

**A Balanced Literacy Framework for Westmount Charter School
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From their Presentation at the World Gifted Conference, Vancouver, August 2009

To enhance the effectiveness of Westmount Charter School's Division One literacy program, we devised a teacher based action research project in the spring of 2008. The focus of this ongoing project is to develop a Literacy Framework that compliments the unique program at Westmount while encouraging common practices, language, and methodologies. The framework also allows for differentiation required to meet the needs of gifted learners.

With Administrative approval a Literacy Framework Committee was formed in September 2008. With that confirmation, seven teachers and a Vice Principal met on a weekly basis to investigate current pedagogical research and develop the framework.

The first area examined was research on compacting and accelerating for gifted students. When the committee looked at the research, it overwhelmingly supported both acceleration and compacted programming for gifted students. Rogers and Kimpston (1992) reviewed nineteen major studies on acceleration (including compacting) and found only one suggesting that there were disadvantages to acceleration. In fact, several studies found that gifted students performed better in subject areas when placed in a compacted or accelerated program. Rimm and Lovance (1992) found that when young gifted students entered accelerated programs, they had greater incentive to achieve academically. When the committee reviewed the research regarding curriculum compacting for gifted elementary students the results were similar.

The second area of research examined related to curriculum frameworks and consistency in programming. The research did evidence that providing common frameworks for teaching staff is beneficial for students. Although VanTassel-Baska (2002) suggested that there was a lack of research examining how multiple teaching approaches can work together she did find benefits for using common frameworks across classes and grades. The committee felt that building consistency with the use of overarching concepts in the Language Arts program would be beneficial. This idea was also supported by O'Day and Smith's (1993) recommendations in the national standards projects. In that project, O'Day and Smith strongly advocate for, "curriculum that emphasizes intra and interdisciplinary connections through over arching concepts, issues and themes..." (Joyce VanTassel-Baska, 2003, p.174).

Once the decision was made to try to build consistency with overarching themes into the Westmount Language Arts program, the question became what those overarching concepts should be. The Committee concluded that the Framework should be divided into six overarching components: Reading, Writing, Assessment, Grammar & Conventions, Reflection, and Representing. A decision was made to begin the investigation with Reading.

The research indicated four essential strategies needed to be addressed in a quality reading program to support the development of overall strong readers: Decoding, Comprehension, Fluency and Vocabulary. From there the Committee determined that there were six essential "vehicles" or "tools" that were required in order to implement the above strategies. They are: Guided Reading, Silent Reading (SQUIRT: Sustained Quiet Uninterrupted Independent Reading Time), a Daily Message, consistent grade appropriate Word Walls, Leveled books in all classrooms, and a Word Study program.

To implement the six essential vehicles the Elementary Community began implementation in September 2009. The Committee determined that each gifted learner could make significant gains by experiencing a small group Guided Reading session at least once every two weeks. Interactive Word Walls were purchased and mounted in all kindergarten to grade three classrooms. SQUIRT (Silent Quiet Uninterrupted Independent Reading Time) was mandated for kindergarten through grade five, occurring during daily during a specified time throughout the school. Classroom books were leveled by teachers and trained volunteers. The focus of Professional Development has been teacher training with an emphasis on investigating Guided

Reading Centres and reading assessment tools. Guided Reading resources including training videos, leveled book sets, listening centres and centre materials were purchased. To support the program an Elementary teacher was designated a .2 time position to act as Literacy Coordinator.

In addition, the Literacy Coordinator implemented testing to track student development in relation to the four essential reading strategies: decoding, comprehension, fluency and vocabulary. Assessment tools including Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading (STAR) and the Gray Oral Reading Test 4th edition (GORT) were used. The hope is that we will recognize a significant increase in the GORT and STAR reading scores over a period of three years. Moreover, 2008 grade three Provincial Achievement Reading scores will be compared to those of 2011. A teacher survey will be done in June 2010 in order to determine satisfaction with the literacy program and levels of confidence in the implementation of new teaching methods.

The Elementary community has embraced the changes made to the literacy program at Westmount Charter School. They are actively sharing strategies and resources. Teachers are accessing the Literacy Coordinator for assistance in student reading assessment, development of Guided Reading Centres, and overall support in teaching methods. Profits from a book fair have been used to purchase more literacy materials and there has been an increase in Professional Development time allocated to literacy. Finally, the community intends to continue the development of the Literacy Framework with a focus on the investigation and implementation of the writing component of the framework in the years 2010 – 2012.

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