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Independent Reading: Effective Student Assessment in Middle School

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Leadership Application Project of

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Abstract

The findings of the current literature suggest that encouraging independent reading and cultivating lifelong readers, as the state standards require, are best served by activities and assessment that differ from traditional summative assessments. This paper examines current strategies and evaluates practices in teaching and assessing independent reading, and provides a toolbox for how a district can incorporate those recommendations into a revised curriculum.

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Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Minnesota's Academic Standards in Language Arts include an independent reading component, and thus the school district in which the author teaches is among all others in the state tasked with implementing ways to effectively engage middle-grade readers. Yet unlike reading or writing standards, for which the district has purchased a comprehensive textbook and supplemental materials package from Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, very few independent reading curricula or programs exist. A study conducted by Fisher in 2004 confirmed that although several resources exist focusing on specific aspects related to independent reading, there was an obvious deficiency on how to implement an independent reading program school-wide, let alone district-wide, across the country.

Independent Reading, known often as Silent Sustained Reading, has been highly correlated with student achievement in language arts by improving fluency, vocabulary exposure and retention, and critical thinking and analysis skills (Flood, Lapp, and Fisher, 2003; Morrow, 2003). As a result, many states, including Minnesota, have integrated independent reading into education standards. But what is the best way to encourage independent reading in the middle grades? What is the most effective way to measure growth and success in independent reading? The author of this paper, after three years of teaching English Language Arts in a Minnesota middle school, has observed an absence of traditional assessments.

As long as there have been books, there have been "readers" and "non-readers." While many might agree that books and other written works are essential in academia, it may not be widely known just how important non-requisite, self-selected works are to contributing to academic success. Research conducted by Stairs and Burgos (2010) found that a literacy-rich classroom environment, as well as independent self-selection and reading workshops in which students can share authentic reactions to what they've read, are critical to promoting literacy and creating lifelong readers.

Several researchers have found a correlation between time spent on leisure reading and academic achievement (Stairs and Burgos, 2010). Morrow (2003) asserted that teachers greatly influence students' attitudes toward reading, and that leisure reading is best promoted by an inviting atmosphere that includes immediate and ready access to books. A similar study by Flood, et al. (2003) reported that voluntary reading programs using high-quality reading materials resulted in increased comprehension and improved attitudes toward reading.

Paying particular attention to middle grades where students are transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn, that time frame is "critical to fostering ability and interest in reading" (Stairs and Burgos, 2010, p. 42). Several researchers have suggested that students benefit most from independent reading of texts they have selected themselves.

The Minnesota Department of Education recognizes this and thus has included independent reading standards for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. Students are required to read and comprehend a wide variety of literature,

including stories, dramas, and poems, varying in complexity and scaffolded appropriately depending on reading level. These texts should be self-selected for personal enjoyment and interest, as well as curricular assignments. Students should also use their independent reading to increase their understanding of multiple perspectives and viewpoints to help understand the world around them (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010).

The author of this paper teaches in a middle school in Minnesota that has translated these standards to student-friendly learning targets (taken from 2014 curriculum documents) that require students to: 1) read independently a wide range of texts and genres, including both fiction and nonfiction, and 2) read for personal enjoyment, interest and academic tasks to understand multiple perspectives and viewpoints.

As such, and more specifically, the English Language Arts Department at this middle school has determined that these learning targets, housed under the umbrella strand of "Independent Reading," should comprise 10% of a student's grade. Curriculum documents suggest a variety of "Sample Activities" to meet these standards, including (but not limited to) book talks, readers' notebooks, projects, and presentations. The problem arises when such suggestions are limited in scope and specificity, and do not provide any elaboration or guidance on how these activities should be created and administered to address the learning targets. Further, some teachers use methods of managing the Independent Reading requirement that research has deemed to be less optimal in terms of encouraging

reading independently and gauging a student's success and growth with regard to independent reading (Chase, Goodin, & Nichols, 2010).

The author's school is poised to be a literacy-rich environment. English Language Arts (ELA) teachers are strongly urged, as part of the curriculum, to provide students a significant amount of time every week for silent, sustained reading in the classroom. In sixth and seventh grades, where ELA classes are two-period blocks totaling 92 minutes, this typically results in about 20 minutes every day. Eighth grade ELA classes, which are 46 minutes in length, usually reserve Fridays for Independent Reading—the entire hour. Students at this school spend roughly 20% of their instructional class time reading independently. Further, students in all grades at this school are required, as part of their homework each night, to read at least 20 minutes outside of class. These initiatives are a result of extensive research into best practices and fostered by a Teaching and Learning Specialist team at the district level.

This same school has also has adopted, as a means of improving executive functioning skills in its students, a classroom requirement called the "High Five.[1]" This term reflects the five items that students are required to carry with them to their classes: paper/notebook, pencil, folder, textbook, and independent reading book, complete with pre-printed signs and a tagline, "Everyone. Every Class. Every Day." Students are encouraged to keep personal reading materials with them at all times, even in classes that do not traditionally complement language arts such as math or orchestra, under the auspices that if time should allow (e.g. after a test while waiting for others to finish), students should slip into their books

rather than doodle, chat, or do other homework. English Language Arts classes visit the school library at least semi-monthly, although some teachers take weekly trips. Students are also issued a pass for independent trips to the library if needed. Many teachers keep personal bookshelves or carts filled with grade-appropriate reading material and novels. Emphasis is placed on selecting "just right" books that challenge students without being too daunting; reading levels should be just above Lexile measurement of reading level. Some classrooms are outfitted with "book nooks" in which students will find floor pillows or a comfortable chair, the occupancy of which is awarded by a lottery of sorts or as a reward for good citizenship. The school employs a full-time reading specialist who, even at the middle grades, works with students on a pull-out basis for identification and intervention of reading and literacy deficiencies. Nearly half of the teachers in the ELA department teach a Reading Strategies class and work with students who do not meet proficiency on statewide, standardized reading tests.

Every year for *I Love to Read* month, the school hosts a Rockin' Readathon wherein students, families, community members, and other local celebrities like the Chief of Police and School Board members take turns reading continuously in a specially designated area outfitted with several rocking chairs. ELA teachers sometimes conduct "Read & Feeds" wherein students can bring comfortable reading accouterments and snacks, and read for the entire class period. Clearly, this school emphasizes, promotes, and supports reading. Clearly, it requires reading beyond the traditional textbooks and articles. But there is a

missed opportunity to employ best practices with regard to assessing readers of self-selected material.

The author's district has recognized the need to provide literacy tools to high-poverty students. There are a number of strategies in place to combat this. Thanks to a non-profit organization set up by the district, annual donations allow every elementary school in the district to give students their own student dictionaries when they complete third grade. Resources such as lending libraries, book fair scholarships, and "I Love to Read" month activities award books to kids from all backgrounds. Technology-based reading is allowed and even encouraged, however because not all students have access to devices such as phones, tablets, and e-readers, these other methods of getting printed books into the hands of students allow for universal access to reading material. Kids who *want* to read in this district, *can*.

The Author's School District: Background

The author teaches sixth and eighth grade English Language Arts in a district that serves 38,000 students in thirteen suburban communities. There is a wide range of diversity among the six middle schools in the district, all serving sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. District-wide, nearly 25% of students are categorized as non-white, 36% are currently receiving free or reduced-fare lunches, and over 4% are categorized as English Learners (EL). More specifically, the author's school is comprised of 31.8% non-white students, 52.3% students on a free or reduced lunch, and 6% of students are EL. While the district overall is fairly diverse, the author's school includes more Native American, Asian,

Hispanic, and Black students than others in the district, and serves a greater population of low-income and EL students. While identifying factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender were not inherent variables in research reviewed, studies used subjects with similar backgrounds as those in the author's school. These are not privileged students from wealthy schools supported by high tax bases, but rather kids who share classrooms with other kids who face challenges outside the educational system.

This particular district engages readers, which is only addressing a portion of the state standards; what is missing is effective assessment. The fact that this school has already looked outside its district to research the methods are schools are using to promote literacy suggests it might also benefit from examining best practices in assessment, an area that to date has not received the same level of scrutiny and revision. This paper examines best practices used elsewhere in addressing state standards that require students to read independently, and will recommend ways for the district to assess student achievement in this area.

Current Methods of Assessment in Author's Middle School

Current curriculum documents require that ELA teachers at the author's middle school address the standards as listed previously in this paper, and that assessment of those standards accounts for ten percent of a student's ELA grade in sixth and seventh grade, five percent in eighth grade. However, those documents only list the following as "sample activities" to use as methods of assessments:

Book Talks. These can range from informal, extemporaneous speaking about a book a student has read, to a more prepared speech with a minimal time required.

Reader's Notebook. Much like a reading journal, students are encouraged to reflect on what they are reading, write down any questions about content, characters, predictions, etc.

Projects. There is no description of what this entails. The author has observed a wide range of projects assigned and/or offered to students. Several teachers at the author's middle school use a selection of "mini-projects" in the form of worksheets that range from acrostic poems that describe character traits, to a simple reflection of the elements of a story's plot. Some of these worksheets ask students to make connections between the book and their personal lives. Many teachers also have an informal list of more creative, independent projects that students can choose to demonstrate their understanding of and connection to a text.

Presentations. These are also varied, and the author has seen many combinations of book talks and projects that comprise these presentations. Some students use technology to create multi-media Powerpoints and Prezis, while others record book commercials using iPhones and iPads.

Some teachers at the author's school still actively use Accelerated Reader, a computerized program that is discussed later in this paper, and has been suggested to be detrimental to reading for personal enjoyment (Chase et al, 2010). While the author of this paper does not question the quality of these assessments,

other teachers have voiced a frustration by a lack of clear direction and guidelines for effectively assessing independent reading. There is a concern that these activities do not engage readers, but rather are detrimental to students who read for pleasure because this adds a "homework" component to something that should be done as a leisure activity. Further, because these are only "sample" activities and not common formative or summative assessments the way there are in other curricular units, this leads to inconsistency among how teachers not only at this middle school, but the other middle schools in the district measure independent reading, possibly skewing data on student performance in this area.

Project Goal

The following research summary examines the ways students are encouraged to read independently, barriers to a successful independent reading curriculum, and the myriad methods the author found to assess growth in other districts. The goal is to provide, specifically for her own district, a comprehensive list of best practices for encouraging and assessing independent reading that might be incorporated into the independent reading curriculum. Given the emphasis on the importance of reading, particularly of self-selected texts, teachers should have a way to easily reference and access methods that have been positively correlated to successfully engage readers and assess independent reading, which in turn would manifest itself in greater academic success. By assembling a list of best practices and presenting them with the research that supports their effectiveness, this project will provide a toolbox that secondary English Language Arts teachers

in the author's district can access, along with sample activities and lessons on how to use these classroom strategies.

Following an extensive literature review in chapter two, chapter three includes a description of the final product, which consists of a revised curriculum and toolbox. Chapter four is a review of the process used to generate this product. And finally, the appendix includes the product itself, which includes a revised curriculum plan (in the "Understanding by Design" format used by the author's school district), a scope and sequence document to guide teachers through an academic year supporting independent reading, and the various lessons and activities used to do so.

Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, the subsequent terms shall be defined as follows:

Independent Reading. Refers to reading done for personal enjoyment, either in school or out of school, excluding curricular reading. This is cross-genre and readings are self-selected.

SSR, or Silent Sustained Reading. Refers to reading silently, independently, for at least fifteen minutes at a time, which should be long enough to get into a proper reading zone that allows students to tune out distractions and be absorbed by what they're reading.

DEAR, or Drop Everything and Read. Is a synonym for Silent Sustained Reading, used by some districts and a mnemonic device and to emphasize the importance of independent reading time.

E-readers. Defined as individual electronic devices that can stream or download texts, such as Amazon's Kindle and Barnes and Noble's Nook, among many others).

EL, or English Learners. Refers to students for whom English is not their first, most used language. Many districts refer to these students as ESL (English as a Second Language) or ELL (English Language Learner) students.

GROR, or Guided Repeated Oral Reading—This is an instructional strategy used to improve fluency, in which teachers model effective reading and students practice on their own using strategically selected texts and a recursive reading process that includes other adults, peers, and themselves.

Literature Review

This paper focuses on middle grades, which here means sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, however several studies including other grades may be applicable to this research. Findings suggest classroom strategies and activities that engage middle grade readers and effectively assess reading growth.

Before assembling best practices and effective classroom strategies, one should first evaluate and establish the importance of independent reading in middle grades. Numerous studies have determined both quantitatively and qualitatively, that independent reading is effective in supporting a traditional English Language Arts curriculum comprised of reading comprehension, writing, and analysis of literature. These findings support the inclusion of an independent reading component in a district's English Language Arts curriculum, the purpose of which is to create lifelong readers who read, *for enjoyment*, a variety of literary structures outside of the classroom.

The literature review is then organized in the following sections: student-centric barriers to independent reading, challenges for teachers assessing independent reading, considerations for an effective independent reading curriculum, opportunities for assessment, and a discussion on how best to apply learning to a new independent reading curriculum.

