results

I have no real method for measuring the improvement from the two different methods. Students’ Stanford-9 scores all increased to some degree, and 50% of my students from below basic to basic in Math. However, my time with them was only 9 of the 27 weeks leading up to the test, and these students also worked with two other math teachers during this time.

In class assessment also showed little improvement over the course of the semester. Students continued to score approximately the same despite observed growth in class time. Most students regularly scored well below the 50% mark.

I end this semester a bit disillusioned regarding my abilities to improve standardized test scores. I feel I have little control over student improvement in such an isolated testing environment.
Incorporating SAT-9 Skills into an Existing Reading Class Curriculum  
Judith Jacob, ELA Teacher

Introduction

I taught two reading classes to secondary English Language Learners (ELLs). The students were from China, Vietnam, Ethiopia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The students’ reading levels varied from emergent readers to independent readers in English and their native languages. The class was a mix of ninth and tenth graders, and they were placed in the class according to their SAT9 scores. My task was to prepare these ELLs for the SAT9 without a curriculum or any guidelines.

Team Teaching

Our principal decided to implement team teaching between content and language teachers this year. The “team taught” class was designed to have one reading teacher and one math teacher plan and teach together. The class was split into two groups, and each teacher met with each group every other day or every other week. The purpose of the class was for students to make connections across the curriculum, and the teachers were expected to design projects that integrated reading and math skills. Because math and reading skills are the areas focused on the SAT9, these two subjects were combined to create a class with the intention to raise standardized test scores.

The team teaching assignment proved to be a greater challenge than I expected. How do you effectively link a math and reading curriculum together while meeting the standards and targeting the SAT9 content clusters? It was decided that an integrated project-based curriculum would be the best approach. It became team planning instead of team teaching. I met once a week with the math teacher to arrange our topics and projects. The links between math and reading were not made in daily lessons; thus the integration came from the bigger themes and projects.

The first project in the first semester the students designed their own SAT9 exam about the Olympics in Sydney. Through various examples and modeling I taught the students to identify the three different types of reading on the SAT9: textual, recreational, and functional. The students also learned to identify the three types of questions: vocabulary, initial understanding, and critical thinking. The students searched newspapers and the internet for the three types of reading about the Olympics. Then, the students created SAT9 type of questions and answers for each type of reading. After many drafts the students were ready to present their work. Once this assignment was complete, the students then took the same project, but this time they chose their topic. The students were more motivated and involved in the second project because the topic was of interest to them. Some example topics were: various types of music and artists, holidays, events in history, etc. The students would score higher on an exam that has readings that are relevant to their lives and interests. Through these projects, the students familiarized themselves and recognized the format of the SAT9. This enabled the students to recognize their strengths and weaknesses with the different types of readings and questions. Thus, the students knew where to focus more practice and strategies.
The second semester I focused my curriculum around two historical fiction novels, which embedded the SAT9 content clusters. I felt dissatisfied with the way the class went the previous semester, therefore I returned to the way I previously taught the reading class. However, the math teacher and I continued working together. We pulled themes from the novels, such as crime and literacy, on which to base the projects. The most successful project was the literacy survey project. We read a novel about a slave who learned to read and later taught others to read, thus we chose the literacy theme. The students created questions about the importance of reading and the 25 book initiative. They took a poll of students at Bell and their opinions about reading. Next, the students created graphs and charts to present the data to the school. Then, the students produced SAT9 questions based on the results. This project gave the students the opportunity to connect math and reading skills in a practical way. The students enjoyed creating and seeing the results of this project.

Independent Reading and Read-Alouds

Students need to have opportunities to read a wide variety of texts, and they need to have a choice as to what they read. The students were given time to read silently everyday for fifteen to twenty minutes. I read with them in order to model silent reading. Independent reading enables students to put into practice the strategies they have learned in class, increase their vocabulary, and enhance their reading comprehension.

I read aloud each chapter of the assigned novels or the students listened to the tape while reading. When I asked the students what they liked most about the class, I had an overwhelming positive response about the read alouds. I was surprised at how much the students actually enjoyed it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I prefer to incorporate the SAT9 skills into the wide variety of texts we read in class. When I first began teaching the course, many students asked me why we weren’t doing practice tests everyday. This is what they were accustomed to doing in order to prepare for standardized tests. I chose to approach the SAT9 non-traditionally. I use a novel as the center of my curriculum, and then I bring in all types of readings based on the themes of the novel. We work on all SAT9 content clusters, such as cause and effect, sequence, author’s purpose, words in context. It takes time to create materials that incorporate these skills into the readings, but it is well worth the time because the students enjoy the reading. Therefore, they will read more and will strengthen their reading skills.
Multiple Strategies: The Key to Unlocking Stanford-Nine Reading

Janeece Docal, ELA Teacher

Introduction

The summer before my first teaching assignment, my dream was to create a classroom that was like the coffeehouse I frequently go to—abuzz with authentic readers and writers, a literary community engaged in discourse about books. Fresh out of graduate school, I carried Nancie Atwell’s quest to create a literate environment by changing straight rows of desks into a reading workshop. I wanted to promote students’ enthusiasm for and engagement in literacy activities, to encourage discourse about literature among them, to improve their comprehension and understanding of texts. Yet when I entered the classroom at Bell Multicultural Senior High School, the educational community was abuzz with quite a different vision—a classroom of higher test scores AND higher standards.

I was assigned to teach a new class, Reading/Math Strategies. I did not have a mandated curriculum, and wasn’t sure how I was going to organize this class. All I was told was that it was supposed to be an advisory/nine week “test preparation” course for ninth grade students that test at normal conditions (some of their scores though are exempted) and need support on the reading and vocabulary sections of the Stanford-9. The first through third advisory classes had between 15-20 students. The fourth advisory had nine. With four different opportunities to teach this course throughout the year and small class sizes, I had the luxury of being able to experiment with various approaches for this preparation and to let my students’ needs inform instruction. The approaches were mainly: 1) Explicit teaching of format, timed conditions, and content through traditional worksheets and Multiple Intelligence Projects based on SAT-9 objectives with an Integrated Math Curriculum; 2) Practice review of objectives from test prep books and computer programs followed by sample tests with focused group meetings twice a week after school, and 3) a Reading Workshop that focused on comprehension strategies and the connection of reading SAT-9 objectives with literature content and authentic reading and writing activities such as Cross-Age Tutoring, Literary Letters, Newspaper Projects. This paper then features anecdotes and descriptions of the approaches and tools I used, elaborating on “what works”—the strengths and weaknesses of each for English Language Learners taking the SAT-9. An explanation of the current theories of comprehension instruction and appendix of sample classroom materials is included. Action research then focused on the multiple interventions and approaches used for preparation of the test and meeting the standards.

Background

My students. Four native languages, large numbers of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, homes where reading and writing are not frequent, interrupted educations, extraordinary cultural and ethnic diversity, the majority of students with low self-esteem, and learning English as an additional language make up my classroom. This diversity offers phenomenal learning opportunities, however it also
demands complex solutions to questions of learning styles, curricular content, standards, and of course, standardized test preparation, taking, and performance.

As required by DCPS Office of Bilingual Education, I keep language development matrices (charting growth in reading, writing, speaking and listening) on 15 of my 35 students categorized as Limited English Proficient according to the Language Assessment Scales. My class consists of 43% FEP, 36% LEP, 7% low level, and 14% NEP. On the Fall administration of the SAT-9, 55% scored Below Basic, 31% Basic, and 14% Proficient and 0% Advanced. (See “group and individual strengths and weaknesses assessment according to the content clusters of the SAT-9;” prepared for the Professional Performance Evaluation Process.)

More than just statistics is needed to describe my students. I have a student named Hal, who says he reads “stuff” and selects books by “smelling them.” He avoids school reading at all costs; knowing that teachers will eventually give the answer or the “smart kids” will yell it out. Pepe says, “I hate reading,” and puts his head down during any reading activity. Sometimes he’ll have the book open with his head low, looking like he’s reading but he’s actually asleep. Then there is Ruth who has already read thirty books this school year but her lips are just pronouncing the words. She loves to read but when asked questions during teacher-student conferences she admits she doesn’t understand or remember what she read. She is struggling with vocabulary, saying her strategy is to reread something over and over until she gets it. Similarly, Rachel is an avid reader and already has sophisticated reading strategies yet doesn’t know how to articulate her thinking and frequently gets “stuck” with difficult text. These students are what researchers call “resistive readers or alliterates” (those than can read but choose not to), “word callers” (those that can decode words but have difficulty understanding or remembering what they’ve read), and “reading enthusiasts” (strong motivated readers). This mixture of students is also of varying levels of English proficiency, with 20% of my students labeled LEP “Limited English Proficient” according to the Language Assessment Scales (LAS). The others are FEP “Fully English Proficient” with 90% of those students speaking another language at home and/or learning English as an additional language.

