

A Blue Ribbon School Principal's Testimonial

by **Pat Hunter**

As principal at Maple Elementary, I have received calls and emails from all over the country, asking about our students' success on the state's assessment of student learning and our subsequent recognition in 2006 by the U.S. Department of Education as a Blue Ribbon School. Why are Maple's state assessment scores above the norm when over 60 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch, and approximately 40 percent are English language learners coming from homes where more than 80 percent speak one of seventeen different languages? It never ceases to amaze me that whether the person asking this question is a reporter, principal, coach, or parent, each one seems to expect the same thing: a short answer, a silver bullet. Therefore, my usual first reply is, "It's the Maple Way!" There is no one strategy or curriculum that is perfect for all students at any given time.

Maple's academic success is due to a multitude of factors, all centered around instructional purpose and intentionality designed to meet the needs of individual students. Our instruction is based on inquiry-based methods, with writing at the center of all content areas. What led to this type of learning and instruction? Seattle Public Schools' inquiry-based science program was the precursor. For over fifteen years, a dedicated science program staff has developed the program with the support of community members and district, regional, and national funding, including the National Science Foundation (NSF). Prior to 2006, the majority of Maple's teachers had been trained in the grade-level science kits and inspired by how learning science through inquiry engaged and motivated students in their classrooms. In addition, within the science program, Betsy Rupp Fulwiler had begun to develop a science-writing approach that is an integral part of the elementary science program.

Since Maple is an open concept building, successful programs spread like a virus. In our building without walls, teachers are privy to each other's successes and challenges. Because our teachers, like most, are hungry for reliable programs, several of our classroom teachers chose to become lead teachers for the science program. They became facilitators or instructors for teaching the other teachers in the district about using the specific grade-level science kits. (In this work, lead teachers are mentored and supported by elementary science-program coaches.) The science-program support is refined and grows as the teachers and science coaches work and learn together. So the program does not become static but instead continually expands, providing updated support materials and professional development.

As the new principal in 2000—with a Gates Grant mandate to "transform" our schools—I recognized the strength of this inquiry-based science program, including the science-writing approach. I used it as a model to lead our staff to the recognition that inquiry-based methods meet each child where he is and engage him in his learning. All of us begin our learning through inquiry, trial and error. It is evident with today's digital children that trial and error has worked for them, as they explore video games by pushing buttons and trying on-screen entrances to visit unknown worlds. I therefore took what was

working well at Maple—inquiry learning in the inquiry-based science and science-writing programs—and built on it to establish writing as the backbone of all our instruction at Maple.

When I respond to those calls and emails from so many places asking, “How do your students do so well on the state assessment?” I say, “We write. We write. We write.” At Maple, writing begins in kindergarten on day one. We have adopted the philosophy, “If I can think it, I can say it. If I can say it, I can write it. If I can write it, I can read it.” Our reading instruction thus begins with writing. When students write their own words—as a scientist, a mathematician, an author of fiction—they are actively creating their own reading and intuitively learning the purpose for reading: communication of ideas. We teach reading by giving children the opportunity to communicate their thoughts with others through the written word. Students then know that through writing, they can communicate their ideas with many more people than just those with whom they are directly speaking, and they can preserve their thoughts in written form to share in the future. This is our students’ present and future as they blog, tweet, and communicate.

With Betsy Rupp Fulwiler’s science-writing approach, our students learn to use expository writing as a way of communicating their scientific thinking and understanding in their science notebooks. These notebooks are exceptional examples of their expository writing abilities, and their teachers examine and share them when determining students’ learning from the lessons. Parents love seeing the students’ science notebooks at our science night, where students have the opportunity to explore the units with their families and share their observations and writing from their notebooks.

One of our enjoyable and productive K–5 professional development events at Maple School has been our science notebooks Gallery Walk. At the end of a school day, students leave their notebooks on their desks. Teachers and other staff then visit each other’s classrooms to look at the students’ science notebooks. We then share our observations and excitement about what we have seen. For the previous years’ teachers, it is especially rewarding to see how their students have grown. The shared experience also helps to open the conversation on K–5 articulation, which has led to our staff’s agreement that each teacher will teach all three of the science kits for her grade level. The fifth-grade teachers, who identify the skills and conceptual holes that develop when teachers skip parts of or entire science units, have played a key role in reaching this agreement.

Finally, our open design at Maple facilitates our belief that all students are the responsibility of all staff. We are very intentional in all the instruction we provide for our students, with our inquiry-based methods built on the backbone of our inquiry-based science instruction, and writing in all the content areas—including expository writing in science—forming our firm foundation. Visitors to Maple have commented on our exceptional use of time. As they tour our building, they see children excited and engaged in their learning. We have tried to create an atmosphere of respect for children’s desire to learn. The Maple Way centers around all of us working in a respectful learning environment that is based on learning through writing and inquiry.