



# Chapter Four

## Creating a Culture of Achievement

As the World War II veteran recounted his role in the invasion of Normandy, tears streamed from thirteen-year-old Greg's eyes.

"Thank you," Greg said as he jotted notes.

"Son," the veteran replied, "I tell the story every day, and I cry every time."

Our students were at The National World War II Museum in New Orleans to gather information for our team's study of life during the 1940s. As they toured the museum, the students examined the displays and interacted with the veterans who work there. They carried clipboards and took notes to share with one another when they returned to school.

Most impressive throughout the day was our students' level of involvement. They stopped to appreciate every exhibit and took time to imagine the events depicted there. Several people commented on the students' attentiveness and good behavior. One visitor, who had witnessed the interaction between Greg and the Normandy veteran, turned to Monique and said, "I've been watching your students. They have such intelligent questions. It is obvious they already know a lot about World War II. They are so involved and well behaved. They must be your school's most advanced class."

Brian and Ashton, two of the students who heard the woman's praise, smiled and giggled at the comment. A smile spread across Greg's face. The students exchanged a quick glance with Monique. She winked at the students and then thanked the woman for noticing their efforts.

"Yes," Monique said. "They are extremely intelligent and very well behaved when they choose to be."

Contrary to the woman's assumptions, our students would not have been considered advanced by any traditional measure. All forty-four were members of our school's Challenge program, which was designed to put struggling students on a fast track to high school. Each student had been retained twice during

elementary school and was at risk of dropping out before becoming part of our teaching team in the seventh grade. They were overage and unmotivated. A year later, at the time of the museum visit, they had made up the equivalent of two grade levels and had begun looking at failure through the rearview window.

Their path to progress was rocky and uneven. Our performance as their teachers provided plenty of pitfalls too. But the journey to reach that point proved to be the most rewarding school year of our careers, and the lessons from those experiences have enriched our work, offering valuable insights about how effective teaching teams can change young adolescents' futures.

Every teacher struggles to reach all of his or her students. One of the great myths of education is that learning is linear, with each new idea linked to the previous one like colorful and connected towers of Lego blocks. According to this theory, a teacher needs only to fit this piece to that piece to construct the curriculum, and the lessons will seep into students' brains steadily and surely. Reality is much messier than that.

For example, though we pride ourselves on reaching out to students who build walls around themselves and balk in the face of anything remotely educational, some have slipped through our grasp. Recall from Chapter 1 our struggle with a student who was going to be expelled for discipline issues and for repeatedly leaving campus during the school day. Looking back, we realize that we became emotional with each other because we had invested so much time and energy trying to turn this student around. We had spent months counseling, cajoling, encouraging, befriending, conferencing, teaching, and begging him to make wise decisions. However, in the end, he rejected our help, including the final appeal we made to the expulsion committee on his behalf. Eventually, the school dismissed him.

We could have become discouraged by our failure to save this student from his self-destructive impulses. Instead, we chose to focus on what he had accomplished during our time together, reflect on some missed opportunities, and use this knowledge to improve our practices. The same student, prior to his expulsion, had helped his peers with math problems, stayed after school to sweep our classrooms, and brought his brother to meet his teachers. Academically, he had stints of success. For a whole week, he turned in every homework assignment. He wrote full-page entries in his journals. He floated around the class during math to assist other students. Success, for some, must be measured in small steps forward.

However, he was unable to maintain these efforts. We discovered that education was not valued in his family. Most of his siblings had actually raised their esteem within the family by dropping out of school to go to work. Because

our student was too young to drop out legally, he figured out another way to disengage from school. Ultimately, we did not have the power to keep him in.

## Learning to Value Education

Schools today are full of students who are struggling for one reason or another. And they can't all be lumped together into one stereotypical pool of poverty and ethnicity. Before you begin to conjure thoughts that students at risk of failure only inhabit the hallways of urban schools, consider this frightening image. In *On Common Ground* (DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour, eds. 2005), Roland Barth and his colleagues define at-risk students as those who are unlikely to continue learning once they leave school. Barth's explanation suggests that both average achievers and gifted students from "Beaver Cleaver" homes may be in danger of disconnecting if they don't receive the right stimulation and support in school.

Several years ago, when we began examining national and school data as a starting point for our investigation of the common causes of student failure, we were stunned by what we found. For example, we discovered that in 1997–1998, only 30.5 percent of students seventeen years old and older with learning disabilities held a standard high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education 2000). At Dutchtown Middle School, we were on track to continue that awful trend. At the time, just 11 percent of our school's special needs students scored at the proficient level on the state assessments, which meant they were in danger of repeating a grade. In addition, many of our students in the Challenge program—not all of them with identified learning disabilities—had already repeated grade levels while in elementary school. Research suggested that this factor alone made them twenty times more likely to drop out of school than students who are on pace when they enter the middle grades (Rumberger 1995). Other studies have found that one grade retention increases a student's risk of dropping out by 40 to 50 percent, while being retained two grade levels increases the risk by 90 percent (Roderick 1995). Such a frightening statistic underscores our critically important roles as middle-level educators.