Establishing Expectations

We can’t even get to the reading, to taking the test, until we have established expectations and disarmed defenses as a class. English I, what I teach for my other two classes, is a required course and generally some motivation comes with that, but with my fourth period class “Reading/Math Strategies” students entered saying “what is this class? Do we have to take this?” thinking it will be just like other remedial reading classes. From the beginning, their attitudes about the class and reading are abysmal. Even two-paragraph passages, like the ones they might see on the SAT-9, are too long. So I told my students that we weren’t going to do book reports; they were relieved, and then I asked them what kind of expectations they had for a class called Reading Workshop or Reading Strategies. Most were negative, based on their previous remediation experience. But then we started with some brain games to introduce and define the concept of a strategy (see attached). Through these games we determined that we all have an Intelligence and use strategies already—the key would be to share...
them and learn from each other. Thus our discussion of Multiple Intelligences led to breaking down that lower track/remediation mentality and setting up an honest atmosphere. We made a poster of our class’s intelligences with tallies and initials. We freewrote about Gardner’s quote “The question we should ask is not how smart are you, but how are you smart.” We then talked about sports and how athletes use strategies. We talked about what we do when we read, why we read, fake reading and how we avoid reading. After that, we made a poster on student and teacher expectations—from the start, they knew they would be reading A LOT, studying the strategies that good readers use, and trying to improve their test scores. I also listened to their concerns and promised to give more self-selected reading time in class and less homework on Fridays. Their grumblings about the class have lessened.

The next day I read a letter that I wrote to them introducing myself as a reader and brought in about 30 books that have had positive or negative impacts on me and spread them all over the room. I told the story of each book. “This one, *Everyone Poops,* was given to me by a friend to make me laugh while I was writing my thesis on this book.” I held up Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*—a book of some 2000 pages - the students guffawed at the sheer thickness of it. They commented on how they would never read something like that. I held up *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* and said I loved this book because my Nana would read it to me with voices and that was when I truly loved reading, being close to her and spending time together. I also showed them books I abandoned or felt pressured into reading—“I’m having trouble with this book (holding up *Fallen Angels*)—everyone says it is great and you’ve seen me carry it around everyday to read with you during DEAR time (Drop Everything and Read) but I can’t seem to finish it. My mind wanders.”

I asked them to write a letter to me describing their experience with reading (see attached). To brainstorm, we filled out Important Books and Literary History sheets (see attached; Tovani 2000) and made graphs of our reading experiences, plotting from birth to present day. Most had a backwards J shape. I was able to learn that these tough students who don’t want to read had serious baggage. Once unloaded, picking up a book was much easier. For example, I learned that one of my students loved to read but then in middle school his chart took a plunge as a teacher made him read in front of the class—this student suffered through ridicule because he stuttered. Another student shared that her sitter wouldn’t allow her to speak or leave her room, so she escaped to books. Not all is bad—one said she remembered reading books while under the shade of a mango tree; another shared that reading is important because that was the last thing her dad did with her before he died. The next day students shared books and told why they were important—the toughest brought in a teen leadership book saying, “this relates to what I’m going through”—I knew then that a textbook would not do. I needed to have high interest texts for the class. Another brought in a book her dad read to her before he died. This was rich ethnographic data and aided me in developing the future of the course.

Our next step was to set up our class library and sort books into genres. After having briefly discussed and define strategies, I secretly asked two students to observe what others did as they selected books. After the sorting, I announced that we had two spies in our mists and they shared their observations about the selection of book strategies—again my secret way of collecting data on their current approaches to texts
yielded much data. It was also a vehicle for emphasizing that they already had strategies and reading strengths. I then asked them to read an article on illiteracy from the Washington Post—we held an interesting discussion on the topics and how it related to the goals for this class. This was followed by a “What’s Your Thinking?” diagnostic which enabled me, in an informal way, to gather information on the strategies the students used before, during, and after reading (see attached sheets). I used this same sheet for our focused walk (see section on Professional Learning Communities) at the end of the year, with a more challenging text, and found that they had grown in not only the variety of strategies they employed but in their ability to articulate their processes of using and naming them.

Thus the literate environment was beginning—they were talking about books in an honest way. But I had to introduce the SAT-9 as well—in the same way we had to disarm defenses and connect how becoming a better reader helps you do better on the test and in life. But most students’ responses were “so what?” and “who cares?” This was the time for us to discuss the real implications of this test—how it connects to a part of the grade in all courses, to graduation, to the bigger issue of illiteracy, to college entrance exams. Students talked about previous experiences with tests and how vocabulary is the hardest part for them as ELLs. Most admit to just guessing or bubbling in whatever answer, not even reading the passages or questions, just to get it over with—“I don’t understand it and will fail it anyway.” These are the students who will have taken, depending on their language proficiency, possibly seven standardized tests by the end of the school year: Fall and Spring SAT-9, Fall and Spring SDRT, Fall New Reference Exam, and Fall and Spring LAS. They are already prepared for “failure” and are jaded. As a warm-up, I asked them to draw whatever came to mind when I said SAT-9, to jot down any strategies they already knew for how to take a test and ideas on why the test is so important in our school. After looking through these pictures, I knew I had my work cut out for me for this feeling of failure and anxiety were deeply rooted. Skulls, teachers with whips, blood, students crying, unhappy faces, exploding heads are drawn. During discussion of the drawings, some even expressed desire to give up and drop out in anticipation of the outcome—taking this test and not achieving basic proficiency, having to take summer school for remediation, possibly being denied their diploma. (See attached drawings.) We then looked at our Fall SAT-9 scores and analyzed them. Each person made their own grid with their scores for each content cluster, highlighting the 1-3 areas they wanted to work on in the course (see attached). We made a chart of these and added them to our class expectations. From these we set goals for ourselves—to work on context clues, interpretation, critical analysis, reading process strategies, and that each person would read at least 2 books in the nine weeks and the newspaper everyday. This was the first entry in our SAT-9 Portfolio and I used it to guide the objectives for the class.

Realizations From the Start

With all these informal approaches to gathering data, I realized that they provided rich data in a way that put the students at ease. On the more troubling side, I learned why my students were performing at below basic levels on the SAT-9: lack of vocabulary, particularly academic language; not having the comprehension strategies
necessary to unlock meaning from the passages; lack of sufficient background or content knowledge (What is a marble? What is bioprocessing? What is a basement?), not recognizing text structure, and lacking purpose and interest. From this I knew that teaching reading strategies in a workshop style—modeling my passion for reading and using authentic projects—was the approach I would choose for this class.

Modified Reading Workshop Approach
Block Scheduling (1 hr. 15 min. long classes)

Cyclical/Washback Structure:
1. Mini-lesson on isolated strategy
2. Model with think aloud, read aloud, annotation and DED (Double Entry Diaries)
3. Cooperative learning group practice with strategy on model project and with self-selected reading
4. Independent practice of strategy on individual project/assessment/Cross-Age Tutoring

Reading Workshop (Tovani, 2000; Atwell 1987; NCEE High School Literacy Course 2000)
1. Independent Reading—Begin class with 30 minutes self-selected reading time with journaling/annotating/DED to improve reading proficiency and conferencing with individual students for goal-making. (Start with 10 minutes reading time and build to 30 as the students build stamina.)
2. Mini-lesson, Whole Group Instruction: 15 minutes
3. Project Work (individual work and small group collaborations—teams of three at round tables have been effective for me): 30 minutes; also a time for conferencing

Thinking Tools

Throughout the four advisories and different approaches I learned that in order to even gain access to the test, students need to have vocabulary and comprehension. In order to have comprehension, readers must construct their own meaning. In order to do this, they need to apply reading strategies—consciously at first, explicitly taught, and then eventually, automatically. As with each of the three types of text on the SAT-9, each one is different and in order to read well, one must use a variety of strategies. The problem arises when it is a timed test and being a good reader is not necessarily equated with fast reading, yet the hope is that the playing field will be leveled in the long run. The rationale for the explicit teaching of comprehension skills is that vocabulary and comprehension can be improved by teaching students to use specific cognitive strategies or to reason strategically when they encounter barriers to understanding what they are reading. Readers acquire these strategies informally to some extent, but explicit or formal instruction in the application of comprehension strategies has been shown to be highly effective in enhancing understanding (class data; literature review by
the National Reading Panel; Tovani 2000). Four of the thinking tools that have proven most effective are outlined below.

