

Creating a Text-Based Culture in Lewisville Middle Schools

Highlights

- Lewisville Independent School District serves 52,000 students from 13 municipalities located north of Dallas and Fort Worth. The region is one of the fastest growing areas in the United States, according to U.S. Census statistics.
- In 2013/2014, Lewisville introduced the first three units of Inquiry By Design’s curriculum for grades six through eight into six middle schools, along with supporting professional development and learning labs. The instructional focus of the units included creating a text-based culture in the classroom and an introduction to argument.
- In 2014/2015, the same three units were adopted by nine additional middle schools.

The Challenges

When Eric Simpson moved into the role of secondary ELA supervisor for Lewisville Independent Schools in 2012, he recognized a variety of reading and writing challenges. In many classes, sustained silent reading was not a priority, little was done to emphasize independent writing, and student collaboration was not encouraged.

“We know that these practices are critical for real student success,” said Simpson, a ten-year veteran in ELA teaching and coaching. “I wanted to provide a structure that supported the adoption of consistent, TEKS-aligned instructional practices across our system. And I knew that we did not have the time and resources to design something from scratch.”

Combining Curriculum with Integrated Professional Development

At the beginning of the 2013/2014 school year, Simpson introduced three of Inquiry By Design’s units at grades six, seven, and eight to teachers in six LISD middle schools. The units, which are used at LISD to complement other classroom work, are designed to help students develop the ability to read, write, and talk about a variety of increasingly complex texts.

Teachers use the units to cultivate essential reading practices, set up and use writer’s notebooks, and write text-based arguments. Each unit is accompanied by a detailed instructional guide that includes goals, sequenced instruction, and takeaways for every class session.

To launch the work, Inquiry By Design held a two-day workshop on *Dealing with Difficulty* for participating teachers. The workshop introduced teachers to the idea that difficulty is a scaffold for understanding and that students can be coached to work independently and collaboratively through difficult and complex texts. During portions of the workshop, participants worked through a cycle of work and tasks in order to experience the process as learners.

Additionally, department heads and administrators went through abbreviated versions of the workshop to familiarize themselves with the curriculum and practices.

“Typically, professional development is front loaded,” said Simpson. “One of the unique things about Inquiry By Design is that they conduct learning labs during the school year to reinforce practices. These sessions give teachers a chance to collaborate on what’s working and discuss common challenges.”

Signs of a Changing Learning Culture

According to Simpson, he’s seeing positive changes already when he walks through hallways and does class observations.

“Students are now carrying around books that they choose and are sharing them with others,” he said. “We’ve seen a dramatic increase in the use of writer’s notebooks, and even more significantly, in the amount of writing students are doing. Many students filled 35 to 45 pages in the first nine weeks of this school year—that’s a tripling of average writing output.

“Worksheet activity has also gone way down, and discussion activities have gone up. I see far fewer classes set up in rows,” he said.

Simpson also noted that those teachers who use the curriculum with fidelity are seeing huge leaps in the reading levels of their students. The average student in these classrooms doubled her reading growth. According to Simpson, some of the biggest gains have been in the district’s most economically diverse schools with the largest populations of struggling students.

“Students are now doing actual work,” said Simpson. “The Inquiry By Design curriculum is helping us move away from a ‘stand-up and deliver’ teaching model to a truly collaborative learning culture in our schools.”

Update

In 2014/2015 Lewisville added Inquiry By Design curriculum at grades nine and ten to continue support to students as they moved into high school, followed by units at grades eleven and twelve in following years. High school units continued the focus on writing arguments and then expanded into poetry, work with informational and literary nonfiction, and work across multiple texts.