

Evaluation of a Middle School Language Arts Program:  
Using Instructional Time to Meet the Needs of Middle School Students

by

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**ABSTRACT**

Schools are constantly looking at ways to improve their curriculum and instruction. In 2001, President Bush introduced the No Child Left Behind Act to ensure that schools continue to meet high standards. Reading and writing have always been areas of concern for our students. Having an effective language arts program in schools is essential as students learn the communication skills they need to be successful later in life. The purpose of this program evaluation is to take a deeper look into the current seventh and eighth grade language arts curriculum at Manawa Middle School and analyze the students' scores on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE) in reading, writing and language.

Another purpose for this program evaluation is to find out what strategies could be implemented into the program to improve student achievement. The

results of this study indicate that the language arts curriculum could be improved to better meet the needs of these middle school students.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

There is an obvious need for students to be able to read, write, and effectively communicate before they enter the working world. Students who cannot read or write well will struggle in school. “Through language, students make meaning and come to understand and define themselves. Through language, they communicate their sense of the world, function with others, and get things done. Through language, they exercise power over the world” (NCTE, 1991, p. 3). The importance of having a strong language arts program in school districts is crucial at all levels.

President George W. Bush implemented the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 as a way of ensuring teachers and school districts would be held accountable for developing and delivering effective instruction in core subject areas. Language arts and reading are two areas that are continually being assessed. School districts are being held accountable to provide quality language arts and reading instruction to students.

The School District of Manawa, in central Wisconsin, is striving to meet the requirements of NCLB. The district enrollment for the 2006-2007 school year was 850 students, 219 of those being middle school students. The ethnicity of the middle school was 97.1% White, 1.2% Hispanic, .8% Black, .8% Asian, and 0.0% American Indian. Approximately 24.2% of the middle school students fit into the low socio-economic status.

The intention of this study is to evaluate the seventh and eighth grade language arts program at Manawa Middle School. Students in the middle school are required to take language arts each year as part of their core subjects. The program services approximately 115 students each year in grades seven and eight. Students have the same language arts instructor for both seventh and eighth grade and receive instruction for one forty-eight minute class period every

day. In recent years, the state test scores measured by the Wisconsin Knowledge Concepts Examination (WKCE) have been below state average in many of the areas in language arts. Conducting a program evaluation for the Manawa Middle School seventh and eighth grade language arts program will provide an opportunity to analyze the curriculum that is delivered to students, and it will show students' abilities in reading, writing, and language. It will also guide the use of instructional time based on areas that need improvement. By looking at other school district's language arts programs, student test data from the WKCE, and best practices for language arts instruction, the district will obtain valuable information pertinent to improving the language arts program.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

According to WKCE test data, students are performing below the state average in the areas of reading, writing, and language. NCLB puts pressure on school districts to have all students performing at a proficient or advanced level by the year 2014. There is a strong push to make both school districts and teachers accountable. Results from these tests are made available in annual report cards so parents can measure school performance and statewide progress, evaluate their child's school, the qualifications of the teachers, and their progress in key subjects ("Fact Sheet", 2002). If the results from the standardized tests are being used for such evaluation, this district needs to be sure their programs, including the language arts, are meeting the needs of the students.

#### *Objectives*

1. To analyze student data from the Wisconsin Knowledge Concepts Examination in language, reading, and writing.

2. To compare Manawa Middle School's language arts program curriculum to state standards and best practices for language arts instruction.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of the current seventh and eighth grade language arts program at Manawa Middle School.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of the study is to provide key information about specific areas in which the seventh and eighth grade students at Manawa Middle School were not proficient according to the WKCE. The data along with a study of best practices for language arts instruction can lead to suggestions for improving this program.

### *Assumptions of the Study*

The assumption is that the WKCE provides an adequate depiction of students' ability. The data is used by the school district to determine if students are meeting state standards and guides instruction and assistance for students who do not show proficiency on the assessment.

### *Definition of Terms*

*Proficiency scores.* Students are scored on four levels of performance called proficiency scores. The Department of Public Instruction labels these categories as Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Minimal Performance.

*Advanced.* Student has an in-depth understanding and skills in a content area.

*Proficient.* Student shows a competent level of achievement.

*Basic.* Student shows some weaknesses that should be addressed.