**Thinking Aloud through Read Alouds**

Read alouds show language learners how to make sense of a text and how to approach it (Whimby 1975; Pearson, Roeller, Dole and Duffy 1992). Not only are the physical aspects of reading modeled, but also mental. Teachers don’t grade papers, but read right along with the students, laughing out loud, making comments, interacting with the text, and therefore disarming and even motivating students. Invisible mental processes are made visible—before, during, and after reading. As we read *Holes* by Louis Sachar, for example, I would stop often to think out loud, describing what is going on in my mind as I read AND how it helps me understand the text better. I would relate an experience I had when in a juvenile detention center in Paraguay while I was reading, stopping to model a text-to-self and world connection, and saying how it helps me visualize what is happening in the book. Anticipating where students will have difficulty, with language, structure or deficiency in background knowledge, helps me prepare to counter that and show language learners what strategy to use. When I came to a difficult passage or word, I would demonstrate how to use context clues. This process can be done with recreational, textual, or functional documents (those on the SAT-9). When introducing a strategy, I started small, a short piece of text, whatever is most appropriate for the mental process I am demonstrating and the project/assessment, yet always of high interest. I tend to use the children’s books from our Cross-Age tutoring, short stories such as “The Scarlet Ibis” for inferencing or predicting the ending, articles that we will use in projects (again modeling), or a variety of types of newspaper articles that connect thematically to our novel (illiteracy statistics to textual documents on racial profiling)—whatever is contextualized in our studies. The contextualization of readings is crucial at first as they learn the strategy, but as with good readers who are faced with many unexpected texts everyday, the students must be able to transfer these strategies and practice them with “cold texts,” just as they will on the SAT-9.

As we approach the text, I verbalize any information I know or wonder about the topic, by looking at the pictures, title, and first paragraph. I share how I predict what the piece will be about, telling students explicitly what I am doing, what strategy I am using, and pointing out the words in the text that initiate that thinking. “This word in the title reminds me of….These words make me wonder…I notice this about the structure…I am confused about _____ so I am going to read the sentence before and after that word.”

**Challenges and Results.** Oliver spent most of the semester trying to change the way I taught, challenging me and the process. I enjoyed his questions of “why are we doing this?”—it made it more explicit and authentic. But he also shut down, angry that he could no longer breeze through the reader or project without intellectual involvement. “Can’t we just READ it!” He didn’t like it when I stopped to ask the class to think beyond the words and interact with text by drawing conclusions, visualizing, or making predictions. He was used to sitting in class and being told what to think. As the year progressed, his challenging me remained, yet, along with the majority of students in the
class, he began to take charge of his own learning and performing his own read/think alouds. Vonetta even said, “It is so much better when you read Miss. You show me how to make sense.” I noticed Rachel and Alan mimicking me, using the academic language and cognitive awareness in their reading journals and in their responses during focused walks/observations. On assessments, the read alouds seem to have had a significant and positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension.

**Annotating the Text**

Many are familiar with this instructional strategy called annotation, coding the text, or “making a mess of the text” (Davey 1983). While we read aloud, we usually mark the text. We come up with codes, such as circle the words you don’t know and then underline the context clues, in the margin guess at the meaning. Highlight all the important details. Use sticky notes to explain the their thinking and connections next to the passage. Write comments, questions, or connections in the margins next to the words that initiate the response—I wonder…This reminds me of… I think…(noting questions, background knowledge and inferences). As with think alouds, at first we focus on one strategy and use accessible texts, modeling the coding process, thinking it through out loud and marking the codes next to the passages on overhead transparencies or on copies for all to see (if permitted by copyright laws). As students add more strategies to their repertoire, they can make bigger messes of the texts. An example of when we used this type of method was while reading “The Scarlet Ibis” to practice inferencing—students used sticky notes to mark all the clues the author left to support the conclusion they drew about the ending. They thought it was like a game, investigators hunting for clues, working together to have their team find the most—when in fact they were learning how to not to draw outlandish or unsupported conclusions. Before when we had tried to guess the ending, many said “how did you know that?” and this gave them a structure on how to figure it out.

Variations on this theme that have proven effective are when I ask students to “turn and talk” or “turn and jot” (Lucy Calkins, NCEE conference 2001). This is a form of verbal and interactive form of annotation. We read aloud and then I stop and say “turn and talk” or “turn and jot.” At first they can talk and jot/write about anything that comes to mind related to the text. After a few moments of talking and jotting, they share their reflections with the whole class. Then I gently maneuver the discussion to be focused more on the strategy we are working on.

Annotation can also prove effective on practice SAT-9 tests. I would copy a practice test onto transparencies and read the questions and passages aloud. Circling key words in the question, demonstrating how to skim and scan the passage for the key words or ideas, how to underline key points. I would then think aloud my answer selecting and eliminating process, drawing arrows to what in the passage supported my choice. With vocabulary words, we would circle the roots and prefixes or suffixes, writing down possible meanings. We would also write down where we had heard the word before (in movies, commercials, other stories, people talking), write down words it reminds them of, and possible meanings. After mini-lessons on those skills (finding key words, skimming, word parts) and modeling how to “think aloud a test,” then the
students worked in groups to annotate the rest of the test. This worked on motivation but to also show that the answers can be found in the text.

**Dialectical Journals and Graphic Organizers**

The next scaffold I use is the dialectical journal, otherwise known as Cornell notes or Double Entry Diaries (DEDs), to change annotations into an actual description of their thinking or a record of their process of thinking. The DEDs and other graphic organizers, such as the web or Venn Diagram that are on the SAT-9, help language learners structure their thinking and make sense of the text. In the case of the DED, a page is divided into two columns—the left-hand side contains a direct quote or summary from what they are reading, the left-hand side contains a reaction to that quote. The reaction side relates to the strategy or strategies that are being focused on. Again, start with one and then build to multiple columns and strategies so that students are not overwhelmed or distracted. Examples of “thinking options” that Cris Tovani cites in *I Read It But I Don't Get It* are inter-disciplinary: this reminds me of… I wonder… I infer…, this is important because…, I am confused because…, I will help myself by…, the picture in my head looks like…, I think this means…, and interesting facts or details (2000, p. 31). I have used this technique while reading *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros to get students to analyze the effects of objects on characters or in *Holes* by Louis Sacher to make the students develop theories about the author's writing style and themes (or any other literary device) the students select from the book. With a partner, they develop an initial hypothesis and then track it, change it, develop it as they read, pulling instances to support or refute their theory and recording it in the DED. Sticky notes work well to mark the passages also.

Each of these tools must be modeled also—reading an article similar to one they might be doing in a project aloud, stopping occasionally to pull a quote or even a single word from it. Then writing down the connection or response.