The Importance of Independent Reading

Available studies on independent reading, and interchangeably, silent sustained reading, or SSR; and Drop Everything and Read, or DEAR, vary in scope and how to approach it. However, they tend to agree that there is implicit

value in students reading independently for extended periods of time, at regular intervals (Allen & Hancock, 2008; Arthur, 1995; Fisher, 2004; Reutzel, Fawson, & Smith, 2008; Allington 2012). All of these studies concurred that children who read voluntarily in primary and middle grades were shown to have better study habits, language structure, socio-emotional development, and overall superior school performance. These studies also show that children who read independently scored significantly higher on standardized tests.

Arthur asserted, even in 1995, that in an "emerging fast-paced age of information," merely being able to read is not the same as actually reading (p.2). Indeed, long before the prevalence of smart-phones and the ever-present distractions offered by being constantly connected to others, Arthur recognized the waning practice of just reading to read, and with it, a deficit in research measuring the potential achievement gap between readers and nonreaders. Arthur identified a subgroup of Americans who are able to read but choose not to, to whom he referred as "a-literates."

The research study conducted by Arthur in 1995 investigated the effects of recreational reading on reading achievement in middle grade students. Fifty five students from a population of 231 fourth, fifth, and sixth graders from one school in a low socioeconomic neighborhood were given an interest survey, on which reading could be self-identified as a hobby in which students participate by choice during free time outside of school. Students who identified themselves as readers, as well as students who were not recreational readers, were then compared using reading achievement scores from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

Results varied by grade level: scores indicated that students in grade four who were recreational readers also had higher reading achievement scores than those who did not identify recreational reading as a hobby. Fifth and sixth graders did not show statistically significant enough gains to draw the same conclusion for those students (Arthur, 1995). However, Arthur still defended the importance of independent reading, claiming that children who identified themselves as voluntary readers *early* in lower grades did in fact demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement in reading. But he also cautioned that if that interest is not prevalent by the time the student reaches secondary grade levels, the student is unlikely to develop a new interest in reading as a hobby. While this is an older study comprised of a relatively small sample size, it is included to illustrate the history of interest in recreational reading in middle grades.

Additionally, only a quarter of students sought to participate in this study were given permission to do so, which potentially speaks to a 2013 study by Froiland, Powell, Diamond, & Son that supported numerous research studies correlating low literacy skills with socioeconomic status and low parental involvement. To illustrate the correlation, the author theorizes that in a school with low academic achievement, parents may not value or understand the importance of this study enough to let their children participate in a study simply to gain further insight in how to improve their children's reading performance. While the study did not explain the low participation rate, other reasons could include language barriers or the simple unreliability of counting on students to bring home or return permission slips. Students who come from homes not

equipped to scaffold reading instruction, provide books, and support schoolwork were less likely to engage in leisurely reading. Lack of independent reading further perpetuates low performance.

Reutzel, et al. (2008) found similar results with regard to fluency and comprehension growth. In a similar study using 72 third graders from two schools with 35-50% poverty rates, they used standardized test scores to identify high, medium, and low performing students. Then the four third grade teachers across those schools underwent additional training and staff development with literacy coaches to maximize growth throughout the school year. Reutzel and his colleagues determined that not only was there evidence to suggest that silent sustained reading improves fluency, but that a variety of fluency practices is successful in motivating and engaging readers

Fisher (2004) also believed there is a relationship between independent reading and academic growth, and conducted a much larger study—2,200 students an urban high school with a 99% poverty rate. Fisher claimed the increased emphasis on standardized testing resulted in educators caring more about *how well* kids read than *how much, and when*, kids read. In an effort to support his belief that independent reading time affected test performance, the school established dedicated, school-wide time for silent reading. The goal of the was to shift the school culture from emphasis on test performance to the importance of reading, and many teachers, despite claiming they did not have the training or resources to adequately promote the endeavor, worked to engage and encourage students to read.

Initial results in Fisher's study were flat; however, in talking to teachers Fisher discovered that the independent reading program was not being consistently implemented, thereby skewing the results since not every student was being exposed to the pro-reading culture. He then had to reexamine the data for students who *were* reading throughout the year, based on observation and teacher reports, and analyzed pre- and post-test data. The results showed that students who engaged in more independent reading time did indeed have statistically higher reading test scores.

The fact that the studies by Fisher (2004) and Reutzel (2008) included students ranging from elementary school to high school with different socioeconomic and urban/suburban backgrounds suggests a consistency between independent reading and literacy in a variety of environments. Independent reading could benefit students universally.

Fisher (2004) acknowledged contradictory research, however. Specifically, he referenced a report issued by The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in 2000 that argued the effectiveness of independent reading with regard to academic achievement could not be documented. But Fisher addressed this research by using his own study as an example of outside factors that could affect the outcome of such studies. As previously mentioned, teachers at the school in Fisher's study were challenged school-wide to commit with consistency to SSR for one year to determine if it affected scores on their annual standardized reading tests. When Fisher found that not all teachers were devoting time to actively supporting students in SSR and

recalculated the results using only the students who were reading, the results supported his theory. Fisher suggested the contradictory research findings could be dependent on other factors, such as lack of reading material, teacher attitude toward independent reading, and reinforcing accountability, all of which are discussed in subsequent sections of this paper.

Pflaum and Bishop (2004) addressed this "conundrum" (p.208), in which it is difficult to tell if student achievement is directly impacted by silent reading or affected by outside factors. In addition to the support previously mentioned, they also suggested that independent reading may not be sufficient as the *only* driver of achievement scores, but should certainly be incorporated into a total reading program to *improve* those scores.

Student Barriers to Independent Reading

There are several reasons why kids simply will not read for pleasure, or even if they enjoy reading, why they will not read outside the classroom. Students may have limited access to books, poor book selection skills, or lack appropriate scaffolding by teachers. These reasons are discussed in the next section because they also hinder the success of a program that is set up and expected to succeed. Some factors exist even despite schools' best efforts to engage readers: lack of motivation, distractions, and the absence of effective modeling.

Motivation. Turner's research (1993) on improving reading comprehension achievement of middle-school students cited lack of motivation as a key factor for why 50% of the students studied did not like to read independently. However, what appears to an outside observer to be a lack of

motivation may simply be distractions that demand more of the students' attention, like television and friends. In a small study of 54 students, Turner administered a reading interest survey and measured results against comprehension and basic skills tests. He determined that if given a choice, students would prefer to socialize or watch television, but that does not mean they inherently dislike reading. They could, in fact, like reading just fine, but do not prefer it to other activities. Lack of motivation can also result from being out of practice; no child wants to do what is difficult, and if they are a struggling reader, or the act of reading is unfamiliar or uncomfortable, a child will understandably avoid it. Similarly, a poor attitude about the value or need for reading will not actively motivate a child to read.

Turner (1993) also discussed the use of external motivation as a method of engaging readers. These included strategies like reward coupons for tangibles like pizza, parties, free books, etc., classroom rewards, and negative reinforcements like grades based on a point system. While these incentives worked short-term to build momentum, they failed to maintain excitement long-term and students quickly lost interest once the rewards were removed. This finding was consistent with those in a meta-analysis by Akin-Little, Eckert, Lovett, and Little (2004), which confirmed that many extrinsic rewards used on a classroom, especially with younger children, are ineffective.

Guthrie, in his book *Engaging Adolescents in Reading* (2008), includes contributions by many literacy experts who agree with the conclusion that reading engagement was more important to academic achievement than socioeconomic

factors. A meta-analysis of dozens of studies and articles concluded that students who were more motivated to read independently reported more academic success, which in turn led to students being more willing to read. Conversely, he also found that the less time students spent reading or were able to read, the more likely they were to drop out of school.

Distractions. Some kids in Turner's 1993 study claimed they actually enjoyed reading, but physical and/or mental distractions did not allow them the opportunity. For some, this meant the household was too noisy or physical conditions of the home did not allow them the peace they needed to read. For others, they had obligations like work or caring for younger siblings that precluded their ability to read. Turner's research showed that 54% of nine year-olds reported reading most days for pleasure, but that figure dropped to 35% for thirteen year-olds; he cited an increase in homework as another possible distraction. As kids advance through middle grades, they are required to divide up their available free time among other classes and work, whereas in lower grades fewer academic or sports obligations infringed on their reading time.

Lack of Effective Modeling. Turner (1993) attributed a significant number of non-readers to their parents also being non-readers. His survey found that 27% of students rarely or never saw their parents reading for pleasure. He insisted that in our efforts to teach kids how to read, we have forgotten that they also need to be taught to want to read.

While Turner's 1993 study may have been among the earliest to identify the importance of parental modeling of independent reading, Miller & Anderson

(2009) and Fisher, et al. (2009) more recently included effective modeling as key tenets of success in their books on engaging adolescents in independent reading.

Challenges for Teachers of Independent Reading Initiatives. In addition to student-centric barriers to independent reading, there are also challenges inherent to the various reading programs themselves. These include teacher accountability, managing reluctant readers, equipping teachers with the knowledge to implement effective programs, encouraging students to choose appropriate books, providing adequate access to books, and promoting parent engagement in their children's independent reading habits. The key difference between these challenges and those presented by students is that teachers often have the ability to address them, affording those teachers some control in improving those initiatives.

Accountability. In Reutzel's previously described 2008 study, he and his colleagues addressed the need for accountability in SSR. How do we know if a student is reading? How can we tell if a student is engaged while reading in the classroom? How do we know students are reading at home to the extent they say they are? This is especially true if teachers are reading their own books while the students are reading, as has been suggested in several studies. This study was also the first to suggest that using SSR measures as an indicator of academic achievement may not be as reliable as once thought because there is no valid way to prove just how much students are reading independently outside of school. This is because students, especially adolescents who are prone to inflating their times for various reasons, are the ones doing the self-reporting. This study also

compared SSR with another method called Guided Repeated Oral Reading (GROR), but guided reading is rarely used in middle grade language arts classes. Fisher's study in 2004 identified a common feeling among teachers who felt as if they "owed" their students a grade. One teacher aptly summed up her colleagues' sentiments:

> Non-accountability is definitely the most difficult concept to grasp in terms of SSR. As a teacher, I'm accountable for everything--standards, state tests, student attendance- everything... I'm not sure how I will know if students are reading. I see them reading and they seem to like it, but how do I know what they are getting out of it? (p. 147)

Teacher Knowledge. Arthur (1995) cited several studies that pinpoint a weakness with regard to teacher knowledge of children's literature. A questionnaire administered to 571 elementary teachers found that 91% of respondents could not name three children's books written in the past five years; 71% could not name even one. Yet 89% of those surveyed could list three or more activities designed to promote independent reading. Clearly, there is an opportunity to provide staff development in the area of independent reading, in both engaging and assessing students.

Taylor, Graves, & Broek (2000) suggested that it is not merely enough for reading teachers to read; they also need to practice discussing what they have read. For a conversation about literature to be authentic, teachers need to be confident enough in the process to demonstrate the skill to their students.

Student Ability in Book Choice. Reutzel (2008) agreed with others' contention that students should be free to select their own texts. However, the study identified a flaw in that aim when students are not taught how to effectively select the right text for them. Reutzel pointed out that a student who chooses a book that is too difficult may get discouraged and not finish the book, or worse, spend several hours reading it and not gain any enjoyment or learning from it. In education, we refer to what is called the Zone of Proximal Development, which abides by the notion that students need to be challenged sufficiently to feel motivated and accomplished, but not too much so as to be overly confused or discouraged (Woolfolk, 2004). This zone has a place even in independent reading.

Access to Books. Even worse than not being able to effectively choose a book that's both easy enough and interesting to read, is the desire to choose a book but not having a sufficient selection from which to choose. Fisher's 2004 study identified a lack of text resources as a main concern among teachers, and a considerable barrier for students when they were not able to provide their own reading material. The high school used in the study wrote and was awarded a grant that provided them with several hundred of age-appropriate, new books in a variety of genres and topics to entice students to read. According to the American Library Association, a classroom library should include at least 300 independent titles in a variety of genres, to help account for many students who do not own their own books or otherwise have no other access to independent reading material (Huck, 1993).

Parent Engagement. We know from several studies that parents are a child's first teachers, and how they model reading and literacy is often emulated by their children (Fisher, 2004; Padak & Rasinkski, 2007; Reutzel, et al. 2008). However Padak & Rasinski took this notion a step further in an article published in 2007, by providing specific guidance for parents who wish to encourage their children to be lifelong readers. They cited specific methods effective in primary schools that can also be used in the home, like the "Five Finger Rule of Book Selection" (p. 351), wherein if on any given page a child encounters more than five words he or she does not know or cannot readily figure out using context clues, that book is too complicated and should be postponed. The article also suggested making allowances for rereading favorites, or reading below grade level simply because the book is enjoyable. Even teachers enthusiastically read middle-grade and young adult novels, as part of a larger reading "diet," and value being able to share those texts and experiences with students. Other suggestions include guidance on finding appropriate reading materials, and support for helping new readers or English language learners become more proficient. Padak and Rasinski's strategies are universal to promoting reading because they bridge the gap between the acclaimed job of school and responsibility of the parent. Anyone— everyone—should be able to help children engage in reading, although actual effectiveness in parent engagement was not measured.