*Minimal.* Student shows limited academic knowledge in the area tested.

*Scaled Scores.* Scaled scores are based on the number of multiple choice items answered correctly and points earned for the short answer items. Scaled scores can be used to measure progress over time and compare students and schools performance on the same test.

*WKCE.* The Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination is a standardized assessment administered each year by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students throughout the state. Students are tested in the areas of reading, language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and writing.

### *Limitations of the Study*

One limitation of the study is using a standardized test as a measure of data. Students do not always take these types of tests seriously, so their capabilities may not be evident through their results. Teachers may also change the curriculum they would normally teach just to match the test. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (1992) states,

In many districts, raising test scores has become the single most important indicator of school improvement. As a result, teachers and administrators feel enormous pressure to ensure that test scores go up. Schools narrow and change the curriculum to match the test. Teachers teach only what is covered on the test. Methods of teaching conform to the multiple choice format of the tests. Teaching more and more resembles testing. (p.3)

The duration of the test is also a limitation. Students test throughout an entire week, several hours a day. Test fatigue is a concern along with keeping students motivated to work to their best ability throughout the entire testing period. The program evaluator is also the instructor of the language arts program. This is a limitation to the study in that only an internal evaluator's perspective is being shared.

*Methodology*

The Wisconsin Knowledge Concepts Examination (WKCE) will be used as a primary measure of data. There will be an item analysis to determine areas that need improvement. This information will then lead to recommendations for how to improve Manawa Middle School's language arts program and ideas for enhancing its current curriculum.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

A program evaluation is a valuable tool because it answers basic questions about a program's effectiveness. Data can also help to determine areas that may need improvement (Metz, 2007). While there has always been an interest in student literacy and success in both reading and writing in school, there have not been major changes in literature and writing instruction in recent years. Langer (1991) found the following:

In secondary schools there has been no major change in conceptualizing literature instruction in the past 25 years (except for what individual teachers have been doing.)

While there has been extensive change in English classes, the concern has been primarily with writing. And despite the fact that more than 80% of the writing that goes on in English classes is about literature, there has been little recent research on the teaching of literature. English and language arts teachers have come to feel schizoid in their classes, using process-oriented approaches to writing, and very traditional approaches to the teaching of literature. (p. 2)

The lack of data and evaluations done for language arts programs speaks to that fact. There have been some evaluations of language arts programs in recent years however, as some schools work to improve their curriculum and align it to fit both state and national standards and the requirements of NCLB. Johannessen (2002) supports the need for schools to look at ways of improving educational programs. He writes, "If English teachers focus their instruction and curriculum on raising both test scores and student learning through an integrated curriculum, then students are more likely to perform well in both arenas" (p.9). This well-balanced approach is what schools seek. Looking at evaluations done on language arts programs will help indicate some direction on how to achieve this.

There are several models of evaluation that could be used for this program evaluation. The Objective-Based Evaluation Model is useful because it allows the evaluator the opportunity to see the purpose and intent of the program. The limitations of this model include the assumption that the internal evaluator considered the needs of all stakeholders when developing the program. East Brunswick Public Schools' language arts program evaluation (2005) used an Objective-Based evaluation. The evaluation examined the scope and sequence of the K-12 curriculum, reviewed instructional materials, and looked at student achievement. Researchers also analyzed surveys given to parents, students, and teachers. The evaluation was centered on three primary questions including:

1. Are the goals of the curriculum appropriate?
2. Do all the students have access to curriculum?
3. Are the students achieving the objectives of the curriculum? (p. 1).

McGlinn (2003) cites Judith Langer's work of the Excellence in English project that she directed. Langer based her study on two specific questions:

1. What kind of English instruction enables students to develop high literacy?
2. What kind of school or district programs enables teachers to teach effectively?

Langer's study compiled data from 25 schools, 44 teachers, and 88 classes, grades 6-12, for over two years in California, Florida, New York, and Texas. Using interviews with teachers and administrators, and student work, Langer determined six components of effective teaching in English language arts. The six components include:

1. Students learn skills and knowledge in multiple lesson types.
2. Teachers integrate test preparation into instruction.
3. Teachers make connections across instruction, curriculum, and life.

4. Students learn strategies for ways to do the work.
5. Students are expected to be creative thinkers.
6. Classrooms foster cognitive collaboration.

