

Analytic Reading

The chemistry students at Northwestern High School were not fiddling with Bunsen burners or studying the periodic table one recent weekday morning. They were sitting at their desks, reading an article about food coloring, underlining key ideas and preparing to analyze it in an essay.

This is the beginning of what Prince George's County officials hope will be a significant shift in teaching and learning, one that mirrors a change taking hold in high schools nationwide as districts adjust to the Common Core State Standards. Literacy, long the responsibility of English teachers, is filtering into every other classroom — including math, science and even health class.

The idea is that in order to be ready for college, students need more explicit instruction about how to read, think and write analytically. And they need to be able to glean meaning not just from literature in English class but also from historical primary sources, scientific articles and other (sometimes dense) works of nonfiction.

Prince George's has started an ambitious effort to train all teachers to be literacy teachers, and lots of adults in the system are hopeful: "I think it's going to be effective in the long run if all teachers buy into it, if they believe that it can work," said Sheree McNeil-Gordon, the teacher in that Northwestern High chemistry classroom.

All students aren't buying it — yet.

After observing a chemistry class, history teacher Jessy Feinberg, 24, writes down notes of her findings inside a conference room at Northwestern High School. (Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

"English and science are two different things," said Bella Kuete, 15, one of McNeil-Gordon's students, who said she'd never been asked to write much in science class. "Writing an essay doesn't help me get better at science."

Teaching literacy in classes other than English — or "reading and writing across the curriculum" in education lingo — is often implemented unevenly, in fits and starts and without much quality training for teachers.

Proponents of the Common Core hope that the new standards, which have been adopted by more than 40 states, will trigger a new and sustained focus on literacy in all subject areas. The Core requires students to analyze what they've read and to write arguments with clear thesis statements backed by evidence; the introduction to the standards say that they "insist that instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language be a shared responsibility within the school."

"The focus on college- and career-ready standards has really given us a call to arms that we've got to prepare our students in another way, not just with the facts that are associated with a particular content, but with the ability to think, read and write in that content," said Jayne Ellspermann, a Florida high school principal and president-elect of the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

In Prince George's County, overhauling literacy instruction is the centerpiece of chief executive Kevin Maxwell's aggressive plan to improve achievement, with the goal of ensuring that by 2020, 90 percent of students are graduating from county high schools prepared for college or the workforce.

[*\[Schools chief unveils plan to improve Prince George's schools\]*](#)

"Literacy is the key to everything else in school, and that's why our strategic plan is centered around it," Maxwell said Thursday evening in his annual state of the schools speech, according to a copy of his prepared remarks. "It permeates every aspect of our work and it is our most effective tool in closing the achievement gap."

[*\[Maxwell proposes plan to lower class sizes, boost salaries\]*](#)

At the elementary-school level, the literacy push means doing more to make sure that children are able to read fluently and comprehend on grade level. At the secondary-school level, the school system is training teachers at every school to use common terms and strategies.

Students are learning to "annotate" whatever they're reading, marking it up to highlight key ideas and words that they do not understand. They are learning to "unlock the prompt," or make sense of multi-part essay questions. They are learning to build thesis statements and discuss rhetorical devices.

Northwestern history teacher Jessy Feinberg said she thinks there is great power in giving students consistent messages from classroom to classroom.