

Rural Sites Teachers Inspire Community Connections

Journal Projects Build Literacy and Support

By PHIP ROSS

Teachers in the Rural Sites Network (RSN) are exploring new ways students can use writing in meaningful tasks and engage the larger school community at the same time. Three of these teachers—one each from Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and Nebraska—had a chance to present their projects during the RSN meeting at the NWP Annual Meeting, which was held in conjunction with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Fall Convention in Milwaukee. Through this opportunity, each teacher was able to review her project with other teachers, discussing both the specifics of the project and ways in which it might evolve.

Using Journals

At the November meeting, Mary Beth Crovetto outlined the parent-teacher-student journals with which she is experimenting and finding favorable results. “The parents and students both love the activity, especially the students,” the Ponchatoula (Louisiana) High School English teacher said. “They enjoy reading and sharing what their parents write, and the parents enjoy and appreciate the interaction with their teen.”

Crovetto said she began doing parent-teacher-student journals in her class this year, and she has found that 100 percent of parents of accelerated English students are participating and 90 percent participate in her regular English II class. She has set it up like this:

- One day a week, students write in their journals on a teacher-selected topic for 10 minutes.
- Journal entries are shared aloud in class.
- A similar prompt is assigned for the parents to respond to.
- Students take journals home, and parents respond to students’ writing, then write on their assigned prompt.
- Journals are returned on Thursday or Friday, and students share parent responses in class.
- After five entries from both participants, Crovetto reads the journals and responds with comments and a grade. Points are earned for writing, and bonus points are rewarded for parent responses.

“Parents have stopped me in the grocery or at church asking about their homework assignment,” Crovetto said.

Strengthening Community

The second project grew out of the first Rural Voices, Country Schools retreat in California three years ago. (Rural Voices, Country Schools was a three-year NWP initiative funded by the Annenberg Rural Challenge.) At that time, Nebraska teacher Amy Hottovy realized she

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wanted to do research that would not only document the effectiveness of Rising City (Nebraska) Public School but also keep the school open.

“Faced with the threat of consolidation or closure due to state and local funding, the school needed positive press—more than numbers that showed our school was not efficient or how few students attended,” she said.

So Hottovy approached 24 students, teachers, administrators, and community members and asked them to keep journals for an entire school year. “They documented what made [Rising City] a good place to live and learn,” she said.

Hottovy, a high school English and speech teacher, made sure the journal entries were eventually shared with the school board, district patrons, and the state legislature. Besides the “positive press” the journals provided in the face of major changes in the school, Hottovy said the journal writing worked its magic on the participants as well. “The project allowed participants to develop a stronger sense of what their school and community means to them,” she said.

Hottovy’s presentation at the RSN meeting prompted discussion about finding ways to write for survival—survival of a school, survival of students, and survival of rural education. “Although my project didn’t save my school the way I’d hoped, it brought participants together and showed us what effective rural education looks like,” Hottovy reported. “Talking with other teachers reminded me that every teacher

in every school is faced with an issue—the challenge is to connect school and community so the issue becomes important to more than the people who work in the building.”

Making Classrooms Public

With more modest, but no less powerful results, South Elementary teacher Colleen Myers of Clymer, Pennsylvania, has added activities in her classroom that will increasingly involve parents in their children’s learning in “unobtrusive and meaningful ways.”

Myers began her parent/teacher journals after she was challenged to make her classroom and teaching more public during a Rural Voices, Country Schools retreat the same time Hottovy began her project.

“In these journals, we have a continuing conversation about their child,” Myers said of parents’ participation.

Since launching this project, Myers has accumulated a variety of strategies that involve parents in her classroom. They include:

- a storytelling project through which parents assist their children in selecting books, retelling stories, and making props
- a “Book Buddies” event for which children select books and accompanying activities to take home to do with parents
- a student-to-parent letter-writing unit that gives children an authentic reason for writing (conversations center around what the children want to know about their parents’ early lives)
- Celebrate Literacy Day, when parents come to hear children read favorite stories and their own writing
- a presentation, planned and delivered by two parents, to the Southcentral Pennsylvania Writing Project about classroom involvement.

“I depend highly on help from home to move the children along faster in learning to read. When we were offered the challenge of making classroom life more visible with the Rural Voices team, my students’ parents were the ones I wanted to make aware of the things I do,” Myers said.

PHIP ROSS has recently joined the Rural Sites Network leadership team and is a teacher from Waverly High School, Waverly, Nebraska.