As a team, we have tried a range of class configurations to combat failure, including separating a large group of underachievers for accelerated instruction, as we did with the Challenge group during the 2005–2006 school year. We also have tried blending special needs students into our regular classes instead of placing them in self-contained sessions, as well as teaching the same group of students for two years to provide more consistent instruction and build on secure, established relationships. Every year we analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the students whom we inherit and try to find a team arrangement that will be most beneficial.

But appropriate groupings are only one part of the solution for struggling students. An equally crucial component is showing them how to learn. Many students enter middle school behind in one category or another. They may have limited language skills, social and emotional gaps, inadequate family support, or weak foundations in one subject or many. Addressing those deficiencies takes teamwork and a determined approach to meet students where they are and move them ahead, whether by inches or leaps.

Students closely watch their teachers—even when the adolescents seem preoccupied with a dozen nonacademic distractions—so it’s important for us to model effective learning habits. One day, for example, Amanda loudly and purposefully stacked three novels, four academic books, six academic journals, seven newspapers, three trade magazines, and two articles downloaded from the Internet on top of the overhead projector in the front of her classroom. The students were so perplexed that they just sat and stared. They had been expecting to begin their math lesson as soon as they entered the room.

Amanda stood by the stack and said, “This represents the information I have read this week. I am a learner and, as such, I am in constant need of new knowledge. My appetite is never satisfied. Let me share a few things I have found out this week from my adventures in text.”

Amanda continued for the next five minutes sharing what she had learned about how a student’s brain processes new information, the life of the ancient Romans, and the unbelievable carnage at the Battle of Gettysburg.

“So, you read all of that?” asked Charles.

“No, I did not read every word in every one of these books, but as a learner I used specific skills to find what interested me,” Amanda responded. “I browsed the tables of contents in the books or I used the index to find what might interest me.”

Amanda then shared how she might read an entire article from one magazine and highlight important information, while in another magazine she might just skim the material for key ideas.

“Do you ever sleep?” April asked, laughing.

“Well, I know if I have a book with me, I am never alone, so I read everywhere and whenever I have time,” Amanda said. “For example, yesterday when y’all went to lunch, I had twenty minutes to read through this article on deer populations, which we will use soon in our class. Reading is something I find time to do.”

In the back corner of the room, Charles raised his hand to ask, “But you are a math teacher; what does this have to do with math?”

Amanda replied, “Being a math teacher is second to my being a learner. If I am not learning, how can I expect you to do so? I don’t have the money or the time to fly off to Rome, but I can read about it. Reading is my transport vehicle, my time machine, so to speak. I can go anywhere at any time. I also love to talk about what I am learning, which is another habit of voracious learners. So, I will share what I am reading throughout the year, and I in turn expect you to share with me.”

The students sat and pondered these ideas very thoughtfully. Although it would take time for many of them to believe in the value of reading in multiple disciplines, the seeds were planted that day.

Such examples and explanations are crucial for middle grades students, especially for those who do not live in homes where reading for pleasure and academic discussions are part of the family’s routines. Amanda’s reading demonstration is one of the many short activities we use at the beginning of the school year to set the standard for meaningful learning. Our instructional plans would be pointless if we did not also provide daily reminders and examples of how scholars reflect, debate, synthesize, evaluate, and deepen their understanding as they develop intrinsic motivation to explore the world.

One of our team’s formative goals is establishing an insatiable hunger for learning. We believe the best way to stimulate students’ academic appetites is by providing a rich intellectual diet. But first, we have to persuade them to try things they may have found distasteful in the past.

For many students, poor reading skills interfere with academic success in all subject areas. When we taught the Challenge program, 75 percent of our students started the year with scores below the fiftieth percentile level on a national, norm-referenced test of reading skills. Clarissa was typical of many students who had developed defiant attitudes to mask their frustrations. When she entered Monique’s language arts class in August, she placed one hand on her hip, flashed her fingers in front of her face in a Hollywood-quality Z-snap, and said, “My sister said you make people like to read. Well, I hate to read, and I ain’t gonna read no book!”

Monique simply smiled and replied, “You will read before the year is over, I promise. There are tons of excellent books out there, and I’m sure the right one is waiting for you somewhere. I’ll help you find it.”

Clarissa backed down just a little. “I know you’re gonna make me read, but I ain’t gonna like it!” she said.

By January of the same school year, Clarissa had recorded a message for our team literacy campaign in which she excitedly stated, “Reading is fun if you

know how, so get a book, snuggle up, and read!” Here was the queen of the antireading crowd working to persuade others that it was a worthwhile activity!

## Literate—and Lovin’ it!

Clarissa’s transformation was not instantaneous, miraculous, or isolated. It resulted from a calculated team effort to place reading center stage in all subject areas. From the first day of school, we design activities to infuse literacy throughout the curriculum.

Sometimes the methods prompt students to question our motives and doubt our sanity. Two weeks into one school year, Ashley quietly confided in Amanda, “I don’t want to be mean, but I think Mrs. Wild is very A.D.D. Maybe she needs medicine.”

“What do you mean?” Amanda asked, pretending not to know why the student thought Monique had attention deficit disorder.

“Well, she keeps jumping from thing to thing in class,” Ashley explained. “She keeps starting this movie and three minutes into it, she turns it off and says, ‘Let’s do something else.’ I don’t know if she is right, Mrs. Mayeaux. You might need to check on her.”