A formative approach is another way to evaluate a program. Using an Improvement Focused Model of evaluation is also an effective way to evaluate a program because the main focus is to provide information for program improvement. Schneebeck and Tompkins (1997) used the Improvement Focused Model of evaluation for their study of a Language Arts/Reading program in grades K-5. An elementary instructional materials selection committee set out to answer questions regarding students' achievement and teachers' instructional practices in order to guide their selection process for new instructional reading materials to improve the existing reading program. The researchers determined that a strength of the program is its competent teachers, but a weakness is the achievement gap between lower socio-economic students and nonsocio-economic students. Looking at other reading materials/programs would help them improve their program by selecting materials suited for students with varying needs.

The West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District (2001) also conducted an improvement focused evaluation in their district. Using interviews, documents such as curriculum guides, program goals, and philosophies, and site visitations, the evaluation team worked with the district to report findings and recommendations. The study states, "A program evaluation does not have to reach a summative judgment regarding the status of a school district or a specific academic discipline being analyzed. The program evaluation simply reports the discrepancies and formulates recommendations to ameliorate them" (p. 2).

### *Effective Language Arts Programs*

The International Reading Association (IRA) says that students' performance level in reading achievement drops when they reach their middle school and high school years (IRA, 2002). This is the age when students begin making decisions about the rest of their school careers and their future beyond school. Quality instruction is essential to ensure students are equipped with the skills they need before they leave school. IRA (2002) suggests that middle schools should provide continuous reading instruction for all young adolescents. They also suggest instruction should be individually appropriate to meet the needs of the individual student, and that students also need ample opportunities to read and discuss their reading with others.

NCTE (1991) lists several key components that should be part of any language arts program. Students should have the opportunity to:

1. read whole texts in their original versions, sharing written and oral meanings, not simply supplying workbook answers or responses to predetermined questions
2. collaborate in writing many whole texts, not answers to exercises
3. read and write different kinds of texts for different readers: personal essays, informative writing, literature, and persuasive writing
4. learn grammar and usage by studying how their own language works in context
5. encounter and critique a diversity of print materials- books, signs, posters, brochures, and so forth. (p.4)

Hinson (2000) echoes some of these same suggestions and recommends increasing reading aloud to students. Hinson also encourages teaching reading as a process and not as a single, one-step act. Having students write before and after reading and providing opportunities for students to write original pieces for real audiences such as their class or perhaps a broader

community is also important. Writing should also be modeled by the teacher as they lead students through the writing process demonstrating the stages. The Wisconsin State Reading Association (2003) suggests that reading and writing should be an integrated process. They recommend explicit instruction in reading strategies applied to literature and content materials.

Robb (2005) supports some of these same ideas. Giving students comprehension strategies is an essential part to any reading program. Likewise, modeling these strategies and providing opportunities for students to practice these strategies in both an independent and cooperative learning environment is also beneficial for helping students increase their reading comprehension.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (Wisconsin DPI) suggests that reading instruction at the middle school level does not need to be presented as a separate course; rather, schools should take an integrated approach by making reading part of a language arts program and all other subject areas as well (Wisconsin DPI, 2008a).

Fisher and Frey (2004) support this same idea in their book *Improving Adolescent Literacy*. They write, “We maintain that literacy must become the responsibility of the whole school. We believe that every secondary school teacher can assist in the literacy development of adolescents” (p. 1).

Beyond promoting literacy and writing instruction as a school-wide movement comes the idea that literacy and writing instruction must be connected throughout a language arts curriculum. Langer (2001) notes that integrated instruction, which is instruction that takes place when students are expected to use their skill knowledge within the context of another activity, is more effective than simulated instruction, when students simply practice the concepts they have been taught.

### Chapter III: Methodology

There are many ways to measure students' progress during the school year. Teacher conferences, report cards, grades on daily assignments all help to determine whether or not students are progressing. Another source of information is a school district's standardized assessment tests. The WKCE is administered each year by the Wisconsin DPI to students in grades 4, 8, and 10. This test is part of the Wisconsin Student Assessment System, a statewide program that provides information about what students know in core subject areas. Students take tests in the areas of science, social studies, mathematics, language arts, reading, and writing.

