



NICHOLASVILLE — Some familiar customs of high school English class are easy to spot in Sarah Cox’s classroom at East Jessamine High. Juniors start class working through the daily vocabulary exercise. This Tuesday morning, each student tries words like *awry*, *aghast* and *connoisseur* in a sentence.

“My recruiter told me that basic training would be *arduous*,” one boy volunteers.

From there, the class transitions to a discussion of symbolism and theme in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” an 1836 short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne. They are working, like generations of students before them, toward reading and analyzing *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne’s 1850 classic of Puritan Boston in the 1600s.

While traditional in many ways, Cox’s plan for English class adds academic dimensions prompted by the language arts standards Kentucky adopted in 2010. *The Scarlet Letter* is framed by readings that include fiction — as in today’s class — but also essays, speeches and other historical documents. Students will read and discuss an account of English colonial efforts by Capt. John Smith, published in 1624, as well as a fiery sermon by Massachusetts theologian Jonathan Edwards in 1741 illuminating the ideology of the Great Awakening.

All of the works come together to add depth to students’ understanding.

Today’s English teachers, Cox said, find and emphasize connections between genres of writing and show students how to use evidence to develop a stronger understanding of what they read and write.

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ABOVE: Sarah Cox, a language arts teacher at East Jessamine High School, prepares her 11th grade students for a discussion of symbolism. Kentucky’s language arts standards have expanded connections between fiction and non-fiction in reading and writing plus the development of speaking and listening skills.

KEEPING THE FOCUS ON KENTUCKY SCHOOLS

Visit www.prichardcommittee.org or e-mail us at admin@prichardcommittee.org to add your name to our e-mail list. To find out more about Kentucky’s academic standards, visit education.ky.gov/comm/UL/Pages/Kentucky-Core-Academic-Standards.aspx. See our brief on Progress in Kentucky Schools: Higher Standards, Assessments and Teaching at www.prichardcommittee.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2015_Messaging_Document_Final.pdf

Making Connections: Language Arts Skills Enhanced Across Genres | Continued

“We are focused on what’s needed for a functioning citizen in the 21st century in college, in the workforce and as an informed person and consumer,” Cox said.

“Our students need to be able to take information and analyze it; to be able to cite evidence for whatever claim they are making,” she added. “To get there, we are covering a wider range of texts and asking students to think and build skills for understanding the information and ideas in front of them. It’s not just about reading to pass an English class, but making sure students can comprehend complex texts independently.”

At East Jessamine High, English class covers reading, writing, speaking and listening skills through lessons that require students to apply concepts across a variety of sources or works.

Cox, like many English teachers, spends time searching out pertinent and interesting works. An essay about cell phone use or data hacking might complement a discussion of privacy or government surveillance issues from the dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451*, still a fixture on many high school reading lists.

Beyond themes, she seeks informational pieces or historical documents that address other areas of the state’s standards: techniques like satire or irony, style and content that add power to an author’s point-of-view, or figurative language and nuances in word meanings.

Angela Baker, a language arts teacher at Berea Community High School, agreed that the standards give students more challenging experiences by balancing literature and informational text, analyzing ideas across works and citing evidence.

“We don’t take tests anymore over the exact thing you just read,” said Baker, in her 13th year teaching. “The goal is applying skills independently and being able to see things like an author’s purpose or main ideas across pieces.”

Baker said one result is that English classes can be more relevant to more students.

“There are a lot more opportunities to connect with issues that would interest students and let them see how ideas from the past connect with the present — plus this shows how reading helps you be a thinker in the real world,” Baker said.

DEFINING PROGRESS

Kentucky Academic Standards for English Language Arts spell out what all students should know and be able to do on many fronts. The document includes reading standards for literature, reading standards for



information texts, writing standards, speaking and listening standards, and language standards covering areas like conventions of standard English and vocabulary.

The standards are broken down by grade level and include suggested literature titles or informational text appropriate for students in certain grades.

For example, *Charlotte’s Web* is among the fiction examples for second or third grade while the poem “The Road Not Taken,” by Robert Frost, is listed as appropriate for sixth- through eighth-grade students. The standards also

list non-fiction works, such as John Adams’ “Letter on Thomas Jefferson” in the sixth- through eighth-grade range, or “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King Jr., for high school freshmen or sophomores.

The standards also encourage teachers to incorporate information communicated in graphs, charts and maps; text from digital sources; and technical text like directions and forms. The varied materials are part of building students’ literacy in subjects like science and social studies as well as skills that are part of an English class.