Kathryn, who had overheard the exchange, stifled a giggle. Both she and Amanda knew what Monique was up to. In the middle of a lesson, Monique would say, “I don’t feel like doing this any more. Let’s watch a movie!” Of course, the students were willing to stop the lesson to watch a movie, so Monique put a *Star Wars* DVD into the player and let the credits roll. As soon as the first character appeared in the movie, Monique said, “Aw, this isn’t making any sense. Let’s go back to work.” Without any explanation, she then continued the class as if there hadn’t been any interruption.

Monique followed this pattern for four days. She would stop the lesson midstream to resume the movie, only to turn it off after complaining about being bored or not understanding the plot. When Kathryn was in the classroom, she would sympathize with the students and beg to watch more of the movie right along with them. When the students moved to Amanda’s class, she patiently listened to their complaints and controlled her desire to laugh.

Monique went about the school day as though nothing was amiss, but on the sly she was recording the comments students made:

“If you would let it play, you’d understand it.”

“You can’t watch two minutes at a time; you’ll never get it.”

“You have to give it a chance. Don’t just give up on the story.”

“The first five minutes is just the setting and the characters. They haven’t even gotten to the plot!”

“You’ll never get through it like this.”

“Have you ever watched a movie? This is *not* how you do it!”

Finally, on the fifth day, Monique decided that watching a new movie was in order. She popped *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* into the machine and said, “I know what the problem is. *Star Wars* is a bad movie. Let’s try *Indiana Jones*.”

Of course, *Indiana Jones* met the same fate as *Star Wars*, and a new cycle of interrupted and disconnected activities began. By this point our students were beside themselves with frustration. “Why are you doing this?” they asked. “You are picking good movies; you’re just not watching enough of them. The problem is not the movie; it’s the way you’re watching it.”

Jean Paul timidly ventured an idea: “I know. You’re trying to make a point about something, aren’t you?” he asked.

“About what?” Monique answered with another question.

“I don’t know,” Jean Paul replied. “But something about language or reading since this is language arts.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Tate, picking up the conversation thread. “You’re showing us what *not* to do.”

“What not to do when?” Monique asked, purposely obtuse.

“When we read?” asked Tate.

“Yes,” Monique said, “and you have supplied me with all the lessons I wanted you to learn about reading.”

Kathryn began to read from the list of student comments that Monique had compiled, and the students groaned. They had been fooled into creating the list of arguments that we would use the rest of the year to encourage them to read. Here are some of the lessons the students discovered:

- Give books a chance and you might just find a story you like.
- Spend time reading. It is impossible to get involved in a story if you only spend a couple of minutes with it.

- Read at least a third of the book before you give up. The beginning of the book builds the plot by introducing characters, establishing the setting, and so on. The early part of the story or book might not be as exciting as the middle, but it helps you understand the meaning.
- Don't skip from book to book. Spend time finding a story that interests you so that you won't abandon every book you pick up.
- Books are like movies; they're stories. If you like movies, you may just enjoy reading a book.

Our effort to captivate young readers does not end with this little bit of fun. If we want our students to love reading, we have to link literacy to every subject. We also use reading to reinforce skills, such as cooperation, that help our team function effectively.

*Seedfolks*, by Paul Fleischman (1999), is a wonderful, short book that we have used to teach students how different people with different ideas can come together to make a community. We do not relegate the book to Monique's language arts classes. Because we want to demonstrate the strong connections in a community, we each read a few chapters a day to whichever group we have after lunch. The book's lessons would not resonate if we simply read a passage and then walked away, so we extend the classroom conversation through dialogue journals. In addition, we may make simple academic connections such as asking students to plant bean seeds in our small team garden during science class. We talk about how we jointly care for the plants, which leads to discussions about how we could grow if we all worked together. These conversations, in turn, lead to others that examine the qualities of supportive communities. Through such exchanges, our students realize that what they read and learn applies to their lives.

As Joey reflected in his journal, "I think the quote hanging in Mrs. Wild's room that says, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world . . . ' relates to the book *Seedfolks* that we read in Mrs. Mayeaux's class. In *Seedfolks*, they changed their town and how people treated each other. I think it relates to our class because we do stuff to help each other and the community."

That year, when we had finished reading *Seedfolks* aloud, our students missed the daily habit. So Amanda began reading *Tangerine*, by Edward Bloor (1997), in her math classes. Students started rushing in the door each day to get their ten-minute literary fix.

As the story progresses, the book takes a sad turn when one of the characters dies. During class, Amanda read the following passage: “Erik stopped just inside the garage and said, ‘Mike Costello is dead, Mom. He got killed at practice today.’” Then she closed the book.

“What?” students yelled, wanting more.

“That’s it,” Amanda said. “That is all I am reading to you. If you want to know what happened, you will have to get the book and read it.”

The screaming match began.

“Where can we get one?” students cried out in unison.

“It just so happens I have nine copies right here,” Amanda said, “and I will draw names for anyone interested in finishing the book over the weekend.”

When twenty students threw their hands into the air, Amanda wrote their names on slips of paper. After the drawing, Joey was not among those who had received a classroom copy.

“They have to be done by Monday, right?” he asked. “Well, I will just go buy my own.”