The School District of Manawa uses the WKCE to test all students in grades 4, 8, and 10. The district also tests students in reading and math each year in grades 3, 5, 6, and 7. The WKCE assessment is meant to keep track of students' progress and meet the requirements for NCLB. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act says that between now and 2013-2014 each school must show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Each state establishes a starting point for academic achievement based on federal guidelines. The state must raise the bar over a period of time to meet the 100% proficiency goal for all students by 2013-2014. If schools fail to meet AYP, they will be labeled "in need of improvement" (Allen, n.d.).

In recent years, students in grade 8 have scored below the state average in the language arts, writing, and reading portion of the WKCE test. If students are to be at the Advanced or Proficient level in all subject areas by the year 2014, there needs to be some analysis to determine the areas of weakness for these middle school students. Analyzing test data from the WKCE test administered in the fall of 2006 in the School District of Manawa will provide vital information that should impact instruction.

### *Subject Selection and Description*

WKCE data was collected from 60 students (36 female and 24 male) in grade 8 in the areas of reading, language arts, and writing. Reading data was also collected from 61 students (31 female and 30 male) in grade 7.

### *Instrumentation*

The WKCE tests are developed by CTB/McGraw-Hill and data has been collected from these tests since October 1997. (Wisconsin DPI, 2001) states,

The WKCE includes multiple-choice (selected response) and short-answer (constructed-response) items in reading/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The short-answer items are scored by professional staff and allow partial credit for partially answered questions. The WKCE also includes a writing assessment that requires the student to write about a specific topic. The students' responses at grades 4, 8, and 10 are scored using a set of established scoring criteria for the evaluation of writing. (p. 1)

### *Data Collection Procedures*

Students tested for an average of 2.5 hours each day for five days. The district set up a testing schedule based on the Wisconsin DPI's recommended testing dates. Results from the WKCE test administered in the fall of 2006 were received in May of 2007.

### *Data Analysis*

Appendix A (Wisconsin DPI, 2001) shows the reading objectives measured by the WKCE. The reading portion of the test consists of both multiple choice and short-answer (constructed-response) items. The objectives written in italics indicate the processes measured by short-answer items.

Appendix B (Wisconsin DPI, 2001) shows the Language Arts Objectives measured by the WKCE. This test consists of both multiple choice and constructed-response items as well. Both tests are scored using scaled scores. The researcher used the scaled score ranges, which are categorized under Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Minimal, to determine areas of concern.

Tables 1 and 2 below show the scale score ranges for the WKCE Reading and Language test.

Table 1

Reading Test Scale Score Ranges

Reading	Minimal Performance	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Seventh Grade	310-433	434-466	467-522	523-780
Eighth Grade	330-444	445-479	480-538	539-790

Table 2

Language Test Scale Score Ranges

Language Arts	Minimal Performance	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Eighth Grade	250-357	358-384	385-417	418-520

The writing test is scored using a nine point scale. Students' writing is evaluated using two rubrics. One is a six point rubric that measures if the writing is focused and organized. The writing test is scored using a range from 6.0 (Exemplary) to 1.0 (Minimal).

### Test Results

The data that was collected in the fall of the 2006-2007 school year indicates that there are many areas within the language arts and reading test that students are not performing at a Proficient or Advanced level. Tables 3 and 4 show the proficiency scores for these grade levels. The table indicates the state's average percentile for students scoring in each proficiency category and also Manawa Middle School's seventh and eighth grade students' scores.

Table 3

#### WKCE- Grade 7 Proficiency Scores

Test	Enrolled	Minimal	Basic	Proficient/Advanced	Proficient/Advanced Wisconsin Average
Manawa MS	→	→	→	→	
Reading	61	11%	8%	33% + 48% = 81%	88%

The state average for the reading test in seventh grade was 88% Advanced/Proficient. 81% of Manawa's seventh graders scored Advanced/Proficient. This is 7% below the state.

Table 4

#### WKCE- Grade 8 Proficiency Scores

Test	Enrolled	Minimal	Basic	Proficient/Advanced	Proficient/Advanced Wisconsin Average
Manawa MS	→	→	→	→	
Reading	60	7%	15%	47% + 32% = 79%	83%
Language	60	20%	32%	27% + 22% = 49%	61%

The eighth grade state reading average was 83% Proficient/Advanced. Manawa's eighth graders scored 4% below that with 79% scoring in the Proficient/Advanced range. The state average for the Language test was 61% Proficient/Advanced. Manawa's students scored significantly lower on this test as only 49% of the students met the Proficient/Advanced level.