Considerations for an Independent Reading Curriculum

This section discusses six aspects of independent reading that teachers should consider and address before embarking on an independent reading

curriculum. They include the ability of students to choose their own texts, modeling and demonstrating the value of independent reading, establishing and encouraging good independent reading habits, minimizing the obligations related to independent reading, coaching students in making meaningful connections, and identifying the requirements and/or limitations of technology to be used for independent reading, in either the reading itself and assessment of reading. Each school and classroom is different, and teachers should acknowledge their own classroom dynamics.

Self-Selected Texts. Many literacy experts agreed that self-selected texts are an important component in independent reading. In a study conducted by Stairs and Burgos (2010), 53 eighth graders were asked to write in their reading journals about the best book they have ever read, how it changed their lives or influenced their thinking, and who else would like this book (and why). Answers to questions two and three varied, as did specific titles mentioned in question one. However, 92% of the titles students said were most influential in their lives were self-selected, independently chosen books. Only one title, *The Giver*, was read as a whole-class novel and selected by four students. Student choice was valued, and as a result students were able to connect with characters and relate to themes in texts on a personal level, thereby increasing their interest and subsequent motivation to read. Strongly put, Stairs and Burgos "...urge English Language arts teachers to keep independent, self-selected reading at the center of the middle grades English Language Arts curriculum" (p. 45).

Several sources cite the same data: Reutzel, et al. (2008) determined that self-selected, independent-level books for reading not only help with fluency but also maintain students' interest. Allington (2012) found, similarly, that even within a specific genre–say, biographies, for example– students were more engaged when given a greater selection of biographies from which to choose.

A large qualitative and quantitative study by Ivey & Broaddus (2001) went so far as to say inability to access engaging, appropriately leveled books is the primary reason readers become reluctant. While the sentiments expressed by students in the study may not have been completely new, the method in which it was obtained was—rather than having students self-report about reading habits, as numerous other studies had done, Ivey & Broaddus asked more than 1,700 sixth grade students from 23 schools in a variety of urban and rural communities to comment on the instruction of their independent reading curriculum. Their method included a checklist survey followed by open-ended responses and interview, providing both qualitative and quantitative data. This last point made the study rather innovative, allowing for both empirical research and a breadth of student voices to be included in their findings.

An additional finding was that many students were reading what they wanted to outside of school anyway, regardless of texts recommend in and by the school, and not admitting to those texts if they thought they would "not count" for what they considered to be academic reading. They refer to a phenomenon called a "literate underlife" (p.354), in which students read, write, and talk about topics not sanctioned in a typical classroom (Ivy & Broaddus, 2001).

Early and Repeated Modeling. Children who are read to, and conversely, who have the opportunity to independently enjoy picture books at an early, pre-reading age, learn to equate voluntary reading with positive associations (Arthur, 1995). Further, as children age, repeatedly exposing them to different genres and formats such as poetry (e.g. Dr. Seuss), pamphlets, brochures, newspapers, and magazines helps to remind them that voluntary reading can extend beyond the novel. Even the author's eleven-year-old son equates reading the newspaper on a slow and lazy Sunday morning with the informality of pajamas and coffee served in something other than a commuter's travel mug.

The shared reading experience in school, as with classroom-driven SSR can also be a valuable driver for engaging kids. Turner (1993) suggested that watching peers read has a "profound effect" (p. 43) on a student's reading interests. Middle school is surely a socially influential time, and if that influence is motivating a child to read, the side effect is a positive one.

Another way teachers can model effective reading and fluency is through teacher read-alouds. Ivey & Broaddus (2001) found in their research that students are much more interested in content, even in non-curricular reading, when it is read aloud in an engaging manner. While read-alouds take time, they can often set the groundwork for a shared reading experience, and if done early in the year, can create anchor texts to which lessons can be attached throughout the year. Allen (2000) reiterated the importance of read-alouds, calling it "risk-free" (p.45) because students are able to enjoy various types of literature without being responsible for the mechanics of making meaning. Allen also pointed to the

benefit of "mental model building" (p.46), in which students are free to create imagery in their heads about what they are hearing. This in turn allows students to make connections beyond the written and spoken word, delving into visual learning. Read-alouds are especially beneficial for struggling readers.

Falling into this same category of being read to is the use of audiobooks as a classroom tool. Similar to read-alouds, students are able to follow a story using someone else's fluency. As long as the content is age-appropriate, there is more leeway on the reading level because students are not responsible for decoding. And since many audiobooks use actors as narrators, there exists the added bonus of piquing the students' interest with the theatrical element (Allen 2000).

An additional facet to modeling is overall enthusiasm for reading. Atwell (2007) advised teachers to "teach reading so that students feel the enthusiasm of a trusted adult when we communicate to them one-on-one about literature" (p.93), claiming that students who feel encouraged and sustained will be greater contributors to a community of readers.

Silent Sustained Reading Habits. Arthur (1995), Fisher (2004), and Turner (1993) all ascertained that adults should model independent reading; students need to see the adults around them enjoying books. Arthur went so far as to suggest it should be held daily at the beginning of every school day. Fisher, Frey, & Lapp (2009) compared modeling independent reading to instructional modeling teachers already do for other processes. They suggested that it is helpful for students to see teachers read, work through the process of making meaning,

and then verbalize an inner dialogue so that students have a clearer understanding of what they should be doing when they read.

Fisher (2004) not only agreed that students in middle grade should be allotted daily independent reading time, but that it was actually "the most effective tool available for increasing a child's ability to write, spell, and comprehend" (p. 139). Scheduling time for reading and protecting that time during the day underscores its value and importance.

Minimizing Obligations. While educators are looking for ways to hold kids accountable to their independent reading, especially the time spent outside the classroom, Turner (1993) maintained that one of the success factors in an SSR program is to just simply let kids read. As they begin to dismiss the rigor required of comprehension quizzes or monotony of reading logs, they can relax and enjoy the reading experience for reading's sake. Turner also endorsed reading to kids, even at the middle and high-school levels, so they can be free to enjoy the experience of the story without the effort sometimes required of decoding, reacting, and synthesizing.

Making Meaningful Connections. Ivey & Broaddus (2001) pointed out that student connection with texts is important; indeed, even very early grades teach readers to make connections between texts, between the text and themselves, and between the text and the greater world around them. This can be taken further in that not only should students be making personal connections in their independent reading, but they should be making curricular connections, too. For example, asking students to discuss among themselves the elements of plot

within their own books can enrich a lesson on plot. Not only does this deepen their understanding of what they are reading, but also it makes the lessons relevant and personal. The research study concludes with the recommendation that independent reading and teacher read-alouds should take on a more central role in middle grades, but concede that more research is necessary to consider their place within instructional and curricular goals.

Allington (2012) went further, saying that students should go beyond those meaningful connections and hold deeper classroom discussions that involve summarizing, synthesizing, analyzing, and evaluating their texts. The more students engage with what they read, the more understanding they will derive from it.

Technology. Technology has crept into the classroom, ranging from school-supplied Chromebooks and laptops that are more readily available, to students' individual devices (e.g. iPods, e-readers, etc.) A study by Miranda, Johnson, and Rossi-Williams (2012) determined there was definite value in using e-readers. In addition to devices intended solely for reading, students are increasingly downloading reading applications onto other personal devices, such as tablets and smart phones.

According to Miranda, et al., (2012), e-readers can be motivating to middle-schoolers because these kids are already integrating technology into their everyday lives, and see the ability to use them in the classroom as a novelty or reward. Additionally, many of these programs allow you to instantly access a dictionary to look up the meaning of a word, sometimes simply by "hovering"

over the word in question. Some programs include a read-aloud feature, in which students can access a voice-over that reads the text to them as they follow along on their screens. While features like a dictionary is helpful to most readers, the read-aloud one is particularly beneficial for English-language learners and struggling readers (2012).

Potential Assessments for Evaluation

Current independent reading curricula rarely consider developmental and personal differences among students. Many times these programs call for reading and writing experiences that emphasize students' weaknesses rather than capitalize on their strengths or successes (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Further, many assessments tend to measure a benchmark that should be evaluated elsewhere, such as grading a book report for its written value, rather than the content or connections made with the text.

There are likely myriad ways to successfully assess independent reading. The author has discovered through her research an evaluation of these specific methods in the following section: student metacognition, self-reporting and diagnostics, parent involvement, journals, *Books in Action*, *The Millionaires Project*, *Book Bistro,* collaborative reading and discussions, and computerized assessment. Some of the methods are included in the project toolbox, based on alignment with learning presented in the literature review, on how best to support independent reading. Specifically, *Book Bistro* and collaborative reading seem to support best practices determined by this research. Additionally, these techniques may not be mutually exclusive; it is very likely that an astute teacher who clearly

knows her students combines two or more of these to create a hybrid of assessments. A positive byproduct of combining several assessment techniques is that teachers can address multiple learning styles and students have more than one opportunity to demonstrate achievement.

Metacognition in Students. Allen & Hancock, in 2008, acknowledged the need to improve reading instruction through valid assessment. They developed a research study that involved individualized cognitive profiles for students. The study consisted of 196 fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in a rural Oregon school whose student population was 88% white and 12% Latino, with 62% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Using a comprehension test regularly used by the school district, they measured comprehension achievement in all students and then divided them into three groups: assessment only (control), assessment plus reading profile awareness, and assessment plus comprehensive awareness. Commonly, teachers are solely responsible for providing feedback about students' reading strengths and weaknesses in the areas of comprehension, fluency, and decoding. However in this study, teachers provided specific and personalized input that led students to develop their own metacognitive processes while reading. Students were taught to deliberately monitor their comprehension through strategic note-taking during independent reading, and alter elements of their reading like pace, book choice, and distractibility, accordingly. This allowed students to further control their reading environment and subsequently, their own reading success and enjoyment. Students were able to translate a process that was meant to aid their reading ability and use it to enhance their personal reading

experiences. Using the state reading assessment, gain scores were calculated for each of the three experimental groups. Allen & Hancock concluded that higher levels of metacognition resulted in greater score gains, thus underscoring the importance of student self-awareness during reading.

Self-Reporting/Diagnostic Combination. Standardized and comprehension tests can be reliable indicators of a student's reading ability, but they cannot assess a child's attitude toward reading. Arthur (1995) included a study in which the instructional and recreational attitudes in children were measured, using a proprietary methodology called *The Diagnostic Reading Attitude Assessment* (Dryden, 1982). The study surveyed 634 children to identify positive and negative attitudes toward recreational reading. The methodology was found to be extremely reliable in gauging student interest and success with regard to independent reading. It also, sadly, identified a very specific subgroup of students who simply do not, and have never, enjoyed reading on their own. These kids viewed reading as less important than watching television, participating in sports, music, or other hobbies.

Parental Involvement. Turner (1993) suggested a parent-teacher-student contract meant to motivate students by involving parents in their performance. However, the section on *Parent Engagement* discussed earlier established that while parental involvement and support can increase student achievement, many students have parents whose work schedules do not allow them to be active participants in their child's learning, parents who simply do not value being directly involved in their children's education, or are unable to due to language

barriers. The program needs to be something students can own and monitor independently.

Independent Journals. Turner (1993) recommended this strategy, in which students are encouraged to respond to readings and the degree of requirements and content varies from teacher to teacher. This can be a great reflective tool for not only interacting with a text, but also for monitoring progress for both the student as they fill up a journal, and the teacher who now has a visual snapshot of what the student has read. Simply put, journals hold kids accountable to reading because if they are not reading, they will not be able to effectively write about what they have read.

Books in Action. Chehayl (2008) developed this proprietary assessment tool as a way to encourage readers to physically interact with their texts. The premise is that upon finishing a book, students have a menu from which they can choose a vast variety of projects. More difficult or multi-faceted projects earn more points. The program is highly creative and offers much variety for students, including options such as designing an advertising poster for the book, drawing a cartoon of the book's conflict, or preparing and presenting a food representative of the book. However, it still includes a formal assessment that teachers will have to evaluate, and does not address the issue of kids just simply wanting to read. Chehayl, in the background of the article, reinforces what several others have stated about the importance of choice and appropriate book selection, with one minor distinction. She emphatically stated, more forcefully than in other studies, the importance of teachers reading *with* their students during independent reading.

The time allocated for SSR should not be a time for checking e-mail or grading papers, but rather, the best and most accessible opportunity to model the practice.

The Millionaires Project. O'Masta & Wolf (1991) described a successful experiment implemented in a military base school of only 228 students. As part of its School Improvement Plan, a group comprised of teachers and parents launched a school-wide effort to read over one million minutes in one school year. They succeeded, claiming that all children participated and contributed to exceeding the goal. The project was modified as the school year progressed to account for changes in student behavior and complacency with the project, but overall was deemed a huge success. In addition to the documented increase in time spent engaged in reading, parents reported more positive parent-child interactions, and overall shift in attitude toward reading for pleasure. The shared goal also had a positive impact on school morale, which was observed but not measured objectively.

