A LITERACY ANALYSIS

Of

**Education-Excellence Elementary School**

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*Course #ELP 595; Professor B. Brander*

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**Abstract**

Education-Excellence Elementary (E3) School is located in the city limits of southwest Durham County and, for the purposes of this paper, will be used as my case study school. I will utilize readings from textbooks, magazine articles, online sources and other materials to support my findings and understanding of literacy at its core, and how it affects the inner workings and the teaching / learning goals of this school. Additionally, I will extract statistics from primary and secondary resource data previously compiled from education entities at the state, local school district, and corporate levels that has been disseminated to school building leaders. They (principals) then passed this information on to teachers and auxiliary instructional staff during professional development (PD) seminars and professional learning communities (PLCs) for the purpose of determining curriculum paths and making decisions on how they will drive instruction. I will incorporate field research through interviews and surveys to help me understand how and why gaps in literacy knowledge exist at E3, cite the conglomeration of readings, qualitative and quantitative data to support any theories that I develop, and suggest what should be the next steps to take and resources to obtain that will bridge and eventually close E3’s literacy deficits.

**Introduction**

I’ve always been encouraged to learn, and I cannot remember a time in life when I felt unwilling to learn or to combat those who gave me any degree of encouragement when it came to my education, both formal and informal. Over time, I have formulated the theory that all learning is undergirded by reading, and when I use the term *reading*, I mean in any and all of its forms. Whether it’s the interpretation of prose or fiction, navigating the route from a map, composing notes on a musical staff or calculating the variables of a mathematical formula, reading takes center stage in how fluent you see something, how your brain comprehends meaning, and what steps you take to prove proficiency in what you’ve read. Postured at the foundation of my strong belief that education is the principle key to life success, is this statement: *Learn to Read, Read to Learn.*

I have personally experienced the task of reading from several lenses; as a child and student, a parent, an author, an educator and even now, as an educational leader. It is from the very latter lens that this analysis is written and presented which gives insight to one school; its vision, culture, qualitative & quantitative data, and proposals for improvement in the school’s literacy proficiency. It is my hope that within this analysis is an overarching theme that literacy in all forms will raise student proficiency, and that an increase in reading comprehension undergirds it all.

**Facts & Statistics**

Education-Excellence Elementary (E3) is geographically located within 30 minutes of Chapel Hill / Orange County in a relatively middle-class community, but walking distance from urban housing communities that also populate this student body. According to the NC School Report Card Data (2015-2016), E3 has an average daily membership (ADM) of 649 students, which is 132 students above Durham school district averages. Additionally, 96.3% of E3 students attend class daily, with 0% of criminal incidents occurring by students on the school grounds. Based on these statistics, it can be concluded that E3 students regularly attend class and that the school is both safe and orderly. Further analysis of this qualitative data revealed that E3 received a reported performance grade of “C” and was determined to have exceeded growth according to the NC indicators.

For the purposes of full disclosure and literacy analysis, the same Report Card indicated that E3’s test data (of which the following data point was only determined by 3rd – 5th end of grade scores) revealed a Reading score of 49, where students in the “testing grades” scored either the labels of “Sufficient”, “Solid” or “Superior” command of literacy knowledge and skills, leaving 51% or over half of E3’s 3rd – 5th grade students with either a “Limited” or “Partial” command of reading knowledge and skills, failing to meet what would be grade-level proficiency or college and career readiness.

One additional assessment that only applies to 3rd grade students at the end of the academic year and whose data was published on the same NC Report Card site, was the *Read To Achieve Test*, which was part of a law enacted by the North Carolina General Assembly (2013) and meant to, in addition to other education policies, raise the reading proficiency in students K – 3rd grade. According to E3 data, 34 of 102 (33%) 3rd graders who took this ‘second chance’ test at the end of the 2015-2016 academic year failed to perform proficiently and were either retained in 3rd grade or promoted to 4th with an addendum in their cumulative record which indicated that they would receive additional reading interventions (such as summer camps) during the subsequent year and an opportunity to pass the reading portion of the 3rd grade assessment.

According to Todd Whitaker (2012), there are two ways to improve a school significantly: *recruit great teachers or improve the teachers already there*. Of the 51 teachers and faculty at E3, 100% are fully licensed, 47.1% have advanced degrees, 5 are Nationally Board Certified (1987), and 78.4% of the staff have 4 or more years of experience with a relatively low employee turnover rate of +/-15%. This data is evidence of the stability of E3’s teaching force; easily a stable starting point for the development of a cohesive and effective school literacy program.

**School Culture**

Booth & Rowsell (2007) expressed the, “*…mounting pressures and expectations for schools to ensure that all students are acquiring the literacy skills they need…,”* for both 21st century careers and college career readiness (CCR). The written vision of E3 seems to exemplify this mounting pressure:

*We are focused on improving academic achievement for all students and committed to ensuring that all students graduate from high school prepared for college, careers and life. We strive to provide excellent teachers in every classroom - setting high expectations for every student, meeting the needs of our diverse learners and preparing our students to excel.* (2016)

Based on the verbiage of the mission statement, literacy seems to be at the forefront of the school’s efforts and understanding of how they should operate.

