

Middle Level Literacy

Citizens For Education last reviewed the Middle Level Reading program in 2007. This year, Citizens revisited the curriculum to determine how the program has changed and progressed. The focus of the curriculum is continual increase of more students into Advanced levels of proficiency on state testing and an emphasis in Writing as well as Reading.

Literacy Course Offerings – All 7th grade students continue to take both an English and Literacy class, accounting for a double period of RELA (Reading/English/Language Arts). They are placed in either “Literacy Learning” or “Literacy Skills” (see details of how placement is determined below). In Literacy Skills, the students learn essentially the same material as Literacy Learning, only not in as great a depth, and the classroom pace is slower. In addition, Literacy Skills classes use Teen Biz, a web-based reading and writing program that is individualized to each student’s ability.

Because many of the students in 7th grade Literacy Skills are reading below grade level, it often takes two or more years to raise their reading ability. This is the reason, according to Peggy Walsh, District RELA Curriculum Coordinator for grades 7-12, that many of the students in 7th grade Literacy Skills forgo beginning World Language in 8th grade, in favor of a second year of remediation.

For the 2009-10 School year, of the 1,005 students in 8th grade, 804 are taking a World Language and 201 are in Literacy Skills. The chart below breaks out the enrollments in Literacy Skills classes in each Middle School.

School	Number of Students in Skills 7*	Number of Students in Skills 8*
Holland Middle	67 out of 344 students (19%)	75 out of 369 students (20%)
Richboro Middle	25 out of 202 students (12%)	37 out of 251 students (15%)
Newtown Middle	63 out of 409 students (15%)	89 out of 430 students (21%)

*Includes students with IEP's

Complementary Components of the Literacy and English Curriculums – Grade 7 students benefit from having two 44-minute class periods each day to learn all the elements of the RELA program. By using two classes and two different teachers, students are given the opportunity to learn from unique sources and multiple teaching styles. In the team-teaching middle school environment, Literacy and English teachers work together to ensure continuity and complementary subject matter in both classrooms.

The RELA components include study skills, critical thinking and analytical writing. The Literacy Classes teach the “how” of reading and writing, while each student’s appropriate track English class teaches the “what” of literacy. Students build skills by learning vocabulary, recognizing context clues in text, developing skills to analyze novels, and writing in their journals.

Assessments – The district uses a variety of reading assessments including:

- PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment)
- Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI)
- Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI), which measures accuracy, phrasing, re-telling and the rate of a student’s ability to read aloud.

- Woodcock Johnson 11 Diagnostic Reading Battery, which tests a variety of reading components including comprehension, word attack (strategies used when reading an unknown word i.e. breaking it into syllables) and vocabulary

The PSSA is the primary tool used to verify the success of the RELA program because it is the assessment used to judge if a school meets the requirement of the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation. In 7th grade, the percentage of students achieving at the advanced level has increased from 59.3% in 2005-2006 to 65.2% in 2008-2009.

In 8th grade, the scores in Advanced and Proficient ranges have seen an improvement from 2005-2006 from 86.9% to 93.5% in 2008-2009. The improved performance from 7th grade to 8th grade is noted in the following chart:

7th to 8th Grade PSSA Data

	<u>7th Grade</u> 2005-2006	<u>8th Grade</u> 2006-2007
Advanced	59.3%	72.8%
Proficient	30.4%	19.5%
Basic	7.2%	4.4%
Below Basic	3.1%	3.3%
2006-2007 2007-2008		
Advanced	60.7%	76.8%
Proficient	30.0%	16.7%
Basic	6.2%	4.0%
Below Basic	3.0%	2.5%
2007-2008 2008-2009		
Advanced	60.0%	76.4%
Proficient	29.7%	17.1%
Basic	6.9%	0.8%
Below Basic	3.4%	3.0%

At both grade levels, scores in all four levels - Advanced, Proficient, Basic and Below Basic - are better than state averages.

The district began administering the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) to all 6th, 7th and 8th grade students in 2005. The assessment is given at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year and is norm referenced. Norm referenced tests compare a person's score against the scores of a group of people who have already taken the same exam, called the "norming group". The SRI is tailored to adapt to the individual student; depending on the student's response to a question – correct or incorrect – the next question is determined, and so on. This test is used to gauge students' progress throughout the year, and to help with course placement recommendations.

Students' Course Placements - To determine in what level incoming 7th graders should be placed, the teaching staff considers a number of different criteria. SRI and PSSA results, as well as the recommendations of the teachers and literacy specialists are considered. The 6th grade

staff will administer additional assessments as needed to properly place the students in the Middle Schools.

For placement in 8th and 9th grades, the same considerations are used as above, as well as samples of writing prompts administered in the classroom. In addition, the middle school staff uses the results of Teen Biz and the Woodcock Johnson assessment (as needed) in both grades.

Differentiation – In both Literacy Learning and Literacy Skills there is a wide range of reading levels in the classrooms, and differentiation of instruction has become a necessity. First and foremost, students, guided by their teachers, self-select appropriately leveled texts. In the Literacy courses, it is not necessarily the grade level of the classroom reading selections that is important, but the lessons learned from those selections such as genre, setting, style etc.

The Best of the Best - Citizens raised the issue that students at an advanced reading level, who are already prolific readers, might be better served in an Honors level classroom, or even starting World Language in 7th grade, rather than taking the year of Literacy Learning. However, according to the Reading teachers we met with, who represented all three middle schools, they believe that the area of greatest improvement for advanced students is in their writing ability.

Citizens thanks the following teachers and staff for their dedicated time and effort in RELA, and for the time they took to explain the program for our article:

Mary Loikits and Mary Sanders - Newtown Middle School

Maureen Flynn – Holland Middle School

Lorraine Tolbert – Richboro Middle School

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