

**7,941 Books and Counting...
A Modern Day Literacy Miracle is Born In West Denver
By Kathryn Harris**

I recently heard a teacher at West Generation Academy, an Innovation School in Denver Public Schools, say, “If students can do these four things, they can get a good paying job in today’s economy. The things are reading, writing, presenting, and listening.” From what I’ve seen so far, our students coming from one of Denver’s most socioeconomically challenged communities are well on their way to success.

Something amazing has happened in the two short years since West Generation Academy opened as a turnaround replacement school for West High School. After a unanimous vote by the Denver Public Schools (DPS) Board of Education in 2011, the school opened in Fall 2012 with 350 students in grades 6, 8, and 9.



The school staff was saddened when they received the fall benchmark testing results shortly after opening. The data indicated that 80% of the student body was 5 or more years behind in reading. That meant the odds were definitely stacked against a student body made up of 60% English Language Learners, 99% minorities and 100% free and reduced lunch qualified students.

Sobered, but undaunted, the school partnered with The Carmel Hill Fund to train teachers, acquire high interest literature and implement technology banks and skillware to measure student comprehension. In addition to the skillware provided by Carmel Hill, teachers also integrated Reading Plus and Newsela. After two years of hard work, West Generation Academy supported by Generation Schools Network and Carmel Hill have built a culture of literacy.

Dr. Robert E. Slavin, Johns Hopkins professor and Director of Center for Research and Reform in Education, has authored a number of studies on the most effective programs and techniques for developing and sustaining literacy among students of various age groups and skill levels. His findings repeatedly point to several elements that are most critical to success, particularly among students who struggle with reading: extensive high-level professional development for teachers, cooperative instruction and learning practices, transforming schedules and teacher practices to be responsive to the needs of students, and longer class periods with varied or rotational teaching modalities.¹ Linda Diamond of the Consortium on Reading Excellence (CORE) highlights many of these, and adds the

need for responsive technology that supplements teacher instruction and provides structured feedback for student and teacher. The CORE report also underscores the importance of strong support from school leadership in order for a program to be effective.² The approach to literacy at West Generation Academy integrates all of these vital elements, with remarkable results.

“It’s been amazing for me to see the impact of our work. We have gone from not being able to get students to read to having to ask our students to take a reading break so we can focus on other types of coursework. I am so incredibly proud of them,” stated Amanda Novak, 9th grade Humanities teacher.

According to Jon Reinhard, V.P. of Learning & Teaching for Generation Schools Network, “We are privileged to have played a significant role in this transformation of a DPS school and to have opened up the world to so many students. Reading gives our students access to the world and is something that can never be taken away from them no matter what their circumstance”.

Kelly Austin, Implementation Specialist at Carmel Hill who supports the Accelerated Reader program across multiple schools stated, “West Generation students are showing some of the highest comprehension rates among other middle and high schools in their cohort. Accelerated Reading tests show that on average West Generation students are comprehending at an 83% level. Given how far behind these students started, the growth is amazing.” There are several critical contributors to this progress, says Wendy Loloff Piersee, CEO of Generation Schools Network, “With Generation Schools Network, structures have been adjusted to make daily reading time with the right supports possible, teachers have time to look at data daily and weekly, teachers read alongside their students and students who are behind in reading are receiving daily skillware support during afternoon Studio Courses to catch up to grade level. It’s a winning combination”.

Vice President of the Morgridge Family Foundation, Carrie Morgridge, stands firm in her support of the literacy program at West Generation Academy. “The field knows a lot about building literacy programs for Pre-K and elementary school students. However, there is not much research available on how to foster a culture of literacy for middle school and high schools students. We cannot give up on these students. West Generation Academy is proving that this is indeed possible with passionate and well-trained teachers, engaging and leveled books, and tools available to assess progress, monitor comprehension, and provide remediation as needed to catch students up.”

It is with tremendous excitement and promise that students at West Generation have almost reached their goal of reading 8,000 books this school year. That’s an average of more than 17 books per student. As of May 28, the total number of books read was 7,941. This is 8 times the number of books read in all of last year. To quote one of my favorite authors, “The more you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.” - Dr. Seuss, “I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!”

To learn more about this modern day literacy miracle, please contact:

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

4 key strategies enabled a culture transformation in two short years:

A new school schedule with more time dedicated to reading, writing, listening and speaking.