A few conclusions can be drawn from this test data. Manawa middle school is falling below the state average in many areas of language and reading. The eighth grade language arts scores show that less than 50% of the students are performing at a Proficient/Advanced level. This percentage is also significantly below the state average. A closer look at an item response analysis will help determine specific areas of weakness. Table 5 shows the top five weakest areas in reading and language arts for seventh and eighth grade.

Table 5

## WKCE- Specific Areas of Concern

Test	Grade	Standard/Objective	Percentage of students who showed correct response- District	Percentage of students who showed correct response- State
Reading	7	*Objective 3- Analyzing Text	59%	62%
Reading	8	*Objective 1- Determines Meaning	66%	72%
Reading	8	*Objective 2- Understands Text	64%	72%
Language Arts	8	**Standard B.- Writing	74%	78%
Language Arts	8	**Standard D.- Language	60%	67%

\*A list of Reading Objectives and subskills measured on the WKCE can be found on the web at:

[www.dpi.wi.gov/oea/wkce-crt.html](http://www.dpi.wi.gov/oea/wkce-crt.html)

\*\* A list of the Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards for Language Arts Grade 8 can be found in Appendix C, or on the web at: <http://dpi.wi.gov/standards/elaa8.html>

*Current Practices*

The seventh and eighth grade language arts program's curriculum is based on the Wisconsin State Standards. At this time, there are no other specific program goals in place.

Curriculum is updated frequently based on students' needs and new instructional materials.

Appendix C (Wisconsin DPI, 2008b) lists the Wisconsin Performance Standards for grade 8 in English Language Arts.

Currently, the Manawa Middle School language arts program focuses heavily on standards A-D. There is very little instructional focus on standards E and F. According to test data, however, students are performing poorly on some of the same standards that are covered in-depth through various literature and writing units. A look at best practices for these specific areas will provide ideas for improving instruction.

### *Limitations*

Any standardized test will have limitations. In order to capture a true picture of a student's capabilities, many different forms of both formal and informal assessment should be used. The WKCE is just one assessment tool used to look at student progress. Experts warn against putting too much weight on the results of a standardized test. Allen (n.d.) says the following:

In addition, paper and pencil tests of this type cannot measure all things of importance, including performing or producing, becoming a good citizen, or getting along with others. Finally, recognize that all students have bad days and that many students experience test anxiety. (p.1)

Another limitation of this test is the time it takes to receive the results. Students take the test in November and districts do not receive the results until spring of that school year. This does not leave much time for teachers to make any changes to their curriculum or instruction. Results are looked at more in depth during the end of summer, but by this time, teachers are already set to begin a new school year.

The readability of the test results is also a limitation. The language arts portion of the test is based on the Wisconsin State Standards for English/Language Arts. The data is then itemized by standards. The reading test, however, uses the Wisconsin Reading Assessment Framework, and the data is presented using objectives. This is not explicit enough for teachers to know what is being measured. Because of the time and effort it takes to look up the various subskills that are being tested, teachers could be missing out on gaining valuable insight that could improve their curriculum and instruction.

### *Summary*

Standardized testing is one way to ensure that school districts are held accountable for providing the type of instruction students need to be successful. When the WKCE is used in conjunction with classroom observation and teacher-developed assessment, it can provide important information about students and the effectiveness of educational programs.

## Chapter IV: Results

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study to evaluate the effectiveness of the seventh and eighth grade language arts program at Manawa Middle School. Standardized tests, like the WKCE, are one form of assessment that can help teachers measure if students are performing at an acceptable level. A closer look at the objectives and subskills that are assessed on the WKCE will help determine the areas where students would benefit from increased practice and instruction.

The seventh grade reading data, as shown in Table 5, shows a weakness in Objective 3 which is analyzing text. Manawa students scored 3% below the state. Specifically, students performed the lowest on questions dealing with literary text. This would include: making inferences about story elements, analyzing implied theme, or main idea, and analyzing different view points. According to test data, there is also a weakness in analyzing author's use of language in literary and informational text such as author's use of tone, style, and literary devices. Students do receive a large amount of exposure to different genres of literature in their language arts class; however, data shows they are not able to analyze the author's purpose or writing techniques.