1. **Reading Roles.**

Taking the dialectical journal a step further, I would assign reading roles in which the students became authentic reading strategies. The students keep their responses in their composition books, which assist in SAT-9 skills and also meet the standard of Reading in Depth/Evidence of Reading Comprehension. Here are some that I have used in novel study guides that are then put in their portfolios.

a. **Questioner or Literary Guru**—Initially, readers answer questions posed by me and receive immediate feedback. Once they are comfortable with the question types, the readers themselves ask questions about various aspects of the text. The questions involve basic comprehension or details for close reading as well as interpretation, critical analysis of style or literary devices. I use their questions for quizzes and exams or to start class literary discussions. The students know this and it motivates them more since their questions are used in authentic ways. They are also learning SAT-9 vocabulary and question format. I explicitly teach them the types of questions through a concept attainment/question sort type of game—we put different
types of questions on strips of paper. Then in their cooperative groups they try to figure out what certain questions have in common, where answers for those types of questions can be found, and they try to come up with categories for them. For example—all these questions require me to look at the text and the answer is right there in the story. They labeled this question type “fact questions.” After the activity, I tell them that these types of questions are called “Initial Understanding” on the SAT-9. Or these questions make us look for clues, or make us think—“why questions” which are “Interpretation.” We then looked for the qualities that make good questions and looked at the structure of questions—different question prompts. For example, many of the SAT-9 questions have the same format—what is the author’s intention? what do you think the character will do next?, which of the following is irony?, the character can best be described as…, another best title for the selection would be… By looking at the question types, my ELLs learn the vocabulary and format of the test. They are familiar with this question prompts and anxiety is lessened. After taking the Spring SAT-9, Max said, “Miss. I felt fine because we talked about all those questions and literary terms.”

The students even used this reading role as one of their mini-lessons for their Reading Buddies—they prepared the various types of questions and then made a collage of questions that their buddies had about their stories.

b. Tracer—readers track the chronology or sequencing of events. They also look at story structure as a means of helping them recall content and understanding what they have read.

c. Character Tracker—students keep track of characters by looking for details of characterization through character action, mental description, physical description, and dialogue. This role also includes text-to-self and text connections and the use of graphic organizers such as the character’s head or Venn Diagrams in which readers make graphic representations of the material to assist comprehension.

d. Psychic—readers summarize what they have read and then give predictions for what will happen next. Entries look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of chapters 1-3</th>
<th>Predictions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think _____ will happen…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Based on (quotes, page #) Because…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Readers are taught to integrate ideas and generalize from the text information.

What works with strategy instruction

- Educators can explicitly teach the same strategy to the entire class. The strategy is applied to their self-selected reading book, higher or lower level depending on their
sophistication of language and reading facility. Thus all levels are challenged and taught how to better comprehend what they read and develop meta-cognitive skills (becoming aware of their own processes as readers).

- Strategies are applicable in all curriculum areas—when aligning the process clusters and objectives for SAT-9 reading and math, we realized that these are really thinking strategies used in various avenues, for predicting and estimating are essentially the same strategies.
- Strategies are applicable to recreational, textual, and functional documents (the three types of readings on the SAT-9). The content, how the piece is organized and its style dictate which strategies to use and teach although the use of background knowledge can be applied to any text. Readings can then be varied and balanced, creating a rich literate environment.
- The students are working on the objectives of the test without realizing it and in authentic ways, modeled after what people do when they read “real texts”, not just passages on a test. Motivation is then higher.
- Reading strategy instruction does not foster the basic skills vs. higher order skills dichotomy nor the notion that socioeconomic factors or background determine students’ level of achievement (Schmoker 1999). The strategies, particularly guided reading, focus teaching in the students’ zone of proximal development.
- The strategies and access tools help make text understandable and students are able to negotiate texts, determine purposes and what is important, and become more engaged in their reading—which is the goal when transferred to required reading material. By making them better readers overall, then SAT-9 test scores should increase. Class data suggests that text comprehension is enhanced when readers actively relate the ideas represented in print to their own knowledge and experiences and construct mental representations in memory.
- By using the same instructional methods (read alouds, think alouds, annotation, DEDs) students can focus on the strategy in the mini-lesson or the structure of the text, not on the format of delivery. Chances for confusion are lessened. Successful learning involves the use of numerous strategies.

**Why This Type of Instruction Works Well with the SAT-9**

*Linking objectives.* Focusing on comprehension strategies rather than merely test preparation will actually address the content and skill of the SAT-9 and relate to standard-based curriculum and instruction. Understanding how meaning is constructed and not merely decoding words, and realizing that reading is best viewed as a process and not just a set of skills to be mastered, actually addresses the objectives of the SAT-9. Besides the six cueing systems that readers rely on during reading to make sense—lexical, syntactic, grapho-phonic (surface structures), semantic, schematic, and pragmatic (deep structures)—seven strategies of comprehension have been identified by research: determining importance, creating mental images, synthesizing, relating new to known (schema), questioning, inferring, and monitoring meaning (Rumelhart 1976; Keene and Zimmermann 1997). English Language Learners must develop all these skills in a new language and demonstrate it in a new language on an exam that was not normed for them—a complex task—yet, the objectives of the SAT-9 do align
with these cueing systems and seven comprehension strategies. For example, when explicitly teaching the strategy of background knowledge or using existing knowledge to make sense of new information, I am actually addressing 32 items (out of 52) on the reading comprehension exam (interpretation and critical analysis). Being able to go beyond what is in the text, interact with the text, draw on personal experience and prior knowledge, are high on Bloom’s Taxonomy of thinking and are the building blocks for meeting the achievement in reading standards in our curriculum (see *NCEE Performance Standards*). One of the hardest sections for my students, the vocabulary section, can be enhanced by teaching word attack skills, Greek and Latin roots, prefixes, suffixes, context clue strategies. For speakers of romance languages, students can view their language as an asset by being taught the concept of cognates, which will assist students on the synonym section. At least ten of the items utilize knowledge of when and how to use strategies, familiarity with different text styles and structures, and knowledge of common literary devices. As there are far more interpretation and critical analysis questions, questions that rely on facility with the surface and deep structures of the language (a true challenge for language learners!), comprehension strategies are a priority.

Teachers must do more than measure comprehension. With direct, explicit instruction that demonstrates what good readers do, students can be taught how to comprehend text better, and thus, hopefully, do better on the test. There is no set of prescribed activities or panaceas for preparing students for the test. There are only suggestions and descriptions of the approaches I used in my classroom, elaborating on “what works”—the strengths and weaknesses of each for ELL taking the SAT-9.

*Projects—the Case for Authentic Assessment*

*The Olympics Project.* Judith Jacob, another teacher at Bell, was also assigned to teach the Reading and Math Strategies course. She describes her experience in this project, but include mine here as well. Our first question, like the students, was “what is this?” We attended training and began to formulate a teaching plan with our math counterparts. Our training focused on Integrating Curriculum. The main process is to look at the target population, content, content standards, possible concepts in common, cross-curricular standards, representative tasks to meet those standards, and finally integrated activities and assessments (see Team Planning Sheet). By aligning the SAT-9 objectives for reading and math, common concepts were inference/deduction, critical analysis, prediction/hypothesis, and process strategies. We chose to focus on the latter and came up with the Olympics Project in which students became consultants for Harcourt Brace, the makers of the SAT-9. They were explicitly taught the question types and text types of the SAT-9 and did the same for the math objectives (see attached sheet for description of test content and test question prompts). We did question sorts (like in the Questioner Reading Role) and text sorts. We asked the students to collect things that they read everyday and to make entries in their reading log of what they read all day—from medicine labels, bill boards, and recipes, to phone books, poems, and applications. They learned that they read more than they think they do, but that there are different types of text that have distinct purposes.
With the Olympics Project their task was to follow the Olympics in the newspaper and find a Textual, Recreational, and Functional document on the topic. Once they read the three articles, practicing certain reading strategies and annotating them, they were to become the test makers and write SAT-9 type questions for the three articles. In math, they took mathematical concepts revolving around the Olympics and created problems and solutions, like the angles and statistics. They labeled the types of texts and questions and created a poster to showcase their test. They did this as “guided practice” and demonstrated their knowledge in a similar second project where they were able to choose their own topic. We submitted the projects to Harcourt-Brace for an authentic audience though we didn’t receive a response from the company. The thinking behind this approach was that if they learned the question types, the vocabulary and format, and were able to write their own questions mimicking the SAT-9, then they would be able to answer them better.

Benefits

Current events and the choice of topics provided for greater motivation. The students really wanted Harcourt Brace to see the types of topics and articles they find interesting—texts that they actually read as opposed to those that put them to sleep on the test. Also, the students were able to make some limited connections between reading and math and learn the format of the test. Although the format was too much of an emphasis, some students realized that they need to use different strategies while reading different texts and also be able to answer different types of questions to prove their understanding—functional reading is different than textual. They were also able to realize that some answers can practically be underlined in the text; others need to be based on clues or hints. Familiarity with the types of questions and texts allowed the ELLs to have less anxiety about the test and not be confused with the format. A major drawback was that writing your own questions for the material, even if given the question prompts, skips a few levels in Bloom’s Taxonomy and often led to the frustrational level of the students, particularly those with special education needs.