Book Bistro. Book Bistro was a strategy implemented by Kasten & Wilfong (2005) that sought to fulfill a goal most closely aligned with the standards that the author's school is trying to meet: creating lifelong readers who read for personal enjoyment. Kasten & Wilfong described similar struggles in engaging readers, including a computerized monitoring program and complex grading system. Ultimately, they looked to personal experience as inspiration. Recalling personal preferences with regard to sharing books, they established a "cafe" environment in the classroom that provided students with an informal venue in which to discuss books they've completed. By replicating a cafe outing

with friends, there was a slight shift from school assignment to something a student might do for fun, and they were eager to participate. Using a set of questions as a guide and a short written piece to accompany their talks, which also serves as a leave-behind of sorts for classmates who might later want to read the same book, Kasten & Wilfong created an atmosphere that, according to both written evaluations and post-project interviews, clearly improved students' attitudes toward reading, and better yet, inspired them to want to share what they've read. This method allowed students to "show their work" without feeling like they were actually *working*.

Collaborative Reading/Discussion. Pflaum and Bishop, in their 2004 study, found that students reported collaborative learning to be one of the most successful ways to engage middle-grade readers. While they did not apply a title to their method, like Book Bistro, Pflaum and Bishop discussed class techniques like Literature Circles and simply sharing with classmates, as ways to make meaning of texts they've read. Similar to curricular readings, students want to make connections to what they read. Sometimes simply having to explain what happened in their independent reading books cements what they have read and gives them the impetus to ask questions about what they might not understand. Knowing that they were going to have to be the experts on the content, especially something they enjoyed personally, drove them to engage on a higher level with their reading.

In an extensive study by Ivey & Broaddus in 2001, over 1,700 sixth-graders were interviewed and studied to determine what motivates them to read

for pleasure. Ivey & Broaddus concurred with others that middle-schoolers tend to lose their passion to independent reading and this is where negative attitudes and resistance to reading begin to gain purchase. However, they also found that if students were allowed to *talk* about what they are reading, they feel more positively toward the content and process. They cite the contradiction between teachers wanting students to be able to read critically, but seldom allowing them to initiate conversations about books. Much of that critique happens through dialogue and feedback, the ability to "socially construct knowledge" (p.354). This method honors students' need for self-expression, so critical in middle grades.

Atwell (2007) wrote about the importance of collaborating and discussing books in classrooms. Her experiences as both a classroom teacher and researcher have accumulated several years' worth of qualitative and quantitative support for setting aside time in school for independent reading, and then finding ways to share those experiences with peers. She referred to "booktalking," which is an informal, extemporaneous presentation of what one has read. The effort sounds much like a mini-commercial for the title, and the result in that students "sell" their peers on their books. Atwell's book lists several anecdotal accounts in which struggling readers, slow readers, and reluctant readers all improve their attitudes and aptitude as a result of simply talking about books. Atwell's research also corroborated what others have found to be a statistic correlation between independent reading and academic performance.

Computerized Assessment. Chase, et al. (2010) conducted a study that evaluated a controversial program, called Accelerated Reader (Hellman &

Friedman, 2005). It is a computer-based reading assessment tool used by many schools, and it has several components. There is a reading test (called the STAR test) that measures a student's reading ability and pairs them with appropriate texts. Upon finishing a book, students then take a computer-based comprehension quiz ranging from five to twenty points, depending on book length. Students earn points for each quiz completed, and the program monitors cumulative points over the course of the term. Teachers assign a final grade based on points. Some schools added an extrinsic reward component as well, letting students earn prizes at different point levels. There are positive aspects to this program: some believe the STAR test to be a great way to identify appropriate texts for readers whom teachers may not know very well. Some students even claim to prefer the multiple-choice tests to lengthier requirements like book reports.

The research conducted by Chase, et al. (2010) found fairly favorable results, despite several complaints that drove the school to evaluate the program in the first place. They determined that the program can be beneficial if used consistently, more so in the younger grades when basic recall of facts in books is a more grade-appropriate skill. They did, however, caution that the program should not be used to impact a student's grade, but rather it should be used a diagnostic tool to monitor comprehension and guide instruction.

An intervention report published by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences found more similar results, claiming that Accelerated Reader had "no discernible effects" (2008, p.1) on fluency, but that it could possibly positively impact achievement, particularly among younger grades.

These findings were based on research that involved over 600 students from 12 schools in the southern United States and Pacific Northwest.

When teachers use Accelerated Reader as a method of summative assessment, it falls prey to the same issue as other graded assessments—students delay finishing a book because they do not want to take a test. Or, they choose books far beneath their ability so the test will be simpler. Test questions can be very specific, sometimes focusing on a small detail that is inconsequential to the plot or theme. A student who missed the description of a certain element in the book (say, the color of character's car, for instance) may very well have identified a sophisticated, less obvious theme. But the test does not allow for that and would assign a lower score based on the missed, and possibly less important, question.

Another weakness of the program is its cost, which can result in it becoming obsolete. In the author's school district, the program was purchased as a set of software CDs, which was a much more affordable option than the expensive online version. However, what the district saved in money, it lost in relevance and accessibility because software that is nearly a decade old contains book titles just as antiquated. While some students think nothing of grabbing an older title off the library shelves, the author has observed far more students reading bestsellers like *Divergent* and *Harry Potter*, among other popular young-adult literature, none of which are in the outdated program. The teachers who use it do so sporadically and with mixed results, since the program's limitations restrict its use.

A similar study by Topping, Samuels, & Paul (2007) evaluated computerized assessment in general, exploring the impact of technology on

literacy. They concurred that computer-based reading tools like Accelerated Reader are more beneficial to younger children and determined there was no benefit to its use in middle grades, with the exception of lower-achieving students. In fact, they found that overall implementation quality declined as grade level increased. Topping, et al. advised that if these programs are used, staff should be properly trained in how to maximize their benefits.

Discussion and Application

Given the established importance of independent reading in middle grades, a comprehensive review of the barriers to, challenges of, and considerations for an independent reading curriculum was essential in laying the foundation for evaluating methods of assessment. A thorough understanding of what has shaped students' attitudes toward independent reading and what challenges must be overcome, provides teachers with an accurate landscape they can navigate with available tools and resources. Knowing, for example, that technology in a given school is scarce, will impact a teacher's use of computerized assessment. Language barriers will affect a teacher's ability to involve parents in an independent reading program. Access to grants and other financial resources might allow teachers to establish impressive classroom libraries helpful in self-selecting texts.

Turner's study asserted, "Sixth grade may be the pivotal year, the last period of maximal influence toward reading and school achievement...Therefore, prior to high school, the elementary or middle school teacher must attempt to positively influence students' attitudes toward reading" (1993, p. 42). The author,

who also teaches sixth graders, has deemed this to be important work. Even if there is no significant short-term academic gain in being an engaged, lifelong, independent reader, being one allows students to make connections—to themselves, other texts, and the world around them—which will enhance their remaining school years.

Every other major subject in the author's school district is provided with a clear curriculum designed to specifically address state standards and the district's learning targets. English Language Arts, however, is less fluid. While math, science, and social studies all have a textbook through which students can progress via units and chapters, ELA has "suggested" tools and resources. With regard to independent reading, teachers have very little guidance in how to assess something that comprises ten percent of a student's grade. This paper reiterates the importance of independent reading, and the toolbox in chapter three provides teachers with specific activities and lessons that other schools and researchers have found helpful in engaging and assessing independent readers.

Teachers should be redirected out of their comfort zones; many of them have always required formal summative assessments like comprehension quizzes. Many teachers in the author's district rely on Accelerated Reader as a means to assess and grade independent reading, which this research suggests can actually be detrimental to middle-grade readers' affinity for reading. This Leadership Application Project asks teachers instead to evaluate readers on classroom engagement and book completion rates, and use other means of engaging students, such as the Book Bistro, and increase opportunities for collaborative

discussions. Since the sixth grade ELA curriculum was recently rewritten to accommodate the state's recent adoption of Common Core standards for English Language Arts, there is little chance that the independent reading portion of that curriculum, which is not much more than a few "sample activities," will change anytime soon. However, despite fresh standards, the document used to guide instruction still includes assessments that this research has deemed less effective. Included in this toolbox is a revised set of curriculum documents, and a combination of activities and assessments discovered in this research as well as ones the author was already using that support best practices found in the literature review. These findings will be distilled into a concise electronic summary to share with colleagues in order to pave the way toward amending that portion of the curriculum document.

Description of the Product

Using the findings from this extensive literature review, the author's personal classroom experiences, and information already available via the author's district, the following toolbox was created to replace the current Independent Reading Curriculum. All documents can be found in the appendix, and will be loaded onto the district's shared Google Drive for 6th grade teachers across the district to access. Future development includes a staff development session in which these tools will be explained in more detail, and activities like the Book Bistro will be modeled for other teachers.

Teacher Resources

The author's district utilizes a Google site to house all curriculum documents. Updates are communicated throughout the year electronically via this site. No printed documents are provided, and teachers use their discretion about how much to print. Many teachers are opting for a "paperless classroom," in which even student work is completed and submitted on Chromebooks in the classroom. The following resources will be saved to and labeled on this curriculum Google site. The author will request that when the e-mail is distributed letting teachers know that the documents are available, a special note be included to call attention to the revisions made to the Independent Reading portion of the curriculum.

District Unit Learning Plan Documents. Curriculum documents are referred to as District Unit Learning Plans, and are assembled by unit, Independent Reading being one of them. Included in the Appendix is the current

version of the Learning Plan, which offers very little in terms of sample activities for student assessment. Accelerated Reader® is not listed as a sample activity, but the author's experience has determined that many teachers in the district, typically ones who have been teaching for many years, are still using the program. In fact, one middle school currently uses the more updated online version, and requires all sixth graders to test after completing independent reading books.

The revised learning plan not only includes a greater variety of student activities, as described below, but also provides teacher resources that address the teacher-centric barriers like lack of knowledge about student literature and how to monitor student engagement.

Parent Letter. The parent letter will be sent home at the start of the academic year, and sets expectations early for both students and parents. Requiring parent signature elevates the value, and shares with families the importance of and support for independent reading in the curriculum. This letter helps to answer the "Why is my child spending time in school *just* reading" question teachers are asked every year. This letter addresses the findings from the Literature Review that claim the importance of parental engagement.

Monitoring Student "Reading Zones." Reading Zones are a measurable continuum to track student engagement during independent reading. Because it is clear and quantifiable, students readily understand how it is used. Conversely, this makes it simple for teachers to use as an assessment tool. It has been incredibly effect when used in the author's classroom.

The premise of the Zones is simple: By using visual cues, teachers evaluate if students are so engrossed in their books that they do not even realize when the teacher is moving onto something else (Zone 5), or are so disengaged or distracted that they do not even have their books open (Zone 1). Measurements are taken daily, and averaged over a period of time to establish a pattern of reading behavior. The Literature Review discussed the effectiveness of meta-cognition in students, and this provides teachers with an unobtrusive way to promote student self-awareness of reading engagement. It also allows for assessing the act of reading, rather than assignments completed after reading.

There are two documents: The first is the teacher resource that accompanies the reading zone sheet for students. Each zone is modeled for students at the beginning of the year so students understand expectations. The author has had great success using this model in her classroom because it monitors engagement authentically, while students are reading their leisure books. Teachers can use this as an assessment tool by printing a blank grade book matrix and frequently monitoring student reading in class. The date of observation would go at the top, and the corresponding number would be assigned to each student. Twice a trimester, or more frequently, if the teacher chooses, the numbers would be averaged and a grade assigned. For example, if a student averages 4.5 or greater, the in-class reading grade would be an A. A 4.0-4.4 number would be an A-. Teachers can create their own grade values if desired. This system allows students to be accountable for behavior and book selection, and because it is an average. Even the best reader in the class can have a couple of "off days" and still

earn an A grade. Monitoring zones is less intrusive than walking around and writing down book titles and authors, as many teachers do, and simply writing down a number on a grid results in less work for the teacher. Students can see the score at any time, though typically the teacher only makes a point to interrupt students if they are not fully engaged in the first place. There is no need to jar a student from active reading just to compliment them on doing so. However, patterns and averages are shared with the students on a regular basis. This process, in tandem with the book log, is an effective way to see if students are completing or abandoning books, which is also a sign that book choice intervention may be necessary. It is also an objective method of logging student absences during reading time or avoidance behaviors such as frequent and ill-timed library visits or consistently using reading time to complete missing work.

The second sheet simply reiterates the zones in language understandable by students so they are aware of, and can be accountable for their own reading performance in the classroom. By knowing exactly what is expected of them, they have a greater chance of success because they know what success looks like. For some students, they are not capable of recognizing active independent reading simply because they may rarely have achieved it.