To launch West Generation, Denver Public Schools partnered with Generation Schools Network, a national nonprofit that helps schools and districts restructure the school year and day to provide up to 30% more learning time cost-effectively and provide programming and supports that prepare students for success not only in school, but also in work, and in life. Students at West Generation Academy have daily Humanities Courses – a 90 minute block structured around a blended rotational model where they spend 30 minutes in small group reading instruction, 30 minutes working independently or collaboratively and 30 minutes in uninterrupted reading.

The right tools and partners. West Generation Academy has partnered with Carmel Hill and has received training, technology, and thousands of books - highly relevant, engaging and available across all reading levels. “We are racing to keep up with the demand at West Generation – this is great. Teachers at West Generation really care about reading, they care about books, and they care about literature. They make reading a priority. They are the heroes in this story,” remarked Kelly Austin. Teachers are provided monthly professional development on the Accelerated Reader program provided by Carmel Hill to develop rituals and routines, get students excited about reading, and recommend the right books. Carmel Hill ensures that students at and below grade level have access to high interest, differentiated texts at their level every day to support reading comprehension. Some of this year’s favorite books have been Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty, Leaving Paradise, Mockingjay, and Lockdown: Escape from Furnace.

“There has been a laser focus over the last two years to bring students up to grade level in reading,” said Principal Domonic Martinez. Engaging material has been central to the culture shift at West Generation. Newsela provides daily leveled non-fiction reading to West Generation offering an innovative way to build reading comprehension with nonfiction that’s always relevant: daily news. “With the support of Newsela’s leveled content, students can participate in conversations about our world’s most pressing topics, while building stronger reading skills,” said Jenny Sullivan, a 6th grade Humanities teacher.

Another tool that has been highly effective in building foundation skills has been Reading Plus, which has been used as an intervention during afternoon Studio Courses for students that need to catch up their literacy skills to grade level. Reading Plus, provided to West Generation by the Morgridge Family

Foundation, is a web-based program serving students in grades 3 and up that transforms how, what, and why students read while broadening interests and building knowledge.

Frequent assessment and feedback. With the Accelerated Reader program, each book is accompanied by an on-line test that students take after completion to measure their comprehension. Students and teachers know right away if there is a problem and they address the issue immediately. Another form of feedback is short-cycle assessments. Student are tested every 6 weeks to track their proficiency and growth in reading. The blended rotational model used during the Humanities Courses allows teachers to break up the classroom into three smaller groups. Teachers use the reading data (Accelerated Reader, Reading Plus, and short-cycle assessments) daily to group students and differentiate instruction based on student need. These strategies appear to be paying off. The Generation Schools Model provides up to 90 minutes every day for planning and teacher collaboration. You may want to read that sentence again. This means that teachers actually have time to learn about, use, and reflect upon all the tools and data that is available to them - every day. More time structured into their day for focused planning and reflection is clearly benefiting the students at West Generation.

A little healthy competition. And never underestimate the help of competition. Momentum has been building all year. Routines and rituals for reading have been firmly established in each classroom. Students and teachers have been tracking number of books read, words read and comprehension spurring competitions across classrooms and grade levels. It has become cool to read. Founding principal Bob Villareal's vision of having every student walking around the school with a book in hand or in their backpack has become a reality. The school is determined to reach 8,000 books by the end of the school year on June 27th. Competition is getting fierce. Which Humanities class will win? Which grade will prevail? Clearly there are no losers in this story.

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ENDNOTES

¹Robert Slavin's publications on this topic include *Effective Reading Programs for Middle and High Schools: A Best Evidence Synthesis* (2008), *Effective Reading Programs for English Language Learners: A Best Evidence Synthesis* (2003), *What Works? Issues in Synthesizing Educational Program Evaluations* (2007), *Effective Reading Programs for Title I Schools* (2009), *Educators' Guide to Identifying What Works for Struggling Readers* (2010), *Effective Programs in Reading and Mathematics: Lessons from the Best Evidence Encyclopedia* (2013).

²The 2006 CORE briefing paper is available from their website, at <https://education.ucf.edu/mirc/Research/CORE%20-%20Implementing%20and%20Sustaining%20an%20Effective%20Reading%20Program.pdf>