Integrating Skimming and Scanning

From the Olympics project, I learned that I had to integrate the “time factor.” Within all projects, we did warm-ups on skimming and scanning, and the use of SQR. For ELLs, stamina and speed are issues. The passages in the SAT-9 are generally 500-600 words long and there are six passages. The test makers calculate that the student should take 3 minutes to read the selection—approximately 200 words per minute. We started with 300 word passages and built up over time, focusing on key words, reading the question to determine purpose, and practicing timed readings. The benefit was to again lessen anxiety and familiarize the student with timed conditions, building stamina and speed.

Sample Tests—My Next Approach
A focus group of about 10 students met on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school to take and review sample SAT-9 tests. These weren’t done solely in isolation—they were accompanied by independent reading, journal writing, and strategy building (see integration of test practice, SAT-9 objectives, and strategies in the Nine Week Plan). With these sample tests, we reviewed the format, used time conditions, and discussed test-taking strategies such as elimination. We also would go over the answers to figure out what in the text supported it. We used test preparation books, such as *Taking the Terror Out of the Stanford 9* (just look at that title!), *Stanford 9 Language Coach*, *Reading Strategies for Nonfiction and Literature*, *KeyLinks*, and computer programs such as Skills Bank and Prentice Hall. Again, this lessened anxiety for the conditions and format of the test, while the computer programs motivated students. These students scored higher on class assessments; however, I noticed that these programs supported guessing and superficial thinking with great breadth and very little depth. I also noticed that non-instructional factors, such as background and prior knowledge, explain most of the variance among student scores. Is this fair, accurate or equitable? Does this show a discriminatory effect, particularly with this norm-referenced test?

I also was enraged that I spent the whole year requesting an overhead projector to provide my students with more visual aids and better instruction, yet was readily given this software and test-prep books. It shows what Alfie Kohn says to be true: when poorer schools do manage to scrape together the money to buy materials, it’s often at the expense of books and other educational resources that they really need (2000).

**Cross-Age or Grade Tutoring/Reading Buddies/Integrated Reading Method**

My ninth graders were paired with kindergartners from Harriet Tubman Elementary School and first graders attending Capital City Public Charter School. After going through training in ways to share books, creating advertisements and bibliographies of books that they deemed valuable for children to read according to criteria for a "good children’s book" and write mini-lessons on strategies, they were encouraged to use their native language to first talk about and then write about texts and strategies. This helps not only them, but also their buddies, become more proficient in English and to create literate behaviors. Each 30-40 minute session was followed by a reflective process, whereby the students wrote about their teaching experiences in Field Notes, discussed issues with each other, and planned for their next mini-lesson on a reading strategy. They learned elements of literature such as character, setting, conflict, and theme. The focus on strategies and literary elements helped them become better teachers but also met the SAT-9 Reading Objectives.

**Benefits.** We know from studies in cognition that learning is a social endeavor (notably Jean Piaget’s work and the Learning Process Theory). Students engaged in active, not passive, learning experiences when they have an authentic audience. More time is spent on task, practicing the reading process in a multi-sensory environment. Again the reading strategies are modeled and made explicit. They were also reading for real purposes. They were able to read texts like “Rosa Lee’s Story” and “Someplace to Call Home” (recreational documents) on literacy issues affecting real people, analyze
literacy statistics (textual and functional documents) and identified Reading Buddies as a way to help, to find a solution to illiteracy. This project helped them realize that they not only had to learn the reading strategies for themselves, but to teach to their Reading Partner. The inclusion of opinions, examples, observations, and rationale, which are so much a part of their Field Notes, is often transferred to reports, essays, and other writing assignments. Because they had practiced the strategies and SAT-9 objectives on children’s books, taught them to others, they scored higher on classroom assessments/practice tests (relative to pretests). The tutors learned the strategy as I modeled it, practiced it on books for their reading buddy (books that were accessible to them yet not embarrassing since it is for their tutee)—they can learn the basics without ridicule, and then applied the strategy to their in-class, grade-level and self-selected reading.

Another benefit of the program, which cannot be measured in numbers but which was very evident from their reflective essays on their experience, my observations/anecdotal records and conferences with students, was the affective and social gains made by both the tutors and the tutees (also evidenced in their reflections)—development of social behaviors, improved attendance, personal communication skills, classroom discipline, sense of responsibility and being a role model, enhancement of peer relations, self-esteem, and an internal locus of control. I spent less time disciplining and more time in individual consultation as a facilitator; this is never measured or accounted for by standard, routinized approaches to evaluation. The effect was beneficial on achievement in test scores and significant on their attitudes toward subject matter. Although two males refused to participate in the service-learning program, it did prove beneficial to those who traditionally did not complete portfolio/standard-based assignments. One such student would do ALL work, including the typed written reflection, for the Cross-Age tutoring. She voluntarily engaged in them as she was committed to her role, and her tardies and absences decreased. The research literature on the subjects of peer and cross-age tutoring is extensive (see Hedin 1987; Rekrut 1992; Imich 1990; Cohen and Kulik 1981, 1982; review by the School Improvement Research Series www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/9/c018.html) suggesting gains in affective outcomes and language arts areas such as story grammar, comprehension, acquisition of vocabulary, and general reading skills. Yet such outcomes are usually measured using locally developed rather than standardized tests.

*Literary Letters/Letters about Literature*

After reading and developing theories about the texts, our class used literary letters as a way to assess a variety of responses to literature (a standard and SAT-9 objective): text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-current events, authorial, literary devices, style and structure. We studied each response in turn and used reading strategy/test prep books on occasion as models. For example, there is one section in the test preparation book on “putting self in the character’s shoes” and another on “What will happen next? Prediction.” The students wrote letters to Sandra Cisneros and Louis Sachar. Once again, the authentic audience and the non-report format motivated them. Sandra Cisneros even wrote back with a letter, signed photo, and dedicated book. The
students are now convinced that their voices matter. All the while they are practicing SAT-9 objectives in a “covert” way.

The first part of the letter is synthesis (weaving details about the book while dialoguing with the author), asking questions and making predictions. The second part of the letter has their reactions and judgments supported by details and quotes from the text. The conclusion includes how the writing affected or changed their thinking. From this project they practice strategies, the writing and revision process, introduction and conclusion writing style strategies, supporting inferences, and develop a vocabulary for explaining their writing choices. (See assignment sheets, rubric, and student work.)

Newspaper Collage Project—Current Project

While trying to get the class excited about the 25-book initiative in our school, the students were asking, “why do people read? What do you read? Why is the newspaper interesting to people?” and from these questions we started two projects. One was a letter written to Washington Post readers asking them to share their experiences about the power of reading. This stemmed from our sharing of books/Literary Histories and from reading an article about Jim Burke’s book I Hear America Reading. This resulted in over 200 responses from Post readers (involving the community in our classroom), two articles in the Washington Post (included in appendix), one book donation, and possibly more projects such as a book list and new curriculum. The students have chosen to read some of the recommended books and they are excited to go to the computer to read the new responses. They also like to apply their reading strategies to them—looking for important details, summary of learning, what interests them, and author’s message.

Looking at the Post-generated responses in this way provided models for the second project, the Newspaper Collage, and has begun a way of teaching a thinking process while reading. This project is also aligned with the standard of reading and comprehending informational materials to develop understanding. This project allowed the students to explore the answer to “why do we read?” by finding something that they wonder about. One student wonders about missing people, another about technology, still another about weather. They are collecting and tracking these topics in the newspaper—learning the newspaper structure, annotating the text, filling out K-W-Ls and Double Entry Diaries on the topics. They first have to consider what they know about an article (background knowledge), preview the title and headlines, predict what it will be about, ask questions to guide their reading, circle and look up unfamiliar words, underline what is interesting and important, make connections, stop and think about what they have read, and figure out what they have learned and what is the author’s purpose. This is the reading process. They apply the seven habits and strategies that we have been learning and use them to aid in their comprehension of the texts but to also develop a theory about their topic. Again, many of these strategies are also objectives of the SAT-9. They will eventually make a poster collage with the articles, showing connections to prove their thesis. (See attached assignment sheet.) This is what they should do while they read anything and the hope is that this process becomes automatic.
The benefits for the SAT-9 are important: they have become faster readers, they are more familiar with text structure; they need to access prior knowledge; they can extrapolate information from a text and know where to locate information; and they challenge the text in a meaningful and deeper way through DEDs, Annotation, KWL, making a thesis and drawing a conclusion. Instructionally, motivation is high due to their choice in topics and the Multiple Intelligence, hands-on nature of the project. For a concrete example of this, Rachel was presenting her project to the portfolio committee and she made the observations that one paragraph or sentence relates or paraphrases the next (structure), that the on-line Post has easier vocabulary and longer text than the printed Post, that “one article said that technology will cause X,Y, and Z, but I doubt that will happen and the other article supports that” (drawing a conclusion with textual evidence), and that her vocabulary in the presentation increased. She was able to articulate her choices but also use the vocabulary of technology: capability, carriers transmit, globalization, telecommunication, consumers.

