

# **The African American Childhood Reading Experience n Pittsburgh: Building Blocks for Academic Success**

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**Overview**

**Rationale**

**Objectives**

**Strategies**

**Classroom Activities**

**Annotated Bibliography/Resources**

**Appendices-Standards**

## **Overview**

The Pittsburgh Public School system has the largest population of African American students in Allegheny County. According to the district website, the number of African American students throughout the PPS system for the academic years of 2005-2006 was 18, 801. This figure is more than the ethnic distribution of the Asian students (502), American Indians (39), Hispanic (259), and white students (11,547), combined.

Of these students, 9,719 are enrolled in grades 9-12. The current trend within the Pittsburgh Public School system is an attempt to "right-size" all schools to maximize personnel effectiveness and financial distribution. One adverse effect of this "Right-Sizing" activity may be an the increase in classroom size. As a result of this "Right Sizing," some of the elementary schools will close and many of the kindergarten through fifth grade students will be forced to attend already existing elementary school buildings that may have class size problems. Furthermore, some designated elementary schools will go to the eighth grade. This might cause a negative change for an African American population that has already proven to be at risk and further increase the academic achievement gap between the African American students and the remaining population.

As a librarian I have witnessed a downward spiral of reading activity amongst students as they progress from one grade level to the next. The results of this lack of reading surfaces in many arenas. One of which is the reading portion of the PSSA test scores and overall achievement of the African American high school student. Although District wide strategies to counteract this situation specifically have yet to be implemented, this unit will discuss a few of the pro-reading strategies and programs that were in place and some of the reactions to those activities.

One strategy to tighten the achievement gap amongst those individuals at risk would be to address the literacy problem that exists within the school system. Not that the population is illiterate. It is more a case in that large part of the at-risk population has turned its back towards reading. There may be a decline in the reading process across all of the demographics. However, the negative impact upon the African American student can be life changing and devastating. The problem is even more critical when addressing the lack of progress among African American boys. These students need to be reintroduced to appropriate literature and genres and encouraged to read to therefore transform themselves from a group of reluctant readers into a group that aggressively embraces the activity of reading. This should be done with the hopes and expectations of this group becoming life-long readers and students who score higher on standardized tests. There should also be improvement strategies made for those students that are reading below grade level. Students identified as such should be exposed to literature that has high interest but is written at a lower reading level. Once the reading experience has been re-established, it could be the catalyst for positive change.

## **Rationale**

For most children, the reading experience is introduced at an early age. Most of the initial reading experience is done from the home. In home situations where reading is not practiced regularly, children may get the reading experience from early childhood education programs such as pre-school or head-start. Research has demonstrated that children who attend pre-school or head start programs have more academic success because they are exposed to letters, numbers, colors, and primary elementary concepts early on. In the current and popular book about African American promise, *The Covenant*, Edmund W. Gordon, Ed.D., explains, "Early childhood education is key to school readiness and sustained academic achievement, yet at age three, only 45 percent of African American children are enrolled, and at age four just 73 percent are registered." (32) Thus, too many underserved African Americans children are not taking advantage of early childhood education programs and therefore start out their academic experience behind their peers. Once the students finally take part in the early childhood educational programs, they have to adjust to the social climate as well as the academics. For the most part, however, it is believed that the early intervention of reading and the primary academic subjects prepare the youngsters for academic and social success. Besides the social experience, some pre-schoolers are also exposed to computer technology. Those that are exposed to computer technology benefit not only from the technology portion but also get to see some of the basic primary learning concepts being put into practice.

It is at this time when the pre-schoolers are able to get an appreciation for children's literature. Students get to enjoy pre-reading activities that allow them to become familiar with picture books, nursery rhymes, fairy tales, and stories that are read to them out loud. The African American child of this primary grade level (Kindergarten through second grade), shares the same experience. However, in many elementary schools in the Pittsburgh Public School District they get more exposure to children's literature because many of these students are not only exposed to the classics of children's literature but also experience the pleasure of learning about multi-cultural variations of nursery rhymes and fairy tales that reflect their culture. This experience taps into their background

knowledge or schema, and provides them with a sense of ownership because the characters, settings, and language are familiar.

When emerging readers in the primary grades choose a book they often choose literature that "speaks to them." Picture books or books that have stories that they know become favorites. Books that rhyme and have interesting vocabulary become popular. Books such as Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham* are classic favorites across the board. At times, the young reader will even experiment with their book selections because having access to reading material gives them a sense of ownership and responsibility. Elementary school students that have the opportunity to visit a library, in the school or public, have the chance to choose for themselves and this gives them freedom.