Tips for Maximizing Independent Reading. This document outlines some of the ways teachers can engage students in the classroom by providing guidance on read-alouds, making good use of library time, getting education on student literature, employing the local library, and getting more familiar with e-resources. The purpose of these suggestions is to address the teacher-centric

barrier of lack of knowledge and resources as stated in the Literature Review. The following information is included as a separate document in the Appendix, but is worth mentioning here because the tactics listed have been noted in the author's classroom as being highly effective in creating a literacy-based culture:

Read-alouds. Sixth graders are not too old to be read to, and research indicates they will actually benefit from being read to because it engages them, eliminates decoding barriers for struggling readers, and models fluency and expression. Choose a high-interest book that suits both you and your students, and spend some time reading it over several weeks. This can be a great bell-ringer activity, as well as a break in between writing work. These books, even if used for "leisure" reading, can also be used as anchor texts to discuss literary themes, vocabulary, writing prompts, etc.

Know what your kids are reading. Websites like Scholastic.com and Goodreads.com are great ways to keep up with tween and young adult literature without having to read them yourself (although, that is a much more engaging path—and you might find you enjoy those books). Subscribe to their monthly newsletters and you will receive short blurbs about books that you can then share with your student. Frequent book recommendations are a great way to introduce books to even the most reluctant readers because sometimes knowing something about the plot or characters might be enough to entice them to check out the book.

Make use of library time. Use the library staff! Have media specialists select books that will engage your students. Spend time with your students…walk the aisles with them to find out what they are reading. Sometimes you may find a

student who can "never find a book" because he has no idea how to use a library, but would never admit that in middle school, and walking those aisles might be the only way to identify the problem. Students who see their teachers in the library are more likely to invite them into their literary worlds and you will find that some will seek you out for book recommendations.

E-resources. Some teachers discourage the use of electronic devices, which is okay. However, consider that for some students, this is the only way they read out of school. For them, consider a tutorial on the different e-reading resources out there. The local library will gladly come to your school to introduce FREE software and downloads so students can check out e-books and audiobooks from the library. This is a great way to get more books to more kids.

Local library. Partner with your local library. In addition to teaching students about e-resources, the library will also talk to students near the end of the school year about summer reading programs, incentives, and volunteer opportunities. This is a great way to increase reading over the summer, which will help ease summer learning loss. You can even arrange for students to get their library cards this way, which addresses the common barrier of not being able to physically get to the library. For middle grades, this is also especially helpful for high-level, mature readers who would like to read (still age-appropriate) content that the middle school does not carry.

Introduce Little Lending Libraries. Many communities and schools have these little free libraries, which encourage anyone to take a book and trade it back. This eliminates the need for a library card altogether.

Talk books! The surest way to get kids excited about books is to talk about it. One quick and easy way to do that with zero preparation is to have students turn to a neighbor after independent reading and spend 30 seconds talking about their books. Offer to let students share extemporaneously with the class a particularly engaging book. Encourage students to keep a running list of titles they'd like to check out. Many times students will accompany classmates to the school library to check out a book the other one is about to return.

Use Rewards Sparingly. Research shows that extrinsic rewards for middle school kiddos are less effective than for their younger counterparts. Celebrate all achievements. Success for a non-reader will look different than for a voracious one. Growth will be individual and you may have a student for whom completing *one* book in a trimester is a small victory.

Sample Activities. There are also several sample class activities collected over time from both research and classroom experience, each of which can be "graded." However a word of caution: Depending on the students, this can actually be detrimental to independent reading because students will slow their book completion to avoid the work. For those students, it is best to consider these activities as an end-of-trimester project done about one specific or favorite book they read. This is also important because students who did not enjoy a book will not want to do a project promoting it. The purpose of including these activities is to acknowledge the various class structures, teaching styles, and student bodies, and that teachers will likely appreciate having more ideas than fewer ones. Activities can transfer over to whole-class readings and assignments as well.

Student Resources

The following resources are for students:

Reading Log. Unlike traditional logs used in elementary school wherein students track daily reading by minutes read, this one simply tracks books completed. It can be kept in students' binders or in a teacher-kept binder accessible to students when they are in the classroom. The latter method allows teachers to check in on student progress anytime without having to collect logs first, and eliminates the risk of losing the log. The log is a matrix comprised of a column of boxes under headings created by different genres. Tracking books completed by genre lets students and teachers alike see trends in reading—which genres, titles, and authors toward which students gravitate. Making longer books worth more boxes on the matrix combats the belief that students will be "penalized" for reading longer books because they take longer to complete and therefore will result in fewer books read in a trimester. A visual record can be rewarding; students love watching the columns fill up (similar to a filled bar graph), and these can be printed back-to-back to accommodate voracious readers. Students get a new sheet each grading term, and the hope is that they will surpass previous trimesters' totals.

This method of tracking reading holds kids accountable for their reading habits, and allows teachers to manage how much kids are reading without using the at-home logs that the Literature Review found to be ineffective and inaccurate.

Surveys. There are several samples of student interest surveys that teachers can administer at the beginning of the year to diagnostically assess reader

interest, strengths, and challenges. These can even be re-administered at the end of the school year to qualitatively measure growth.

Reader Resources. The following are resources have been sourced by the school's reading teacher, and effectively communicate in student-friendly language, some of the considerations discussed in this paper. Students can keep these in their ELA folders/binders as reminders about how to maximize success in independent reading:

- Think When You Read (a great tool for reminding students what active reading looks like)
- Good Readers Ask… (provides stems and prompts to help them reflect on their reading)
- Choosing a Good Fit Book (minimizes abandoned books and reading avoidance)

Book Recommendations. This list is a running log of titles that students would like to read. These can be self-generated, or inspired by classroom discussions or recommendations made by teachers or classmates. It is meant to make library time more efficient because students already have a ready-made "shopping" list for books they would like to read. Research determined that peer recommendations and shared enthusiasm over texts is a successful way to engage students.

Status of the Class. This document can be used a variety of ways, either as self-documentation of student progress, or as a teacher-held document to monitor progress through books. It is a sheet comprised of columns listing the title

of the book, the page number, and what is happening at that point in the book. There are several rows under each of these headings. Students would complete a line after reading, either every time post-Independent Reading, or weekly. This may be tedious, depending on how frequently this is used. But it can be an effective way to identify slow readers, since specific page numbers would indicate just how many pages they are reading in a specific amount of time. Students who have difficulty following a plot may also benefit from logging a general summary after reading. If a teacher is completing the chart only once a week, students who complete books at a faster rate may appear to be abandoning books, which, if that is the case, would require a discussion: Are the books too difficult? Not interesting enough? Is the student not dedicating enough reading time to fully invest in the book? It would be wise to cross-reference this with the reading log to check for book completion.

Book Bistro. There are three documents here. The first is the brochure that students complete prior to the activity itself. The second is a sample of the directions given to students, typically printed directly on the backside of the brochure, unless that will become something more polished. The final is a sample of the table-tent cards that can be printed onto cardstock to guide student discussion. This last one can be modified into a simpler Inquiry Cafe, similar in structure, with desks pushed into groups, but with less planning and no written product. An even simpler modification would be to post the discussion questions on the board and facilitate discussion among students. The point of the activity is

to encourage students to talk about their books and to create effective buzz that translates into greater interest in those titles.

The author discovered this method in her research and was inspired to try it immediately in her classroom. The result was high engagement and participation among students and this activity has become a regular occurrence per student requests.

How to Give a Book Talk. This is a student resource for kids to keep as a checklist for preparing to discuss a completed book in front of a group or the entire class. Because many teachers require book talks to demonstrate understanding of a book a student has completed, this may be helpful in guiding students through the process.

Independent Reading in the Classroom: How it Works. The following describes what Independent Reading looks like in the author's classroom once the process has been modeled and established at the beginning of the academic year: Independent Reading is practiced daily. There time dedicated solely to reading, typically at the beginning of the two-hour ELA block. (There are additional opportunities to read silently after completing assignments, assessments, etc.) Time allotted to reading ranges from 15-30 minutes, depending on the day's agenda. Once attendance has been taken, students are expected to settle into their books without partaking in anything else (talking, homework, listening to music, etc.) They must read the entire time. Usually a random name is drawn for a student to sit in the "Book Nook" for the day's reading time. (This is a cozy chair in an area of the room set up for reading.) Exceptions include students who have

been absent and may need to make up missing work, students who need to visit the library for a new book, or students who need to log their completed books. As students complete a book, they log it on their reading log under the appropriate genre column. The number of boxes they fill in depends on the number of pages. Students visit the library as a class bi-weekly, but they have may request an individual pass if time allows to check out new books as needed. Library policy allows students to have four materials checked out at one time, assuring students a "back-up book" for one they might finish or abandon.

After the students have been given adequate time to settle into reading, the teacher uses the Reading Zone matrix to observe student behavior during reading, and marks the appropriate zone for each student. This is done from an inconspicuous place in the classroom and should not interfere with students unless one is not on task and needs to be redirected.

Some students use this time to see the teacher about confusing words they have found, point out vocabulary words they have spied in their books, or ask about something they do not understand about their books. Sometimes students simply want to tell teachers about their book.

At the end of the reading period, the teacher gives a minute or two warning, recognizing that some students will want to finish a page or chapter. Some students just need a minute to "come back to reality" after being engrossed in another world for 20-30 minutes. This is an opportunity to share favorites. The teacher is instrumental in sharing book experiences and recommendations, and students will often then request to check out a teacher's recommended book, or

add it to their reading list. More often than not, students will request extra Independent Reading time.

Description of the Process

The process of completing this Leadership Application Project was a streamlined one that began with the final project in mind. After I identified the need for a revised Independent Reading Curriculum, I received and followed the steps for completion using educational and professional resources as needed.

Initial Planning and Research

Both the research and planning phase of the project were a direct result of the Research Methodology class required by Augsburg College. I postponed completion of a Master's Degree pending the realization of a specific, concrete need in my district, and after this need was identified, I determined it would be a good fit for an LAP. I used the Research Methodology class as a springboard for actual research, using the assignments and research time to complete an extensive literature review rather than the preliminary one required for the class.

Project Proposal

My initial adviser at Augsburg College tentatively and verbally approved my project idea prior to the Research Methodology class. During the Research Methodology class, I conducted research to support the thesis based on professional experience and communication with curriculum specialists in my district. The instructor of the Research Methodology class then supported the thesis, and I wrote a preliminary proposal at the conclusion of the class.

At the beginning Augsburg's inaugural Leadership Application Project cohort class, I submitted this proposal, along with the literature review, to Donna Patterson for approval. The proposal was supported and extensive feedback was

given to strengthen the thesis, clarify the end product, and further explore the research.

Research and Communication

The research process was a recursive one, spanning two classes (Research Methodology and the Leadership Application Project cohort) and two professors/advisers. As feedback was given, the paper I wrote in the Research Methodology class evolved into a deeper exploration of the topic and how best to turn findings into something usable for my district.

With the aid of Augsburg College research librarian Boyd Koehler, I conducted extensive research over several weeks. I considered personal, professional classroom experience that helped solidify the need for the project. I then sought the assistance of Julie Scullen, Teaching and Learning Specialist in Reading for the author's district, who provided many books and resources that I incorporated into the literature review and consulted in developing the final product.

In three years teaching both sixth and eighth grade English Language Arts, and seventh and eighth grade Reading Strategies (intervention), it became clear that there were very few resources to aid teachers in meeting the state standard for Independent Reading. Veteran teachers seemed to have a deeper toolbox for this, but research findings suggest many of these tools are no longer considered best practices. Fellow teachers, as well as two curriculum specialists in her district validated this.

Future Development

The Reading Teaching and Learning Specialist for my district has expressed interest in supporting this project and has agreed to help me facilitate future staff development to support teachers. I hope my findings and resources will be integrated into the sixth grade Independent Reading Curriculum and made accessible to other ELA teachers in the district via the online data-sharing site used by all teachers.

I recognize that this philosophy of minimizing formal assessment for independent reading is a culture shift for many teachers and schools, and will require care to respect my colleagues' teacher experience and expertise as I encourage them to reevaluate this portion of the curriculum. My sincere hope is that this can be communicated in part with these curriculum documents, and also through personal relationships among teachers during shared staff development.

To measure the success in adopting the practices laid forth in this paper, I plan to seek feedback from teachers, perhaps as part of the year-end web-based survey administered via our curriculum department. Because this survey is a customizable, Google-based platform, I will be able to tailor questions to learn how teachers are measuring independent reading, as well as their openness to making changes based on my findings, and any success in changing practices. This survey can be ongoing and cumulative to capture changes in independent reading practices over time.