Why These Projects Worked

- The most effective projects (Tutoring, Newspaper Projects, Literary Letters) taught SAT-9 content in an unobtrusive way.
- These projects did not sacrifice critical thinking. We labor under the false notion that students must master basic skills before they can learn higher-order skills or engage in complex activities. Low-performing students stand to gain the most from approaches that incorporate basic skills into complex, higher-order tasks. Research shows schools and effective programs have demonstrated that standardized test scores can improve significantly when challenging tasks and activities are used (Resnick, et al. 1991; Schmoker and Wilson 1993; Livingston, et al. 1989; Pogrow 1988).
- The most effective projects incorporated a literature-based reading program and reader response theory—students must read a lot to become good readers.
- The thinking tools must be recursive and used throughout the projects.
- They created literate classrooms characterized by decentralized and collaborative classroom structures, with the teacher modeling ways to respond to text and participating in literate discussions and then stepping back to let students construct meaning in authentic ways. This is supported by social constructivist perspective on learning (Vygotsky). They include student choice and begin with their needs.
- The projects include the integration of reading, writing, and talk about reading. Research shows that reading itself—lots of it—is perhaps the most vital and worthy activity for students to engage in to improve their reading ability and test scores (Krashen 1993; Showers et al. 1998). Building language instruction around lots of reading and focused dialogue about that reading is the best approach. Research shows the test score results to be astonishing (Palincsar and Klenk 1991; Berlier and Casanova 1993).
- They valued authentic reading and writing activities and Multiple Intelligence Theory.
Test preparation activities were only effective because they allowed for coherent, conceptual ways of chunking the new information about test format and the vocabulary of a test, for better performance (Wiggins 2001).

Mini-Assessments mirrored on SAT-9 type activities raised the questions: With ELLs, is the test still valid for its intended purpose? Does the SAT-9 accurately measure their content knowledge or just their level of vocabulary? For example, one student understood the passage she read but could not answer the question because she didn’t know the word “fond.” For testing done in English is first and foremost an English language proficiency exam.

Multiple Strategies Discussion and Conclusion

In order for assessments to be effective and useful for educators in instructional practice, they must be deeply entwined with the classroom teaching and learning driven by the standards. Assessments must be authentic, dynamic—focusing on both the processes and products of learning—and tied to the larger thematic issue of literacy. The thematic issue helps students with the “so what? And who cares?” around standardized tests. Our America’s Choice Standards may not be in direct alignment with the Stanford-9, which is mandated by DCPS, and the SAT-9 is not an authentic and dynamic assessment that is directly contextualized in our classrooms. Clearly this lack of alignment goes against assessment theory (Riddle 1999). Assessment, standards, curriculum and instruction are disconnected from one another, negatively impacting the education of all students, particularly ELLs (Gottlieb 1999).

Instruction must also be a part of a multiple-strategy method—dependence on a single instruction method or tool will not result in optimal learning. Evidence suggests that presenting diverse approaches in instruction and teaching a combination of reading comprehension techniques across the curriculum with various texts is the most effective. When students use them appropriately, they assist in recall, question answering, question generation, summarization, and motivation. When used in combination, these techniques can improve results in standardized comprehension tests. Overall, authentic activities and explicit instruction of comprehension strategies were most effective in meeting the complexities of reading instruction and making the SAT-9 more accessible.

Individual student results for SAT – 9 reading objectives have yet to be compiled by the school. Yet, when these authentic projects and comprehension strategies were employed (as opposed to the traditional test practice method), 75% of the students reached their goals on SAT-9 cluster objectives. In order to do this, they had to score 80% or higher on mini-assessments that mirrored SAT-9 questions and passages. Fatalism is down—they don’t just bubble in any answer and they can explain why they are choosing that response with evidence from the passage. (See section on Professional Learning Communities for analysis of results from mini-assessments.) Their reading motivation has increased. Hal’s head isn’t down any longer—he is actively annotating textual and functional documents pertaining to weather. Pepe finished his two books for the nine weeks, declaring “this wasn’t so bad. That main dude [character] is just like me—a troublemaker.” Ruth is still decoding words, yet she is able to hold onto their meaning more, helping her peers with the newspaper project.
Rachel and others are able to articulate their reading processes—they have gained a metacognitive vocabulary and have strategies to help themselves when they get stuck (See section on Professional Learning Communities for focused walk results on strategies). Their anxiety over the test has lessened. Based on student course reflections and on my own observations, they have renewed confidence in themselves as readers. After the Post project, they feel that their opinion matters, that they are not at the “lower track” any longer—they ARE readers and writers. This affective change had to occur before they could even begin to do well on the SAT-9.

“If you wanted to be sure to do well on your annual physical, would you practice the physical in advance? Or would you eat right, exercise, and get enough sleep?” Grant Wiggins, president of Re: Learning by Design, used this analogy to help his audience think through the issues related to teaching and test scores. “To practice the physical gets it backwards,” he said. “I should practice being healthy, and then the physical will take care of itself.” Similarly, this is what I tried to do with the reading workshop—use good teaching practices and let the SAT-9 take care of itself. In the long run, better thinkers and students, will hopefully yield higher results. Maybe not this year, but in the long run...

Next Steps and Questions

This action research has raised many questions that carry important implications and need further attention. Such questions and future steps are:

- Analyze the test scores to find out which class and approach actually yielded the best results. Track these students’ scores over the next three years to see if long-term effects can be determined.
- Become more consistent in focused walk and other informal data collection procedures.
- Better integration of reading and math curriculum.
- Add a research-based structure to the Reading Buddy program—how much benefit is gained in relation to the amount spent?
- Gather parent perception—why are other parents protesting, as they are in VA, Boston and New York, but our parents do not? Is it that they must rely on translations of talk about stanines and renorming? They don’t understand the categories of below basic, proficient and advanced? Is there a misperception with the standards of learning? Is this test accepted because they feel they can’t change it, it is part of a “higher power”—DCPS and the Bush Education Plan?

- Does the SAT-9 undermine the standards-based reform because it is not aligned with the DCPS’ Standards for Teaching and Learning or the America’s Choice Standards?
- Is another wide-scale assessment more appropriate for the America’s Choice standards and ELL needs?
- Do wide-scale tests, even with accommodations, fully expose English language learner’s knowledge and abilities or should the system be redesigned with these students’ needs addressed in the development of assessment?
• By setting these “high standards” are we really setting up a “sorter tracking” model in which everyone by definition won’t be able to meet the standard?
• Is the LAS a good indicator of SAT-9 levels?
• Don’t other data collection methods, such as the portfolio or language matrix, yield more accurate results?
• How can parent, teacher, and student voice be a necessary aid in this process of aligning assessment, standards, curricula, and instruction?
A group of ninth grade students were recognized as students well versed in the content of mathematics. This group of students termed the “High Achievers” had achieved at a Below Basic or Basic level on the Stanford-9 Test (SAT – 9) given in the fall of 2000. The “High Achievers” group was expected to report after school on Monday and Tuesday for 6 weeks prior to the official SAT – 9 testing. The group was to meet from 3:30pm until 5:00pm to familiarize themselves with the all of the varying content objectives that could be encountered on the test. A total of fifteen students were selected for “High Achievers”, six attended consistently, missing less than two sessions.