Eighth grade reading data, presented in Table 5, shows a weakness in Objectives 1 and 2. Manawa students scored 6% lower than the state on Objective 1 and 8% lower than the state on Objective 2. Objective 1 focuses on using context clues to determine the meanings of words and assesses knowledge of word reference materials in order to determine the meaning of a word and its pronunciation. Objective 2 assesses the understanding of literal meaning of a text such as information about story elements and the sequence of events in a text. Students have very limited instruction on how to use a dictionary or other informational resource books. There is no separate

course for library research. Any library or reference instruction would need to be part of the regular classroom teacher's curriculum. Students do have practice finding the story elements and sequence of events in a text in their language arts class; however, data shows they still struggled with this portion of the reading test.

The eighth grade students also showed weakness on Standard B of the test, as is shown in Table 5. They were 4% below the state. This portion of the test analyzes how well students produce and publish clear, effective writing. It also assesses their understanding of editing, spelling, and grammar usage. Students have practice with these skills when they revise their writing and their peer's writing. They also practice writing skills by writing responses in journals and daily assignments. Daily Oral Language warm-up activities in the beginning of class are also for students to practice editing skills. While these types of activities allow students to practice important editing skills, the test data shows that students are not applying these skills when assessed.

Table 5 also shows that Standard D was an area of weakness for these students. Manawa students scored 7% lower than the state. This portion of the test deals with vocabulary, and analyzes the ways in which students understand using words, phrases, idioms, and other grammatical structures for improving communication. Specifically, students need to be able to understand how to use dictionaries and resource books, and understand figurative language. Vocabulary instruction is currently limited to studying the vocabulary that accompanies the reading assignments and a daily word of the day activity in which students receive exposure to new words. There is not a large amount of time spent on figurative language. While it is important for students to be exposed to new vocabulary words, it appears that the current

vocabulary strategies being used in this classroom are not enough. Students need to be able to correctly use the words in context and understand how words are used in different settings.

Seventh and eighth grade language arts students are receiving instruction in some of the areas in which they scored low on according to the WKCE test data; however, they are not receiving instruction in all of the areas. Even if they receive instruction or exposure to these objectives that are measured on the test, it appears that students are not able to apply these skills when assessed. It is clear that the middle school language arts program could be improved to better meet the needs of its students.

## Chapter V: Discussion

Is the Manawa Middle School's seventh and eighth grade language arts program meeting the needs of its students? According to test data, students are struggling with some important reading and writing skills. With the presence of NCLB and the expectation that all students will be in the proficient or advanced category in all subject areas by 2014, it is evident that the language arts program's curriculum needs some improvement. A closer look at specific instructional strategies for these areas of concern will help to improve the current program's curriculum.

### *Conclusions*

NCTE (1991) makes the recommendation that all language arts programs provide opportunities for students to read a variety of texts and provide written responses beyond that of a simple workbook response. They also suggest students receive ample opportunity for producing different types of writing. Manawa's students receive a variety of exposure to different literature within their language arts class, but there needs to be a school-wide focus on reading strategies for each content area. The language arts students are also given many opportunities to write a variety of essays and written responses, but again this needs to be a school-wide practice. If students are not expected to practice reading comprehension strategies and produce quality writing across the content areas, then the skills that they have learned are not being practiced or reinforced.

### *Recommendations*

Regardless of how soon there is a push to make improving reading and writing a school-wide movement, there is still a responsibility to deliver quality instruction within the language arts classroom. Grammar usage was an area of weakness for these students. Students struggled

with sentence combining and revising sentences within a piece of writing. Currently students practice their editing skills using a skill and drill technique called Daily Oral Language. Students practice peer editing exercises when there is a larger writing assignment, but it is obvious that these types of segregated activities do not help students with the application of these skills.