Joey and many others did buy their own copies of *Tangerine*, including several students who told us that they had made their first visit to a bookstore during the weekend. Their enthusiasm reminded us of the pivotal moments during our own adolescence when reading became a passion—and of the adults who either spurred our interest or snuffed it out.

Amanda recalled the librarian who refused to let her borrow a copy of *Gone with the Wind*. Kathryn told us how she had to wait until the twelfth grade to find a teacher who made her excited about literature, and Monique revealed that she had struggled to comprehend anything she read before the fourth grade. Though she could read the words, her fluency often interfered with understanding. The lack of positive experiences and her perception that reading was out of her grasp caused Monique to avoid books whenever possible.

Monique’s view of reading changed when her grandmother took her to the library one summer and helped Monique select a “thick book,” which she then read cover to cover. Her grandmother checked with Monique daily to see what she thought about *Johnny Appleseed*, the book she’d chosen. During their conversations, Monique’s grandmother revealed that she, too, had read *Johnny Appleseed* as a child and told of her favorite events in the plot. The

conversations carried Monique through the book, at first because she did not want to disappoint her grandmother and eventually because she wanted to find out what happened next in the story. The powerful combination of good literature, authentic interactions with another reader, and pride in finishing an entire book helped Monique become a passionate reader.

Reflecting on this life event caused Monique to decide that as a teacher she wanted to show her students how to love reading just as her grandmother had taught her. Now, because we work as a team, our students experience three adults supporting them in the way Monique's grandmother supported her and illustrated the joys of reading for her. This occurs for all of the reading they complete in class, both independent reading for enjoyment and assigned reading for class.

## Reading Becomes a Habit

The reading we typically assign in our classes consists of literature that encourages deep thinking. We read short stories such as “The Lady or the Tiger” by Frank Stockton (1884), which drives our students crazy because of its inconclusive ending. Months later they continue to debate the story during class, at lunch, and during recess. We read novels such as *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton (1967), which pull our students into the action before they even realize they're reading. In addition to assigning poignant literature, we consciously seek to develop students' reading habits by letting them make informed choices about what they will read.

Early in our collaboration, we used Nancie Atwell's book *In the Middle* as an idea generator for our team practices. As Atwell explains, students become more enthusiastic about reading when they get to choose what they read and have access to a wide selection of text.

We took this message to heart and began surrounding our students with great literature of all genres. Our team now has a library of more than one thousand titles, which are arranged alphabetically by the author's last name and housed in Monique's classroom. When students need resources or a book to read, they first check the team library and then visit the school library if necessary. However, our students do not just randomly choose the books they'll read from our shelf. Without guidance, they would spend most of their time shuffling from shelf to shelf randomly choosing books to read. Without proper background knowledge about the types of books available to them, our students cannot make informed decisions as they select books to read.

To help students match books to their interests and make a plan for their potential reading, we use a variety of techniques. First, our students maintain a list of favorite authors, genres, and books. Once they identify the books they enjoy and the factors contributing to their enjoyment, they are more likely to seek books that they are predisposed to like. In addition, our students maintain a list of books they want to read so that they always have specific books they can look for on the crowded shelves without resorting to random choices that hold no significance for them.

Using book talks, we recommend books we've enjoyed to students by listing the criteria for quality. Our students listen to the talks and make recommendations for books they've read that are similar. Sometimes our students have read the books we're introducing, and they reveal their experiences with the books as well. Eventually, our students will take over the book talks and the job of persuading their classmates to read the books they've enjoyed.

In addition to book talks, we often give our students a chance to sample various books from the class library. We place one book on each student's desk. We then provide two minutes for students to peruse the books and make notations. At the end of two minutes our students either add the book to their must-read list, or pass it on to the next student in the row. The books continue around the classroom in a round-robin fashion until students have been exposed to ten to fifteen books during the session. We have found that once students discover the types of books that interest them and begin relating those books to other life and school experiences, they are hooked.

Reading eventually becomes a habit for our students, which is the first step to becoming avid readers. But good habits must be cultivated through structure, guidance, and practice. We hold our students accountable for reading twenty minutes each day during class and twenty minutes at home each night. We track their progress by recording page numbers as our students silently read in class. Each night our students record the number of the last page they've read, and we check their charts the following day during our twenty minutes of independent reading.

In addition to monitoring students' reading progress, we take the time to discuss the books with them during brief asides in class. We also often ask them to use journal entries to relate independent reading to assigned reading by asking questions such as, "What have you read independently that reminds you of the short story 'Flowers for Algernon'? Explain how the two pieces of literature are related."

Ultimately, we want our students to explore books of their own choosing to experience what Teri Lesesne calls the "unconscious delight" of reading

that occurs when we become absorbed in books. In *Making the Match* (2003), Lesene describes the stages students pass through on their way to becoming lifelong readers. These steps include reading autobiographically to search for characters like themselves, reading for philosophical speculation, and reading for aesthetic and vicarious experiences.

Time is a crucial stimulus for enthusiastic readers. “Frequent practice in reading is one of the main contributors to developing fluency,” David A. Sousa reminds us in *How the Brain Learns to Read*. “Children who lack fluency read slowly and laboriously, often making it difficult for them to remember what has been read and to relate the ideas expressed in the text to their own experiences” (2005a, 82).