Personal Reflection. The completion of this Leadership Application Project was the culmination of patience and inspiration. After completing

licensure in 2009, I waited to complete the last two classes in my Master's Degree for two reasons: First, I was advised that some school districts may look at degree completed as a salary liability when hiring new teachers. Second, I wanted my final project to be driven by a need in the classroom, and I was not seeking employment immediately after completion of licensure. The first issue was a moot point, since my school district does not consider lane advancement in the hiring process. The second issue was resolved after completing my first year of teaching English Language Arts to sixth graders in 2013-2014, and discovered that the less "work" I required, the more they read. It was an eye-opening moment for me when a student, a young boy who was a very reluctant reader, said to me after completing his first book of the year: "Can't I just read the next one?" It was halfway through the school year already, and he had abandoned every book he had read. He finally alighted upon a series he liked, and when he finished the first book, I congratulated him and encouraged him to do a small project similar to what the other teachers were requiring of their students. When I realized that I was missing the point of reading for enjoyment and creating lifelong readers, I sought support from the reading specialist in the building, who confirmed that I had some autonomy in the classroom over how I measured Independent Reading. I ascertained that I already had enough ways to measure comprehension and writing in the classroom, and yet that was exactly what I was assessing with my post-reading assignments. Instead, I began focusing on the experience of reading itself, and a whole new community of readers emerged. I have since seen great

strides among my students, including statistically significant gains in the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment reading scores.

Such a revelation was pivotal for me because not only did it allow me to be confident in my role in creating classroom reading management and assessment, but it also provided an opportunity to show leadership in my school and district. Developing curriculum that will benefit other teachers is important to me, especially in light of a district ELA department that currently is currently spread thin across a large district. Given greater changes such as the adoption of Common Core and changes to our standardized testing system, Independent Reading is understandably a lower priority within the English Language Arts Curriculum, but it is a portion to which I can actively contribute.

I was especially eager to complete the process that I started so long ago when I decided to change careers from advertising management to teaching. Not having completed my Master's Degree was weighing heavily on my mind. I am not a procrastinator by nature, and thus unfinished assignments do not sit well with me. Completing this degree will leave me free to pursue my Reading Endorsement, something I have always wanted to do but has now been reinforced after completing this research.

An unforeseen aspect to this line of research is that I am now able to share my passion for reading and books with students on another level. I am able to be authentically enthusiastic in my support for their reading and progress. I love time spent with students discussing books, finding books for them to read, and reflecting on text connections. I have since started a student book club that meets

weekly, and there is nothing more gratifying than knowing that these kids are reading extra books because they want to, and giving up precious social time to stay after school, discussing literature with like-minded peers.

From an academic standpoint, I am struck by how much there is to learn, even for an "experienced" student. Despite being an able writer and having what I thought was a moderate understanding of the research process, completing the Research Methodology and LAP cohort classes reminded me that there is always room for growth. I now have a much deeper understanding of the philosophy behind research, and the importance of evaluating research for value beyond content.

A potential limitation of this project is overcoming skepticism of colleagues who uphold the effectiveness of practices this research finds ineffective. However, I firmly believe that no two classrooms are alike, and if a teacher truly believes his or her classroom techniques are in fact effective in promoting and accurately assessing Independent Reading, then I would encourage that teacher to maintain that methodology. The purpose of this project is to provide, for the many teachers, including myself, who seek an updated toolbox from which to draw techniques that not only inspire kids to read more outside the classroom, but accurately reflect if they are in fact doing so.

My school already seems aligned with some of the best practices found in existing research. According to findings for this paper, our school's allotted SSR time averaging at least 100 minutes per week for sixth graders exceeds all the recommendations. This does not include the additional required twenty minutes

students are to read outside school hours. I believe this illustrates the high value our school claims to put on literacy. However, with regard to the curriculum itself, there seems to be some misalignment with research, namely in the accountability area. Curriculum documents suggest students complete something after reading--whether it be a report, project, or Accelerated Reader test. This has been known to backfire in practice, and may actually be hindering students' gains in the area of independent reading. If the goal is to create lifelong readers and establish good independent reading habits bred by enjoyment and personal fulfillment, we should assess it in a way that does not negatively impact the desired behavior. I appreciate that administrators at my school are incredibly supportive of staff-led initiatives and readily advocate on their behalf at the district curriculum-planning level. I am excited to share my findings with my colleagues.

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Endnote

1. The term "High Five" was brought to the school by a teacher who has children in another district in the same state; the author's middle school heard of its success and adopted the term and basic premise.

Appendix

Original Curriculum Document

District K-12 Curriculum Unit Learning Plan

Department: ELA	Course: ELA 6	Unit Title: Unit 10: Independent Reading	Grade Level(s): 6th
Assessed Trimester	Pacing: All Year	Date Created: 6/12/13	Last Revision Date: 2/12/13

Program Understandings
Students will understand that:

Course Understandings
Students will understand that:

DESIRED RESULTS (STAGE 1) WHAT DO WE WANT STUDENTS TO KNOW AND BE ABLE TO DO?

Standard and Benchmark Mastery

High Priority Students must know:

Medium Priority Students should know:

- 6.9.10.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature and other texts including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently and independently with appropriate scaffolding for texts at the high end of the range.
  4. Self-select texts for personal enjoyment, interest, and academic tasks.
  5. Read widely to understand multiple perspectives and pluralistic viewpoints.
- 6.5.10.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
  4. Self-select texts for personal enjoyment, interest, and academic tasks.
- 6.9.1.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
  4. Come to discussions prepared having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.
  5. Follow rules for collegial discussions, set specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.
  6. Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.
  7. Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.
  8. Cooperate, mediate, and problem solve to make decisions as appropriate for productive group discussion.

Low Priority It is nice for students to know:

-

Common Misunderstandings

-

Transfer

Students will be able to independently use their learning to: (product, high order reasoning)

- Show comprehension of text read independently

Meaning

Unit Understanding(s):

Students will understand that:

-

Essential Question(s):

Students will keep considering:

-

Acquisition

Skills Students will:

- Set specific goals and deadlines
- Define individual roles as needed
- Ask specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion
- Respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion
- Cooperate and problem solve to make decisions for productive group discussion
- Demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing

Reasoning Students will:

- Read for personal enjoyment, interest and academic tasks to understand multiple perspectives and viewpoints
- Read for personal enjoyment, interest and academic tasks to understand multiple perspectives and viewpoints
- Take part in discussions (one on one, in groups, and teacher-led) to discuss texts using the text to support ideas
- Follow rules for discussions

Knowledge Students will:

- Read independently a wide range of texts and genres (fiction)
- Read independently a wide range of (informational texts and genres (non-fiction)

Essential new vocabulary

- Fiction
- Non-fiction
- Genre

EVIDENCE OF LEARNING (STAGE 2) HOW WILL WE KNOW THEY HAVE LEARNED IT?

District K-12 Curriculum Unit Learning Plan

Sample Unit Pre-assessment:

Evaluative Criteria	Sample Progress Monitoring
	Sample Performance Tasks (Transfer and Meaning): **Book Talks, readers notebooks, presentations, projects,**
	Other Sample Evidence (Meaning and Acquisition):

Sample Formative Unit Assessment:

Common Summative Assessment:

INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING (STAGE 3) – WHAT WILL WE DO IF THEY HAVEN'T LEARNED OR KNOW IT ALREADY?

Standard and Benchmark Mastery	Sample Student Friendly Learning Targets	Sample Activities	Sample Resources	Sample Modifications	Sample Enrichments
High Priority Students must know:					
Medium Priority Students should know:					
6.RL.10.10 - By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature and other texts including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently and independently with appropriate scaffolding for texts at the high end of the range. a. Self select texts for personal enjoyment, interest and academic tasks b. Read widely to understand multiple perspectives and pluralistic viewpoints	Read independently a wide range of texts and genres (fiction) Read for personal enjoyment, interest and academic tasks to understand multiple perspectives and viewpoints	**book talks** **Readers notebook** **Projects** **presentations**			
6.RI.10.10 - By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. a. Self select texts for personal enjoyment, interest, and academic tasks.	Read independently a wide range of informational texts and genres (non fiction) Read for personal enjoyment, interest and academic tasks to understand multiple perspectives and viewpoints				
6.SL.1.10 - Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. a. Come to discussions prepared having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion. b. Follow rules for collegial discussions, set specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.	Take part in discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) to discuss texts, using the text to support ideas. Follow rules for discussions. Set specific goals and deadlines. Define individual roles as needed. Ask specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.				

District K-12 Curriculum Unit Learning Plan

1. Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion. d. Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing. e. Cooperate, mediate, and problem solve to make decisions as appropriate for productive group discussion.	Respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion. Cooperate and ~~problem solve~~ to make decisions for productive group discussion. Demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing				
Low Priority It is nice for students to know					
District wide Instructional Materials: •					

6th Grade Independent Reading Toolkit

This toolkit is to be made available to all 6th grade ELA teachers; each set will be uploaded onto the district's document site and labeled with direct links for printing:

- Scope and Sequence Document
- UBD Document (curriculum)
- Parent Letter
- Reading interest surveys
- Reader Resources
- Book Recommendations List
- Status of the Class Sheet
- Independent Reading Book Log
- Reading Zone Monitoring Sheets
- Book Bistro
- Independent Reading Sample Activities Summary
- How to Give a Book Talk
- Additional Considerations for Managing Independent Reading

Independent Reading Scope and Sequence

This document outlines what to introduce when, and lists a summary of available assessments.

Workshop Week:

-Review UBD documents and make necessary copies for students.

September:

-Send home parent letter.

-Administer reading interest surveys.

-Review reader resources with students.

-Provide book recommendations list and Status of the Class sheet.

-Establish first book log.

November through May:

Assessments:	Frequency:
-Reading Zone Monitoring	-3x/week
-Book Logs	-1x/trimester
-Book Bistro	-1x/mo or tri
-How to Give a Book Talk	-teacher pref.
-Other Sample Activities	-teacher pref.

UBD Document (revised curriculum-page 2, with new assessments)

District K-12 Curriculum Unit Learning Plan

Sample Unit Pre assessment

Evaluative Criteria	Sample Progress Monitoring
	Sample Performance Tasks (Transfer and Meaning) **Book talks, readers' notebooks, presentations, projects**
	Other Sample Evidence (Meaning and Acquisition)

Sample Formative Unit Assessment...

Common Summative Assessment...

INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING (STAGE 3) WHAT WILL WE DO IF THEY HAVEN'T LEARNED OR KNOW IT ALREADY?

Standard and Benchmark Mastery	Sample Student Friendly Learning Targets	Sample Activities	Sample Resources	Sample Modifications	Sample Enrichments
High Priority Students must know					
Medium Priority Students should know					
6.4.10.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature and other texts including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently and independently with appropriate scaffolding for texts at the high end of the range. a. Self select texts for personal enjoyment, interest and academic tasks b. Read widely to understand multiple perspectives and pluralistic view points.	Read independently a wide range of texts and genres (fiction) Read for personal enjoyment, interest and academic tasks for understand multiple perspectives and viewpoints	"Zone" monitoring Book/genre log Battle of the Books Participation & activities Read alouds Journals/writing about reading Book Bistro/Inquiry Café 'Books I Love' Rookie Readathon Collaboration/discussions Book talks Book commercials E-readers/library	Student goal sheets Reading interest surveys Choosing the right books Reading tips Teacher oriented resources (Scholastic, Goodreads, etc.) Parent letter		
6.5.10.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. a. Self select texts for personal enjoyment, interest, and academic tasks	Read independently a wide range of informational texts and genres (non-fiction) Read for personal enjoyment, interest and academic tasks to understand multiple perspectives and viewpoints				
6.9.11.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. a. Come to discussions prepared having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text,	Take part in discussions (one on one, in groups, and teacher led) to discuss texts, using the text to support ideas Follow rules for discussions. Set specific goals and deadlines. Define individual roles as needed				

Hello 6th grade ELA families!

Middle School places great emphasis on independent reading. In fact, independent reading materials make up one of our school's "High Five"—the five things we are to have with us in every class, every day. In 6th grade, independent reading makes up 10% of your child's ELA grade.

How much should my child be reading?. Research shows that silent sustained reading is more effective than practice tests when it comes to standardized tests like our state's MCA test. We will read in class most days, but that's not enough. Students are expected to read OUTSIDE of school at least 20 minutes each day. We rarely have extensive homework in ELA because it is expected that your child will spend some time at home reading.

What should my child be reading?. Students can read library books, personal books from home, newspapers, magazines, etc. Studies show kids are most successful when they read a wide variety of genres and interests. Audiobooks count if they supplement printed books. Even the most fluent readers improve when they read more often.

How will my child be graded?. I will use a variety of assessments to monitor your child's progress. Progression through books is one way for me to understand how much they're reading. Simply put, if a child reads 20 minutes in ELA class, and then another 20 minutes at home, they will read twice as many books as a child who only reads at school. I also monitor a child's attention to a book in class. We will also do a variety of book talks and discussions about what we're reading to ensure they're understanding what they read.

So how many books will my child need to read?. Our goal is 40 books throughout the year. It sounds like a lot—however, broken down into trimesters it ends up being about 13 books each trimester. Remember, EVERYTHING counts. Shorter books, nonfiction, poetry books, even graphic novels. Longer books count for more. Students should challenge themselves. They will not have a reading log to complete at home, but rather we will keep track of progress in a general log here at school. Please do not be discouraged. Reluctant or slower readers who read far fewer books but are still improving each trimester and doing their best are still meeting their goals. I plan to individualize as I get to know your child's reading habits. They will be surprised at how quickly the books add up!

