AJL Presentation

Julia-Intro

Hello, I am Julia Weinstein, the librarian at Rockwern Academy. This is Elaine Kaplan, our middle school Language Arts teacher and Assistant Principal.

Rockwern Academy is the community Jewish day school in Cincinnati, Ohio. We have students from 18 months old to 8th grade.

About five years ago, there was a lot of discussion among the parents at Rockwern regarding desires for their kids to have exposure to a broader group of children, both for diversity and more social opportunities. We were also hearing from parents that one of the things they valued most about Rockwern was our close-knit community.

Among the faculty, we were having discussions about ways to increase integration across the curriculum, including Judaic studies, science, music and art.

So, when Elaine saw something in the local newspaper about a school that had done an all-school read of one book, it sparked an idea. That particular school’s goal was for the purpose of encouraging parents to read with their children.

We started thinking about an all-school read in a different way - to promote cross curricular study, to build community within our school, and to create an outreach opportunity in Cincinnati.

One of the core values at Rockwern Academy is lifelong learning. By asking everyone to read one book, all teachers, all students and parents, we hoped to model that value in a visible way. We decided to ask all of the teachers, in all grade levels, to design a lesson based on one book.

We would also ask older students to read and share with younger students, and give little ones an opportunity to teach each other and also present their learning to older classes.

And, we would reach out to another school to read a book with us. This would help our children meet and learn from students from other backgrounds and help broaden all of our horizons.

Another addition to the program which we very quickly learned could be a huge component is service learning. Each year that we’ve added service learning, our school has won the School of Contribution award from Children, Inc., funded by the Mayerson Foundation.

As a librarian working with a limited budget for collection development, I made use of the Cincinnati public library system to add valuable resources to provide books on other ethnicities, other countries and other cultures.

The relationships we’ve developed with the public library have proven to be a great advantage to us.

Elaine is going to share with you the programs we’ve done so far.

Thank you, Julia.

We have done the ASR four times now, and each year we took a different approach. I’d like to share with you our four approaches, because each program has had its own strengths and challenges. As you design your own program, hopefully you can learn from some of the mistakes that we made as well as some of our successes.

In our first year, we chose perhaps the most challenging text, *Three Cups of Tea*, by Greg Mortenson, which was a best-seller at the time and had the unusual advantage of being published in three different formats: an adult version, a young reader version, and a picture book, called *Listen to the Wind.*  In this book, Mortenson wrote about the work he had done in Pakistan building schools in poor and remote districts, primarily for girls. It was an amazing story of one man, with no specific training, who saw a real problem and devoted his life to trying to solve it. Some of you may remember that later, Greg Mortenson encountered serious challenges to his leadership of the Central Asia Institute and the accuracy of his claims about his achievements, but when we chose the book, that was still in the future, and he seemed like a true hero. Although Mortenson was not Jewish, he appeared to be a great example of someone dedicating his life to the Jewish value of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world.

The basic themes in this text, the crucial importance of education for all children, and the fundamental idea that receiving an education is a privilege not to be taken for granted, were concepts that could be discussed and analyzed by children of all ages. Beyond that, however, we found multiple opportunities for cross-curricular integration. In Language Arts, we were supporting the Common Core’s goal of incorporating more nonfiction at all levels. Social Studies teachers could discuss the geography, history, and culture of Central Asia. *Listen to the Wind,* in particular, had beautiful cut-paper illustrations which could be emulated in art class, and Judaic Studies classes seemed like the perfect place to bring in an analysis of how Muslim culture and values were similar to and different from Judaism, Jewish culture, and Jewish values. This last angle let us to our most interesting but also most controversial endeavor.

In discussing the book, Julia and I had the idea that perhaps it would make learning about Muslim culture more fun, interesting, and real if our kids could meet Muslim kids. We were aware that there was a Muslim Day School in Cincinnati, and, with the support of community Rabbis and our Head of School, we decided to reach out to them. We met with Umama Alam, principal of the El-Sewedy International Academy, housed in the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati. Fortunately for us, Umama was open to developing a program with Rockwern, and together we hashed out a plan for our work.

