



TEACHERS POWERING PROGRESS

Columbus City Schools Find Success with Teacher-Driven, Collaborative Approach

Teach at a distance—and learn how to do it as you go. That is what many educators across the nation were asked to do when the pandemic hit more than three years ago.

Columbus City Schools (CCS) met that challenge by harnessing the power of teacher voice and expertise in creating a wide net of literacy support through the channels of schools, families, and the community.

The CCS student population is as vibrant and diverse as the Columbus community. Serving nearly 47,000 students, CCS families represent 104 countries and 110 languages spoken.

To serve this student base, CCS is guided by its “Power of One” five-year strategic plan that relies on a collective of students, teachers, staff, families, and partners working to ensure each student is highly

educated, prepared for leadership and service, and empowered for success in a global community.

“Any one person in the district, I don’t care who you are, what your job is, has an impact on the students that we teach,” said Jennifer Ey, CCS director of literacy.

With an intentional focus on helping teachers, families, and students recover outside of the classroom, CCS used Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund dollars to create and distribute materials closely aligned to classroom content. ESSER funding has been provided to state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) to address the impact COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, on elementary and secondary schools.

In the first year of the #TogetherWeReadCCS At-Home Library Initiative, a reading component of the

Power of One program, CCS saw an 8 percent increase in reading scores between the spring and fall semesters for grades 1–6, far exceeding the national average and indicating the dreaded “summer slide” had been successfully avoided.

PRIORITIZING FAMILY NEEDS

For CCS, the blueprint for success began with equipping families with resources to encourage students to read for at least 20 minutes per day. This relatively small investment of time has been shown to increase language development, improve comprehension and critical thinking, develop global empathy, and strengthen family relationships.

But establishing reading as a habit becomes a bigger challenge when quality reading material isn’t readily available. Statistics show that 61 percent of America’s low-income families don’t have access to books, and more than 90 percent of CCS students qualify for free or reduced lunch. There was a clear need to get books in the homes of CCS families.

“When families are truly engaged, this [home-school] partnership nurtures a sense of belongingness and fosters healthy relationships.”

—Seneca Bing

Utilizing ESSER funding, CCS distributed more than 1.7 million books to CCS students, each receiving a total of 25 titles aligned with projects being done in the district. CCS then began a partnership with Bookelicious, an AI-driven platform that gives students the opportunity to select titles for their at-home libraries based on likes and interests, placing emphasis on the benefits of choice and voice. This layer of matching book selection to individual preferences is a connector that encourages independent reading.

CCS family engagement entails more than simply supplying resources. “By providing a whole-child approach and including the voice of families, family ambassadors and bilingual engagement liaisons serve as navigators in the home-school partnership. They listen to unique family needs, provide tips, tools, and strategies to support learning at home, and create

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As NCTE returns to in-person Annual Conventions, the organization is eager to develop and strengthen relationships with local literacy communities. In planning for the 2023 Convention to be held in Columbus, Ohio, NCTE opened dialog with Columbus City Schools. We found innovation underway and a clear commitment to listening to and learning from teachers, presenting strong alignment with NCTE’s positions and values.

Initial meetings with elementary, secondary, and central office leadership led to more opportunities to learn with and from each other. CCS teachers were consulted about their interests and ideas for programming at the upcoming Convention. A shared interest in emphasizing writing and cross-curricular opportunities resulted in partnering on a national grant proposal. As the Annual Convention draws near, new opportunities to support Columbus City Schools are forming. In discussion are author visits, book donations, and special briefing opportunities with national leaders.

“This [literacy program] is all about the love of reading and bringing the joy back into reading, and I feel like NCTE was the right group [to work with] because that’s what they do for teachers every day,” said Jen Ey, CCS director of literacy. “So, if we’re going to continue spreading joy, what [more] perfect combination of two groups to do that with?”

NCTE is excited to be holding our Annual Convention in Columbus this November, and connecting with CCS is one of the many reasons why. We’re thrilled to witness and support like-minded organizations who advance literacy and the English language arts.