The impact of focusing on reading across the team amazes us year after year. Our toughest group of students produced the most surprising results. Of the forty-four students in the Challenge program, only six had read a novel independently before joining our team. The others had listened to books on tape in class but had not actually read for themselves. By the end of the school year, they were reading a book every two weeks, on average. Some students read one book a week, a few read a book every three weeks, but every student significantly improved.

This is not to say that we consider quantity the only evidence of success, but the more students read, the more fluent they become. Our students also developed new perspectives about reading’s benefits.

Joshua visited us on his first day of high school to reveal his discovery to Monique. “You know, Mrs. Wild, I didn’t stop reading just ’cause school was over. I remembered what y’all said about how reading helps you learn. Looks like I learned a lot this summer ’cause I read five books.”

## Discovering Diamonds in the Rough

Though improving students’ literacy skills is a starting point, it is by no means the only way to turn low performers into high achievers. As a team, we also have to show students *how* to learn. This might seem obvious, even disingenuous, but the truth is that many young adolescents do not understand how to “do” school. They don’t know why some students seem to get the game while others don’t. It’s as if they were absent the day the rules were explained.

When working with the Challenge program, for example, we quickly discovered that our struggling students were extremely curious, articulate, introspective, and interested in learning. They craved success, yet they

continuously came up short because they didn't know how to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, at least in conventional terms. Not surprisingly, the students were distrustful of teachers and administrators and considered school an unpleasant place. We had to show them a different side.

We started with positive self-talk. Steven was typical of the students on the Challenge team. He believed he was "stupid," a "failure," a boy who belonged at the back of the class. Standardized tests made him particularly anxious. The upcoming end-of-year test would determine whether or not he would advance to high school, and Steven was terrified of failing.

At the end of each day during the week the state set aside for annual testing, Steven would come to us dejected and unsure. We would give him a team pep talk. "You can do this," we told him. "You have worked so hard. Look at how much better your reading abilities are than they were in the beginning. You are ready."

Each morning we would urge him on with similar phrases, and Steven would trudge through another day of testing. He would thank us for believing in him commenting, "Y'all really make me feel like I can do this." During lunch we actually overheard Steven commenting to another student about the test, "Sure, man, you can do it. Just believe in yourself."

Other times we pulled students outside to discuss their strengths: "John, you are such a leader in our class. Your opinion is valued by the other students, especially Sam. I don't want Sam to know this, but I need help. Is there any way you could just mention things like, 'Sam, you are really good in math,' or ask Sam to 'help' you with something?"

This approach serves two purposes. First, it draws out students' natural talents. John began guiding the class in a positive direction. Second, students hear positive comments from someone other than their teachers. Sam needed to know that his peers thought well of him.

The one pitfall to avoid when modeling positive talk is fake praise. You have to be sincere, or kids will eat you alive. In addition, the praise can't be the same for every student. It must be specific and address individual needs. Over time, students start internalizing the positive messages. What they hear becomes what they think about themselves. We experienced this professionally as well. When we were preparing our presentation for the Disney Teacher Awards, we felt as scared and unsure as many of our students do on test days. We'll never forget the pep talk that Steven provided.

"You can do this," he told us one morning. "You have worked so hard; just show them what ya got. Isn't that what you told me? If it works for me, shouldn't it work for you?"

## Visualizing Success

We realize that we won't always be around to give our students the moral support they need to tackle tough tasks, so we teach them to use their talents to overcome their weaknesses. Some of our students find it quite difficult to acknowledge their strengths, so we systematically help them identify what they do well so they can rely on their strengths in difficult situations.

To uncover students' talents, particularly the talents of those with learning disabilities, it helps to work collaboratively with your colleagues. We're not proud to admit this, but in the past we often viewed our special education students through a different lens than our "regular" students. Before Kathryn joined our team, we often fell into the habit of creating different, less difficult versions of class work for our special needs students. Our perception was that they could not pass our classes if they were required to do the same activities we'd planned for our general population students. Kathryn's presence on our team challenged us to plan our lessons so that our special needs students received strategies and individualized support to help them complete the same class work required for other students.

Terrence was one student who opened our eyes. In math class one afternoon, we asked students to work with partners and use graph paper and string to solve a fixed-area problem based on the famous feud between the Hatfields and McCoys.

As our students were trying to figure out how much fence Mr. Hatfield would need to separate his pigs from Mr. McCoy's field, Terrence suddenly jumped up and shouted, "Hey! Make it a square. That's it!"

Amanda was so surprised she jumped back. Terrence was usually a quiet, almost withdrawn student who seldom had the correct answer. When Amanda asked him to explain his reasoning by writing it on the whiteboard, he confidently elaborated for the other students.

"Y'all look at this," he said. "If I make my string into a square, I have more area with the same perimeter. Now that is cool."

His peers stared at him, not sure whether they should believe him. Terrence dismissed them with an insouciant wave of his hand. "I'm right," he declared and strutted back to his seat.

Amanda asked him later how he came up with the answer so quickly, and he replied, "I dunno, but I just saw it in my head somehow."

How often do we present lessons or accept answers only one way in our classrooms? What would happen if we periodically shifted the perspective, as

one might do by turning a kaleidoscope to get an alternate view? Could we help students like Terrence suddenly see the light? Teamwork encouraged us to ask ourselves such questions, and collaboration enabled us to find some new solutions.

