



South Central Summer Lab teachers focused their professional learning on purposeful, interactive read-alouds.

# Students' Literacy Blossoms at Summer Learning Labs

*Summer Labs Give Students a Safe Space to Read and Write, Give Teachers a Chance to Collaborate and Try New Strategies*

The students would usually be long gone, the halls quiet at South Central Elementary in Kinmundy, Illinois.

But for three weeks this summer, the school has bustled with energy as a group of six core teachers and 31 students participated in a summer lab aimed at giving students—and teachers—fresh enthusiasm for reading and writing.

Students spent their mornings reading aloud, performing book passages on stage, and developing student-directed writing. Teachers spent their afternoons discussing the new strategies they were modeling for the high-poverty school's hardest-to-reach kids.

"By the end of the first week, children who would never have picked up a book for reading were asking their teachers, 'When's it time to Read to Self?'" said South Central teacher Terry Liddle, referring to the student read-aloud time.

"The attitude shift, the instructional shift has been huge. Huge," Liddle said.

South Central is one of 21 rural schools in five states that are running literacy labs this summer, thanks to a

Literacy Innovation in Rural Education through Collaboration (LIREC) grant.

The two-year, \$4.6-million grant grew out of conversations between NCTE and two partners, Rural School & Community Trust and the Institute for Educational Leadership, about how to implement a standards-based reform effort in rural schools in a way that builds local capacity and ownership for change, said program director KaiLonnie Dunsmore.

The summer labs provide a focused opportunity for student and teachers alike to develop stronger literacy practices. Yet as Dunsmore points out, they're only one piece of the overall initiative, which includes a comprehensive needs assessment that provides information instructional leadership teams can use during the school year, as well as funds to place books in classrooms, community locations, and with families.

"This grant is intended to develop the capacity of schools and the community to support and sustain high-quality literacy instruction for students in ways that build

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on the unique assets and culture of each community," Dunsmore says. "This is about teacher, family, and community ownership for change and growth."

## Different Regions, Different Challenges

The program's five school clusters, in Vermont, Illinois, North Carolina, Arizona, and West Virginia, demonstrate the diversity in what constitutes "rural" poverty and schools.

"When people hear 'rural schools,' they have an image in mind. But rural schools are very, very different from each other, and interventions need to reflect those distinctions," Dunsmore says.

In Vermont, for example, the schools participating in this work are tiny, and in isolated geographic pockets. Many of their teachers have deep experience and are certified.

Some of the participating schools from West Virginia and North Carolina have high teacher turnover and rely on AmeriCorps and Teach For America teachers. In some of these communities, the infrastructure is crumbling. "In one location, two years ago, the students held school in the gym all winter because they didn't have sufficient heat in the classrooms," shared Dunsmore. "Yet others have new building projects under way."

School size varies dramatically as well. Some participating schools have 300 elementary students; others have 29.

These rural areas reflect distinct cultural and ethnic histories and communities. Some participating schools serve Native American populations (one such is on the Gila River Native American Reservation and is under the authority of the Bureau of Indian Affairs); others are in communities that are predominantly African American; still others are primarily Caucasian.

Dunsmore explained that "each community has a historical and cultural context that informs the design of each literacy plan."

## Access to Books

South Central Elementary is a case of Midwestern poverty. It's in a farming community where school consolidation has left students as young as kindergarten with bus rides of an hour or more to school. And 70 percent of the district's students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, Terry Liddle said.

Access to books is a big challenge in the summer. There's one public library among the four towns the district serves, Liddle says, but many students are "way out in the country; they can't get to it."

"We have a large group of children who have no books at home. It's common during the summer for students to lose what progress they've made during the year in reading," she says. "They don't have anything to read."



Participating summer lab teachers spent collaboration time planning ways to work with informational texts to elicit more rigorous conversations among students.

## Building Stamina

LIREC's summer labs have two goals. They target the most at-risk readers at participating schools, those in the bottom 25 percentile. At the same time, they offer teachers a chance to try new classroom strategies.

"The structure is designed to engage kids. In some ways it's like a camp setting with hands-on, collaborative activities, a chance for them to find books they like and feel competent as readers," says Dunsmore.

