

Literacy – The Tool of Learning

Ken Sommerfeldt

Once a week, the Lethbridge Herald publishes a column written by a superintendent of one of five school jurisdictions in the Lethbridge area. This week's column is authored by Ken Sommerfeldt, Superintendent for Westwind School Division and was published on October 25, 2017. Thank you to the Lethbridge Herald for permission to post this article on the CASS website.

With all that is involved in student learning, the tools of literacy remain foundational to student success at all levels. This sounds too simple to be stated, but it remains central to the conversations that teachers are having as they assess and refine their classroom practice in support of students mastering these essential skills. In classrooms today, teachers are becoming expert in assessing student reading, and comprehension levels, to ensure the mastery of these essential skills. Teachers are working to disaggregate the component skills of reading to better understand each one and then responding to deficiencies that a particular student may have.

While there are many reliable assessments to determine the reading levels of children, it is not enough to come to the understanding that a student is unable to read at grade level. This is the beginning of the work that teachers are engaged in. Depending on which expert one may choose, there are as many as 10 different and unique skills that together equate with the ability to read, express oneself verbally and in writing. Working to understand which of the parts may be deficient and then developing strategies to help students increase their skill level in these areas is very important.

“Too often, when children struggle to read, educators assume the problem lies within the children themselves,” says Deborah Wolter, a literacy consultant in the Ann Arbor Public Schools. “But in fact, decades of research have shown that whatever children’s innate skills, strengths, and abilities may be, what really matters are the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of the teachers and other adults in their lives.”

In her article, Wolter identifies the conditions that most good readers experience so that schools can better replicate those circumstances in the classrooms for kids. Here are a few:

- “Access to plenty of books and reading material” In many schools the concept of a classroom library has become the norm.
- “An army of adult support.” Enlisting adults in this journey to literacy is important, whether it be volunteers in the school or parents and grandparents supporting students.
- “Effective strategies to get unstuck.” Providing skill development to students to contextualize a word within a sentence and allow them to move forward.
- “Reading deeply and thoughtfully.” It is important to provide an environment where students can read silently and for fun.

Since we know that literacy is the tool of learning, what a great responsibility we all have to support students of all ages in their journey to becoming excellent readers.

“Moving Readers from Struggling to Proficient” by Deborah Wolter in Phi Delta Kappan, September 2017 (Vol. 99, #1, p. 37-39)