Things begin to change when students enter the intermediate years of elementary school. Although the students are only a few years older, some are forced to grow up faster than their counterparts. Too many students in the African American community begin to push away from academic endeavors. According to the PSSA test scores, the achievement gap starts to become more noticeable during the third through fifth grades. Contradicting the previous cultural belief that education is, "key to success," many of today's African American students shun academic achievement for fear of 'selling out' or 'acting white.' Despite the teachings of acknowledged African American scholar and spokesman, W.E.B. Dubois, there is shrinkage of the pool of individuals that he would dub the "Talented Tenth." Noted author and social scientist Dr. Juwanza Kunjufu points out in his insightful book, *To Be Popular or Smart: The Black Peer Group*, "the phenomenon of peer pressure and its impact on academic achievement has reached catastrophic proportions. It has now reached a point that to do well academically in school is to be accused of 'acting white' and risk being called a nerd." Unfortunately this peer pressure is so influential that even young students become almost defiant when asked to read a book. It may go as far as students sneaking about to read or denying that they really enjoy learning. This is ironic because history tells us that although African Americans were denied access to reading material during America's years of slavery, they still risked their lives to learn to read and write. Slave narratives and books like *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* indicate that slaves had to hide their reading skills because if they were caught reading or learning to read, they might be punished or killed. The same fate was applied to those that who taught or encouraged reading because the authorities realized that literacy was a step towards freedom. This put literacy at a premium and the people interpreted the ability to read to be in association with independent thought and reason. In fact, it is quoted in David Boyle's book *Coming to America: African Americans*, that recently freed slaves that were traveling in mass to the north practically, celebrated the notion of education. "Negroes living on the bare ground with the sky for their covering, all hopeful, almost all cheerful, everyone pleading to be taught, willing to do anything for learning." (33) This description reinforces the implied cultural belief that education is one of the keys to success in the African American community and it should be noted that the notion of "selling out " or "acting white" is a relatively new concept that has infiltrated the child culture during the last 10-15 years. It is almost as though the acceptance of these labels prevent the students from knowing how intelligent they really are. If there were a way to make the pursuit of education as popular or as cool as being an entertainer or athlete, then an increase of literacy and PSSA scores could be expected.

A more severe drop off of academic pursuits exists at middle school levels. As mentioned before, peer pressure plays an important role. The academics become more rigorous and the students begin to go through changes within themselves. This is also the time when students begin to question things and become more impulsive. If guided correctly, this is when students can really latch on to good literature rather than turn away from it. There are many great books written for this level and the students need to be exposed to them. The efforts of many teachers however are thwarted because there is too much emphasis on raising standardized test scores rather than connecting the reading experience to education. It would be sensible to believe that a positive reading experience and the exposure to various genre and authors would better the chance of academic success and higher test scores.

During the late 90's, PPS and other school districts across the country attempted to introduce ethical values as part of the curriculum. The values were known as "character traits" which focused on words such as "faith" or "trust" and were accompanied with definitions and attached to literary pieces meant to exemplify and support the value. It is not known what success the program had. However if nothing else, the program did re-enforce the reading experience by exposing the students to the literature that was often classic. Another program that has been in place for the last decade in the Pittsburgh Public School district and others across the nation is the reading of 25 books per year. Although the concept of reading 25 books is cavalier, there is little effort to gauge if students are actually reading or comprehending their claims. The theory itself is based on a trust factor that students and teachers intentionally or unintentionally exploit. Students often prove to be deficient when it comes to mastering vocabulary and comprehension. This also manifests itself in the PSSA results.

Another part of the reading curriculum that was implemented in the PPS during the early 90's was the "READ A NOVEL" (RAN) program. This curriculum required 4th and 5th grade students to read a selected novel as a class. Since this was done across the district, a student would have read at least two novels by the time they reached middle school. The novels that were selected were "Bunnicula", and "Trumpet of the Swan." Both novels respectively are now regarded as popular favorites in Children's Literature. The purpose of this reading activity was to introduce the students to the idea of actually reading a novel or chapter book. The lessons that accompanied the books introduced the students to new vocabulary, prompted comprehension strategies and motivated discussion. The exercises also gave students the opportunity to participate in sustained reading and exposed them to the authors and other books of the same genre.

