

Say “I Can” and Use Research Skills

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Monica McCoy, Otterbein College preservice teacher, works with her fourth grade “research buddies” on learning about state government.

Children at Alcott Elementary in Westerville, Ohio, have a new habit of saying, “I can!” In the last few years, educators in our district have carefully translated the standards in their elementary courses of study into “I Can” statements. (Ohio’s Academic Content Standards define what students are expected to know and be able to do.)¹ Our related “I Can” statements are child- and parent-friendly and state clearly what a child is working on in school.² For example, the Ohio Content Standard that reads “Draw distinctions between fact and opinion”³ becomes the “I Can” statement: “I can explain the difference between fact and opinion.”⁴ The standard, “Understand the meaning of main ideas and supporting details” becomes, “I can use details to summarize the main idea in informational text.” Students and families regularly see our “I Can” statements on documents sent home, report cards, and displays in the hall. No longer is the course of study an invisible document.

Working Together

During the fourth and fifth graders’ recent study of government, we used “I Can” statements to integrate reading, writing, research, mathematics, and social studies. The fourth graders were studying state government; the fifth graders, the Preamble and Article II of the U.S. Constitution. Their teachers, Jenny and Beth, collaborated with Karen, a professor at Otterbein College. Karen’s undergraduate students in Middle School Education partnered with Jenny

and Beth's students as "research buddies." In small groups (one college student with five or six elementary students), research buddies used their research skills to learn about the branches of state government (in the fourth grade), or the purposes of the Constitution and the steps toward becoming President of the United States (in the fifth grade).

Some educators feel that science and social studies have suffered as a result of the No Child Left Behind law,⁵ which stresses reading and mathematics.⁶ We were determined in our project to put the social studies content first. We set out to align the appropriate literacy and research skills with the social studies process and content standards. It was not difficult to locate many skills from the language arts that would give us a vehicle for driving our social studies content.

Making a Citizen's Brochure

We wanted the students to feel engaged in their research about their government. Inspired by Stephanie Harvey's book, *Nonfiction Matters*, we derived an authentic assignment for the culmination of the students' research.⁷ Each research buddies group addressed specific content-related questions that were linked to the relevant standards, or "I Can" statements. Once students researched their questions, they created a "Citizen's Brochure" so that parents and other students could learn from their study.

We got inspiration for our "Citizen's Brochures" from Dinah Zike's many books⁸ on the use of inexpensive materials and simple techniques, adapting the use of file folders for students' project reports. Each Citizen's Brochure utilized both sides of a file folder. We allowed the groups to make their own choices about the content on the folder, so long as their questions and "I Can" statements were addressed. Using the file folder allowed us to print large 17×12-inch brochures to share with others.

Each Research Buddies group approached its task in a different way. Armed with the "I Can" statements in language arts and social studies and the assigned final product of a "citizen's

brochure," the college students set about planning the four days of research and writing with their elementary buddies. The Otterbein College Research Buddies embraced the use of the "I Can" statements as guides for their lesson planning. This structure assisted each group to proceed on task, but it also allowed for very different results. We list below some of these "I Can" statements and elaborate on their use in our project:

Defining Words

"I can define words using context clues and authors' definitions." Both grade levels used primary sources, supplemented with more kid-friendly websites and nonfiction secondary sources. We valued the use of the actual government documents: the fourth graders read parts of the Ohio Constitution and the fifth graders, the Preamble and Article II of the United States Constitution. However, the language of these primary sources posed a challenge. In some cases, the text (especially the Ohio Constitution) was archaic, complex, and full of unknown vocabulary. The college buddies modeled their use of reading strategies to figure out the meaning of the primary source text: as they encountered uncommon vocabulary, they "talked through" the surrounding words in the paragraph and made inferences based on more common vocabulary, current situations, and their own prior knowledge. The college students used the dictionary to look up clear definitions for words such as "resignation" and "disqualification." Once they read the dictionary definition aloud, they rephrased it in their own words, then reread the original text and asked the children, "Does that make sense now?" Many of the research buddy groups made vocabulary lists of new words as they worked together.

Creating a Plan

"I can create a plan to collect data or information." We wanted to integrate mathematics with the social studies content. To do this, we decided that each group would ask a survey question about the content they had researched. Once

students composed their own research question, they surveyed their classmates and parents and tallied the results. The data were displayed on the Citizens' Brochures.

