

The Middle School High Five: Strategies Can Triumph

No Child Left Behind. Adequate Yearly Progress. High-stakes testing. Performance standards. Reading on grade level. Writing on demand. No matter where you turn in education today, language arts teachers are shouldering a lot of the responsibility for preparing students to pass state tests. How can it all get done in a 45-minute middle school period called Language Arts?

For those of us who teach this subject, we know that it can't all get done. Because of this, it is critical that we manage our middle school day in creative ways so that students are taught and practice language arts skills in all of their classes. We know the jargon all too well: reading in the content areas, interdisciplinary units, and writing across the curriculum. Our challenges are supporting the staff and finding the time in all of our classes to make it happen.

I am the literacy support teacher for nine middle schools in the Anchorage School District. We have about 7,500 students in our middle schools with 93 different languages spoken and a mobility rate close to 20%. We are an urban district with all of the problems associated with urban schools in the lower 48. We have miraculously held on to our middle school concept since its inception ten years ago even with district and state funding crises year after year after year. Most of our schools operate on a 7-period day. Students have four core classes, PE, and two electives. Staff teach four periods of core subjects and one elec-

tive. They have a planning period and a team planning time. It is this team planning time that raises eyebrows from those seeking educational budget cuts each year, but it is also this team planning time where critical coordination takes place to make middle schools function as they should.

I had spent two years emailing weekly literacy tips to the language arts teachers—random strategies from all of our best literacy leaders: Janet Allen, Linda Hoyt, Linda Rief, Jeff Wilhelm, and a host of others. Feedback was always positive, but I soon realized that I was going about this in the wrong way. With a plethora of strategies from which to choose, teachers were overwhelmed and inefficient, causing instruction to become hit or miss. From class to class, there was little consistency or curriculum alignment. It became apparent that strategy instruction needed to be organized in such a way that it became the norm and not the exception. Students deserved explicit, sequenced instruction from all of their teachers in a meaningful, connected way. In an effort to improve reading comprehension as well as elevate the importance of reading and writing in content areas, I developed a districtwide staff development initiative called the Middle School High Five.

Mustering Support for the Middle School High Five

At a spring districtwide meeting with all nine department chairs present, I pitched the idea of the Middle School High Five. “What if,” I hypothesized, “we chose five reading strategies that we all agree improve comprehension. We could roll out a strategy a week and get our content area teachers on board, too. If everyone were to systematically use the same reading strategy during a

certain period of time within their school, students would receive repeated practice on the strategy in a variety of settings and on a wide array of text,” I suggested. As heads began to nod, I continued, “With our high mobility rate across the district, this coordination could help anchor our students as they move from school to school. Let’s agree to teach five reading strategies districtwide to see if reading comprehension improves. This idea of less is more could actually help us work smarter and not harder.”

The language arts department chairs were quick to agree to this initiative, and they sent me off to the districtwide principals’ meeting to rally support. Strategies were selected that were already commonly used in our schools and at the same time reflected the different stages of the reading process: Around the Text, KIM Vocabulary, Two-Column Notes, Reciprocal Teaching, and VIPs/Sum It Up. By choosing *before*, *during*, and *after* reading strategies, content area teachers would not only add specific strategies to their toolkits but also become more informed about reading as a process. Layered booklets were printed up with step-by-step teacher-friendly explanations (see Figure 1), which also included content area examples. Masters were made available electronically and sets of sturdy reciprocal teaching cards were created for the fourth strategy. All teachers, regardless of content area, would be able to teach the five strategies without any extra preparation time involved.

Preparing to Launch the Middle School High Five

I attended the content area districtwide meetings to discuss the Middle School High Five and to garner support in advance of our implementation. Content area teachers felt comfortable and agreed to teach these strategies as long as they were first introduced to students via the language arts teacher on every team. One area of legitimate concern was the weeklong focus on each strategy. Teachers wanted at least a two-week window on each since finding uninterrupted instructional time is so challenging. Determining an acceptable cal-

endar was no easy task either. In the end, it was decided to launch the Middle School High Five right after winter vacation when staff and students returned to school with renewed energy. In a stroke of good luck, there were actually ten instructional weeks between winter break and spring break. The fact that the Standards Based Assessments (Alaska’s statewide tests) were scheduled for immediately after spring break became the exclamation point to this initiative. We would soon know if the the Middle School High Five would better prepare students for success on the statewide testing.