From what I experienced, the students enjoyed the RAN program and looked forward to participating in it. After completion of the 4th grade book, students eagerly anticipated reading the 5th grade novel. This is the type of fever that we need to recreate in our school system at all levels. However, for whatever the reason, the program was terminated. Interestingly enough, this was also the time period when there was a shift in the teaching of language arts in the PPS. The school system made moves to teach language arts by incorporating a "Whole language" approach. No longer were the subjects of English, Spelling and Reading taught separately but were now crammed together in one curriculum. This move might have saved the district money because schools no longer had to purchase a text book for each subject. This move may have also saved teachers some time since they no longer had to teach the basic rules of spelling or grammar but opted for whatever the "whole language" lesson offered instead. In the long run I think that the district threw the baby

out with the bath water and left too many students in deeper water without the tools necessary to stay afloat. All things considered, it would be an interesting study if school districts that have continued to teach the basic components of English, Spelling, Reading, etc. were compared to those school districts that have chosen not to, especially if the progress of the students that are most at-risk were tracked. It would also be an interesting study to see how teaching each language art subject separately affects the PSSA scores.

The separation of reading and education becomes even more critical during the middle school years. Middle School students are not required to go to the library as a class and if they do, the visit is primarily for research or word processing. The peer pressure is in high gear and the atmosphere gives way to other social distractions. Students rarely read for pleasure and many are not aware of the materials in the YA genre though there are plenty available. Unfortunately, many of these students lose their innocence and feel that they are in survival mode. In the book, *Boys Into Men Raising Our African American Teenage Sons*, authors Nancy Boyd-Franklin, Ph.D. and A.J. Franklin, Ph.D. reflect that even the African American teenaged male student who at least wants to attack his schoolwork must do so with discretion. "Refusing to study in public places. This teenager doesn't carry his books in school and spends the time doing anything but studying. He does schoolwork only at home, away from the watchful eyes of his peers."(95). From what the PSSA scores indicate this holds true for the African American teenaged girls to some extent as well although boys suffer at a far greater margin.

The negative situation for the African American male student has reached epidemic proportions. Not only are they more prone to earn PSSA test scores that are below standards but they also represent a large portion of the nation's high school drop outs. According to an article in the March 6, 2006 edition of the New York Times newspaper, in 2000, 65 percent of Black Male high school dropouts in their 20s were jobless-unable to work, not seeking it or incarcerated. By 2004, the share had grown to 72 percent, compared with 34 percent of white dropouts and 19 percent of Hispanic dropouts. It appears that a portion of those African American male students that do attend high school are not performing well and those who have dropped out are prone not to be employed by the time they reach their 20's. There is also a direct correlation between the rate of high school drop outs and the rate of incarceration of this same group.

By the time these students reach high school, the academic drop-off becomes more severe. The inner city high school student spends even less time in the library looking for literary materials that would enhance his or her reading experience. As with the middle school students, high-school students only visit the library for occasional research. Students in the PPS system are still required to read at least 25 books per year. The students are to read a set number of books of the same author or genre and must compose a writing sample to justify what they read. Unfortunately too many students either choose books that were turned into films, (they rent the video or DVD), or they get by by reading the book jacket and then fabricating a report to the dismay of their teacher. Other students choose to skip over the books written in the genre of YA and select books that are written for an adult reader. Though these books are not available in the school library, these adult books that feature adults in inner-city street situations are the "hot" books of choice. Some educators have no problems with these book selections because the children are at least engaged at some reading activity. The books in question become problematic for many teachers because of the books' contents which emphasizes and sometimes glorifies drug culture, street crimes and often enough,

the degradation of women. Not that these themes do not exist in other genres. It is more likely that students that read this material are not exposed to much else and this presents an imbalance. Furthermore it is not common for this type of literature to show itself in any PSSA or SAT test. When test questions arise that pertain to classic literature these students may find themselves unprepared.

For those students that would read, the challenge is making sure that there is enough literature. There does not seem to be a reasonable strategy that ensures that the students are being provided with books that are of their own interests. Part of this problem is because those who are responsible for providing the books are not in touch with the population. Too many adults are clueless about what is going on in the lives of teenagers and there is not enough dialogue to change it. When communication does occur, it is usually formal and flows from the top down. Students want their voices heard like anyone else and if their interests are known and respected then the probability of getting them to do what is expected is easier. To get anyone to read it helps to know what they enjoy.

