



# 5 SUREFIRE WAYS TO ENGAGE ADOLESCENTS IN READING

## 1. Flood your classroom with books they will want to read.

**“Let me be clear: if we are to have any chance of developing a reading habit in our students, they must be immersed in a K12 ‘book flood’.”**<sup>1</sup> When students are surrounded by books, we send the message that we care that they are developing into readers and we are committed to helping them do that. Many K-5 classrooms are flooded with books, but as we enter middle and high school, we can encounter drought. So how do we do this? Dedicate capital funds to outfitting ELA, EL, and Sped classrooms with libraries of high interest, current books kids will want to read. Classroom libraries have both print and digital books, written at a variety of levels, spanning many topic areas, both fiction and nonfiction, in many genres, and forms (verse, graphic novel, etc.). Move your “book rooms” into the classrooms. Redistribute the “whole class novels” into choice books for seminars and book clubs to allow for a variety of books to enter the English classroom. Spend supplemental funds on curriculum sets of leveled texts across the many topics of Science and Social Studies to line the shelves and fill the baskets in content area classrooms. This flood offers students an opportunity to approach a topic in their textbook from many different perspectives and to go deeper in some aspect of an era they are studying.

## 2. Coach students to discover what they like and can read with ease.

As students are beginning to find books they might want to read, especially if they are reluctant, resistant, or struggling, they may fall into a myriad of avoidance behaviors. Some will choose to “fake read”, others will choose books they have already seen as a movie, some will suddenly need a drink of water or to visit the nurse, and still others might engage instructors in a charming conversation rather than settling in to read a book. Resist the temptation to correct these behaviors and instead start a conversation about the student’s interests and activities. As soon as you hear a golden nugget, tuck it away. **Go find the book that matches your student’s passion, bring it back and say the four most important words (according to Steven Layne), “I thought of you.”**<sup>2</sup> **Help students discover their avoidance behaviors and set goals to reduce them by employing strategies to find books they might like.** When students do find a book they can’t put down, ask them to talk about it. The enthusiasm will be contagious.

## 3. Make reading a social activity.

“It’s a common thing at our lunch table to talk about the books we’re reading, ‘cause we all take them to lunch, even though we don’t read them at lunch” states 8th grader Kelly.<sup>3</sup> Adolescence is a social time for students. Making friends, discovering oneself, and overusing the personal pronouns of *I*, *me*, and *my* are evident with this age. So why not capitalize on this and offer ways for students to talk about what they are reading. **Give 15 minutes a week for students to “buzz about books”.**<sup>4</sup> **Share what you are reading. Ask students to give book talks.** Eavesdrop at lunch tables and fist bump students who are talking about books. Greet students at your door with, “which book are you excited to immerse yourself in today?” Give students opportunities to “vent” about characters in their books and the decisions they are or are not making. Of course, we want students in their “reading zone” as Atwell coined, but after those sacred minimum 20 daily minutes, get them talking!<sup>5</sup>

## 4. Build student self-efficacy.

"I can because I think I can".<sup>6</sup> Students will engage in reading tasks or any tasks for that matter, when they feel confident doing so. "Self-efficacy and text comprehension are situational. That is, the emotional and cognitive demands placed on a reader vary according to the subject matter that the reader is tackling."<sup>7</sup> **We need to build our students' confidence by showing them how they already use the strategic actions necessary to take on difficult text.** Show students an image and ask them to share their thinking as a group. Some will ask questions, others will make predictions, some will use background knowledge to infer, and others will offer a critique. As students do this, notice and name the comprehending actions they are taking. Commend them on their higher level thinking. Next give them a challenging piece of text (a satirical cartoon or a poem, perhaps) and ask them to employ those same skills to see if they can make sense together. Do these activities one on one and in small groups to continually build confidence. When students recognize that their efforts to learn to snowboard, master a video game, or choreograph a dance for the talent show are all the SAME strategic actions they can try with their history textbook or science lab, they will begin to believe they can because they think they can.

## 5. Celebrate

While we want to be very careful not to implement if/then rewards--if you read 10 books, you get a pizza party--which can diminish motivation, we do want to celebrate goals accomplished.<sup>8</sup> We want students to be intrinsically motivated to engage in reading for pleasure. Intrinsic motivation relies on "**Autonomy** – The urge to direct our own lives. **Mastery** – The desire to get better and better at something that matters. And **Purpose** – The yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves."<sup>9</sup> **So we need to look for authentic opportunities where students have shown autonomy in their book choices, mastery in learning something new, and initiative to take what they have learned beyond the walls of the classroom.** Celebrations can be as simple as giving opportunities for students to share stories of how a book changed their thinking or moved them to action, creating book trailers, reading to preschool or elementary students, performing readers theatre, creating Public Service Announcements on the benefits of reading, or developing a community "book challenge" where students chart books read on a class visual. Community book challenges can better serve motivation than individual displays. When students are working toward a common goal it promotes community and can deter discouragement or competition.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Kelly Gallagher, *Readicide* (Portland: Stenhouse, 2009), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Layne, *Igniting a Passion for Reading* (Portland: Stenhouse, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Gay Ivey & Peter Johnston, "Engagement with young adult literature: Outcomes and processes." *Reading Research Quarterly*, 48 no. 3 (2013): 255-275.

<sup>4</sup> Layne, *Igniting a Passion for Reading*

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Atwell, *The Reading Zone*. (New York: Scholastic, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Vacca, "They can because they think they can." *Educational Leadership*, 63 no. 5 (February, 2006): 56-59

<sup>7</sup> Vacca, "They can because they think they can."

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009)

<sup>9</sup> Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*.

**Want to further the conversation?**

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