NCTE (2002) explains the following:

As human beings, we can put sentences together even as children- we can all *do* grammar. But to be able to talk about how sentences are built, about the types of words and word groups that make sentences- that is *knowing* about grammar. And knowing about grammar offers a window into the human mind and into our amazingly complex mental capacity. (p.1)

Students need to be able to understand basic grammatical terminology, but they need to understand more about how and why words are used. Students benefit much more from learning a few grammar essentials than from many terms and rules. NCTE (2002) suggests experimenting with a few different approaches. Sentence diagramming, or using metaphors to explain the different parts of a sentence is one approach. A second approach is showing students how it applies to their own writing. If they understand how a sentence is put together, they have a better chance at understanding a difficult piece of writing and perhaps even using the author's style as a model for their own writing. This will also help with analyzing the author's use of words and literary devices. Lastly, using skill and drill practice will be the most meaningful when it is integrated into the context of writing assignments. When students can apply the skills they learned, it will make much more sense. Using students' own writing for grammar examples and turning that into a revision exercise will make the lesson more applicable. Besides reinforcing

editing skills, using student writing can also be a tool to talk about word choice and sentence fluency.

Another area of concern for these middle school students is their ability to understand words in the context of a sentence. Students receive a lot of exposure to words in their language arts class, but this is not enough. Students need to be able to recognize the word and its meaning, but they also need to be able to understand words in a variety of contexts. Burke (1999) suggests challenging students in the context of the classroom. One idea is wording assignments or directions differently using new vocabulary words. This technique would allow students to be exposed to new words, but also hear these words used in a familiar context. Vocabulary mapping also creates an awareness of the language that surrounds students. Burke recommends teaching students how to read a dictionary entry. He suggests focusing on word history information to generate discussion of where the word came from and pay attention to the usage notes. He also recommends teaching and using vocabulary from other disciplines such as biology, or history, but instill in students a clear understanding of literary terms used to discuss English and their own writing. Another suggestion is having students generate words for writing. Showing students a picture or a clip of a movie and brainstorming words that describe what is happening can help students think creatively about how words are used and allow them an opportunity to pick up new vocabulary words.

Manawa's seventh and eighth grade students also struggled in areas of reading comprehension. The Wisconsin DPI says that reading instruction does not need to be a separate course. Considering school funding and budget issues, it is likely that some schools, like Manawa Middle School, do not have a separate year-long course for reading. Bintz (2002) notes that several trends still remain prevalent in secondary education. One is that secondary school

teachers continue to see themselves as teachers of content and not reading. They rely on the English teachers and the language arts curriculum to teach students the reading skills they need. Some teachers do not feel competent to teach reading. The Wisconsin State Reading Association (WSRA) supports the idea of integrating reading instruction into all content areas. Their position statement for reading design of middle schools states,

The ultimate goal of reading instruction is to develop independent readers. Reading is a tool that spans disciplines, is integrated into all content areas, and addresses diversity. A reading program is not a reading class; it is a school's total commitment to literacy.

(WSRA, 2003, p. 1)

School districts, including Manawa, would benefit from having professional development opportunities for improving literacy. Teachers need to learn strategies that would enhance their instruction and increase reading comprehension in their content areas.

Fischer and Frey (2007) suggest literacy strategies be consistent school wide. They write, "As they learn these content literacy strategies, they become transportable, meaning that students take their knowledge of the strategy with them from class to class" (p. 210). If students feel comfortable with a strategy, it becomes a common practice for them and there is a greater likelihood they will use that strategy. If reading everyday at the beginning of the school day or journaling in a response journal after reading in class become a consistent practice throughout all content areas, then there are no surprises when it comes to expectations of the students. Students can clearly benefit from these unified practices.

Students will inevitably learn most of their comprehension strategies in their language arts classroom. Considering that the students of Manawa Middle School only receive language arts instruction for one forty-eight minute class period each day, classroom structure and content

delivery become extremely important. Fischer and Frey (2008) recommend focus lessons. A focus lesson is typically 15 minutes long and has a clear purpose. The purpose of the focus lesson should align with the standards as this is a way to ensure a step toward mastery of the standards. “The middle school teachers who consistently ensure their students reach high levels of proficiency establish a content and language goal daily” (Fischer and Frey, 2008, p. 18).