We used a pyramid model for staff development. As winter vacation approached, I reviewed and modeled the five strategies to the language arts department chairs, who in turn went back to their buildings and modeled the strategies for their language arts teachers. It was expected that the language arts teachers would meet with their respective teams and model these strategies for other content area teachers during team planning time. One school, however, asked me to model the strategies directly to the content area department chairs, who in turn would train the teachers in their departments.

Staff awareness meetings were held in January at each school, cosponsored by the principal



Figure 1. Layered books distributed to teachers to explain the “Middle School High Five”

and the department chairs. Staff members were introduced to the principles of Middle School High Five, and materials such as the layered booklets and reciprocal teaching cards were distributed. A concise flyer was written so teachers walked away with a summary in hand as well as all materials needed to participate in the Middle School High Five. The districtwide schedule of allocating two weeks per strategy was delineated, and we began the following week.

Implementation

Strategy #1: Read around the Text

To ensure a strong start and build confidence among staff, my districtwide e-mail tips were sent not only to the language arts teachers but to every middle school teacher. In this way, I could offer each teacher a more personalized account of the strategy to be taught. Read around the Text (original idea from Melvina Prichett Phillips, National Association of Secondary Principals) was a perfect beginning (see Figure 2). Its simple graphic gave both teachers and students six easy steps for previewing text. The circular design of the graphic helped underpin the importance of continuous surveying and questioning of challenging text. Taking the time to follow these six steps gave students the scaffolding they needed to begin difficult reading.

The language arts teachers introduced students to Read around the Text early on in the two-week time frame. At the same time, they had students make their own blank layered booklets to use during the Middle School High Five. Students were expected to keep a record of the strategies they learned, when they used them across the curriculum, and their success with them. The power of the initiative was really felt when students randomly experienced the same strategy in their social studies, science, math, health, physical education, music, and other elective classes. By the end of the two weeks, some students had practiced Read around the Text over seven different times. Puzzled expressions reflected the surprise they felt as they experienced this unified approach

1. Look at the pictures. What ideas are being presented?
2. Look at the captions and read them.
3. Look at the maps, charts, and graphs. Discuss what information they present.
4. Look at the titles and headings. What is the big idea?
5. Read the first and last lines of each paragraph for more information.
6. Ask questions. Give yourself a reason to read.

Read around the Text

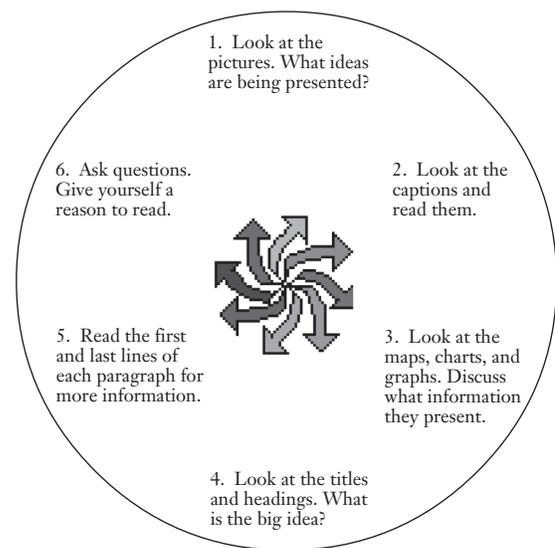
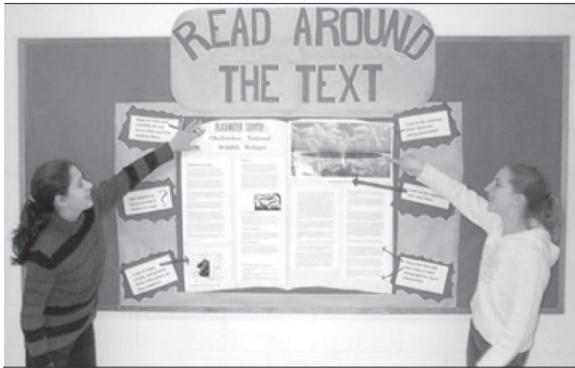


Figure 2. Read around the text (Adapted from “Read around the Text: The Reading Strategy That Worked!” by Louanne Clayton Jacobs and Dee Dee Benefield Jones. Originally posted at the Web site of the National Association of Secondary Principals. Used with permission.)

across classes, and those of us who teach middle school students know how to build upon that kind of energy. To say the least, the students were intrigued, and that meant the students were engaged. Teachers soon began e-mailing me with their success stories, so I knew we were off to a good start.

