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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Kenneth VanderMeulen

Many texts and articles discussing the matter of teaching reading on the secondary level recommend the establishment of reading programs which involve all members of the high school staff. Frequently, authors of such works on originating and developing reading programs will go into great detail about the ways in which committees may be given areas of concern, methods of self-evaluation, and each step to be achieved. Each stage of progress will be named and described with fine elaboration.

Given ideal circumstances of adequate finances, sufficiently flexible personnel, administrators with educational leadership, and consultants with expertise—the steps and stages described by the theoreticians will doubtless succeed in a fairly large school. However, we must be realistic and look at some of the circumstances which are apparently keeping reading programs from burgeoning in many secondary schools in our state. For one thing, not very many small high schools have the financial means to bring in experts, although they might qualify for reading materials and hardware under one or another of the federally assisted programs. Thus, even when an administrator could and would make numerous adjustments to start a reading program, merely calling meetings or forming committees would be futile.

Reading programs *are* growing in the high schools of limited enrollment, however, and it is the purpose of this article to show some of the many constructive and original methods of approach which are bringing about flourishing reading programs. In the opinion of the author, it is inspiring to see the ways that reading teachers are playing a major role in bringing about the increased literacy that is the goal of our field in the seventies.

As is frequently pointed out by observers of reading work at the secondary level, many of the teachers who specialize in the teaching of reading have been in the teaching profession for some time. In smaller schools there are no consultants to whom one may bring problems related to remedial or developmental reading. As a result, the teacher who becomes most concerned and aware of the need to help students read more effectively in the content courses typically is the teacher who does some independent study or takes courses in the field, if such facilities exist in his area.

In the same way, the administrator who is alert to the best ways to utilize his faculty members in teaching assignments will quickly become cognizant of the new capability. He may then ask the teacher who has taken some hours in reading to become a reading teacher. This is a crucial point of progress. If the administrator is not enlightened about the need for teaching reading in the content areas, he may assign the reading teacher to "handle" a special class in reading. When this takes place, the reading teacher should do all in his or her power to avoid being placed on a treadmill of working only with students who are referred as "reading problems" from the several content classrooms.

Of course, remedial reading work is necessary, when proper diagnoses have been made, when facilities have been provided, and when materials have been purchased. However, high school reading programs which include *preventing* reading problems from becoming serious or widespread should be the aim and goal of anyone trained to teach in high school. If the reading teacher finds himself working with the few students who can no longer cope with the reading problems presented in content class work, the real goal of a school wide reading program may remain unattained through the normal steps as described by texts on reading.

To call attention to the many important services which a reading teacher may render the entire high school is the first aim. One reading teacher, who wanted to serve the entire faculty in more than remedial reading, enlisted the cooperation of the English teachers in giving a standardized reading test to the entire student body. The cost was kept low by re-using the test booklets. The reading teacher was then able to issue an accurate and comprehensive record of the reading performance of each student in the high school compared to other students of their grade level, in vocabulary background, rate, and comprehension. By itself, this piece of information was not of great value, except that the process put some student records into the hands of the teachers instead of into the cumulative files. The practical use of the reading records came in enabling teachers to recognize the wide range of reading abilities in each of their content courses.

Of even greater value was the fact that the reading performance records opened the topic of retardation in reading. Not many teachers spend a lot of time wondering about the expectancy level as opposed to performance level of each student. This was the point at which the reading teacher was able to render valuable help in informing his colleagues about performance over capacity, and in encouraging stu-

dents to recognize their great potential. Generally speaking, students want to know the truth about where they stand; in this case, the reading teacher found he had ready audiences when he spoke about what one can do for himself in reading. He had piqued the curiosity of a number of students in the school, and the reading program took shape as a result of *student* requests.

Another avenue of action may involve the community. The teacher trained in the teaching of reading should take a careful look at the make-up of the population in the school locality. Part of his obligation might be to inform the local public of the means that professional teachers have of helping students become better readers. While it might be a bit awkward for the chemistry or history teacher to enter an article in the weekly paper about how his subject is "put across," it would be an entirely acceptable procedure for the teacher of reading to ask teachers how they provoke curiosity about their course field—compiling a regular article for the paper on the basis of their answers. Parents would doubtless become more aware of the importance of building interest, of reading for a purpose, and of organizing material for retention. The reading teacher could, by this simple device, become a sort of liason, to begin to produce a warm concern for the processes of reading in education as seen from the kitchen, factory, and farm. While a school may not practically invite constant visitation, it can supply numerous windows.

A reading teacher in a small town, in order to build an initial interest in developmental reading at the secondary level, called attention of the local populace to the saturation advertising by speed-reading enterprises. Using the letters-to-the-editor column, he pointed out some of the fallacies in attempting to sell speed-reading to students. He discussed the importance of flexibility of rate and the fact that purpose in reading texts never includes mere rate for its own sake. By thus submitting a short piece of writing to a paper read in the school's locality, the teacher accomplished three things at once: Parents generally became wiser consumers as they considered similar ads; high school students became curious as to what comprises efficient reading; and the reading teacher was asked to discuss reading problems with other teachers.

As a teacher of reading, one may realize that some texts being used in the high school are written at levels above the general comprehension capacity of the students in those grades. If such is the case, the reading teacher must also become a diplomat and learn how to help his colleagues without convincing them against their will. Just as

in good teaching everywhere, the job is to aid the teachers to discover the truth about the level of the textbook in use. Instead of the "truth with a blunt instrument" approach, one might, for instance, offer to assist the librarian to arrange displays of fiction and non-fiction works. A brief printed note, explaining the vast range of readability levels represented by a few biographies shown in the display, would evoke the curiosity needed to begin the process of self-education among the other teachers. Sometimes it may also be appropriate to offer one's services in determining reading levels of texts under consideration for adoption in coming semesters. Under no circumstance should the reading teacher merely inform the social studies department that the text in current use is written at frustration level for ten of the twenty-five students in the class, even when it is true (and too often is).

In summary, the position of a reading teacher in a high school is no certain means of organizing and building a reading program, especially when the secondary school is of limited enrollment. High school administrators all over the state consider reading basic to many academic difficulties their students are incurring, but they do tend to want to make a remedial reading teacher out of the person who takes the time to study the teaching of reading. However important the remedial reading aspect is in a school, it remains only a fraction of the total school reading program. As a remedial reading teacher, one's attempts to stimulate the teaching of reading in content classes may lead to a breakdown of communications. Therefore, the reading teacher should limit his first steps toward establishing a reading program to the following moves: He should try to furnish other teachers with resources and records in reading; he should help the administrator see the larger objectives and goals served by a reading program; he should help the student body understand what effective and efficient reading is; and he should try to evoke some interest and curiosity among the local populace about the need to develop reading skills on a continuous basis.