My hope is that you will support your child's reading habits. I would appreciate if you could sign the bottom portion of this sheet and return to school with your child. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions/concerns. Thanks!

I have reviewed the independent reading expectations with my 6th grader and will encourage reading at home to meet my child's homework requirements:

Student Signature: _____

Parent Signature: _____

Reader Interest Surveys

There are three different surveys attached here (simply labeled #1-3, but you can alter as needed), or you may have your own that you like. Which survey you use is not important, but rather, the fact that you are getting students to think about what they read, how they read, and how they should be reading. Surveys are also a great way to collect baseline data about readership habits.

Directions: Administer this (or another survey of your choice) to students the first week of school. Collect and retain. You may also choose to administer a year-end version to determine a shift in attitudes or behavior.

September Reading Survey #1

Name: _____

1. If you have to guess…

How many books would you say you owned? ____

How many books would you say there are in your house? ____

How many books would you say you read over summer vacation? ____

How many books would you say you read last year in school? ____

How many of *those* books did you choose for yourself? ____

2. What are the best three books you've have read or had read aloud to you?

3. In your ideal book, what would be main character be like?

4. What are your favorite genres, or categories, of books?

5. Who are your favorite authors these days?

6. What are some of the ways you decide whether or not you'll read a book?

7. Have you ever liked a book so much that your reread it? _____ If so, can you remember any of them titles/authors?

8. What do you think someone has to do or know to be a strong, satisfied reader of books?

9. What do you think are your three greatest strengths as a reader?

10. What would you like to get better at when it comes to reading?

11. Can you write the name of a book you'd like to read next?

12. In general, how do you feel about reading and yourself as a reader?

September Reading Survey #2

Name: _____

1. Do you like to read?

2. Are you a good reader?

3. How did you learn to read?

4. Do you read a lot at home? With whom--alone? Parents? Other family? Friends?

5. Why do people need to learn how to read?

6. What's your favorite book?

7. Do you go to the public library?

8. What do you do when you don't know what a word is?

9. What's your favorite thing to do in school?

10. Who is a good reader you know? Why?

September Reading Survey #3

Reading Interest Assessment, Formative

Name: Grade: Date:

1. I can read my textbooks and understand them.

Always 4 3 2 1 Never

2. I know how to change my reading rate (read faster or slower) and when I should do so.

Always 4 3 2 1 Never

3. I can successfully prepare for class each day.

Yes 4 3 2 1 No

4. I can stay on task when my teacher asks me to read silently.

Always 4 3 2 1 Never

5. I participate in class.

Every day 4 3 2 1 Never

6. I believe I can and will graduate from high school.

Always 4 3 2 1 Never

7. I am sure I will get into the college of my choice.

Always 4 3 2 1 Never

8. I read things outside of school that interest me.

Yes 4 3 2 1 No

9. I have a book I can say I am currently reading.

Always 4 3 2 1 Never

Scullen, 2009

10. Circle the genres/types of reading material you **like** or **might like best**.

history	travel	plays	sports	science fiction
adventure	romance	detective stories	war stories	art
poetry	supernatural stories	car stories	novels	biography
astrology	humor	folktales	how-to-do-it books	mysteries
books in a series	drama	nonfiction	gaming	westerns

11. Do you have a subscription to any magazines? Which ones?

12. What are your top 2 favorite movies you've seen? What TV show do feel like you can't miss?

13. Do you ever borrow books from the school library? YES / NO

From a teacher's classroom? YES / NO

14. About how many books do you own? _____

15. What are some books you **would like** to own?

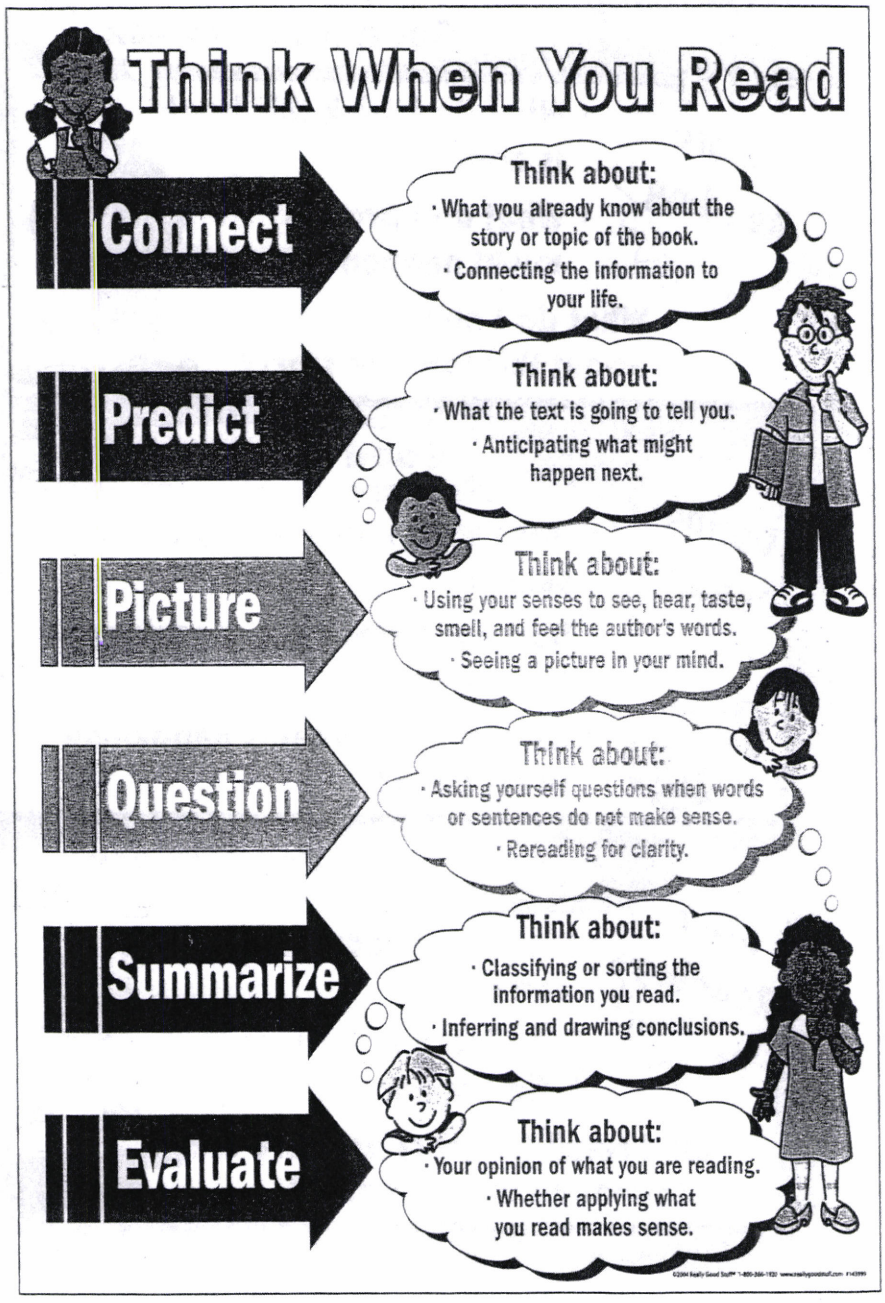
Reader Resources

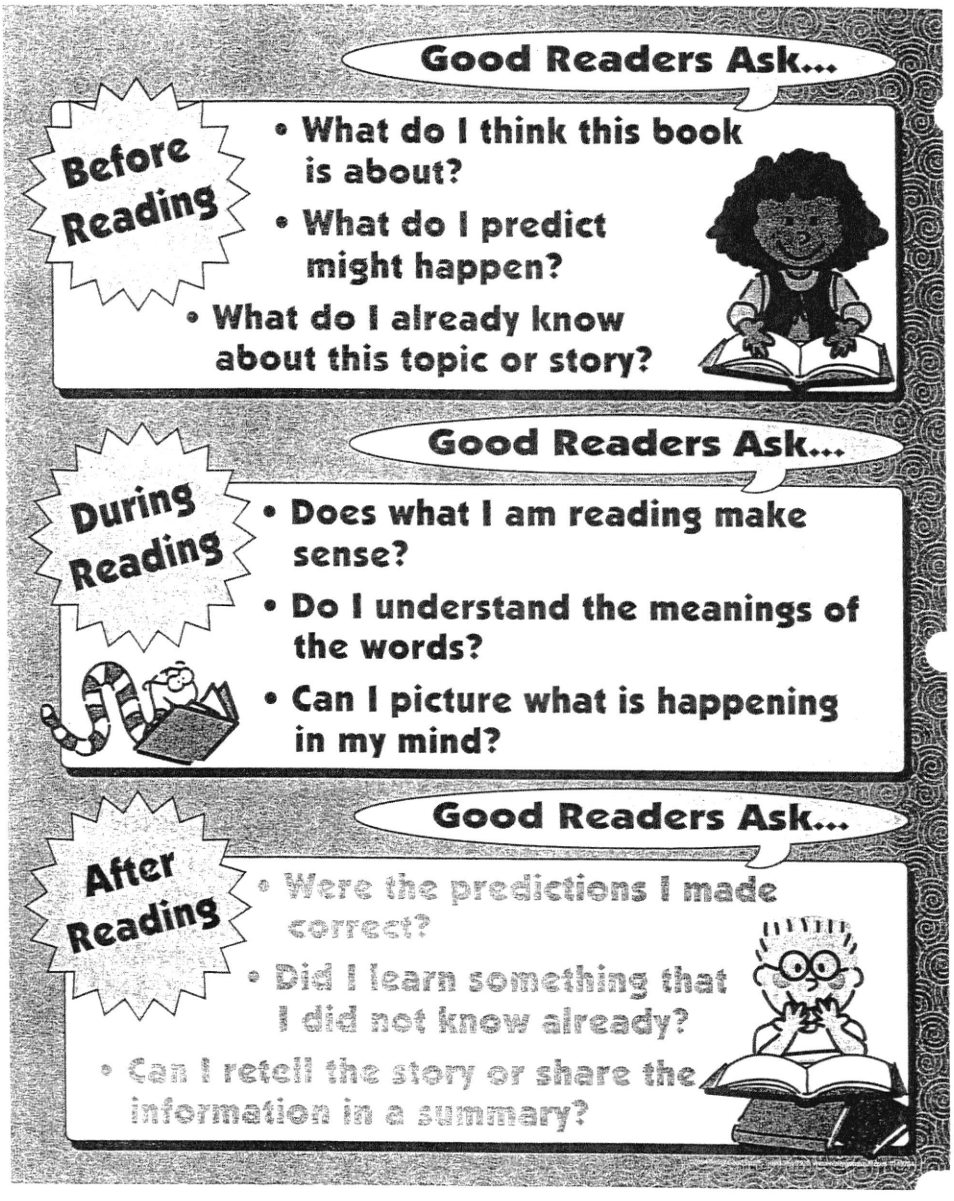
Directions: The following documents can be issued to and reviewed with students (either as a whole-class or paired activity) to help guide them in effective independent reading. Much of this should be a review from elementary school, but the information can help them improve their reading habits and metacognition. It's most helpful for students to have a section in their ELA binders dedicated to Independent Reading, where these and other documents can be easily resourced.

- Think When You Read
- Good Readers Ask…
- Making Good Book Choices

An alternative activity for these resources is to complete a "KWL" to review the content:

1. Ask students to recall what they **know** about effective reading strategies. Brainstorm on the board or complete independently.
2. Ask students to brainstorm what they **want** to learn.
3. Review the documents and summarize what they **learned**.





Mrs. Simon
9/8/12
Making Good Book Choices

Choose a book that is a good fit for you!

"Five finger rule"

1. Choose a book that you think you will enjoy.
2. Read the second page.
3. Hold up a finger for each word you are not sure of, or do not know.
4. If there are five or more words you did not know, you should choose an easier book.

- Still think it may not be too difficult? Use the five finger rule on two more pages.

Read two or three pages and ask yourself these questions:

-Will it be an easy, fun book to read?
-Do I understand what I am reading?
-Do I know almost every word?
-When I read it aloud, can I read it smoothly?
-Do I think the topic will interest me?

- If most of your answers were "yes," this will probably be a good book to read independently by yourself.

Will this book be too hard for me? Ask yourself these questions:

-Are there five or more words on a page that I don't know, or am unsure of?
-Is this book confusing and hard to understand by myself?
-When I read it aloud, does it sound choppy and slow?

- If most of your answers were "yes," this book is too hard. You should wait awhile before you read this book. Give the book another try later, or ask an adult to read the book to you.

Book Recommendation List

Directions: This should be passed out at the beginning of the year when students are setting up their ELA folders. As students share their favorite books, or you talk to your students about good books you've read, they can add those here. Then when it's time to visit the library for a new reading book, they can consult their list for ready "shopping."