The students came up with a wide range of questions. A fourth grade group asked, "How many representatives are in the Ohio House of Representatives?" Another group asked, "What branch is the Supreme Court in?" A fifth grade group tackled more divergent questions: "What would life be like without a Constitution?" and "What do you think about a woman president?" Students discovered that the answers to these more complex questions were not always easy to summarize and tally in a numerical way.

Getting Organized

"I can use different strategies for organizing my writing." The college students chose a variety of graphic organizers to show to their groups. Some used webs to arrange the notes from their research; others used two- or three-column lists. One group brainstormed a long list of possible sources for their research about the executive branch of Ohio government. A fifth grade group decided to use bullets to list the responsibilities of the President. Another group of fifth graders made a flow chart to show how the President is elected.

Using Examples

"I can write an informational report using facts, examples, and details in logical order." The ability to glean important information from a variety of sources, then take that information, organize it, and retell it in one's own words, is difficult for students in the intermediate grades. Our middle school and high school colleagues tell us that this standard challenges older students as well. The citizen's brochures provided a manageable format for the informational report. Most groups chose to parse out their brochures into several smaller sections. This made the report less daunting than a formal report. We believe that such smaller doses of nonfiction writing pave the way for the more

challenging assignments the students will inevitably see in the future.

Conclusions

Our “I Can” project resulted in two important lessons that we would like to share with other educators.

First, well-crafted standards, chosen by educators and integrated into the curriculum, allow social studies to receive its deserved prominence in our classrooms. These standards empowered us to challenge our students to do research and to synthesize their findings into unique, authentic products. Many of the language arts standards for reading and writing of non-fiction served as effective vehicles for children’s learning of the content standards for the social studies. Well-chosen standards encourage and support our going well beyond “teaching to the test” in the content of our lessons.

Second, extra hands in the classroom (in our case, five college students for each of the ten classrooms) allow our children to “dig in” to complex material, and allow us as teachers to differentiate our instruction in ways that are difficult to do when a teacher is alone in the classroom. During our project, a visitor in the fourth grade room would have overheard one group excitedly debating whether the executive, legislative, or judicial branch of state government “was the most important.” Across the room, at another table, a group was trying to decide how to communicate on their brochure the steps needed in making a law. Down the hall in the fifth grade, a group was in the computer lab, making sure they understood who could run for the U.S. presidency. Another was putting the finishing touches on their list of purposes of the Constitution. All of the children were engaged.

We had enough adults to focus that engagement and to assist when a child needed extra guidance. Finding those extra hands to work with our students, and providing the appropri-

ate structure for how that work was to occur, was worth the extra planning and effort. While other teachers might not have assistance from college students as we did, they might be able to duplicate our approach by using adult volunteer “buddies” or older high school students earning service-learning credit.

We are living in a standards-based environment. Our social studies curriculum can and must thrive in such an environment. As educators, our responsibility is to insure that the standards that guide our teaching also challenge our students to make their best efforts. As citizens and social studies teachers, we can surely settle for no less. 🌉

Notes

1. Ohio Department of Education’s Academic Content Standards at www.ode.state.oh.us/
2. Westerville City Schools’ website announces its “I Can” statements at www.westerville.k12.oh.us/Curriculum/stds.htm
3. This booklet, “A Standards Guide for Families” is distributed in all Ohio Schools. The booklet for grade four is shown at www.westerville.k12.oh.us/Curriculum/Grade4.pdf
4. Westerville Public Schools’ “I Can” Statements for Grade Four at www.westerville.k12.oh.us/Curriculum/ICan/ICANFOURTH.pdf Grade Five’s “I Can” Statements are at www.westerville.k12.oh.us/Curriculum/ICan/ICANFIFTH.pdf
5. U. S. Department of Education, *No Child Left Behind* (Washington, DC, U.S. Government, 2002).
6. This website states that it advocates a sound approach to school improvement at nochildleft.com/2006/sept06killing.html
7. Stephanie Harvey, *Nonfiction Matters: Reading, Writing, and Research in Grades 3-8* (Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 1998).
8. Dinah Zike has popularized the use of scrapbooking, simple folding for students’ writing activities, and other visually appealing ways for students to present the results of research and projects in a variety of subject areas. See for example, www.dinah.com/catalogpage/catalog.htm and Dinah Zike, *The Big Book of Books and Activities-An Illustrated Guide for Teachers, Parents and Anyone Who Works with Kids!* (San Antonio, TX: Dinah-Might Adventures, 1992).

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