Research shows that once teachers gain an understanding of the items that will appear on standardized tests they are better equipped to incorporate the testing structure into the classroom (Alderson & Clapham, 1995). Several teachers at Bell Multicultural have had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the content objectives that appear on the SAT – 9. Those same content objectives can be addressed using the Test Best testing material. Since “off the shelf testing material” tends to be more reliable than teacher-made tests (Alderson & Clapham, 1995), we decided to select Test Best as our training tool. The format of the Test Best material is straightforward and easy to work with. The content objectives (functions, statistics, geometry, algebra, calculus, etc.) are individually addressed with sample problems followed by practice problems. At the completion of the nine content sections are a review and comprehensive practice test. Test Best is divided into tasks; Task 1 addresses math objectives at a 9th grade level and Task 2 at a 10th grade level. Both tasks were completed during the six-week period when “High Achievers” convened.

In order to familiarize the students with the different content objectives on the SAT – 9, we spent the first four sessions working through practice problems. Students were assigned three content objectives from Test Best Task 1 every session. Students worked through sample problems followed by 2-4 practice problems. The correct answers for the practice problems were posted on the chalkboard and students were asked to check their answers against the correct answers. Students reworked problems to get the correct answer. On questions where students were still having difficulty reaching the correct answer, we worked them out on the chalkboard. On week 3, we took the first timed practice test. Though the students had encountered minimal difficulty with the problems in the prior weeks, they struggled with the timed test. Students were given a minute for every question that appeared on the test. None of the students completed the test, the most advanced student reached question 35 of 41. Session 2 of week 3 was spent in reflection. What questions on the test slowed you down? Did you monitor how much time you spent on each question? Did you feel prepared to take the test?

At the completion of week 3, the “High Achievers” group moved on to tackle Test Best Task 2 in the same manner we had worked through Task 1. Session one and two
of week 4 and session one of week 5 were spent revisiting the content objectives, working through sample problems followed by practice problems. On week 5 the students pulled out another practice test. Again, 1 minute was allotted for each question. The questions in Task 2 were more challenging but a greater number of the students completed more questions than they had on the previous timed test. We spent week 6 reflecting on the challenges encountered on the timed test and revisited some content areas of difficulty.

Of the six 9th grade students that regularly attended “High Achievers”, three increased their level of achievement, two remained at the same level, and one student decreased in level of achievement. Spring SAT – 9 scores were compared with fall SAT – 9 scores to determine areas of change. Table 1 summarizes the findings for the six students that were prepared to take the SAT – 9 using Test Best tools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Level achieved during Fall testing</th>
<th>Level achieved during Spring testing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Below Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Basic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Comparison of Fall and Spring SAT – 9 results for students that regularly attended “High Achievers.”

There are a few important factors to mention with respect to this sample; all students that participated in “High Achievers” tested at Level 1. There are four levels of testing, Level 1 students are fluent in English, though it may not be their first language, and their scores are most significant in school rating. The approach used in “High Achievers” to prepare students to battle the SAT – 9 was not the only technique used to prepare the students for the SAT – 9. All students received some sort of guided teaching in their math classes and four of the six students received the second of the two approaches yet to be discussed.

A different approach to prepare students for the SAT – 9 assessment was taken in Biology class. The biology teachers were assigned the math SAT – 9 objectives of functions, statistics, and graphing. Students learn objectives more completely when they are integrated in real life situations (Dewey, 1943). The real life situations on which the SAT – 9 objectives were addressed was oriented around biology content. Biweekly objective assessments were given to gauge what students understood and what we needed to spend more time dealing with. Two sections of Biology I are taught at Bell Multicultural High School. First period Biology I is a Fluent English Proficient (FEP) class of fourteen 9th grade students. Second period Biology I is a Limited English Proficient (LEP) class of twenty-four 9th grade students. It was with these classes that I sought to connect math SAT – 9 objectives with science content.

Students were introduced to the concept of natural selection by analyzing the number of light and dark colored moths captured over a 10-year period. Students graphed data from a table, drew conclusions from the graphs, and used calculations of
percent change to mathematically substantiate inferences. Statistical analysis including mean, median, mode, and range were compiled using the data set.

Individual student results for SAT – 9 math objectives have yet to be compiled by the school. The best analysis that can be proposed is a cumulative one that compares levels between fall and spring scores. Of the fifteen reported scores for Biology I students; seven students moved up one level of achievement, seven students remained at the same level, and one student decreased in level of achievement.

Table 1. Comparison of fall and spring SAT – 9 scores for students in Biology I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Achievement</th>
<th>Fall Testing</th>
<th>Spring Testing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Possible conclusion and recommendation material. The ESEA assessment provisions are based upon the belief that the inclusion of ELLs in these wide-scale assessments is key to ensuring that these students also benefit from standards-based reform and learn to high standards: “students will need to receive at least the same quality and the same amount of content instruction as is given to other students” (Rivera & Stansfield, 1998, p. 67). However, difficulties arise because the America’s Choice standards and the SAT-9 may not be in direct alignment. This clearly goes against assessment theory (Riddle 1999). Assessment, standards, curriculum and instruction are disconnected from one another, negatively impacting the education of all students, particularly ELLs (Gottlieb 1999). Further difficulties are apparent for the standardized test was developed for the assessment of native English speakers—not for ELLs. Research is divided between those that believe that only tests developed with this population in mind can fairly and accurately assess ELLs, and those that support the inclusion of ELLs in mainstream assessments through appropriate testing accommodations and/or modifications (Menken 2000). The district follows the latter path, with exemptions of test scores based on language proficiency and accommodations in presentation, setting, and timing of this test intended for native English speakers. Whether they receive these accommodations or exemptions is
based on their level on the LAS (Language Assessment Scales). There is great variance on how ELLs are defined, how the results can be compared, and one must question if the LAS is a good indicator for SAT-9 level taking. Is that the intended purpose of the LAS—a placement tool for the SAT-9? How do LAS and SAT-9 scores correlate? -- All prospects for future action research. While accommodations are intended to make test content more accessible to ELLs they do not necessarily meet their linguistic needs. Further questions arise: is the test still valid for its intended purpose? Does the SAT-9 accurately measure their content knowledge, meeting the performance standard, or just their level of vocabulary? For example, one student understood the passage she read but could not answer the question because she didn’t know the word “fond.” Testing done in English is first and foremost an English language proficiency exam.

**Overall Conclusion and Recommendations**

The six teachers, Superfriends, who participated in this project are left with at least as many questions as answers about ELLs and the SAT-9 at Bell Multicultural. Yes, the school did see a slight increase in its SAT-9 scores this year, as did most of the teachers involved with this study. On the mathematics portion of the test, the number of below basic students decreased 5%, those attaining basic increased 6%, 10% of students scored proficient (the same percentage as in Spring 2000), and those achieving advanced increased 1%. On the reading section, below basic students decreased by 7%, basic scorers increased 8%, and those reaching proficient increased 1%, even though advanced readers decreased from 1% to 0% of those tested.

The teachers, especially Pollock, Nussbaum and Docal are still left wondering how to address the needs of the many below basic students at the school when there is such a variety of skill levels under that umbrella. Another question: how do the LAS and SAT-9s tests correlate if at all? Should the LAS be used to determine readiness for the SAT-9? The teachers, especially Nussbaum, Hunt and Mitchell, wonder how much of the improvement their students made can be attributed to the SAT-9 activities their students did in class.

With regard to the “best” method of preparing students to take the SAT-9, there is no consensus – or rather, there seem to be any number of ways. Pollock supports the effectiveness of both “direct” teaching to the test (through Test Best) but also advocates a project approach, as does Nussbaum. At the same time, Jacob and Hunt would attest to the effectiveness of integrating SAT-9 preparation into existing (content-focused) curriculum instead of carving out special “SAT-9 time”.

Perhaps the slight gain in test scores as a school is a function of the whole school approach. Below, then, is a list of whole school approaches which the Superfriends feel the school should take in order to prepare its students, especially second language learners for the SAT-9 next year.