Both schools began by reading the books. Our early childhood and primary students read *Listen to the Wind.* Grades 3 and up read the Young Readers’ edition of *Three Cups of Tea,* and many of our teachers and parents read the original. LA teachers incorporated the book into their classes. The more exciting part started when we initiated our pen pal program with the International Academy. Each student in grades 3 and up received a same-gender pen pal from the other school, and they wrote letters introducing themselves. It was early fall. We were celebrating the High Holidays, and Ramadan was almost simultaneous with Rosh Hashana that year, so our kids learned to wish their Muslim friends “Eid Mubarak” as a holiday greeting, and the kids at the Int’l Academy learned “Shanah Tovah” and “Chag Sameach.” Right away we felt an unexpected kinship; we were all celebrating holidays not on the standard U.S. calendar. Upon receiving their first response letters, our students were surprised by the other similarities they found between themselves and their new friends. They liked the same sports, followed the same teams, shopped at the same mall, watched the same shows, and shared similar concerns about going to a small private school in suburban Cincinnati.

Once we saw that the pen pal program was successful, we moved on to planning and preparing for in-person visits. Kids at both schools learned songs that they would sing together – the sogn “Three Cups of Tea,” “Od yavo Shalom Aleinu” and Matisyahu’s “One Day”. In Art class, they decorated tea cups to exchange with their pen pal friends. In January, after two snow postponements, the El-Sewedy kids came to visit Rockwern. They toured our school, visited the synagogue, viewed a Torah, and excitedly met their new Jewish friends. Local press covered the visit. (VIDEO HERE?) In March, we traveled to their school, toured their mosque, and shared Kosher/Halal snack. In January, both schools were invited to sing together with a choir from an inner city school at the Community Martin Luther King Day celebration, which began a tradition that continues to this day. We were also invited to walk together in the pre-game parade at Great American Ball Park before a Reds game. In introducing us, the announcer said, “The students taught our community a lesson about understanding and friendship.” Later, we were featured on the big scoreboard singing “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” together, during the 7th inning stretch.

This particular ASR brought its own challenge. There were members of the community who weren’t quite ready for this ambitious cross-cultural project. We were surprised by negative feedback. Perhaps if we had anticipated this more clearly, we could have avoided some unpleasantness. Overall, however, the program was hugely successful.

For All-School Read 2.0, we chose President Obama’s recently published book, *Of Thee I Sing,* written as a letter to his daughters, talking about a variety of inspirational American heroes such as Albert Einstein, Jackie Robinson, Helen Keller, and Caesar Chavez. The text of this book was probably most appropriate for the students in the middle of our range – a bit above the preschool’s comprehension level and not sufficiently challenging for our middle schoolers. However, the topic of heroes provided opportunities for independent research and reading, and our teachers were easily able to incorporate research projects on appropriate reading levels into their reading, writing and social studies curricula. Judaic Studies teachers were able to focus on Jewish heroes, and of course all the research was supported by the Art and Music teachers. Art and Language Arts teachers cooperated on one project in which kids chose a hero for independent research and then created a book jacket which included a cover that they created in Art and a blurb that they wrote for the LA teacher. Loren Long, who illustrated *Of Thee I Sing,* visited our school and was most impressed by the creativity and thought that went into the kids’ book covers.

For this project, we reached out to an inner city charter school, Pleasant Hill Academy. We repeated the pen pal program. Later, we brought the kids together at an assembly where they had the opportunity to build on what they had learned about one hero, Jackie Robinson, by meeting local African American baseball players who had played both in the Negro League and for the Cincinnati Reds. (If you notice a baseball theme here, that is thanks to our beloved librarian, who is a baseball fanatic.) Furthermore, we created cross-grade opportunities within our school as the older kids presented their hero research to the younger kids and also read to them.

What did we learn from this project? The book was very short, so the reading itself was quite brief. If the ASR is intended to be a limited-time experience, that could be good, but for a longer program, a more substantial text is probably wiser. The ability to connect the book to age-appropriate research projects was an asset, and one we would recommend.

