

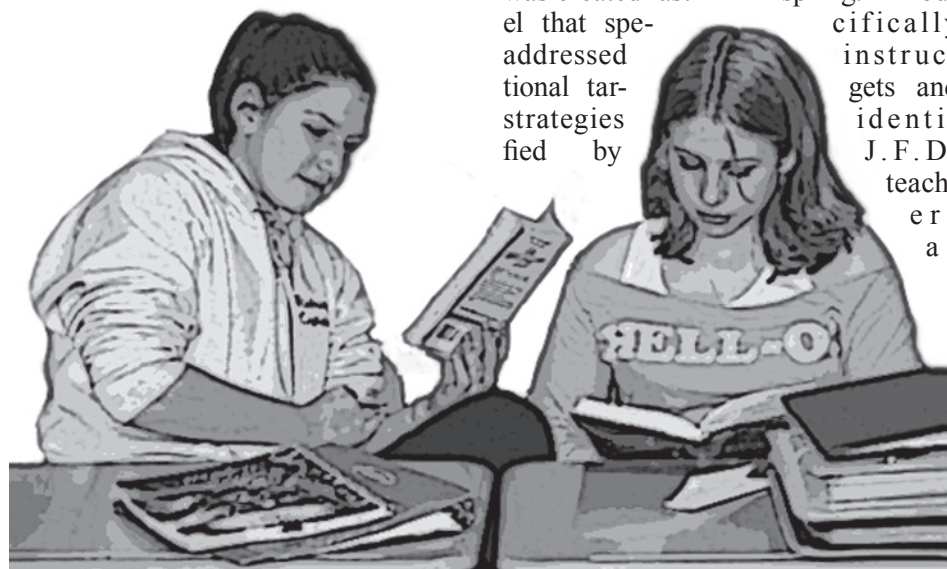
J.F.D.'s Model for Staff Development

by Lisa McPhee and Robert MacDonald

“We must apply what we know from research and promising practices to foster powerful literacy experiences for our students. The journey to lifelong learning begins with a shared vision of success and a common vocabulary for how we talk about these critical issues.”—Betsy Dyches

One of the components of James F. Doughty's action plan to accelerate student reading performance at J.F.D. targets staff development. Historically, J.F.D. teachers experienced the traditional staff development model of attending workshops hosted or sponsored by an organization or professional group frequently on topics that were not tightly tied to instructional practice and to improving achievement. And, while many of the workshops were informative they often lacked the specificity and the detail to sustain professional growth among a talented and experienced faculty.

Another model more responsive to student and faculty needs at J.F.D. was created last spring. A model that specifically addressed instructional targets and strategies identified by J.F.D. teachers as



Ruthann Dowling and Jaelle Merrill relax during silent reading time. Below Madeline Wheelock, also of James F. Doughty School.

areas needed to elevate teacher effectiveness and to improve student performance was designed by members of the faculty and administration and enthusiastically supported by Superintendent Ervin and Assistant Superintendent Hackett.

Consistent with Michael Schmoker's suggestion of promoting teacher leaders spoken about in his text *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement*, J.F.D. identified faculty member Lisa McPhee to lead the reading staff development initiative.

Reading teachers were surveyed to identify instructional reading topics that would become the focus of the staff development. Then, Lisa began the time demanding but stimulating review of the literature. The content of the staff development would reflect practices acknowledged in professional research and literature.

Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline* offers this opinion of educational research, “What we have learned about teaching and learning in the last 15 years is among the exciting discoveries of our 200-year history”.

Based on survey information from teachers, the targets for staff development became:

1. Pre-Reading Strategies
2. Strategies used during reading
3. Post Reading Strategies

The response by J.F.D. reading fac-

ulty to the opportunity to participate in the staff development seminar exceeded expectations. While one offering covering pre-reading strategies had been planned, a second offering was held to accommodate all the teachers who expressed interest.

At the first seminar teachers met in small groups (about five participants in each group) and the topic was **pre-reading strategies**. The first thing the group did was to briefly review what some of the professional literature has to say about reading instruction at the middle school level. Working with the knowledge that reading (or making meaning from text) is a process, we focused in particular on what the literature says about the importance of using pre-reading strategies. Once it was clear that students need to have some strategies to use to prepare to read successfully, we turned our attention to what those strategies are, and to how we can teach them to our students.

We reviewed ways to help students engage their prior knowledge of genre, content, and themes. We discussed ways to make students aware of the importance of making predictions, as well as the process for doing this successfully. Lastly, we discussed how to help students set a purpose for reading as a means of enhancing their chances of successfully making meaning from the text. We reviewed and discussed specific classroom lessons and activities that are cited as best practices in the professional literature. For each lesson or activity we identified the elements that were crucial to the goal of the lesson, as well as what elements could be adapted to meet specific classroom and student needs.

Teachers were asked to bring with them a text that their students typically struggle to comprehend, as well as any teaching materials they use with this text. Before we concluded the session, each teacher began the process of developing a lesson or activity that combined their experience with teaching with the text and the ideas and activities that were part of our discussion. Teachers are now using these lessons in their classrooms, and will reconvene later in the school year to share and evaluate their experiences.

Karen Novak, alternative education teacher at J.F.D., commenting on the workshop said, “It reinforced the importance of providing students with background information prior to reading. Some activities Lisa suggested have been great at involving all students in meaningful discussions about their reading assignments.”

Seventh grade English teacher Jay

Kemble also found the workshop productive. “Reading and comprehension skills are critical. The seminars provide an opportunity for teachers to better understand current best practice and then to implement and teach the skills that will enhance student abilities to better organize and apply reading and comprehension techniques that will eventually lead to academic success.”

Two additional seminar sessions are scheduled before the end of the school year. One will focus on how to teach reading strategies that students can and must use as they read. Discussion will examine how to empower those students who have reached the middle school still not expecting texts to make sense. The discussion will focus on questioning strategies; both those that can be used by teachers to help students make sense of text and those that can be used by students to help them identify where and how texts are not making sense. The discussion will also include ways to help students make connections to text, and how to use those connections to achieve comprehension.

The third and final session will focus on strategies to be used after the reading of a text (or section of a text) has been completed. In particular, the discussion will outline how to help students know how to draw conclusions about what they have read. This discussion will explore in some detail best practices for helping students learn to make inferences from increasingly complex texts.

To this point the staff development model implemented at J.F.D. to inform instruction in reading has been enthusiastically received by faculty. Strategies presented at the workshop intended to support pre-reading by students have been activated and implemented by teachers. Registration at workshops 2 and 3 reveal a faculty committed and dedicated to professional growth specific to instructional research and best practice.

As Schmoker says, “We can not afford to overlook the rich opportunity that schools have to make a difference.” That's the impetus in J.F.D.'s initiative – to make a difference in student reading performance.

