

Chalkboard

By

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Following is the third of a five part series authored by one of the school district's four principals or the assistant superintendent. If you make a commitment to read all five articles, you should end the series with a both a general understanding of the programs that drive our curriculum and the perspectives of the people who implement them.

Each school in the state must report to the State Department of Education what and how they plan to teach the children they have each year through a plan called the Arkansas Consolidated School Improvement Process. The Arkansas Department of Education has said that schools will make improvement in the academic areas of literacy and math. Literacy is reading and writing. Math is arithmetic. Reading, writing, and arithmetic- that sounds like what we have been doing for a long time. What we are teaching is almost the same but what we are expecting students to learn and how we are teaching has changed a lot.

In order to make major improvements we must experience major changes. We cannot expect to do the same thing the same way and get anything different than what we have gotten in the past. The teachers are striving to improve the way that they give information to the students. They are looking for more than just the answer, they want the students to understand how and why they have that answer. The teachers have put in over 60 hours of in-service learning ways to help students learn. We have 30 hours of in-service during the school year where we are studying "Strategies that Work" and "Nonfiction Matters, Reading, Writing and Research in Grades 3-8". The author of both books is Stephanie Harvey. She is one of the leading educators in the nation at this time. Along with the 30 hours of classroom work the teachers are spending extra time outside the classroom reading and researching how they can use these new ideas. The teachers then have another 30 hours that they have to find other workshops that will help them in their area of the curriculum.

Teachers have also spent six hours in a workshop put on by Dr. Lee Hannel to review his book Highly Effective Questioning Developing the Seven Steps for Critical Thinking. Each of these workshops and classes that the teachers attend are to help them be a better teacher. I do not know of any student that is doing more homework or studying more than the teachers are this year. There is not a teacher that is satisfied with the way their students have performed on the Benchmark test. We have been improving in most areas of the test but just not at the rate of improvement that we seeking from our students. The sixth grade last year did show great improvement over the prior year and we are very proud of what they have done. However, as I have already stressed, the teachers are not willing to sit back and say, "Oh, look what a good job we did this year". The teachers want more for their students. The teachers want to ensure that they have provided everything a student will need to be and do the best that he can.

All the data that we have collected over the last few years show that the students have the basic understanding of how to work a problem. They know how to add, subtract, multiply and divide. They understand the problem-solving concepts and processes. They are having trouble thinking through a problem or a passage that they have read. Students also are having trouble expressing their thoughts and ideas. This is in both the written and spoken word. These are the areas where the teachers are working to see that students are getting the correct instruction.

Teachers and students are doing much more writing and thinking than they have done in the past. This is a change that has also caused some problems with you as parents. Parents have said, "I can't help with my child's homework". This is true to a point. We have included in our schedule a study hall for all the students this year. At this time they can go to the teacher and ask for help with the material that has been covered that day or the day before. We have agendas where each child should keep a record of what is expected of him or her each day. Teacher put in comments as to the work being done or not done each day. This is a great way to keep up with what you child is doing in school. We must communicate with each other to be able to help the children.

One other major change that the State of Arkansas has made is Act 603 of 2003, which provides that each school will develop a parent volunteer program. The components of this program are: "Involve parents of the school, alumni, and community, address grade level and individual need of the school, implement a volunteer plan, plan activities and events, Open House, 'Meet the Teacher' night, Career night, Math/Science night, magazines, games, and information for parents. With all the changes that are going on the one thing that remains constant is that the teachers are doing their best to teach the children so they will be ready for their future.