Strategy #2: KIM Vocabulary

With Read around the Text now behind us, it was time to move on to another before reading strategy called KIM Vocabulary. Language arts teach-



Two participants in “Middle School High Five” check out a strategy bulletin board.

ers were extremely comfortable with this vocabulary activity and saw excellent long-term results, no doubt because of the drawing element involved. (Our teachers remembered Janet Allen alluding to this strategy in a visit she made to Anchorage one year, but upon further digging, no source could be found for this powerful strategy.) Figure 3 shows this strategy’s four steps to learning new vocabulary words.

When appropriate, students use color symbolically in the memory device, which enhances the word’s meaning. Creating a unique word association seems to improve retention, too. (The use of the foot in the example establishes an unusual connection to the key word, *defeat*.) Students write their sentence only after they have had repeated exposures to the word in context and have a firm grasp on its meaning.

The KIM vocabulary sheet was self-explanatory, especially with the content area examples provided in the staff layered booklet; however, content area teachers needed coaching on how to select which words to teach. This opened up an opportunity to give additional information on the importance of vocabulary instruction and the three-tiered approach described by Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan in *Bringing Words to Life*. With only four practice spaces provided on the KIM master, teachers had to reflect on the reasons for selecting specific vocabulary words. Were they choosing words that would help students comprehend the text as well as words that appeared frequently in many settings?

Imagine this from the student’s point of view. On Monday, an eighth grader is preparing to read “The Tell-Tale Heart” in language arts class, and the teacher pulls out KIM Vocabulary sheets to learn a handful of words. A couple of days later, this same eighth grader goes to science class where a unit on biology is underway. The science teacher has students use the KIM vocabulary sheet to learn a set of words. Later on that day, our eighth grader is in Spanish class and is asked to complete a KIM vocabulary sheet there, too. At the end of two weeks, the student has mastered this strategy through multiple exposures and practical, repeated practice.

Strategy #3: Two-Column Notes

We were one month into the Middle School High Five; two before reading strategies had been taught. We were ready to move into the during reading phase of the initiative. Every middle school teacher has expectations that students will use note-taking skills effectively, yet many teachers forget to take the time to model the process—a process that can differ greatly from class to class. Two-column notes (Santa, Havens, & Maycumber, 1988) gave teachers similar expectations and terms. Once students learned two-column notes in the language arts classrooms, it was easy to apply the skill in content area classes (see Figure 4).

Students understood the paper-folding technique and the need to record main ideas on the left-hand side. Then they recorded the subtopics

1. Record the key word (K).
2. Write down important information about the key word including a user-friendly definition (I).
3. Draw what the key word means, and link it to an unusual connection to create a memory device (M).
4. Write the key word in a context-rich sentence for application.

 (K = Key Vocabulary Word)	 (I = Information/Definition)	 (M = Memory Cue/Picture)
defeat (v.)	to win victory over	
Your Sentence: Bush <u>defeated</u> Kerry in the 2004 election by winning the electoral college.		

Figure 3. KIM vocabulary strategy

Math	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • equilateral triangle • right triangle • isosceles triangle • scalene triangle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 congruent sides - 3 congruent angles - equal - has a 90° angle - 2 congruent sides - 2 congruent angles - "I saw Celese!" - no sides congruent - no angles congruent

Figure 4. Two-column notes work well across content areas.

on the right-hand side along with supporting details. Teachers could easily scaffold by giving students the main ideas and asking them to locate the subtopics

and details. Some teachers went a step further by teaching the concept of power notes—using numbers to code the importance of information: 1 = main topic, 2 = subtopic, 3 = supporting detail.

Students found two-column notes less cumbersome than outlining and more organized than webbing or mapping. It became an excellent device for self-testing, too. With the paper folded, students partnered up and used the main ideas as cues to explain all they could remember before self-checking. The reverse worked well, too, with students using the subtopics/details from which to play Jeopardy. Could they turn the information into a question that identified the main idea? The folded paper became an effective manipulative for determining the important information from the reading, and once again students were engaged.

Strategy #4: Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1985) has been around forever and has strong support in research, yet this is one of the strategies teachers didn't seem to use comfortably. The fact that students work in cooperative groups or go back and forth with the teacher in a dialogue can cause classroom management issues. To help teachers use this strategy more successfully and to ensure that group work could take place successfully, color-coded reciprocal teaching cards were mass-produced (see Figure 5). Prompts written on role cards improved classroom management by keeping students focused and accountable. Many classrooms were converted into temporary "Board Rooms" (à la Donald Trump in *The Apprentice*) with students applying the comprehension processes of summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting using challenging text.

Although the now routine biweekly e-mail tip from me provided further ideas for implementing reciprocal teaching, the most effective staff development was having teachers take on the roles of summarizer, questioner, clarifier, and predictor in small groups with adult text. When time was taken for this level of staff development, teachers were more apt to use this during reading strategy in their lesson plans.