Many teenaged African American males are fascinated with gangsters. It is not uncommon to see in any American high school students sporting t-shirts with images like Tony Montana, (Scarface), or Don Corleone, (The Godfather), or even Tony Soprano, (the Sopranos). Many students don't realize that these are fictional characters yet they insist upon accepting these figures as part of their urban sub-culture. Once when I was attempting to convince a reluctant young student to read a book for a book report, I noticed that he was wearing a Scarface shirt. After I explained to him that the "Scarface" on his shirt was played by the actor Al Pacino and that the original "Scarface" was the nickname for the gangster Al Capone, I then introduced him to a book about gangsters. The book became an enormous hit amongst him and several other students. The trick here was to tap into the students' background knowledge and interest. After reading the book that I recommended to him, the student became the local authority of gangster lore. Students enjoy reading biographic literature about individuals who are interesting. Many students enjoy the exploits of their favorite sports and entertainment heroes and icons of popular culture are items of interest to the young reader. Unfortunately many of the subjects that the students want to read about are not present in books but are easily found on the internet, television, and movie screens. By the time some of these people, places or things are found in books they are old news and by this time the students are on to something else. To capture the short attention span students should be introduced to short stories and poetry. Not only will this provide exposure to other types of reading genre, but will hopefully hold their attention.

Even though the high school aged African American male is most vulnerable during this phase to becoming a reluctant or non-reader, it is interesting to note that there are not many books or authors that write with this group in mind. After researching several lists of books written for or by African American teenagers, I noticed that books written for African American girls far exceed those books written for or about boys and more specifically, African American teen aged high school boys.

There are a few authors that stand out. YA books written by African American authors such as Sharon Flake, Sharon Draper, Jacqueline Woodson, and Rita Williams-Garcia are popular amongst African American teen-aged girls. These authors write from the African American perspective and

the themes, characters, and experience is something that most YA's can relate to. Walter Dean Myers and Christopher Paul Curtis also write noteworthy books for teens and as African American male authors they almost have the market cornered on books that feature African American teenaged males as the central characters. These award winning authors give flavor to the literary world and are able to give insight to the rich cultural history that encompasses the African American experience. When a people's culture and heritage becomes a part of literature, then that population becomes validated. In the book, "Children's Literature: An issues Approach", Masha Rudman, states, "When any segment of society is excluded from literature, the implication is thereby conveyed that the group is without value."

In the children's poem book entitled "Harlem," authored by Walter Dean Myers and illustrated by his son Christopher Myers, culture and heritage reveals itself and subtly speaks volumes about the inner city African American experience. One illustration depicts two African American gentlemen donned in suits, bow ties, and sporting short hair cuts, while they hawk newspapers. In the background of this scene is an image of Harlem's famous Apollo Theatre. On the marquee of the theatre is a list of African American musical artists that are not part of the mainstream but have been around for years. The casual observer may not recognize that the men are working for the Nation of Islam and that they are respected as upstanding members of the African American community. Citizens of the African American community however will see this episode as commonplace. It is refreshing when culture rich experiences such as these show themselves in children's literature. The reading experience is for everyone to benefit and learn from.

By the time they reach high school, students know the requirements and many procrastinate the reading of the before mentioned 25 books. By the end of the year, many students try to cram as much reading in as possible in order to make the deadline. Many teachers don't require their students to be accountable for their readings. Too many students fall behind because no one checks on them periodically to monitor their progress. The end of the year becomes stressful for both teacher and student because that is when the teachers expect the students to provide evidence that the students were on task. It might be more logical and more productive if the students were required to present what they read several times throughout the year. This would help to keep everyone honest and the students would be aware of the teacher's expectations. It might also relieve students of the feeling that they are pushing a boulder up the side of a mountain. The manner in which the reading of 25 books is currently done suggests a mandate that is without accountability.

When it comes to addressing the literacy needs of the African American children in the Pittsburgh Public School system the reading portion of the PSSA shows that there is something that is being neglected. Whatever strategies that are already in place if there be any, are not working, have not been working, and there is no indication of any plans to change this situation. Author of the book, Understanding and Educating African American Children: From Excuse to Excellence, William L. Jenkins states, "Education should address the needs of the students. Programs should be tailored to fit students' needs whatever they are, if they are indeed needs that should be addressed by the schools. I am not opposed to integration. I don't necessarily think it is the best solution to the problem of educating minorities in this country, but I'm not opposed to it. What I am opposed to is schools and educational programs that do not adequately address the needs of all the students". (63).