The IRA (2002) suggests students receive continuous reading instruction, but also that the instruction is individually appropriate. Teachers need to be aware of their student’s abilities and provide resources that fit their abilities. Teachers also need to equip themselves with a variety of strategies to help students with reading comprehension. It is not enough, however, for students to be exposed to a variety of reading strategies. Students need to have a clear set of strategies that they feel comfortable enough using on their own. Fischer and Frey (2008) found that most teachers model strategies on inferencing, summarizing, predicting, clarifying, questioning, visualizing, monitoring, synthesizing, evaluating, and connecting. Modeling how these strategies work is important as it allows students to get familiar with the strategies and observe how they work to increase reading comprehension.

It is essential that students are equipped with the proper skills they need to be able to communicate effectively. NCLB and high stakes testing are there to ensure that students are meeting the standards set for them. Currently the seventh and eighth grade language arts students are receiving instruction centered on the state standards, but they may not be receiving the type of instruction they need. This program evaluation and the recommendations for best practices in language arts instruction should guide the use of instructional time to better meet the needs of these students.

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## Appendix A: Reading Objectives Measured on the WKCE.

Basic Understanding	Analyze Text	Evaluate and Extend Meaning	Identify Reading Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate the understanding of the literal meaning of a passage through identifying stated information, indicating sequence of events, and defining grade-level vocabulary.</li> </ul> <p><i>Write responses to questions requiring literal information from passages and documents.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate comprehension by drawing conclusions; inferring relationships such as cause and effect; and identifying theme and story elements such as plot, climax, character, and setting.</li> </ul> <p><i>Write responses that show an understanding of the text that goes beyond surface meaning.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate critical understanding by making predictions; distinguishing between fact and opinion, and reality and fantasy; transferring ideas to other situations; and judging author purpose, point of view, and effectiveness.</li> </ul> <p><i>Write responses that make connections between texts based on common themes and concepts; evaluate author purpose and effectiveness, and extend meaning to other contexts.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate awareness of techniques that enhance comprehension, such as using existing knowledge, summarizing content, comparing information across texts, using graphics and text structure, and formulating questions that deepen understanding.</li> </ul> <p><i>Write responses that interpret and extend the use of information from documents and forms, and that demonstrate knowledge and use of strategies.</i></p>

## Appendix B: Language Arts Objectives Measured on the WKCE

Sentence Structure	Writing Strategies	Editing Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate an understanding of conventions for writing complete and effective sentences, including treatment of subject and verb, punctuation, and capitalization.</li> <li>• Demonstrate an understanding of conciseness and clarity of meaning in combining two sentences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate knowledge of information sources, outlines, and other pre-writing techniques.</li> <li>• Demonstrate an understanding of the use of topic sentences, concluding sentences, connective and transitional words and phrases, supporting statements, sequencing ideas, and relevant information in writing expository prose.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the appropriate use of capitalization, punctuation, nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in existing text.</li> </ul> <p><i>Demonstrate knowledge of writing conventions and sentence structure through identifying and correcting errors in existing text and text written by the student.</i></p>

Appendix C: Wisconsin State Performance Standards for Grade 8 English/Language Arts

- A. 8.1 Use effective reading strategies to achieve their purpose in reading.
- A. 8.2 Read, interpret, and critically analyze literature.
- A. 8.3 Read and discuss literary and nonliterary texts in order to understand human experience.
- A. 8.4 Read to acquire information
- B. 8.1 Create or produce writing to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- B. 8.2 Plan, revise, edit, and publish clear and effective writing.
- B. 8.3 Understand the function of various forms, structures, and punctuation marks of standard American English and use them appropriately in communications.
- C. 8.1 Orally communicate information, opinions, and ideas effectively to different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- C. 8.2 Listen to and comprehend oral communications.
- C. 8.3 Participate effectively in discussion.
- D. 8.1 Develop their vocabulary and ability to use words, phrases, idioms, and various grammatical structures as a means of improving communication.
- D. 8.2 Recognize and interpret various uses and adaptations of language in social, cultural, regional, and professional situations, and learn to be flexible and responsive in their use of English.
- E. 8.1 Use computers to acquire, organize, analyze, and communicate information.
- E. 8.2 Make informed judgments about media and products.
- E. 8.3 Create media products appropriate to audiences and purposes.
- E. 8.4 Demonstrate a working knowledge of media production and distribution.

E. 8.5 Analyze media and edit media work as appropriate to audience and purpose.

F. 8.1 Conduct research and inquiry on self-selected or assigned topics, issues, or problems and use an appropriate form to communicate their findings.