

Fall Creek Elementary School

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Charles Garrett, Principal

Fall Creek Elementary School in East Bend, North Carolina, put concerted effort into developing a student body of fluent writers. Teachers at Fall Creek attribute their success in this area to recent changes in their methods of writing instruction. Prior to 2009 most writing assignments were single prompts, with all students working on the same step at the same time. After training with Dr. Beth

Frye at Appalachian State University and Lucy Calkins from The Reading & Writing Project, the school instituted a writer's workshop model in which students choose a topic that interests them and move through the writing process at their own pace. This change has led to significant improvements in the volume and quality of students' written work.

- ◆ Pre-K-6
- ◆ 86% White
- ◆ 11% Hispanic
- ◆ 2% Black
- ◆ 1% Other
- ◆ 55% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

The Writer's Workshop Model

From kindergarten onward, teachers at Fall Creek schedule approximately 45-minute daily writer's workshops, integrate writing practice across the curriculum, and encourage students to write at home. This gives students the daily writing practice required to become effective writers. Every classroom has the steps of the writing process posted on the wall and this process is modeled consistently throughout the school year. Students begin using this process in first grade, knowing how to move independently through the steps by the end of that year. Teachers follow the same routine daily for workshops: read-aloud, mini-lesson, student practice, conference, and sharing.

Read-Aloud

Most lessons begin with the teacher reading an exemplary text, called a *mentor text*, aloud. This can be a book, news article, informative text, the teacher's own writing, or any other text that illustrates the feature(s) of writing the teacher wants to discuss that day. They use mentor texts to address a number of aspects of writing, such as the purpose of a piece, its intended audience, and how to use the appropriate style and vocabulary. Mentor texts give students a writer's eye view of a text as the teacher guides them through looking for specific features, such as three pieces of supportive evidence in a persuasive letter or use of similes or alliteration in a poem. Teachers can use these texts to show students that authors use the writing process to get to the final product, and discussing what they notice helps students later emulate the features of good writing.

Mini-Lesson

After reading an appropriate mentor text, the teacher conducts a mini-lesson on the day's focus. For example, when teaching about voice, a teacher might read a poem from the point of view of a whale to help students identify strategies for establishing voice. The subsequent mini-lesson might include the teacher modeling the steps he or she followed to find the right voice for a piece of writing.

Teachers introduce a strategy or skill, model it, work together with students—giving support when needed, and gradually release them to try it on their own. In the early grades, students will need more modeling and support before they use these strategies independently, but they will be able to work independently more quickly each year.

Student Practice

The bulk of writer's workshops are dedicated, uninterrupted writing time in which students work at their own pace. Oftentimes teachers dim the lights or put on music to signal that it is time to practice the strategies they have seen and discussed in mentor texts. Students can continue working on a piece in progress or start fresh, always self-assessing where they are in the writing process and moving independently through the steps. Teachers model the process of self-reflection, determining next steps to help students avoid getting stumped and asking "What do I do now?" They also encourage students to be flexible, returning to the revising or even planning stage if they need to and then moving on from there. In many classrooms the poster of the writing process is designed so students can place their nametag alongside the step they are currently working through.

Conference

After students have had a chance to write, teachers hold one-on-one or small-group writing conferences in which students can share their writing and receive feedback on specific elements. For example, if a sixth-grade student is writing a letter to a third-grade student about the dangers of smoking, the teacher will focus on making sure the student wrote in such a way that a third-grade student would understand and stay interested. During conference time, a teacher may suggest something to a student that sparks the student to go back to a different step in the writing process. Students know that the need to return to a piece is okay and part of an author's writing process. Conferences are informal and may take place at the teacher's desk or casually as the teacher circulates and monitors the students as they work.

Sharing

Collaboration and feedback are important parts of the writing process, so writer's workshops allow time for students to share their writing with peers. Fall Creek students engage in sharing and peer revision as "writing buddies," listening as their "buddy" reads his or her writing aloud, asking questions, and providing suggestions. Teachers model the types of features students should listen for—for example, descriptive details about characters in a story and the setting—as well as the types of questions to ask the author (e.g., "You said that the main character *went* to school, but I wonder if there is another word you could use. Did she *run*? Did she *trudge*?").

This sounding board process allows students to see if they are getting their ideas across in their writing. If they are not, they revise. For example, a buddy may say, “I wonder if you could add more detail here.” Then, authors go back and work on their own, evaluating their writing and the comments received from the buddy to decide whether and how to implement the suggestions.

Comfort and Ownership in the Classroom Writing Community

Fall Creek teachers understand the importance of making students feel comfortable as part of a writing community. This allows students to take risks and share their writing more freely. Fall Creek teachers ensure students’ comfort by allowing them choices and by celebrating their writing.

Choice

Teachers give students as much control and ownership over their writing as possible, helping them view themselves as authors. Students have free choice of topics, writing styles, genres, writing materials, and even where they sit or lie while they write.

To help students know how to choose writing topics, the class will spend time talking about *kinds of topics* they can write about—for example, something important to them, something they know a lot about, or something they wonder about. However, the specific topic is left up to the student.

Students keep writing notebooks with covers personalized with photographs, drawings, or other images. On the first page of their notebook, students list topics they might want to write about someday, adding to the list throughout the year as they think of new topics. Whenever it’s time to start a new piece of writing, students simply turn to the first page of their writing notebook and choose a topic from their list.

Students also have control over where they write and what they use to write. Students can choose from a variety of pens, pencils, and even types of paper, such as paper that has lines on the bottom half and blank space at the top for illustrations. They take their materials to their favorite area of the classroom where they can be comfortable for the duration of workshop time. In larger classes where there is not enough room for every student to choose a place to sit or lie down, teachers divide the class in half and alternate which students can choose their location on even or odd days of the month.

Celebrating Writing

Teachers at Fall Creek make sure that students feel happy, safe, and comfortable by celebrating students’ writing accomplishments and instilling a sense of pride. Teachers display student writing in the hallways for other students and teachers to see and create activities to honor writing and extend the writing community beyond the classroom.

During one such activity, Author’s Chair, a student sits in a special (sometimes decorated) chair and reads his or her piece of writing. Classmates give the author very specific feedback, such as “I really like the details you used to describe _____” or “I really like how you *showed* instead of *told* us about _____.” They are taught to be constructive and positive if they have suggestions for improvement, for example, “I wonder if you might like to use some onomatopoeia to describe _____.”

Teachers also use publishing parties to celebrate and showcase student-selected writing that has been taken through all the steps of the writing process and that the student considers finished. They display the published pieces in the classroom or in the school hallways, and teachers provide snacks and hot chocolate to contribute to the feeling of celebration. Classmates and other students walk around the “gallery” and read the “published” pieces. Armed with yellow sticky notes, they write down “two stars and a wish” for the author: two positive comments identifying elements of good writing and one suggestion for improvement. Authors later collect all of the notes left on their pieces, place in their portfolios, and reflect on them when writing their next piece.

Next Steps for Fall Creek’s Writers

Once Fall Creek began truly celebrating writing and using the writer’s workshop model every day, students started to enjoy writing more, were able to write for extended periods of time without stopping, and produce longer and more varied pieces of writing. The model also gives students consistency from grade to grade. Teachers pass the students’ writing notebooks to their next teacher, allowing students to continue working from their existing topic list. Fall Creek students rarely say “I don’t know what to write about”; they know exactly how to begin the writing process and follow it through to a published piece of writing.

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