

From the Desk of Stefan Czaporowski, Superintendent of Schools

March is Literacy Month across the country, and there is no better time to celebrate the progress in literacy instruction that is being made in Westfield Public Schools. Our *2017 District Literacy Action Plan* has been approved by the School Committee and is available to review on our WPS website under the “District” tab. This five-year plan outlines our five goals in the areas of leadership, assessment, instruction, staff development, and student support. These new goals, created with input from over 50 representatives of our educational community, build upon the success of our previous five year plan. We continue to provide students, teachers, and principals the support they need as we move forward in all things literacy.

Unlike math which builds on one concept after another, literacy is cumulative and begins at birth. Virtually everything a child sees and hears contributes to his or her ability to read. A child in a home filled with books, who is read to and well-spoken to on a consistent basis, and who is given opportunities to explore parks, wander museums, and interact with the world enters formal education with a great advantage in vocabulary and experience. This prior knowledge allows them to create greater meaning from new learning experiences. Those children who come to school with learning gaps and vocabulary deficits begin their formal education at a disadvantage, and our schools attempt to address these gaps before they become too wide to overcome. When students enter kindergarten, they are learning to read, but by the time students reaches third grade, they should be reading to learn.

Westfield Public Schools is committed to our literacy initiatives that address not only reading and writing, but also include the skills of speaking and listening and understanding the power of language. Over the past five years we have created foundational documents such as “Accountable Talk Charts” and writing rubrics that align with our *2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for ELA and Literacy*. We have implemented classroom structures at the elementary level that ensure all students receive small group direct instruction on a daily basis. We have introduced a writing program at the K-2 level entitled *Written Expression* that gets to the heart of constructing language, and we build upon that knowledge with the *Empowering Writers* program at the 3-5 grade levels.

We have also reconfigured our summer reading program at the secondary level, where we now set aside time to celebrate books through school-wide book discussions and activities. The middle schools and high schools vary in approach, but each maintains the same goals: to inspire a life-long love of reading and promote literacy skills. Many students have returned to school excited to share their books. Even students who claim to “hate reading” have found books that they have enjoyed cover to cover due to a peer or teacher recommendation. And, as research tells us, there is a significant “summer slide” when it comes to learning. Asking students to explore books during the months of summer is one way to deter this academic gap.

Our five year WPS District Literacy Action Plan focuses our efforts on writing in a variety of genres across the curriculum, with an emphasis on argument writing at the secondary level. Within the writing process, our students compare strong and weak arguments, learn to evaluate sources for their credibility, and look at data for its validity. They are taught to compose arguments that are supported by strong reasons and evidence and use sound explanations and reasoning to express why their argument is worthy. Ultimately, students should be able to apply these analytical skills and concepts to their own decision making process when they venture into higher education and/or the work force.

In this fast paced, ever-changing world, the thoughts of diplomat and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Koffi Annan remain steadfast: “Literacy is...the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman, and child can realize his or her full potential.” Literacy is the single most important skill necessary to function effectively in school, the work place and society, and Westfield Public Schools is committed to assisting our students in the development of these vital skills.