Our third year brought us the realization that, as a Jewish Day School, we probably needed to choose a Jewish Book. (Maybe we should have thought of that earlier!) We chose a fantastic collection of Jewish folktales by Penninah Schram called *The Hungry Clothes*. Folktales were a great genre, because they are teaching stories that can be understood by people of every age on different levels. Also, the anthology provided enough variety that teachers could choose the tales best suited for their own students. We had a lot of fun creating projects that could be shared with other classes. For example, the 5th grade turned one story into a play, created scenery and props in Art class, and presented it to the school. The 4th grade created a very elaborate puppet show, which they shared with students both older and younger. That year, we were fortunate to have the author herself visit our school for a workshop, and we also invited Kathy Wise, a local storyteller who makes her own puppets to enhance her presentations. She performed stories for the whole school and worked with the older students on storytelling skills. Later, the 6th and 7th grades developed their own presentations, and traveled to all the younger classes performing individual folktales. Finally, we had the opportunity for an unusual service project that utilized our new appreciation of puppets. A local pediatrician was taking a team of physicians to South Africa to teach local doctors how to perform pediatric reconstructive colorectal surgery. Our students conducted a puppet-making workshop and sent a collections of puppets to the Red Cross War Memorial Children’s Hospital in Capetown as gifts for the sick children.

This past year, our fourth year, we took yet another approach. Rather than choose a single book for the whole school, we chose a single author, Kathryn Lasky. We chose Lasky because she is incredibly prolific, having written books at levels from preschool picture books to young adult literature, in genres ranging from historical fiction to Holocaust to fantasy. We planned to cooperate with Agnon School in Cleveland, and planned to incorporate technology by creating a joint website where students from both schools could communicate with each other and with Ms. Lasky herself. Teachers chose the books that best fit their own curriculum. *The Deadlies*  was popular in third and fourth grades and inspired a slide-show on *Felix Takes the Stage* by the 4th grade presented to the third grade. The entire 4th grade also read *The Capture*, the first in Lasky’s Guardian of Ga’Hoole series, a fantasy involving a kingdom of owls. They read the books, researched owl behavior, dissected real owl pellets in Science class, and created incredible owl models, which they shared with the kids from Agnon School via Skype. Older students focused on *Lone Wolf*. Rather than sticking with the wolf theme, the older students each chose their own animal to research and followed that up by writing original fantasy stories that incorporated what they discovered. Later many of them published their stories (BOOK COVER SLIDE HERE).

The technology piece of this project was fun and exciting, but technology always presents unexpected difficulties. The joint website (SHOW IT) gave us an opportunity to communicate with each other and with Kathryn Lasky, but it was not as easy as we anticipated, so our advice is, make sure you have a tech guru if you are attempting to do this!

Successes

Students met people from different walks of life, most notably during our first program. Some of these students reconnected when they moved on to public Junior High schools. Rather than seeing a stranger whom they might have ignored, they spotted an old friend.

Older students and younger students had very positive reading times together. Sometimes the younger students shared what they learned and sometimes the other way around. The more the kids read together, the more they know each other. Recently, one 8th grade student remarked in his graduation speech: “I would be willing to bet that I know almost every student in our building, and they know me!”

Because of the cross-circular emphasis in all grades, including pre-school, teachers had new opportunities to work with different teachers than they normally would, and this has established a supportive and collaborative atmosphere among our faculty.

Many parents were involved in some of the outreach programs, further building our school community.

Some of the programs led to incredible community experiences like Martin Luther King Day, going to a Reds ball game with another school, visiting a mosque, and meeting professional baseball players.

Our school won service learning awards and was recognized at a service learning symposium at Northern Kentucky University.

There has also been flaws.

Each year, we’ve learned from the program.

First, we have found that the program needs a specific designated time frame and a way to hold teachers accountable for incorporating the program into their classes. So next year, we will have an assembly to launch the program and a culmination assembly. We will also schedule one preschool class paired with a K-6 class to publish a description of their classroom projects in the weekly Friday newsletter to parents and the community.

We have also learned that choosing one author, rather than a book, makes it harder to accomplish some of the goals of the all-school read. There wasn’t enough shared focus throughout the school. Flexibility is crucial, but too much of it creates a lack of continuity.

In the beginning, we were very excited by the program and forged ahead with plans without including enough of the other teachers. It’s really important to get buy-in early and allow teachers to have input in the planning. Nobody wants something shoved into their carefully planned curriculum at the last minute. For next year, we have decided to add two more people to help plan and oversee the program: one teacher from preschool and one teacher from Jewish studies. We feel this will help with communication as well as coordination between the different grades and curriculum.

Next year, we are planning a new variation of the program. We will be focusing on a selection of books based on the Jewish value of Kavod, respect. Teachers will choose from a selection of books encompassing a range of reading levels, but everyone will know that the intent is to emphasize learning about the same thing, respect, in a variety of ways. Classes will have multiple opportunities to share their learning with each other, with their parents, and hopefully, with the community as well.