

10-1-1969

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Recommended Citation

Criscuolo, N. P. (1969). The Cluster Plan for Reading In-Service Work. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 10 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol10/iss1/6

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THE CLUSTER PLAN FOR READING IN-SERVICE WORK

Nicholas P. Criscuolo

NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT, PUBLIC SCHOOLS

School systems are constantly seeking ways to offer practical and effective in-service reading programs for their teachers. One plan that has been working in the New Haven public school system is the Cluster Plan. This plan is used for staff development and involves taking a small cluster of three or four schools with similar problems and offering practical in-service programs on a released-time basis.

The content of each in-service program is designed to be relevant and practical. Demonstration lessons with children, exhibits and explanations of the latest supplementary reading materials and group discussions of pertinent problems and issues are the types of activities stressed in these programs. Prior to each program, however, a committee composed of principals, parents and teacher representatives from each of the schools in the cluster is set up to plan and implement the program.

Recently the Cluster Plan operated for three inner-city elementary schools in the area of reading instruction. This in-service program began at 1:45 p.m. after early dismissal and took place at Winchester School in New Haven. Four current reading approaches were reviewed briefly by publishers' representatives. Some of the approaches discussed employed the "code emphasis" approach while others employed the "meaning emphasis" approach as discussed in Chall's "Learning to Read: The Great Debate."

At the end of these presentations, a Panel of Interrogators questioned each consultant. This Panel consisted of a parent and teacher representatives from each of the three schools and was moderated by the author. Prior to the program, each panel member had been sent reviews of Chall's book and a short list of related articles to read. After a spirited discussion between the Panel and consultants, members of the audience were given the opportunity to ask additional questions.

The program ended at 3:10 p.m. From 3:15 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. the New Haven Reading Department sponsored a Reading Exposition in the gymnasium of Winchester School which was considered part of this in-service program but was open to all city teachers, parents and other members of the public. Thirty-two companies were represented and they exhibited current reading materials and equipment.

At this Reading Exposition, teachers, principals and parents had a chance to view and discuss the latest reading materials, most of which are being used in the city schools. Such an event enabled teachers to view first-hand the materials before they placed their reading orders for next year. Free bulletins, pamphlets and other literature were available for general distribution. Coffee and cookies were served at the Expo which lent a feeling of informality to the occasion.

A Guest Book was on hand for visitors to sign. Each publisher was assessed a small fee to cover the cost of the refreshments. Over four hundred people signed the Guest Book, attesting to the success of this event.

Evaluation of the in-service program and the enthusiastic comments received concerning the Reading Exposition, revealed that it was a day well spent. Practical ideas had been disseminated and discussed, teachers in small clusters had become involved, and opportunities for people to see first-hand, and not out of a catalogue, the latest materials in reading had been given. These were some of the ingredients which went into the recipe for a successful and sensible in-service reading program.