Some may disagree with my view that the problem of the reading achievement gap across the nation and in the Pittsburgh Public School system is not necessarily integration. If anything, the African American students that attend the more segregated high schools have better PSSA test scores than those who attend schools that are less integrated. The problems associated with the reading gap are complex and for whatever reasons, are directly connected to the lack of reading. As pointed out in this rationale, these problems occur throughout the academic careers of too many African American students that are in our school systems.

As educators, we can not control much that is outside of our classroom domain. We can only have faith that our drive and instincts as teachers will somehow inspire a child to put forth his or her best effort to learn. What we can and must do is provide strategies within our pedagogy to correct what we recognize as being incorrect. We must realize that we have to do this immediately or we will continue to get the undesired results that we have been getting or the situation will get worse and breed more problems that we dare not consider. We must provide our students with a sense of hope.

In the book written by Richard L. Curwin entitled, *Rediscovering Hope Our greatest Teaching Strategy*, he discusses how underserved students have given up. If they are to get involved in the learning process, students who are reluctant to take risks need something to hope for, something to be gained to make the risk worthwhile. They must overcome past failures and an attitude that predicts failure in the future (decreasing the danger). Learning activities can succeed when they promise students competence in doing what is important to them. (25) It would be a shame to believe that a large portion of the students actually want to fail despite what they may say or do. We must believe that across all demographics students actually want to learn and we are in the business to teach them. To reverse the current trend of non-reading amongst the high school reading population most at risk, we need to reconstruct the building blocks.

## **Objectives**

There are several objectives in this unit. The objectives are broken down with the responsibilities and expectations for the student and teacher.

### **STUDENT OBJECTIVES**

Students will increase the volume of their reading activity.

By the end of the school year students will actually read at least 25 books and have sufficient written documentation that will confirm that the books were actually read. The books will be at the grade level or advanced to the students' reading abilities. The books will be obtained and approved through the school library or academic department.

Students will read and identify reading materials across several genres and be able to identify the works of several authors.

To create a more versatile and comprehensive reading experience, students will be exposed to several forms of literature, (Short stories, poetry, novels, biographies, non-fiction, etc.), and be

given the opportunity to read the literature through both guided instruction and independent reading.

Students will read, write, and speak about the books that they have read.

To support the communication standards proposed by the PPS district, students will be taught various ways to share their reading experience with peers and adults. The information that they share will be meaningful and the students will be credited for meeting the requirements. The mastery of vocabulary, comprehension, and sustained reading will be increased.

PSSA reading test scores for the students that are identified as being the most underserved will improve.

Students that are actively involved in the reading experience will have a better chance at earning proficient or advanced scores.

Students will incorporate reading experience while demonstrating proficiency in technology standards.

Students will use word processing, digital recordings, internet, and email to share the reading experience with peers and other adults.

## TEACHER OBJECTIVES

Teachers will charge students to read the minimum of 25 books per year.

Teachers should logistically track what the students read throughout the year as opposed to the end of the year when the required reading list is due. Teachers must also provide students time to practice sustained reading.

Teachers will do research and choose a selected reading list and provide students with a variety of literature that is challenging, intriguing, and represents several types of genres, and are appropriate to all reading levels.

Teachers will devise a selected reading list that meets the above criteria and will include works from noted authors. Teachers can introduce a reading list at the end of the school year so that returning students can read as many books as possible during the summer.

Teachers will allow students to write in journals or reports and then speak about the books that the students have read. Teachers will reinforce the mastering of vocabulary and comprehension of books that the students read. Teachers will provide time and activities to support this objective.

Teachers will provide access to technological devices that will enable students to write, edit, and share information about the books they have read. High school teachers of language arts will allow students to use a word processor to write about what they read in the form of poetry, short stories,

essays, or scripts. Teachers will also set up pen-pal accounts on the internet with other students to share what they have read. Teachers will control and monitor all pen-pal communications.

## **Strategies**

It should be noted that African American high school students are not the only group of individuals that are not reading as much as they are expected. As noted earlier, the idea of curling up with a good book seems to diminish slightly when students get into the middle school. After years of non-reading activity, the reading spirit goes either into a state of atrophy or just plain flabbiness. In some situations students find themselves reading but not reading what their teachers would consider "good reading material." Like anything else that falls out of practice, non-readers must recondition themselves or go into "Reading rehab" to get back into shape.