Book Recommendation List

Book Title and/or Author	Notes	Genre	Who recommended it?

Status of the Class

Directions: This tool can be used in a variety of ways:

- When reading a novel together, perhaps as a read aloud, students can mark progress after each reading. This is especially helpful for students to remember where they left off if more than a day passes between readings.
- When students are reading independently, they can mark their own progress on this sheet.
- Teachers can use one sheet and use it to monitor progress as they roam among the class to determine progress in independent reading books.

Status of the Class

Date	Title	Page #	I'm at the part where...

Book Log

Directions: Establish one for each student at the beginning of each trimester. Students track books by genre as they are completed. While students can keep them in their ELA folders, it works best to store them in the classroom binder instead, where it can still be accessible to students. Make longer books worth more boxes so longer books aren't penalized. A good rule of thumb is every 150 pages equals one book. Use a new log each trimester.

Book Log

Name: _____

Independent Reading Log

Each time you finish a book, complete the appropriate number of boxes with the **title, author, and page numbers**. Books with more than 300 pages count for two (and each additional 150 pages counts for an additional box).

Realistic Fiction	Historical Fiction	Science Fiction	Fantasy	Mystery	Horror	Biography	Auto-biography	Poetry	Informa-tional	Folktale/ Mythology

Reading Zone Monitoring

Directions

Document 1: Give one to students to keep in their ELA folders. Explain and model each zone for students at the beginning of the year so students understand expectations.

Document 2: This can be used for assessment, and what each zone looks like is explained.

Print out a blank gradebook matrix for each class. Observe kids as they are independent reading (daily, or at least three times a week to get a sense of trends). Observation dates run along the top, and the corresponding zone number is assigned to each student. Twice a trimester (mid-tri and end of tri), average the numbers and assign a grade. For example, if a student averages 4.5 or greater, the in-class reading grade would be an A. A 4.0-4.4 number would be an A-, and so on. (Teachers can adjust grade values as needed.)

Note: Students are accountable for behavior and book selection, and because it is an average, even the best readers can have a couple of "off days" and still earn an A grade. Monitoring zones is less intrusive and creates less work than walking around and writing down book titles and authors. This, in tandem with the book log, is an effective way to see if students are completing or abandoning books, which is also a sign that book choice intervention may be necessary.

Are you "Zoned In" or "Zoned Out" ?

1	I am distracted. I can't read my book because of my own distractions.
2	I just read and don't remember anything I have read. I am not in my zone, but am trying.
3	I am getting in the zone. I am reading, but am often distracted.
4	I am in the zone. I have been reading for several minutes straight and getting into my book.
5	What? You just interrupted me and I was totally into my book!

Monitoring Student Zones

Zone	Defined for students:	What it looks like to teachers:
1	I am distracted. I can't read my book because of my own distractions.	-Books are closed -Students are doing something else (talking, homework, daydreaming) -If eyes are looking up, they aren't reading.
2	I just read and don't remember anything I have read. I am not in my zone, but am trying.	-Books are open -Students appear to be reading -Frequent breaks from reading -Minimal page movement
3	I am getting in the zone. I am reading, but am often distracted.	-Students are reading but look up frequently -Adequate page movement
4	I am in the zone. I have been reading for several minutes straight and getting into my book.	-Students are reading and look up only when distracted (e.g. someone gets up to grab a Kleenex, the door is opened, etc.) -Adequate page movement

5	What? You just interrupted me and I was totally into my book!	-Students are completely engaged -These are the kids who will "sneak read" during other lessons

Book Bistro

Directions: Students are given the brochure ahead of time, usually by a few days. They identify a book to discuss and complete the brochure.

On Bistro day desks should be arranged in groups to allow for easy discussion and movement. The room will function as a "cafe" and should encourage "mingling." In their groups of five or six, students take turns discussing their books using the questions on the table tents as a guide. Brochures are separated and all pieces are collected. This allows evaluation of participants in the discussion, as well as book presenters. Directions are printed on the back of the brochure. Table tents are printed on cardstock, folded, and placed on tables/decks to facilitate discussions. (Note, the top half of the table tents is intended to be upside down so that it reads correctly when folded.)

Directions for Book Bistro:

1. Choose a book that you have recently **completed** (the last month or so). It can be the last one you read or the one you liked best.

2. Complete the center section of your brochure (titled "Student Presenter").

3. Leave the sides blank, as those will be filled out when you present.

4. These are due by **WEDNESDAY, 12/17.**

5. We will have a Book Bistro on Friday, 12/19. You will be expected to talk about your book in a small group, including questions about what you've read.

Book Bistro Evaluation Form

Reader to Left

Name _____

Book title _____

Author _____

How prepared was this reader?

Did you feel you wanted to read this book? _____

Comments: _____

Student Presenter

Name _____

Book title _____

Author _____

Basic summary _____

Would you recommend this book?

Why or why not?

Reader to Right

Name _____

Book title _____

Author _____

How prepared was this reader?

Did you feel you wanted to read this book? _____

Comments: _____

* Fold on dotted lines and carefully tear apart.

1. What do your classmates need to know about book that would interest them in reading it?

2. What touched you about the book?

3. Would you want to keep this book in your personal library at home? Why or why not?

4. Does this book remind you of anything you have learned or talked about at school?

5. Would this book make a good movie? Why or why not?

6. How does this book relate to your life?

More Sample Activities

Battle of the Books. Battle of the Books is optional, but it's a great way to start a condensed, vetted reading list. In fact, teachers can get a preliminary list at the end of the school year for the following year and have something light and easy to read over the summer. By including discussions about the Battle in class, or even using a Battle book as a read-aloud will create excitement around the event and perhaps increase participation. It's a ready-made book club for kids who want to share what they are learning.

Writing about Reading. Frequent short writing or journals are another learning target for sixth graders. Consider including prompts like:

-Write about the plot of your current independent reading book. Talk about the conflict and make a prediction about the resolution.

-Describe at least two main characters in your independent reading book, using traits from your trait sheet. Provide textual evidence that supports why you chose those traits.

- What genre is your independent reading book? How can you tell?
- Write about the best book you read last trimester. What made the book great?
- Why would you recommend it to a friend?

Book Commercials. Students can "sell" each other on books they have loved. This can be impromptu, planned, or even recorded via recorders or even student phones. Technology allows students to record short presentations themselves and share with a teacher electronically. Those can then be assessed and/or shared with the class. Some teachers have made these part of their school's showcase night to share with families. This also addresses the technology standards for sixth grade.

Readers' Notebooks. These are commonly used for students to reflect on what they are reading and jot questions and predictions. The caution is that if this becomes an "assignment" it can actually deter students who would otherwise read independently, but do so less because they are poor or reluctant writers. Instead, consider using journal prompts (as discussed above) .

"Books I Love." This project was done in honor of "I Love to Read' month in February, which also coincided with Showcase Night at the author's school. This was an opportunity for students to create something that would be on display at a gallery walk, open to families, that reflects what they have accomplished in their classes. It resembles and art fair, only the content extends to other disciplines like math and social studies. The Books I Love project is a folded heart with student-created cover art on the front and a book summary and reflection on the inside. These are then displayed in the library and kept up after the event so students can refer to them when seeking a book during library time in ELA class.

Google Forms. For students who have frequent and regular access to technology, Google Forms is a great way to survey students on books and progress. It can be sent to students directly via school e-mail, or linked on a teacher's website. These are also semi-private, since only the teacher can see responses. Surveys appear as a spreadsheet, making data management easy.

"Mini Projects" Collected by Teachers. Written projects need to be at least 1 page in length. Performed projects need to be at least 3 minutes in length. You will need to provide the title of the book, the author, and the number of pages.

- Write a letter to the main character and the character's reply.
- Write a different ending for the book.
- Pretend you are a talk show host and interview the main character.
- Create a travel brochure for the setting of the story or scrapbook pages about key characters.
- Create a book jacket, including illustrations, an enticing synopsis, author bio, and favorable reviews.
- Summarize the book into a comic or story aimed for younger students or your classmates.
- Write a news article about an important event from the book.
- Write about the decisions you would make if you were the main character in the book.
- Dramatize a scene from the story with other students or using puppets.
- Post a book review on a collected inter- or intranet site.

- Chose two characters from the story and write a conversation they might have.
- Write a letter or email to a close friend recommending the book you have just read.
- Make a list of new, unusual, or interesting words or phrases found in your book.
- Prepare a television commercial about your book. Act out the commercial for your classmates.
- Write ten chat room-style questions that could be used to start an online discussion about the book. Or, write ten questions that test other students' understanding of the story. (Make sure you provide a list of answers.)
- Explain why you think this book will or will not be read 100 years from now. Support your opinion by stating specific events in the story.
- Discuss one particular episode in the story that you remember most. Describe why you think it remains so clear to you.
- Write a letter/email to the author of your book. Address it to the publisher and mail it. Or, see if the author has a Web site and email it.
- Write a ballad or song about the characters and events in your story. Set the words to the music of a popular song and sing it to the class.
- Give a dramatic reading of a scene in the book to your classmates.
- Describe in detail three characters from the story. List reasons why you would or wouldn't want to get to know these people.
- Design a poster or new book cover depicting the climax of the story.
- Write an acrostic poem about the book using the letters in the title of the book or the name of a character or author.

- Draw a classroom mural depicting a major scene(s) from the book.
- After reading an informational book, make a scrapbook about the topics.

How to Give a Book Talk

Getting Ready:

- Make sure you've read the entire book
- Think about what makes your book interesting
- Think about how you will capture the interest of the other readers in your class
- Write down page numbers or mark pages you plan to show the class with a sticky note before you present
- Practice your book talk before presenting it to the class

During the Book Talk:

- Show the cover of the book to the class
- Start with a good lead (Sometimes a question gets the audience interested. *Have you ever wanted to eat chocolate for breakfast? If so, this book is for you!)*
- Tell the author, title, genre, library location, series, etc.
- Explain why you chose to share the book
- Tell a little about the book, *but don't give away the secrets*
- If possible, mention other books by the same author or other books in the same series

Tips:

- Look at your classmates
- Speak loud and clearly
- Show your enthusiasm
- Keep it short!

Tips for Maximizing Independent Reading

Read-alouds. Sixth graders are not too old to be read to, and research indicates they will actually benefit from being read to because it engages them, eliminates decoding barriers for struggling readers, and models fluency and expression. Choose a high-interest book that suits both you and your students, and spend some time reading it over several weeks. This can be a great bell-ringer activity, as well as a break in between writing work. These books, even if used for "leisure" reading, can also be used as anchor texts to discuss literary themes, vocabulary, writing prompts, etc.

Know what your kids are reading. Websites like Scholastic.com and Goodreads.com are great ways to keep up with tween and young adult literature without having to read them yourself (although, that is a much more engaging path—and you might find you enjoy those books). Subscribe to their monthly newsletters and you will receive short blurbs about books that you can then share with your student. Frequent book recommendations are a great way to introduce books to even the most reluctant readers because sometimes knowing something about the plot or characters might be enough to entice them to check out the book.

Make use of library time. Use the library staff! Have them select books that will engage your students. Spend time with your students…walk the aisles with them to find out what they are reading. Sometimes you may find a student who can "never find a book" because he has no idea how to use a library, but would never admit that in middle school, and walking those aisles might be the only way to identify the problem. Students who see their teachers in the library

are more likely to invite them into their literary worlds and you will find that some will seek you out for book recommendations.

E-resources. Some teachers discourage the use of electronic devices, which is okay. However, consider that for some students, this is the only way they read out of school. For them, consider a tutorial on the different e-reading resources out there. The local library will gladly come to your school to introduce FREE software and downloads so students can check out e-books and audiobooks from the library. This is a great way to get more books to more kids.

Local library. Partner with your local library. In addition to teaching students about e-resources, the library will also talk to students near the end of the school year about summer reading programs, incentives, and volunteer opportunities. This is a great way to increase reading over the summer, which will help ease summer learning loss. You can even arrange for students to get their library cards this way, which addresses the common barrier of not being able to physically get to the library. For middle grades, this is also especially helpful for high-level, mature readers who would like to read (still age-appropriate) content that the middle school does not carry.

Introduce Little Lending Libraries. Many communities and schools have these little free libraries, which encourage anyone to take a book and trade it back. This eliminates the need for a library card altogether.

Talk books! The surest way to get kids excited about books is to talk about it. One quick and easy way to do that with zero preparation is to have students turn to a neighbor after independent reading and spend 30 seconds

talking about their books. Offer to let students share extemporaneously with the class a particularly engaging book. Encourage students to keep a running list of titles they'd like to check out. Many times students will accompany classmates to the school library to check out a book the other one is about to return. Share what you are reading with the class. Read middle school literature and be enthusiastic about selections you have enjoyed.

Use Rewards Sparingly. Research shows that extrinsic rewards for middle school kiddos are less effective than for their younger counterparts. Celebrate all achievements. Success for a non-reader will look different than for a voracious one. Growth will be individual and you may have a student for whom completing *one* book in a trimester is a small victory.