<p>predictor</p> 	<p>clarifier</p> 
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read the assigned section carefully. 2. Think about the main ideas being presented. 3. Based on what you have just read, predict what you think you will read next. 4. Jot down 3 - 4 predictions. 5. Tell your partner/group about your predictions. See what they think might happen next. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read the assigned section carefully. 2. Think about the main ideas being presented. 3. Jot down any words you find confusing. 4. Jot down any ideas you find confusing. 5. Tell your partner/group about your confusions. See if anyone in the group can clear things up. 6. Ask your group if they had any confusions. Try to clear up any of their concerns.
<p>questioner</p> 	<p>summarizer</p> 
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read the assigned section carefully. 2. Think about the main ideas being presented. 3. Jot down 3 - 4 "I wonder" statements about the content. 4. Read one question to your partner/group and ask for possible answers. Share your thoughts, too. 5. Continue discussing the rest of your questions. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read the assigned section carefully. 2. Think about the main ideas being presented. 3. Jot down those main ideas on paper. Look for 3 or 4. 4. Use bold-faced print and headings to help you. 5. Tell your partner/group what the section was about. 6. Avoid retelling all the little details.

Figure 5. Reciprocal teaching role cards

Strategy #5: VIPs and Sum It Up

Eight weeks into the Middle School High Five found us approaching the end of third quarter and spring break. Momentum began to wane because the novelty of the initiative had worn off, the stress of ending the quarter caused angst for many, and spring break was calling after a long, dark Alaskan winter. We moved into the last strategy, which asked students to respond to their reading using written expression. Adding the element of a written product certainly held more students accountable while increasing difficulty.

Effective summary writing is expected of every middle school student. Often, teachers don't remember to slow down and break this skill into manageable chunks, so they embraced the step-by-step formula we provided for teaching this skill. The writing strategy I presented, while formulaic, served as a springboard for students who struggle with this skill. The intention is to move students beyond this first step toward more sophisticated writing processes.

The first step was to ensure that students could actually identify the main ideas in the reading material. Teachers were asked to use Linda Hoyt's (2002) Very Important Points (VIPs). Students were given sticky notes that they cut into six equal strips. Every time they came to a sentence they thought expressed a main idea, they "highlighted" it with a yellow sticky note strip. The beauty of the approach is that sticky notes are easily removable, and as readers find more important pieces of information, they can change their minds without the permanent consequence of a highlighter marker. With only six sticky notes, the reader is also limited in scope, which keeps students from feeling overwhelmed. To further narrow the exercise, teachers were encouraged to have students work in small groups to compare main ideas and reduce the number to three.

This segued nicely into writing summary paragraphs. Armed with three main ideas, students only needed a vehicle to start their summaries. Teachers taught students the A+B+C formula for writing a topic sentence from *Step Up to Writing*

(Auman, 2002). Using a three-fold piece of paper and a helpful reference sheet (see Figure 6), students recorded each part of the topic sentence separately. In the first column (A), students identified the title and author of the text. In the second column (B), they chose a strong verb from the reference sheet. In the third column (C), they recorded the main idea of the reading. An A+B+C topic sentence might look something like this:

A = The Middle School High Five by Amy Goodman

B = describes

C = how an entire district, school, or team can systematically teach comprehension strategies.

With a strong topic sentence and three main ideas on sticky notes, students were well equipped to write a summary paragraph of their reading. Expecting this same process to be used in all of the content area classrooms saved valuable instructional time and provided our students the consistency they needed from class to class. Even teachers who felt they were not teachers of writing found their students writing organized and concise summaries.

The Middle School High Five Comes to a Close

As the experiment in focusing on just five strategies came to a close, we realized that over 7,500 students across nine schools had participated. Teachers in all content areas grew in the understanding of these comprehension processes, and reading instruction took on a consistency that had been missing. Students learned important before, during, and after comprehension strategies and received plenty of practice in all classrooms. This helped to cement the strategies, which enabled students to apply them on an independent level.

An online staff survey was developed to determine the level of participation for each strategy and to elicit teacher reaction. Ninety teachers responded. Figure 7 shows the percentage of respondents who used the strategies during the scheduled teaching weeks.

