

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## A Schoolwide Vocabulary Approach

Pocomoke Middle School, Maryland • February 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Vocabulary Instruction

### Highlights

- Caroline Bloxom, the principal at Pocomoke Middle School, talks about why the school decided to adopt a schoolwide program focused on vocabulary instruction across the content areas.
- A school norm checklist has been developed to ensure consistency in reading practices throughout the school, including the schoolwide use of word walls and graphic organizers to support the development of vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. Implementation is monitored by the school's reading team.
- Teaming is essential to the school's success. For example, Pocomoke extends training in explicit literacy instruction to teachers across all subject areas, including science, social studies, math, and art, and a team of teachers examines a student's work across all subject areas.
- Pocomoke has seen significant improvement in student reading achievement, especially for students whose families live at the poverty level in this rural community.

## About the Site

### Pocomoke Middle School

### Pocomoke City, MD

#### Demographics

49% White

47% Black

2% Hispanic

1% Asian

1% Native American

56% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

0% English Language Learners

12% Special Education

Pocomoke Middle School takes a schoolwide approach to meeting the needs of each of their students. Vocabulary instruction, comprehension strategies, and learning aids such as graphic organizers are a part of every content area classroom. Pocomoke staff work together to improve students' reading skills through:

- Adopting a schoolwide emphasis on vocabulary instruction;
- Training content teachers and implementing explicit literacy instruction across all subject areas, including science, social studies, math, and art;
- Using graphic organizers across the content areas to support the development of reading comprehension;
- Engaging students in text discussion to promote higher levels of understanding;
- Supporting staff collaboration through student work review discussions;
- Using assessment data to identify needs and inform instruction for struggling readers; and
- Providing reading interventions for students reading below grade level through targeted classroom instruction and supplemental reading classes designed to meet the needs of students requiring more intensive interventions.

## Full Transcript

I'm Caroline Bloxom, and I'm the proud principal of Pocomoke Middle School. We're a 4-8 rural school on the eastern shore of Maryland.

Over half of our children at Pocomoke Middle School are from homes of poverty, and through the research that we have done, we've discovered that there's a lot of difference in homes, the amount of vocabulary that's spoken. So, we knew that a lot of our kids just didn't have that background of hearing extensive

vocabulary everyday at home.

We have very high expectations for all of our teachers as well as our students, and our school improvement team developed a school norm checklist. It is all monitored by our reading implementation team here at our school, and on our reading implementation team, we don't just have reading teachers. We have teachers from all the content areas and all the grades in our school. So, we do mean for vocabulary to happen not just in our reading and integrated language arts classes, but in every single content area in our school.

Consistency and habits make for excellence, and as you walk around our school, you see that consistency. You see it on the walls. You see in every room, the word walls. You see in every room, vocabulary being highlighted. It might even be in the form of vocabulary art.

For middle school in our county, we've used teaming for probably for 20 years, and I can't say enough about teaming. When the teachers are meeting on their grade level teams and in that team you have two integrated language arts teachers, two math teachers, a science teacher, a social studies teacher, and a special education teacher, and they are all talking about reading, that's quite wonderful. So, they're on the same page. I think by being on the same page and consistently having the same expectations of their students, they have been able to move their students forward.

You need that time for teachers to come together and to be able to collaborate on the students that they're working with. A new piece that we have been doing for the last five years is examining student work. Every teacher brings in work, so we have John's math work and science work and social studies work and reading work.

One of the greatest things that has come about by this concentration on vocabulary and our students acquiring more complex vocabulary is that they have taken a lot more risk in the books that choose to check out from the library for their own personal reading. We actually have children now reading more complex books, richer books in vocabulary because they feel confident to do that, and that is certainly been exciting.

The other thing is adolescence is a time when it's an emotional roller coaster for children that are going through adolescence, and acquiring the vocabulary has also helped them express their emotions. So in all honesty, as crazy as it sounds, I think it's even helped with discipline because when children can dialogue about how they're feeling, they do that instead of taking action. And so, I would say that's been an outcome that I am not sure I had really thought about. But just hearing the children discussing amongst themselves words and also being able to talk about their emotions, that's been a real bonus.

Student achievement is obviously what we want to increase. We want our students to continue to do better and better each year. Over the last five years, with the vocabulary and with other strategies in our school, our overall reading scores have gone up from 55 to 85%, which has been pretty phenomenal. Our poverty kids—our students who receive free and reduced meals—now has gone from 35 to 75, and that's exciting. It's exciting to see them, as they have acquired this vocabulary, being able to understand their textbooks

because most textbooks, as I said, when we're doing guided reading, that book may be on their level, but a textbook, all the kids really use the same textbook. So to be able to see them using their strategies and looking at those words in context, words that they've heard over and over, and beginning to understand those because they are part of their core bank of words and to be able to understand their text and actually interact with it more efficiently has been wonderful to see.