Anyone who has experienced rehabilitation of any kind realizes that it is a step towards recovery. The recovery may not totally restore one's zest for the appreciation of literature but in time the rehabilitation process may produce results that exceed expectations.

Some teenaged readers may benefit if they are re-introduced to different forms of literature a little at a time. Before they get into reading however, an assessment should be made to determine their actual reading level. From this point reading materials that are appropriate to the students' reading ability needs to be identified and available. Teachers should make an effort to gather reading materials that are of the student's interests. A student survey can be made to gauge interest trends so that the teachers can prepare accordingly.

Students should be exposed to vocabulary words that are peculiar to the materials that they are reading. Exercises should be given to teach definition, pronunciation, and spelling of the vocabulary words. To increase word ownership, students should be encouraged to use these words in their writings and in their conversations. Teachers should use these words in conversations as well as introduce students to methods of analyzing word analogies. Ideally, the more exposure to unfamiliar words a student receives the more success the student will have when using them. Students should be expected to read, write and speak the words they learn and hopefully the results of an accelerated vocabulary will manifest with an increase in standardized test scores.

During the initial stages of this "reading rehab", teachers should not shun the idea of a team approach or group effort towards reading. The "team approach" should not only consist of students but should include Language Arts teachers and librarians. Many readers enjoy the experience of a group read and a follow-up discussion encourages participation. I have experienced group reading activities with teens that have been very successful and the teens themselves use their powers of peer pressure to engage their reluctant counterparts. The dynamics of group reading ignites interaction and conversation. Since a teens self image depends heavily upon acceptance, a teen would likely read for a group of peers as opposed to reading for a teacher. If and when used correctly, this strategy can be used to motivate more group reading activities. I have yet to see this strategy used amongst a group of African American teenaged males.

While in the group reading sessions, students should rotate the responsibilities of moderator. This will provide the students with a sense of ownership and help them prepare themselves for leadership roles and accountability. After the initial meetings, the teacher should evaluate the participation and reading sessions but remain in the backdrop as much as possible however maintaining the authoritative presence.

Reading must be promoted, celebrated and pushed as a "Cool" activity. We must create the same enthusiasm towards this activity that is displayed at the elementary school level. If more of the respected, (not necessarily popular), students are recognized as individuals that value reading, it could influence others to do so as well. Upperclassmen carry a lot of clout in high school and when these upperclassmen who are members of various sports teams, high school band, cheer leaders or whatever are connected to anything that provides a sense of pride or confidence within that upper class student is allowed to be uplifted, then the almost immediate result is evident amongst the underclass students. Teachers need to work together with the coaches and sponsors of these varied activities to influence the promotion of reading. A strategy to make reading a popular and "cool" activity could involve taking a team photo with a book in each team members' hand and then creating a poster or book-mark out of the photograph. As a keepsake, a bookmark will forever remind a student about reading, especially if the student's face/team is on it. A strategically placed reading poster would shout to the world that reading is and can be "cool." These measures would stir hope to a population that has underestimated the power of reading.

Another strategy that should be considered is to use the electronic medium of the internet to link students from distant schools together to share their reading experiences. Teachers can register and control an internet pen-pal service, (E-Pals) and have it exclusively set up to provide communication for specific groups. All interaction is screened through the group managers, (the teachers), to provide security and keep the students on task. With the use of this strategy, students can communicate with their peers throughout the world almost instantaneously.

Each strategy within this unit may not be any different than methods that are currently being practiced. With consistency and monitoring, I believe that the strategies in this unit will move small groups of the students identified to be reluctant readers into positions where they can be more successful. The overall product and desired outcome is to inspire the most challenged student to become a lifelong reader with hopes that the improved reading behavior promotes the closing of the academic achievement gap.

### **Classroom Activities**

Activity One:

Journal Entries (ongoing throughout the school year)

Objective: Students will keep an ongoing journal of books that they read throughout the year. This journal will serve as an interactive communication device between teacher and student and will record progress of the reading of 25 books.