There were a handful of teachers who felt this initiative was not effective and saw it as an added

<p>A Identify the Text</p> <p>Begin by identifying the piece of text you are summarizing. Include the complete title and the author's full name.</p> <p><i>Cooking Tips for Teens</i> by Chuck Roast...</p> <p><i>Fun with Fabrics</i> by Polly Esther...</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed black;"/> <p>Avoid starting your summary by being vague:</p> <p>This article was about...</p>	<p>B Choose a Strong Verb</p> <p>Attach a strong verb. Notice that the verb "to be" is not on this list.</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">advises</td> <td>illustrates</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">compares</td> <td>presents</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">contrasts</td> <td>provides</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">describes</td> <td>recommends</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">explains</td> <td>suggests</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 20px;">identifies</td> <td>teaches</td> </tr> </table> <p>Use this space to list your own favorite verbs:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	advises	illustrates	compares	presents	contrasts	provides	describes	recommends	explains	suggests	identifies	teaches	<p>C Add a Big Finish</p> <p>Think about the main idea of the text that you read. Ask yourself what it is mostly about. Write the main idea as a phrase and attach it to the end of the topic sentence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the main idea? the big idea? the theme? the moral?
advises	illustrates													
compares	presents													
contrasts	provides													
describes	recommends													
explains	suggests													
identifies	teaches													

Example: A + B + C =
Cooking Tips for Teens by Chuck Roast recommends easy-to-follow advice for becoming an amateur chef.

Example: A + B + C =
Fun with Fabrics by Polly Esther teaches the beginner the basic steps of sewing.

Now complete your summary paragraph by adding three or more important details from the text. Write them in complete sentences. Remember to use only the main points about what you read. Stick to the facts. Avoid writing a closing sentence, which could lead to an opinion.

Figure 6. Graphic organizer for writing summary paragraphs

layer to their curriculum. It is these teachers who need additional testimonials and experience with strategic teaching in order to see for themselves how comprehension deepens and ultimately how more content gets mastered. Most of the teachers who responded were positive about trying this systematic approach to strategy instruction, as can be seen in these anecdotal remarks:

I believe students were more engaged in the text from their initial reading and required less rereading because of KIM and Read around the Text. A good reminder for me to use productive reading strategies in content area.

Every year, early on, I think the High Five should be reinforced.

I think it was valuable to make it a schoolwide focus. It added consistency and meaning to many of the strategies that I already used in the classroom.

It's fun to see how many students adopt the practices because they recognize how it helps them.

The strength of the program here is that our team is using common terminology.

Read around the Text is PERFECT for science. I have found that if I take the time to do this with a section before the students start an assignment, there are VERY few questions of "Where do I find this information?" They become much more independent.

Their responses are more complete, more substantive. Their oral responses are more full, and their retention is much improved. I'm very pleased with the results.

Improving comprehension was a lofty goal, but we took it on districtwide in a systematic fash-

Middle School High Five Focus Strategy	Percent Who Used the Strategy or Partially Used It
Read around the Text	82%
KIM Vocabulary	70%
Two-Column Notes	77%
Reciprocal Teaching	58%
VIPs/Sum It Up	63%

Figure 7. Percentage of teachers who used suggested strategies with their classes

ion. Did reading comprehension in fact improve? Scores from the Gates-MacGinitie reading test that was administered in early September were compared with results from the same test administered in mid-May. Although this districtwide test was not intended to be used as a pre- and post-test measure of the Middle School High Five, all nine middle schools showed above-average growth. The 10-week Middle School High Five was certainly one of several contributing factors.

What's Next for the Middle School High Five?

We adopted the motto of “Less is more” and got all staff to accept the responsibility for teaching reading during the academic day. Next year, we will continue with this initiative. Interestingly enough, teachers do not want five new strategies. Instead they have asked for the opportunity to kick-off the year with the Middle School High Five using the same five strategies as last year. They have requested a longer period of time on each strategy to allow for more flexibility in their instruction. With new seventh graders entering each building and eighth graders who have been through the initiative already, they feel that two years on the same five strategies is the most effective approach. Next year, an additional layer of staff development will be provided. During the month we work on Read around the Text, for example, four supporting e-mail tips will be sent: the first one will be devoted to reviewing the strategy, and the following three will offer extension ideas for further previewing activities, such as an-

ticipation guides. This will allow for built-in differentiation—teachers who want more staff development ideas can extend the Middle School High Five initiative on their own while others can refine the original strategies.

Testing—at district, state, and national levels—probably isn't going away. However, the stress of the test can be diminished when the major problem of comprehension is less of a concern. This experiment revealed that a focus on less is important. The Middle School High Five improved student comprehension and made all teachers more confident reading teachers. Clearly, smart and systematic strategy instruction can triumph in our current climate of high-stakes teaching and testing.

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