Heather McGovern, an early elementary teacher of students with disabilities in Louisville now working as a counselor at Bowen Elementary, said the organization of the standards makes it easier for teachers to recognize where students stand and individualize to move them forward.

“It makes it easier to choose resources,” she said. The same standards can apply as one student reads *Charlotte’s Web* while another reads the easier book, *Stellahuna*.

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STANDARDS’ GOALS

Kentucky Academic Standards for English language arts describe the following characteristics of students who are college- and career-ready in reading, writing, speaking and listening:

- They demonstrate independence
- They build strong content knowledge
- They respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose and discipline
- They comprehend as well as critique
- They value evidence
- They use technology and digital media strategically and capably
- They come to understand other perspectives and cultures

Making Connections: Language Arts Skills Enhanced Across Genres | Continued

McGovern said that teacher training and district support have helped many Jefferson County teachers feel confident working with the new standards and understanding ways they can boost student learning.

“By the time we had been implementing this for three years, you could see significant improvements in reading skills among students,” she said. McGovern added that the standards create clear connections between reading and writing.

“The expectations now help teachers to pinpoint whether students are working on grade level and to differentiate depending on where they are — above or below,” McGovern said. “I’ve grown a lot over the past five years and feel like this has helped my confidence in being able to reach all learners.”

EMPHASIZING REAL WORK

Kristal Doolin at Corbin Middle School in southeast Kentucky is another teacher who attests to the professional growth and student engagement sparked by her work with the language arts standards.

Last year, her efforts to tie together various reading materials and skills produced a community project that continues to draw interest and ongoing student work. After Doolin invited a Holocaust survivor who lives in Louisville to speak to her seventh graders, students asked why there was not a stronger fight to remove Adolph Hitler and end the genocide.

Answering the students’ questions caused Doolin to think about the neglected memorial to 44 former Corbin alumni killed in action in World War II situated in front of Corbin Middle, which was the city’s high school when the memorial was installed.

“I asked more than 100 students if they ever noticed the memorial and only two had,” she said. “Of those, only one had read it, and he wasn’t sure what it meant.”

Seeing an opportunity, Doolin and another teacher launched their classes into a massive research effort. (The writing standards expect seventh-grade students to produce narrative, informational and argumentative writing, conduct short research projects, gather information from relevant sources, draw information from informational texts, use technology to produce writing, write over extended timeframes and more.)

The seventh grade worked to produce narrative and informational text on each of the Corbin vets, finding family connections, searching ancestry web sites,



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— Kristal Doolin,
Corbin teacher

discovering written materials from various foreign war memorials, reading military reports from the 1940s, studying census records and more. Students found cemetery markers, houses where soldiers grew up, and gathered accounts of friends and relatives.

“It’s the most real thing I’ve ever seen my kids do. The work they put in and their desire to find more and do a great job was amazing,” Doolin said. “We worked on it over months, and during that time they learned about everything under the sun. It was interesting because they could see that I was learning right along with them.”

Old newspaper stories yielded antique advertisements that could be studied for persuasive writing.

Students learned in personal terms about the causes, scope and outcomes of World War II. They interviewed local veterans who could connect long-ago events and faraway places with the Corbin of the 1940s and today.

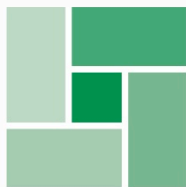
The students built a Web site still being refined and organized an effort to improve the landscape around war memorial, which has gained added prominence on the school grounds.

“It’s because of the standards and the habit of looking for ways to connect students to more authentic reading and writing skills that I ever started looking outside my classroom doors,” Doolin said. “Before, we focused on the nuts and bolts of a subject. We’d find a metaphor in a story, identify it, take a test later, and that was it. Now, we are looking for ways to connect concepts and build students’ skills. If we see a metaphor, we talk about how it impacts the writing.”

Doolin, the 2013 Kentucky Teacher of the Year, now works with struggling readers at Corbin Middle and serves in a hybrid role as a Teacher Leader on Special Assignment through the state education department. She said Kentucky’s language arts standards can provide stronger experiences for students and teachers.

Through connections and ideas teachers can introduce, “students can see relevant reflections of the real world in their classroom,” she said. “We want to build lifelong learners, and this is a step up.”

ABOVE: Corbin Middle School students interviewed local resident Bob Terrell about life in Corbin in the 1940s. The students’ project profiling Corbin alumni killed in World War II is online at redhoundsforremembrance.weebly.com



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