

Middle School Vignette

Enter Hope Middle School and you immediately notice the mission of the school prominently displayed. *Every Student: Read to Succeed*. Two students show up in the entry to greet you and introduce themselves as Cassie and Brett. They inform you that they are both seventh graders and will serve as your tour guides. They first lead you to the media center and you notice that the room is full of students reading, researching, using the computers, working together on projects. At the computer stations, the media and technology specialists, along with a seventh grade social studies teacher, are helping students at computers use digital resources to plan for an upcoming debate on the issue of global warming. You immediately notice that all students are working collaboratively to search specific Internet sites for information to use in the debate. Cassie tells you that students throughout the school are honing their digital literacy skills, both in the media center and in their classrooms. “Lots of kids today are pretty savvy with the computer and Internet and have lots of opportunity to use their skills in their assignments and classroom activities,” she says. Brett then remarks that one of the most popular activities is called *Controversy Circles*, in which students and community visitors read the same article and do a discussion web about the important issues. Brett explains, “Sometimes the visitors are people who work in the school or people from different businesses. And the topics are sometimes really interesting like about gun control and medical ethics and dilemmas like if it is good to have economic development if it causes pollution and stuff like that.”

Leaving the media center, you and your tour guides visit the sixth grade wing and walk into a science class. Students are working in pairs doing research on chemical solutions and planning demonstrations that illustrate key concepts related to salinity and saturation. In the science classroom next door students are reading intently on computers and coding the articles they are reading using digital highlighting. The teacher explains they are reading about chemical reactions to determine if the information confirms or contradicts the experiment they just did. In a third science classroom, students are working in small groups to create chapters for a lab manual. In one sixth grade English/language arts classroom, students are doing a nonfiction study and everyone in the room is reading, writing, or conferencing with a peer or with the teacher. In another, some students are creating reader’s theatre scripts based on various science fiction books found in the classroom library while others are working in literature circles on a set of texts based on a theme from their social studies classes.

You then visit several more subject area classrooms. In Ms. Jackson’s math class you notice that students are using a graphic organizer to solve word problems. Students of Mr. Jefferson are doing a paired reading of the chapter in the textbook, questioning, summarizing, and clarifying as needed. In social studies classes, students are writing *A Day in the Life* papers for Greek or Roman times, preparing

for talk show interviews of famous Greeks and Romans and doing compare and contrast charts around cultural aspects of today's Greece vs. ancient Greece.

As you wander to the eighth grade wing, you are impressed with the abundance of literacy projects on the walls of the hallways. Student work is prominently displayed on every available wall space. You notice that eighth grade students are as actively involved as their younger peers. Some students are reading and classifying letters from soldiers from different eras. Others are working on an interdisciplinary unit on roller coaster design and using reciprocal teaching to understand a variety of texts on the topic. Still others are designing their own poetry anthologies, analyzing the pond water they collected and entering the data into a database that an environmental agency has created, and deciding how to write up the experiments they just completed.

As you head back to the office, you pass the family resource room in which a class is being held on strategies for passing the GED. Further down the hall is a conference room where a group of teachers is having an intense discussion about student performance data and how they will use specific literacy support strategies to address students' needs. Cassie explains that one of the teachers is the literacy coach who helps teachers teach.

Once back at the office, you thank Cassie and Brett for their time and insights. The principal joins you in his office after his schedule of classroom "walk-throughs" and asked for your impressions. You point out that in every class you noticed that teachers were modeling or teaching literacy support strategies and that students were practicing them both individually or in small groups. What astounded you was the high level of student engagement, collaboration, critical thinking, and discussion as well as the amount of reading and writing you saw. You mention that in many schools you don't think you would have seen this much reading, writing, presentation, and discussion in a week, much less a day! The principal smiles and says that three years ago, you wouldn't have seen this much at Hope Middle School either. "At first, both teachers and students resisted. Students were asked to work harder and teachers had to learn how to integrate literacy into their subject areas. I arranged for the literacy coach to attend each team meeting once a month for several months and once they got to know what she had to offer, the teachers realized she was a real resource to them. They also learned that I was serious about this literacy effort as well. Each teacher has an Individual Professional Development Plan and I make sure it contains work on literacy improvement. Now, literacy is the way we do business. Everyone contributes to a culture of literacy throughout our school. It took clear expectations, lots of professional development and coaching, and lots of strong leadership but I think we're getting there. Our achievement scores are slowly improving and everyone has really taken it on as a collective responsibility." Reflecting on what you have observed at Hope Middle School, you can't help but agree.