In our daily consultations and planning with Kathryn, we examined Terrence's math breakthrough through a metacognitive lens: *how* had he learned about learning? Initially, it seemed that while his brain was processing new information, he did not understand what to do with the data. His inability to *see* concepts and connect them to prior knowledge had slowed him down. That is, until the day he found the right tools.

Roger Farr (2002) further clarified this for us during a presentation at National Middle School Association's annual conference. Farr suggested that many students do not realize they are supposed to be thinking as they look at the words on a page. As a result, they may recall words later but not comprehend them.

After we returned to school following the conference, we discussed how the inability to think about their learning might have handicapped some of our students. Amanda recalled those who weren't able to visualize word problems in math, even when she asked them to draw the equations. Amanda and Monique then began compiling and comparing lists of students who didn't seem to have a cognitive compass, and the overlap from subject to subject was astounding. We knew we had to make some changes in our instruction.

We started by consciously crafting lessons designed to make the learning process more transparent. We constructed our worksheets so they focused on students' thought processes rather than following a traditional fill-in-the-blank format. For example, we developed reading guides such as the one shown in Figure 4.1.

Such guides not only improve reading comprehension and math problem-solving skills, they also help us monitor students and correct any misperceptions. As students read silently, we can walk around the classroom and observe their illustrations and comments on the reading guides. Based on what we see, we can quietly redirect a student or make a notation to conduct a mini-lesson later for several students without interrupting the current activity. During our walk-arounds, Kathryn asks the special education students to explain the reading guide to her in order to check for comprehension in addition to tracking their pace through the story.

Visualization guides used in all subject areas eventually double as guides for our large-group discussions, which we call share circles. Because we know that students are more apt to internalize information they actively discuss, all of us use focused classroom conversations to extend our instruction. However,

## “The Lady or the Tiger” Reading Guide

Directions: As you read the story “The Lady or the Tiger,” each time you come to an asterisk (\*) that I have placed within the text, pause and reflect upon what you’ve read so far. Then fill in the chart for the section you’ve just completed reading.

| Draw a picture of what happened | What questions do you have? | What do you predict will happen next? |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| *1)                             |                             |                                       |
| *2)                             |                             |                                       |
| *3)                             |                             |                                       |

What do you think happens after this story ends?

What is the effect of this surprise ending on the reader?

What do you want to discuss with the class?

**Figure 4.1** “The Lady or the Tiger” Reading Guide

in the past we were often disappointed by the results because our students were not discussing topics with any depth or sharing information with each other. Instead, they waited for us to prompt them and tried to give us the answers they thought we were searching for. Or they let one or two of their peers supply all the answers while the rest took notes and remained silent.

A typical exchange went like this: After reading “If I Had a Country, I Should Be a Patriot” by Frederick Douglass (1847), “Ain’t I a Woman” by Sojourner Truth (1851), and “Sympathy” by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1899), students answered some questions individually; then we talked about the literature.

**Monique:** *What does the bird in this poem symbolize?*

**Dakota:** *Slaves.*

**Monique:** *How do you know it’s about slaves?*

**Samantha:** *They’re trying to get free and they’re being held against their will. It says they keep beating against the bars of the cage.*

**Monique:** *How does this poem relate to what we’ve been studying in history and the two speeches we’ve read?*

[Silence]

**Monique:** *Anyone?*

[Silence]

**Monique:** *Think about what we’ve been studying.*

**George:** *It’s about slavery and going free.*

**Monique:** *Yes, Morgan?*

**Morgan:** *What’s the answer to number 3?*

Obviously, this was not the stimulating and enlightening conversation we had intended. We complained about these lopsided dialogues during our team meetings, but initially we didn’t know how to improve them. Through ongoing discussions, research, and observations, we realized that just as students needed to be taught how to think about what they were reading, they needed direct instruction about how to talk about what they were learning.

We started by arranging our classrooms in a circle for discussions. Facing each other encouraged students to respond to the person who had spoken last. We asked students to address one another by name. When students directed their responses to us instead of to the speaker, we remained silent.

This was difficult to do in the early stages, but by refusing to make meaning for students we helped them learn how to do so themselves. Tentatively at first, and then more confidently, they offered responses to one another. Later, we rejoined the conversations to redirect topics or to clarify misconceptions.

We discovered that before they could discuss topics in depth, many students needed time to gather their thoughts and practice phrasing substantive questions and responses. Small groups provided a safe training space. Using discussion guides, students would work with several peers to analyze a topic and prepare follow-up questions for larger class discussions. Kathryn would pull some of the groups aside to review the discussion guide and let the students practice their questioning and answering techniques so they might feel more confident when addressing their classmates. This method proved especially helpful to our special needs students, whose language processing delays inhibited their oral discourse. Figure 4.2 includes a discussion guide we prepared for the literature series previously mentioned.