Material: Journal Book- (should be available in the school supply room)

At the beginning of the school year teachers of language arts will give students journals that they will use to record the information about the books that they read. (See example)

The required information will include book's title, author, illustrator, and copyright/publishing information. The student will also complete a brief description of what the book was about and genre identification. The student will respond to what they enjoyed and did not enjoy about the book and provide a recommendation to another person that they think would enjoy the book that they have read. The bottom of the journal shall remain open for the teacher to make comments. This creates a private dialogue between the teacher and student and provides a means to monitor the student's progress. The teacher should also verify the genre of the book that the student has read in a timely manner. By doing this the student not only becomes aware of the progress that he is making but is also creating a record for the district wide 25 book reading requirement. Teachers should grade the journal entries for completeness.

Activity Two:

Book Talk (3-4 weeks/ongoing)

Objective: Students will write a script about the book that they have read and then videotape a persuasive speech to share their reading experience. Students will work together to complete the communication and technology standards.

Materials: Book journal, writing paper, writing utensils, poster boards, markers, video-camcorder, tri-pod, television

Students will use their journal entries to create a "Book-talk." (Think about the child engaged book talk format displayed on the television program, "Reading Rainbow".) After reading their books the students will write about their book in script format and introduce the book's title, author and illustrator. Students will be encouraged to give a creative and persuasive speech to promote the book to their peers. Students will use cue cards and work together as a production team. The script will include directions and cues for all members of the production team. The students should be encouraged to use pertinent vocabulary and mention the genre their book represents. Students will video tape the book talks for display and store the finished products with the English Department or the library. This activity gives the student the opportunity to read, write, and speak about their book and allows the teacher to incorporate a comprehensive grading requirement for communication.

A brief sample library "book talk" script follows.

(Camera chest shot of student holding book)

Student: Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I want to tell you about a book that I read titled Harlem: A Poem....this book was written by the noted author of children's literature, Walter Dean Myers.

(camera fades from student to book cover.....zooms in on Title and author/illustrator)

Student: This exciting book of poetry displays colorful artwork that was illustrated by

Christopher Myers...As you can see his artwork really reflects the mood of the poems and the story line. On this page the illustration shows a Mother braiding her daughter's hair in the popular style known as corn rows.

(reverse zoom from Mother's hands to entire page)

Student: If you are looking for a book of poetry that speaks volumes about the African American experience in Harlem then this might be a good book to start out with. Other books written by Walter Dean Myers include....

### Activity Three: Vocabulary Builders

Objective: Students will learn to use reference tools, (dictionary, and thesaurus) to determine word meaning, part of speech, correct spellings, etc. of words that are within the text of the books that they read.

Materials: dictionary, thesaurus

Teacher will give students a list of words that are in the text of the books that they will read. Students will be responsible for using the words in conversation and creating their own word games, crossword puzzles, and activities for their peers to participate in. The list of words should grow throughout the students' high school years and should be monitored or tested by the teacher/

### Activity Four: Character/Author Interview

Objective: After reading a book, the student will create a list of questions to be written to one of the main characters (if the book is fictional), or to the author if the book is nonfiction. This exercise will give students a chance to prepare for the mandated Graduation Project, which all students must complete before graduating.

Materials: Book, writing tools, access to word processor.

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#### Internet Sites

<http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/fastfacts.asp>

<http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/fastfacts.asp> (fast facts about Pittsburgh Public Schools)

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/06031/646942.stm> (right sizing)

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/06064/665389-53.stm>

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/06064/665389-53.stm> (right sizing)  
[http://www.campusi.cum/author\\_Jawanza\\_Kunjufu.htm](http://www.campusi.cum/author_Jawanza_Kunjufu.htm)  
[http://www.campusi.cum/author\\_Jawanza\\_Kunjufu.htm](http://www.campusi.cum/author_Jawanza_Kunjufu.htm)  
<http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/hst/northamerican/thesoulsofblackfolks/toc/html>  
<http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/hst/northamerican/thesoulsofblackfolks/toc/html>  
<http://www.idra.org/Research/edstats.htm#earlychildhood>  
<http://www.idra.org/Research/edstats.htm#earlychildhood>.

## Books

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Gaines, Ernest, *A Lesson Before Dying* New York: First Vintage 1993

## Appendices/Standards

### Pittsburgh Public Schools Communication Standards

1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
  2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
  3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and to solve problems.
1. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform and persuade, in all subjects.

2. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging validity of evidence.
3. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
4. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify their purpose structure and use.
5. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform and describe.

#### Pittsburgh Public Schools Citizenship Standards

6. All students demonstrate their skills of communicating, negotiating, and cooperating with others.
8. All students demonstrate that they can work effectively with others.