* continue parent meetings with the principal/administration about the purpose, details, and importance of the SAT-9
* continue professional learning communities, including the tuning process (critical friends) and walkthroughs (with time built in at the beginning of the year to make the goals clear)

* continue Drop Everything And Read (DEAR) time (10 minutes of silent reading) in each class to assist students in their yearly 25-book requirement

* differentiate between the varied levels of below basic students for the purposes of class scheduling

* scrap the reading/math strategies class until major overhaul of the class takes place
  
  • coordinate/schedule common planning periods for teachers working on the same professional learning community teams
References
(By section)

Introduction


The Story of the SAT-9


History of the SAT-9


High Stakes in the DCPS and Bell context


Bell’s Whole School Approach Professional Learning Communities

Individual Approaches

Multiple Strategies: The Key to Unlocking Stanford-Nine Reading (Docal).


Preparing Students for the Stanford – 9 Test at Bell Multicultural High School
(Pollock)


Stanford-9 Levels of Achievement

Performance Standards are content-referenced scores that reflect what students know and should be able to do in given subject areas. The Stanford Performance Standards were determined by expert panels of educators, who judged each test question on the basis of how students at different levels of achievement should perform. These expert judgments yielded four categories or levels of student performance.

Below Basic indicates little or no mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills.

Basic denotes partial mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental for satisfactory work. At the high school level, this is higher than minimum competency skills.

Proficient represents solid academic performance, indicating that students are prepared for the next grade. At the high school level, this indicates preparedness for democratic citizenship, responsible adulthood, and productive work.

Advanced signifies superior performance beyond grade-level mastery. At the high school level, this shows readiness for rigorous college courses, advanced technical training, or employment requiring advanced academic achievement.

### Stanford-9 Content Clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENT CLUSTERS</th>
<th>Number of Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Vocabulary</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synonyms</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Meanings</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Comprehension</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Understanding</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Analysis</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Strategies</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving Strategies</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algebra</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probability</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functions</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Geometry form a Synthetic Perspective</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Geometry form an Algebraic Perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Credits</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trigonometry</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrete Mathematics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Underpinnings of Calculus</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(from Stanford Level/Form: Task 1/T, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995)
Appendix C: Professional Learning Communities

Resource 1: Study Group Meeting Outline (Schmoker 1999)

Before the meeting: Is there an agenda? Are recording tools available? Was a leader and meeting location designated?

During the meeting:
1. Where are we? Identify major concerns and strategies to promote better results for the goal. Discussion and activities focused on… Concerns/Recommendations…
2. Classroom applications since last meeting: strategies that worked. Each member concisely discusses evidence of a strategy that was effective in helping reach the goal since the last meeting.
3. What is the most urgent concern, problem, or obstacle to better results?
5. For the next meeting – Focus on one strategy between the meetings.
6. Reflect: What is happening differently in the classroom as a result of what you are doing and learning in study groups?

After the meeting: Distribute a memo or study group log documenting the team’s focus to accomplish by the next meeting. State next meeting date and location.


General Category of Student Needs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Indicate that Students Need to:</th>
<th>Therefore, in this study group teachers will:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are the intended results of the work of the study group? The evidence that the level of proficiency has increased in the above student needs will be documented on/by/in:
What will be the content or curriculum of the study? To accomplish the above, the study group will use the following materials and other resources (e.g., individuals):

**Resource 3:** English FEP team focused-walk questions and summary of observations; Grade and subject level team notes

Ninth Grade FEP English Student Skill Improvement Meeting
March 21, 2001—Staff Development

Present: Docal & Miranda
Absent: Longoria

**Objective:**
To diagnose students use of comprehension strategies (previewing, connecting, finding the main idea, questioning, and identifying confusions and ways to get “unstuck”)

Students will be able to use meta-cognitive skills in articulating their thinking and strategies used.

**Our Strategy:**
Annotating the text mini-lessons on each of the comprehension strategies for various readings (textual, recreational, functional)

**Assessment:**
Focused walks are planned for Friday, May 11.

During a visit, the “walker” will collect data by conducting a “walkthrough” of each other’s classes. The students will answer a list of questions based on a brief prescribed passage read earlier that day. (Walkers can choose random students and questions or have all students answer the questions.)

**Questions:**

- When you first got the article, what did you do or think about?
- What did you do before you started reading?
- As you were reading, what did you think about?
- This article reminds me of…(label connection as text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world).
- What surprised you?
- What do you think the article is about? What is the main idea? (Support with textual evidence and background knowledge)
- I wonder…(questions)
- I’m stuck or confused by…because…I will try to get unstuck by…
Based on Cris Tovani’s book on Reading Comprehension Strategies

Follow-up:

We will meet again May 16 to discuss the results we have, any problems or successes, and future courses of action (possible “re-teach” lessons).

J. Docal Walkthrough Results May 11, 2001

Materials:

Article: “D.C. Schools Take Aim at Corporal Punishment” Washington Post
Textual, high-interest, current topic

What’s Your Thinking? Sheet of Walk Through Questions

Problems: No common planning time or instructional periods; conducted walkthrough of my own class, to eliminate bias I had all the students answer the questions anonymously

Analysis:

• When you first got the article, what did you do or think about? What did you do before you started reading?
  ○ Question purpose
  ○ Looked at title, blurbs, pictures to see what the article was about
  ○ Headline
  ○ By-line
  ○ Formed questions regarding vocabulary in the title and about the content of the article
  ○ Text-to-world connection
  ○ Text-to-world connection

• As you were reading, what did you think about?
• This article reminds me of…(label connection as text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world).
  ○ Movies
  ○ Own experience
  ○ Most labeled correctly
  ○

• What surprised you?
  ○ Content or statistic in article
  ○ What Vance or Bullock said
  ○ Affective concerns about Corporal Punishment
What do you think the article is about? What is the main idea? (Support with textual evidence and background knowledge)
  - Most able to support their point but wasn’t the main idea, may be detail
  - Found in title, first or last paragraph

I wonder…(questions)
  - Affective and textually based—show depth of thought

I’m stuck or confused by…because…I will try to get unstuck by…
  - Most able to identify confusions
  - Affective confusions
  - Vocabulary
  - Strategies should be more self-sufficient and less traditional (dictionary, ask teacher)—more traditional in LEP class

Follow-up:
Mini-lessons on identifying the main idea
Integration Projects & Team Planning (adapted from Brown, et. Al. 2000)

Target Population:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Standards</th>
<th>SAT-9 Objectives</th>
<th>Concepts in Common</th>
<th>Cross-Curricular Standards</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math:</td>
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<td>Reading:</td>
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</tbody>
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Cross-Curricular Standards

Representative Tasks

Integrated Project and Assessment
Appendix D: The Tuning Protocol/Critical Friends Method

**Introduction (5 minutes)**
*Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, norms, and schedule
*Participants briefly introduce themselves (if necessary)

**Presentation (15 minutes)**
*Teacher presents…
*Context (what the students tend to be like, where they are in school, where they are in the year)
*Assignment or prompt that generated the student work
*Samples of work (photocopies of written work, video clips)
*Evaluation format (e.g. rubric, test)
Participants are silent

**Clarifying Questions (5 minutes)**
Clarifying questions are matters of fact (“How many students will you have in this class? What kind of prior experience in this subject can you count on?”) Save substantive issue for later. The facilitator is responsible for making sure that clarifying questions are really clarifying.

**Examination of work (5-7 minutes)**
* Participants look at the work, take notes on where it seems “in tune” with goals and where there might be problems; and (if appropriate (see Feedback section) write down warm and cool feedback, as well as probing questions.

**Feedback (15 minutes)**
* Participants talk to each other about the work (pretending that the presenter is not in the room), beginning with ways in which the plan seems likely to meet the goal, continuing with possible disconnections and problems. These don’t need to be tight in sequence, but participants should always begin with positive feedback.

Some groups prefer to structure the session by beginning with 5 minutes of “warm” feedback (positive – “What are the strengths here?”), 5 minutes of “cool” feedback (more critical – “Where are the gaps?”), and 5 minutes of “hard” or “probing” questions for the presenting teacher to consider.

The facilitator may need to remind the participants of the presenter’s focusing question.

Presenter is silent.

**Reflection (5 minutes)**
* Presenter talks about what (s)he has learned from the participant feedback.
This is NOT a time to defend oneself (this is for the presenter and is
defending isn’t necessary), but a time to explore further interesting ideas that came out of the Feedback section.

**Debrief (5 minutes)**
Facilitator-led open discussion of this tuning experience.