Because they had adequate “think time” and the chance to try out their ideas on a smaller audience, students became more confident presenting their ideas to the whole class. Now our classroom conversations are much richer and more nuanced than before. Consider the difference in this recent discussion about the Douglass, Truth, and Dunbar essays:

**Monique:** *Over the course of the last three days we’ve read “Ain’t I a Woman” by Sojourner Truth, “If I Had a Country, I Should Be a Patriot” by Frederick Douglass, and “Sympathy” by Paul Laurence Dunbar. I’d like to discuss those three pieces of writing. Who’d like to start?*

**Tyler:** *The poem is deep as in deep like sad and emotional. I thought this because it says the bird is bleeding on the cruel bars. It makes it sound sad and deep.*

**Discussion Guide for “If I Had a Country, I Should Be a Patriot,” “Ain’t I a Woman,” and “Sympathy”**

1. What common themes can you find in these three pieces?
2. Douglass claimed that a true patriot is one who “rebukes and does not excuse its (the country’s) sins.” How does this apply to your responsibilities as a citizen?
3. Sojourner Truth was a black woman and therefore was denied many rights in the 1800s. What is the most important right that she was denied? Why do you think so?
4. What similarities exist among Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and the caged bird?
5. Can freedom exist without people being willing to fight for it?
6. List three questions or topics that you’d like to discuss with the entire class.

Figure 4.2 Sample Discussion Guide

**Dustin:** *I agree with you, Tyler, because it [the bird] is representing slavery. It makes you think of how slaves were beaten and hurt and how they prayed. It's sad.*

**Monique:** *So, Dustin says the bird represents a slave. What do we call that in literature when something represents something else?*

**Amanda and Ariana:** *Symbolism.*

**Monique:** *Knowing this is symbolism, what do you think of Tyler's comment about the wings beating against the bars of the cage?*

**Tyler:** *I think the wings are like the whip.*

**Jude:** *Well, no, I think when his wings are beating against the bars it's like he's trying to get free, but every time he tries to it would just get worse. Then he'd bleed more and fly back to his perch until he was strong enough to try it again.*

**Monique:** *Abhh . . . until he was strong enough to try again. So, Tyler says it reminds him of the whip; Jude says it's representing looking for freedom. Let's go with the freedom thought for a minute. Does freedom mean something? Anyone?*

**Joseph:** *It should. You should respect it. It's a privilege, not a right.*

**Tyler and Donovan:** *It is actually a right.*

At this point many students boisterously jumped in with their opinions and continued the conversation, debating whether freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution.

The mundane question-and-answer sessions of the past have been replaced by these engaging discussions, thanks to deliberate instruction about the art of conversation and guided reflection time to articulate ideas.

## Stimulating the Brain

All this thinking about thinking led to the creation of a short multidisciplinary unit focused on the human brain. Using resources such as David Sousa's *How the Brain Learns* (2005b) and *How the Brain Learns to Read* (2005a) and Robert Sylwester's *How to Explain a Brain* (2005), we wove mini-lessons about metacognition into our daily curriculum.

For example, in science class, Amanda developed a sequence on the brain's physiology. She discussed the proper care of the brain, including sleep and

exercise needs. In math class, she asked students to chart their sleep patterns for one week. We were shocked to discover that 85 percent of our students were getting less than four hours of sleep per night, when the recommended time for young adolescents is eight and a quarter to nine and a half hours a night (Breus 2004). Amanda challenged students to adjust their sleep habits to reach the recommended level for one week and write about their emotional and physical responses in their dialogue journals.

April's comments were indicative of the profound insights students gained as a result of their studies. "I thought I was depressed and dumb," she wrote. "I just needed sleep." Her grades improved sharply after she began sleeping eight hours a night.

As part of our unit on the brain, Monique taught mini-lessons in reading about how the brain reads and what is supposed to be happening. To help students understand, Monique used a filing cabinet analogy to illustrate how the brain stores and retrieves schema, thus allowing us to connect new information to what we've previously learned.

The students began to vocalize the connections they were making while they read. "Hey, Mrs. Wild, this passage reminds me of last year when we visited the beach with my grandparents. Is that a schema connection?" In this way the brain focus was revisited periodically throughout the year by us and by the students. Many students were so intrigued that they joined the website Neuroscience for Kids at <http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/neurok.html>.

The knowledge students gained about their learning habits helped them become less dependent on us and showed them how much they could contribute to their education. The brain and metacognition unit was especially helpful for the special education students as they learned to associate new knowledge with prior knowledge using the "brain-as-a-filing-cabinet" metaphor. As a result, we started encouraging them to set specific and measurable academic goals. Vague ambitions, such as "I will do better in reading class," were unacceptable. Rather, we pushed for real progress: "I will read at least twenty pages a night of a grade-level (or higher) book to increase my fluency and vocabulary." Learning how to analyze students' learning needs so they could achieve these goals became the next phase of our agenda.

We encouraged students to reflect on their previous struggles and identify some possible causes, such as poor study habits or weak organizational skills. With this information, we could help them design an intervention plan, including seeking help from teachers and peers and setting up self-incentives to improve motivation. For special education students, we helped them align

their personal goals with the goals stated in their federal individualized education plan (IEP) documents. In turn, at their IEP conferences we could show their parents and the administrators what the students were working on to help themselves meet their yearly goals. Figure 4.3 shows one of the tools we developed for this purpose.

