

**Interview with Director of Elementary Instruction Dr. Sue O'Connor:
What Happened When Main Street School Adopted Picturing Writing School-Wide**

Interview by Beth Olshansky

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Dr. Sue O’Connor, an educator of 42 years, served as the Assistant Director and then Director of Instruction for Elementary Education in Reading, Writing, and Science for 28 years in Exeter, NH. She was responsible for bringing Picturing Writing (PW) and Image-Making (IM) to Main Street School in Exeter, New Hampshire as a schoolwide adoption for the last 12 years of her career.

BO: Sue, what drew you to Picturing Writing in the first place?

SO: We already had a strong literature-based program in place. We were looking to incorporate a writing component into our science curriculum and integrate the arts as well. Picturing Writing promised to do just that— integrate reading, writing, science, and art.

We looked at a couple of different programs and chose to pilot PW. We offered training to a veteran teacher at each grade level. I was trained as well.

At end of the pilot year, the results were amazing. All teachers who piloted PW, veteran teachers each with over 20 years of experience, saw more growth using this approach than any other program we have ever used, growth specifically in writing and even in reading. Kids were eager to write and then eager read their own and each other’s books.

I wrote, and we received, a Comprehensive School Reform Grant to adopt PW and IM schoolwide and integrate it across our science curriculum while aligning units with our language arts standards at each grade level.

BO: What happened after you received the grant?

SO: Once we got the grant, we developed a schoolwide plan. Teachers saw how beautifully it tied into their science curriculum and committed to facilitating different science units at

each grade level. They also considered which genre of writing each unit would address. Teachers took ownership of the process. Under Beth's guidance, they met as grade level teams to look at our literature collections and the Standards put in place by the State. They worked collaboratively to develop their own units. They were able to tell parents exactly how each unit aligned with their science curriculum as well as addressing their reading and writing standards.

BO: Can you talk about how the PW process impacted student learning?

SO: By then, I had observed 30 years of students coming through the district. Children who started at the bottom of the class often stayed at the bottom of the class. As hard as we tried, nothing seemed to change for those lowest students.

There was always a small core group of students that was hard to move. Those students where there were no books in the home had a much harder time when they entered school compared to the child who was read to every night.

With PW, through its "pictures-first" approach, all students were able to engage in the work, even those who struggled with language issues. When they picked an animal to study, for instance, they were eager to learn about it, to sketch it, to learn facts about it through visual as well as written research, to draw with crayon and then paint their animal. They were so excited and felt such ownership and pride. Through the brainstorming process, they learned how to read their picture sequence to access detail and description. Through the group brainstorming, we saw those struggling students gain new vocabulary and then want to use those new words in their writing.

While research points to children's vocabulary decreasing over the years, we saw PW expand children's vocabulary and do it in a joyful way. Kids would look at the painting they created and brainstorm words to describe what was happening in the picture. We created community word banks. It was a wonderful way to share and grow vocabulary. Students were excited to use those new words, what we called "silver dollar words," to make their paintings "come alive."

There was a tremendous amount of joy and excitement about the process in the classroom and throughout the school. The fact that students produced beautiful books was another plus. Those students could then say, "I am a writer; I am a reader; I am an artist." Their pride was palpable, and their confidence grew.

BO: Beside what you observed in student behavior and attitude, how else did you measure success?

SO: We looked at the data. On our [NH State Assessments](#) in writing after only one year of schoolwide implementation, our Title I students' scores increased compared to Title I students across the State. In fact, our Title I students outscored the State average of ALL STUDENTS across the State in writing at the end of the first year. The majority of our Title I students score proficient on our State Writing Assessment. We considered those outstanding results.

We also made strong gains in our reading scores. On the Gates [MacGinitie Reading Comprehension Test] and the California [Achievement Test], our Title I and SPED students outscored the national average of all students after two years of implementation. We were thrilled with students' progress. Finally, our Title I population was moving into the above average range. Even with our SPED students, I saw the LD population showing more gains over time than I had ever seen before.

BO: How did students' behaviors change as writers and artists?

SO: Our students learned to read like a writer. They saw themselves as writers. They became much more observant when looking at quality picture books. They were focused on writer's craft in a way I had never witnessed. They also learned to see like an artist. They noticed details in books like how the illustrator can change the mood in a story through the use of color. They noticed other details about artist's craft such as how illustrators used changes in perspective to move the reader through the story. They understood that they could incorporate these tools into their own picture story sequences.

Our students who once struggled now thrived when given the opportunity to participate in the Picturing Writing process.

BO: Do you have any last thoughts you would like to share?

SO: PW incorporates a lot of joy. Children who once struggled discover that joy and experience that pride. I have never seen the self-confidence and joy the children experienced with any other program. Students believe in themselves as artists and writers, and they are very proud of their finished work.

Parents loved PW too. They loved seeing their child's excitement and their progress. They were very supportive and volunteered to help with publishing the books.

When we adopted PW, we expected improvement in writing; we didn't expect improvement in vocabulary and reading fluency. Children loved to read their own and each other's books. They participated with joy and full engagement.

BO: Thank you Sue for your years of dedication to ensure every student's success and for sharing your inspiring story.

Editor's Note: Main Street School was fortunate to receive a grant to adopt PW schoolwide. Today, because PW is now considered an evidence-based literacy model, schools can use any of their Title Funds and/or the remainder of their ESSER III Funds to cover costs of training and materials. There are also graduate credit options available for teacher-training and classroom coaching for those teachers who are able to receive graduate credit course reimbursement.