Teachers work in co-teaching pairs, sometimes observing each other, sometimes splitting the class into larger groups and smaller or one-on-one groups. The grant allows them to spend afternoons on collaborative professional learning.

"This really is about looking closely at [a teacher's] practice and having a safe space for teachers and students to try new things," Dunsmore said. Overall, "the intention is to shift from seeing weaknesses in students to seeing strengths and building on that."

Terry Liddle reports that at South Central Elementary, as many as 40 teachers and staff members, including PE and music teachers and paraprofessionals, have sat in on classroom sessions learning how to support student literacy.

Each LIREC cluster has a theme. South Central's is stamina, and plays on the region's cattle- and sheep-raising, rodeo, and 4-H background. "We talk to the kids about how even though sometimes life gets hard and you get tired, you don't give up," she says.

Each morning, the K-3 students in the lab have three hours of classroom time focused on independent reading, interactive read-alouds, and writing. The Read to Self activity has been especially popular, according to Liddle.

The students read to themselves and then get one-on-one time with teachers, where teachers are able to ask "depth-of-knowledge questions, questions higher on Bloom's taxonomy," such as evaluation and synthesis questions, instead of simply having students read and recall.

"Teachers are listening to students read. Kids love that. It's one of the biggest gains of what we've seen," says Liddle. South Central's principal has plans to implement Read to Self schoolwide for the next school year.

Liddle said teachers participating in the summer labs very quickly saw a shift in attitude among students in the lab. The students attending were those who had fallen behind in class, and in many cases given up.

"Their attitude is basically they don't feel that they can read."

But having small-group activities and opportunities to choose their own books helped students build confidence.

One second grader, for example, was a quiet student who never answered questions or volunteered to read in class. But in a small group of five students in the lab, says Liddle, he blossomed. In the lab, "he gets to be one of the leaders."

By the second week of the lab, as students prepared to dress up in costumes and perform as part of a "reader's theater," the second grader asked to perform.

"It was one of those moments that just gives you chills," says Liddle.

## Trying New Teaching Strategies

As part of LIREC's needs assessment, schools identified their biggest challenges and focus areas for the grant funds.

Using read-alouds effectively was a common challenge across many of the school sites, says Dunsmore.

"In many places, teachers were doing it infrequently; in other places it was used as filler with few if any opportunities for children to talk about and ask questions about the story," she says. Teachers wanted to learn how to select good books, to build student vocabulary and comprehension, and engage kids in reading.

Leadership teams at LIREC schools were not surprised to hear their teachers also struggled with writing. Many said their teachers simply weren't teaching it.

"Writing is one of the areas where students in the United States really struggle," says Dunsmore. "Under No Child Left Behind, the primary focus was on reading. Many teachers dropped writing because the state tests stopped assessing it.

"Most people don't feel confident in writing, and teachers often don't know how to support students as writers. If they do, there's lots of focus on foundational skills, grammar, punctuation."

Several LIREC schools used their summer labs to try out new approaches to classroom writing, such as shared writing or informational writing for students as early as kindergarten.

At South Central, teachers have used more student-directed writing exercises, taking the classroom and read-aloud conversations into the assignments, but allowing students to come up with the questions.

Students have responded, says Liddle.

"They like it. It's amazing to see the difference between the children I taught in April and May, and to see them blossom like they are right now."

In recent years, Liddle says, so many teachers have felt under pressure from new state mandates. In Illinois, teacher evaluations are now tied to the state's PARCC test, given in grades 3 to 8 and based on Common Core standards.

For teachers at South Central, the summer lab has given them a chance to step back and see their students, and their teaching, with fresh eyes.

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*Trisha Collopy is a Minneapolis writer and editor.*

**To learn how your school can host a summer lab in 2016, call Leslie Froeschl at 1-800-369-6283, ext. 3627, or email [profdev@ncte.org](mailto:profdev@ncte.org).**

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### Increasing Early Literacy in Rural Communities

This article from *Rural Policy Matters* (January 2015) provides a closer look at the Literacy Innovation in Rural Education through Collaboration (LIREC) project and includes comments from project co-director Doris Terry Williams, Executive Director of the Rural Trust.

<http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=3256>