Throughout the school year, students reflect on their successes and failures and adjust their goals accordingly. They look at their test scores, class assignments and projects, report-card grades, and other evidence of achievement. They rate their classroom performance on a scale of 1–10 across all subject areas and also track their reading habits, visits to the disciplinarian’s office, and their greatest accomplishments during each nine-week grading period. Figure 4.4 shows one of the self-evaluation tools we use.

Students also must provide detailed answers to the following questions:

1. What accomplishment achieved during this grading period are you most proud of? Why?
2. How many books have you read during this grading period? List them, and highlight your favorite.
3. What do you really need to improve? Why?
4. What specific things can you do to make this improvement?
5. What is the most important thing you have learned so far this year? Explain.

For added encouragement, we kept copies of all the goal sheets and self-evaluations to use whenever we met with students or their families. Students also strived to keep each other on course by sharing their goals and evaluations during peer conferences. These student-to-student coaching sessions became a regular part of our team repertoire when we realized how much structured support struggling students needed to reach their academic and behavioral targets.

We designed an academic success plan that included the following components:

### *Support Team*

- All team members, both students and teachers, identified their strengths and weaknesses.
- We posted the list of identified strengths throughout the team areas.
- Students could use other team members’ strengths to assist them with their own weaknesses.
- We provided time twice each week for peer tutors to help other students with academics.

**Goals for \_\_\_\_\_ Grading Period**

First Area of Concern: \_\_\_\_\_

*Remember: Your goals should be very specific. You should be able to provide evidence that you have worked toward and reached your goals. Focus on small accomplishments that will assist you in achieving these important goals.*

My goal is:

The reason I chose this goal is:

My three-step plan for achieving this goal is:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Midterm**  
*(when interim reports are sent home)*

This is what I have done to work on my goal so far:

*Check one:*

\_\_\_\_ This is what I still have to do:

\_\_\_\_ I am making the following changes to my plan:

**End of Grading Period**

\_\_\_\_ Yes, I accomplished my goal.

*Provide proof:*

\_\_\_\_ No, I did not accomplish my goal because:

Figure 4.3 Forms to Help Students Set and Work Toward Self-Identified Academic Goals

| <b>Self-Evaluation<br/>Third Grading Period</b> |                                   |                                    |                                   |   |
|---|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Subject</b>                                  | <b>First<br/>Period<br/>Grade</b> | <b>Second<br/>Period<br/>Grade</b> | <b>Third<br/>Period<br/>Grade</b> | <b>Reflections:<br/>What changes do you notice in your work since<br/>the last grading period?<br/>What must you do in this subject in order to do<br/>better? (Be specific.)</b> |
| Math  |                                   |                                    |                                   |   |
| Language Arts                                   |                                   |                                    |                                   |   |
| Science   |                                   |                                    |                                   |   |
| Social Studies                                  |                                   |                                    |                                   |   |

Figure 4.4 Self-Evaluation Tool

## *Mentors*

- We assigned student and teacher mentors to every student who was in danger of failing and scheduled regular times for them to meet.
- Teacher mentors kept detailed records of every child in danger of failing.
- Mentors were responsible for reminding assigned students to continue working toward their goals: “Jake, maybe you should be writing this down in your notebook.”
- Students moved in and out of mentor groups according to individual needs.

## *After-School Assistance*

- Free tutoring sessions (with classmates) were available twice a week after school.
- Students had to sign up for after-school sessions at least one day in advance.

## *Zero Alerts*

- When any student failed to complete an assignment, we sent a notice home and required the student to attend scheduled after-school sessions.

## *Braggin’ Rights*

- We celebrated successes by noting each student’s accomplishments on our team Braggin’ Rights list. Often, students wrote about their classmates.

Surprisingly, the most difficult step in the plan was the first one. Although our students had no problem identifying their weaknesses, many struggled to identify their strengths. This was especially true of our special needs students. They were under the impression that they had nothing to offer the other students on the team. Their classmates quickly disproved that fallacy by pointing out their strengths:

“Amy, you are really good at presentations. You could help us practice ours.”

“John, you run better than everyone in here. I could use some help in P.E. If you’d run beside me, I’d probably finish the mile next time.”

Our students eventually began to barter with one another for assistance: “Stacy, I’ve never seen a planner or book sack as organized as yours. Could

you help me clean out my binder, and I'll help you with math?"

Together, we learned how to use our collective strengths to overcome individual weaknesses. In hindsight, that sounds like a simple concept, but it represented a revolutionary event for our team, moving us from a group of people sharing a schedule to an integrated unit responsible for the success of all members.

As a result of our focus on goal setting and managing daily progress using the academic success plan, we saw large improvements in our students' academic performance. After the first grading period, 11 percent of core class grades were Fs. By the end of the third grading period, that number was down to 4 percent. By the fourth grading period, 32 percent of our students were on the honor roll, many for the first time. In addition, 29 percent of our students had improved in all subject areas.

The most significant data we can provide to illustrate the effects of our focus on developing students as learners occurred a year after we implemented the academic success plan. All of our students passed the state's annual high-stakes test. None of our students was retained.

One of our finest compliments came from Marvin's dad, who told us he had arranged to take his son on a fishing trip as a reward for making good grades. Marvin was the one who insisted that the trip occur on a weekend instead of during the school week. "He told me he was afraid he would miss something exciting," his dad said.