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—Regina Fuentes

a warm and welcoming environment,” says Seneca Bing, director of family and community engagement. “When families are truly engaged, this partnership nurtures a sense of belongingness and fosters healthy relationships.”

TEACHER-DRIVEN, CROSS-CURRICULAR SCHOOL EFFORTS

To best serve students in school settings, the district implemented research-based curriculum and professional development for staff, administrators, teachers, and literacy specialists. The premise that teachers are the most essential factor in student success was held as a fundamental constant.

“[The At-Home Library Initiative program] has morphed over the last three years based on what teachers are saying,” Ey said. “They hear families and

are excited to be working with families, but they are still struggling with and working on many issues in the classroom.”

At the high school level, identifying and listening to concerns and problems the pandemic brought on, including developmental and emotional issues, and being willing to change the curriculum and approach to teaching with that in mind were key to finding success, according to Regina Fuentes, Eastmoor Academy High School English teacher.

“It was actually a kind of beneficial thing to sit back and grow with the students and re-learn and re-develop these ideas and learn exactly where we needed to correct ourselves as well as where they needed the help,” said Fuentes. “If you just continue to charge forward in the same way we always have, you’re not going to get any new results, you’re not going to get good results.”



The renewed focus on teacher voice also presented opportunities for what might otherwise seem like an unlikely collaboration. Eighth-grade ELA/social studies teacher Pattie Niese and eighth-grade science teacher Kelly Mitchell of Dominion Middle School joined forces to develop a comprehensive unit on *Frankenstein*.

“In ELA, we dive into the framed narrative structure and have students act out scenes and use their creative skills to show understanding of various parts of the story. In science, students are working on a genetics unit. They are learning Punnett squares and creating a monster with dominant and recessive traits, then they create an offspring monster with a partner in class. We both discuss the ethics of the science presented and pull in examples of legal precedent from the social studies curriculum,” said Niese.

By working together, students can dive deep into a topic, experience classic literature, and analyze how legislation can reflect these ethical concerns. This holistic approach increases engagement and helps build a positive school climate.

“Teachers know the students that are sitting in front of them the best. Having the freedom to meet their individual needs based on that knowledge is key to seeing growth for ALL students. While we must meet the grade level standards, being able to decide how best to teach those standards for each student can make all the difference,” Niese said.



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COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Finally, community partnerships were a natural component to buttress what was being taught in schools and homes with newfound literacy-driven parental involvement. United Way, Columbus Parks and Recreation, Columbus Metropolitan Library, and Ethiopian Tewahedo Social Services (ETSS) that serves refugee families are among the extensive list of agencies CCS is working with to make a lasting impact on the lives of families and students it serves.

A partnership with Nationwide Children’s Hospital and its department devoted to early literacy enabled CCS to connect with students before they start school by providing

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professional development and literacy materials to the hospital's early childhood coordinators. CCS also provided family materials, literacy kits, and information posters for literacy specialists in the hospital's Close to Home Centers, noting that 90 percent of the children seen end up enrolling in CCS.

Complete with QR codes connecting to content being taught in schools, CCS teachers and literacy specialists developed writing guides and materials that are distributed to parents by center specialists. This gives CCS an early pathway "to talk to families about the importance of not just physical health and mental health, but also academic health and what that looks like and how it all ties together," Ey said.

ESSER funding has supported the distribution of more than 24,000 customized literacy kits containing resources from all five essential elements of literacy to K–3 students.

In year three of the program, teacher input called for an effort to add different genres to at-home and school libraries, including comics and historical fiction. And by partnering with the popular *Highlights for Children* publication (conveniently based in Columbus), customized covers were created for students that emphasized other informational text genres like magazines and newspapers.

The oft quoted "It takes a village..." adage has always had a home in education. It is highlighted again by the success CCS is experiencing through centering teacher voice, engaging with families, and collaborating with the institutions and programs in the broader community.

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