



## WHAT iGNITES US

Encouraging Authentic Writing Across the Curricula  
ET Richardson Middle School: Springfield, PA

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Joy Rosser is currently serving as secretary on the DVR-PASCD Board, teaching sixth grade science at Kennett Middle School and serving on the Pennsylvania Don Eichhorn Schools To Watch State Team. In addition, she is a member of the southeast regional board for PAMLE. Joy is expanding her research and writing; discovering ways people are being *ignited* within educational institutions, among student interactions, and within families affiliated with education.

"Writing is the painting of the voice," originated from one of the greatest 18th century Enlightenment writers and is now being echoed in the halls and hearts of E.T. Richardson Middle School (ETR) in Springfield, Pennsylvania, Delaware County. With a vision for an academic identity in writing, a means for students to demonstrate creative thinking, an avenue for student choice, and a stronger college/career bridge from middle school to high school, head principal Dan Tracy and district Supervisor of Assessment and Technology, Melissa Butler, are leading ETR students along a guided adventure to better writing.

Changes to the Pennsylvania Common Core Curricula challenged Dan, Melissa, and the ETR staff to promote higher order thinking skills in students' writing and to recognize writing as a point of emphasis in their school. In alignment with the district's vision of "Learn to read, read to write, and write to prove," writing has been moved to the forefront for the school with the most important beneficiaries in mind—the students.

The District Advisory Team focuses on a different idea for improvement or change each year. Based on data and research, a topic is recommended to schools. This past year, writing at the middle level was the priority that prompted a more focused literacy movement at ETR. Teachers were surveyed and asked how much writing their students engaged in and to what extent the writing was positively or negatively impacting student learning. Dan and Melissa both stated that they wanted teachers to be comfortable embedding writing into their curriculum as an influential vehicle of communication; not as a separate incongruent component. Teachers were offered a Grammar Boot Camp this past summer to polish their strategies to best meet the writing needs of all students. Staff development for the 2016-2017 school year focuses on using writing naturally in all content areas. At the root of implementation is the strategic plan developed to make writing a successful part of the middle school literacy journey at ETR.

A more granular look at the school's initiative reveals the thinking and attitudes that writing should be more individualized: providing students more choice and voice to convey their thoughts through writing. Teachers establish increased writing expectations for their grade level and specific departments. They analyze how writing fits seamlessly into instruction and how it blends into the overall learning environment. Two electives have been added to the curriculum:

one based on research and writing (internet usage, credibility of writing, digital citizenship, and plagiarism), and the other elective focusing on non-fiction and fiction writing. Additional peer conferencing at each grade level will engage students, encourage personal investment, and aid in improvement of editing techniques.

Thematic division will diversify the writing as a whole: sixth grade students will focus on geography and a *choose your own adventure* style of writing where writing is a class of its own to establish a strong academic foundation. Seventh grade curriculum will focus on writing in life science, and eighth grade on historical fiction. The combination of these styles and themes may yield writers who are better prepared for high school with a repertoire of writing elements and tools. Beyond the school limits, the Pennsylvania Writing Project and Literacy Project (PAWLP), a branch of the National Writing Project at West Chester University is coordinating efforts with staff for student success. The 2017-2018 school year will be honored with a partnership with the Penn Literacy Project.

The role of the parents is viewed as a critical piece to the success of students throughout their three years at ETR. At the onset of the school year, parents are asked to write about their young adolescent sons and daughters in an effort to demonstrate support and understanding of the writing process. These writing pieces and student products will be condensed into a looping portfolio that follows them from sixth through eighth grade. End of the year reflections will help both students and parents see the literacy journey. Motivated by the opportunity for authentic writing cannot be the only driving force for adolescents. To that end, writing contests each trimester tied to monetary prizes and opportunities for publication in the local, *Springfield Press* newspaper will also entice student writing.

Dan and Melissa reiterated that writing at ETR must be connected to curricula; make authentic, natural connections for students; and must be balanced with other academic and social experiences throughout the school day. These administrators recognize the value of developing teacher confidence and enthusiasm for writing, encouraging students to want to write, and fostering parental and community support to create a genuine writing center. Encompassing the writing focus and the inclusion of all literacy stakeholders woven with the passion to develop authentic writers led to the establishment of this vision, "The ETR community values writing as a tool to navigate a pathway to success. We seek to build a learning environment that celebrates every voice, fosters a culture of collaboration, and empowers students to think and write."

On November 8, 2016, ETR is providing a professional development opportunity for all southeast Pennsylvania middle level teachers to learn more about writing across the curriculum and strategies for implementing these literacy practices. At this traditional teacher in-service on election Tuesday, E.T. Richardson will host the Pennsylvania Association for Middle Level Education (PAMLE) Southeast Regional Conference professional development day entitled *Writing to Learn and Learning to Write: The Power of Writing in All Middle School Classes*. For more information visit the PAMLE website [www.pamle.org](http://www.pamle.org).