

Cecil County Uses Discussion to Meet New Academic Standards

17th October 2012 | Posted in News, Schools

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ANNAPOLIS – As Justin Garagnani sat in freshman English last March at Elkton High School in Cecil County, he was intimidated and worried students would make fun of each other when his teacher said they were going to sit in a circle and talk for the next hour.

“It’s going to feel different,” his teacher, Tim Jadick, said.

He listed ground rules: “Don’t raise your hand, speak to each other ... not me, and be respectful. The whole goal is to let ideas flow.” He then read an excerpt out loud and sat quietly as the class discussed it.

“It was strange, but it was good because you didn’t feel the pressure of an adult there,” Garagnani said. “Thoughts were more free.”

As schools across the state prepare for higher academic standards to be put in place next year, Cecil County is setting an example by taking a different approach to reaching them. This year, the county began systematically implementing discussion-based curriculum and teaching methods in every classroom.

The Common Core Standards, initially adopted by Maryland in 2010, include the Continuum of Literacy Learning that focuses not only on technical reading and writing skills, but thinking skills.

Despite Common Core training sessions hosted by the Maryland Department of Education, Cecil County public school teachers were overwhelmed by how to get students engaged in, and prepared for, higher levels of learning and thinking, county education administrators said.

“We’ve always asked students to read and write, but not at this level,” said Jim Zimmer, Cecil County instructional coordinator for social studies.

Before the new standards, he found social studies teachers giving students shorter, simpler texts.

“Teachers innately want students to be successful,” Zimmer said. When academic standards were raised, teachers, already struggling to get students engaged in simple texts, began asking, “How am I going to get students through this?”

In response, almost a year ago, a group of Cecil County teachers and administrators, including Zimmer, reached out to a Maryland-based, educational non-profit organization, Touchstones Discussion Project, which specializes in discussion-based teaching.

Several faculty members at St. John’s College in Annapolis founded the organization about 30 years ago, and its materials and methods are used nationally and worldwide.

Touchstones has, at some point, been used as supplemental material in every Maryland county school system, said Stefanie Takacs, executive director of Touchstones. But this is the single largest implementation of the program in the U.S.

Cecil County has 16,000 students.

Touchstones is seeing more interest from other counties since the standards were adopted, Takacs said, like Montgomery County, which recently adopted Touchstones into its gifted and talented program.

She's also met with Kent County school officials.

"We're looking at Cecil County and what they're doing," said Ed Silver, Kent County supervisor of education services.

As teachers figure out how they're going to meet the standards, "they're looking for resources, and it just so happens Touchstones provides an awful lot of coverage" of those areas, Takacs said.

Within the next four years, Cecil County plans to implement Touchstones in every class, including math and science, and all teachers, from 3rd to 12th grade, should be trained, said Mike Hodnicki, Cecil County instructional coordinator for secondary language arts.

So far, all social studies, English and upper-level Spanish teachers, as well as school administrators, have been trained, and materials for math and science have been purchased, he said.

English teachers are now required to hold one-hour Touchstones classes once a week.

By reading the text out loud, every student, whether they can read well or not, "reads" it, Hodnicki said. It "levels the playing field, so each student, regardless of reading level, has access to the same, complex text."

Touchstones isn't designed to make students better readers or writers, Hodnicki said, but it does help them discuss a text and understand it, which inevitably makes better readers and writers.

The discussions are surprisingly intimate, Jadick said. He's shocked by what the students are willing to share.

"It was a little rough ... because they were all rowdy about being in the circle, and they were intimidated," Jadick said. But after three sessions, students began saying, "I can't wait for Touchstones."

But he does try to direct them away from personal rants.

"I'll think, 'What do I really want them to get out of this?'" he said.

When students do reach the conclusion they were meant to reach, he said he can't believe "they got what I wanted them to get without me saying a word."

Garagnani said English wasn't always his favorite.

"Before Touchstones, the class was a little awkward ... then we learned how other people thought," he said. "I feel welcome when I come in there."

Jadick said it's hard to tell whether Touchstones has improved his students' reading or writing skills, but they're better at brainstorming ideas and are better behaved.

"The Touchstones mentality has kind of seeped in," he said. "It's a more relaxed classroom environment."

The curriculum and training change wouldn't have happened without the new standards, said Cecil County instructional specialist Jean Clark, who's taught in the county for 34 years and was instrumental in the process.

The change cost the county \$52,000, funded with part of the federal Race to the Top grant, awarded to Maryland in 2010, said Carolyn Teigland, Cecil County associate superintendent for education studies.

The grant totals \$250 million over four years and is divided among the counties, giving Cecil County about \$1.9 million over four years, according to Maryland Department of Education records.

Zimmer said he doesn't foresee the new curriculum being a recurring expense. The actual materials aren't expensive. It's more about changing teachers' mindsets.

Teachers aren't just changing the way they teach, but how they interact with each other, he said. They're asking teachers in different subject areas for help using Touchstones and how they can engage students.

"It's not unusual for teachers to talk to one another," said Janet Newberry, Cecil County instructional coordinator for world languages. "It is unusual for teachers to talk to one another about the content of their classes."