A brief knowledge of the most recent history of E3’s school building leadership is particularly important for the context of this literacy analysis and in my interpretation, spoke of a shift to what is the current school culture and philosophy toward literacy. The current principal has just completed her first year in full-appointment. Prior to this current year, she held the position of interim principal (1/2 year), assistant principal (4 years) and in-house instructional facilitator (3 years) – the entirety at E3. Her rise to the head position at the school was unusual; in Durham, rarely is a principal appointed to the same building where they have an extensive history but in this case the central office, the outspoken parent body, the building staff and even the students could weigh in on their choice of leadership, making her the overwhelming favorite.

What makes this relevant to our literacy discussion is that under the reign of the former principal (for whom the current principal was his assistant), there was a reading enhancement program set in place whose acronym was LIFT – *Literacy Intervention Focus Time –* which was a 30-minute block set aside to assess and identify the weaknesses in literacy for every 3rd – 5th grade student in the school based on the findings of the National Reading Panel (1999), which determined that there are 5 Literacy Focal Components for complete reading comprehension:

1. Phonics
2. Phonemic Awareness
3. Fluency
4. Comprehension
5. Vocabulary

The students were homogeneously grouped by need and paired with a teacher who concentrated on bridging the gap in the understanding of a singular reading focus-component. At the end of the school quarter, the students were assessed on their understanding of that literacy component, then regrouped based on the new data received; whether re-teaching was needed in that component or a discrepancy in understanding of a new reading component was found. This LIFT period during the instructional day was in addition to the 90 minute English & Language Arts (ELA) block that was an uninterrupted part of the school schedule. LIFT was implemented and maintained for two entire school years (2014 – 2016) with what the then principal and staff concluded was a relatively successful literacy venture. For the 2016 -2017 year, however, under the current principal and her vision for the school, there was a shift away from a ‘reading focus to a more math focused remedial system, with the principal believing that, “We can make greater and more certifiable percentage (EOG) gains in math than with English – language arts.” (Author?, 2016) LIFT was phased out before the 2016-2017 school year even commenced.

The current principal’s philosophical shift was somewhat understandable considering the fact that she carries a background in scientific research and an undergraduate degree in biology. In my interview with her, she admitted that her personal thought – processes are more concrete and science-based; she felt that math is more concrete than the abstractness of reading and language arts comprehension. She was very aware that both math and ELA is needed for a well-rounded education, but she was considering the gains that she wanted the school to achieve. In the forefront of her mind was a fact that she expressed in School Improvement Team (SIT) meetings, Teacher Advisory Council (TAC) meetings, Professional Leadership Community (PLC) meetings, and Professional Development (PD) sessions: *“We have exceeded growth for the last three years, and I want to exceed growth for a fourth year - my first as principal.”* Embedded into the school culture was this belief, and this path-goal style of visionary leadership was verbalized at her every turn (Northouse, 2016).

Several initiatives were set in place and considered school-wide, cultural literacy norms for E3 during the 2016-2017 school year. Among them (initiatives) were:

1. The Reading / ELA block of 100 minutes during the school day was to be considered ‘precious’ – uninterrupted, standards-based and data-driven. I wanted to point out that this initiative supports the building leader as an advocate of instruction – protecting time that’s set aside for literacy (Booth & Rowsell, pg. 71)
2. There was time allotted for both whole-group and small-group instruction
3. Instead of homogeneous grouping of students by need and ability, there was heterogeneous grouping, modeling of a lesson and then individualized monitoring of learning
4. 4th grade would heterogeneously transition to teachers who specifically taught ELA
5. 5th grade would have a separate Writing teacher and Reading teacher using block scheduling for 60 minutes each
6. An Interventionist would create 45 min. blocks of time for 3rd – 5th graders who were on ‘the bubble’ with ELA proficiency
7. Each week, Tuesdays were devoted to PD intended to raise proficiency in a particular subject
8. Thursdays were devoted to grade level ‘kid talk’ during PLCs to see where there might be a special need for particular students in academics or classroom behavior

According to a survey that I created for the use of E3’s teaching staff to aid in formulating this analysis, many of the reading teachers either did not consult special-area teachers concerning their role in the literacy spectrum; or, in the case of special-area teachers (particularly art, media, music, physical education and technology), many gave no consideration that they had a role in proficient literacy. These beliefs are in polar opposition to Cunningham & Cunningham (2013), who hold to the theory that the lack of teaching content-area vocabulary is a roadblock to both literal knowledge in a singular subject and comprehension across subject area(s).

My survey (Appendix I) was distributed to the entire teaching staff, which included the principal, all teachers, instructional assistants (IA), the school’s instructional facilitator (IF), and myself as the interventionist for 3rd -5th grade. I received results from thirty-six (71%) of the staff.

**Resources**

Although many aspects of E3’s literacy culture had intentionality (such as blocked times for ELA instruction), the resources that teachers used and how the literacy policy was implemented at the classroom level had a large degree of autonomy. Such was the case of resources used, according to my survey analysis.

A wide variety of literacy resources have been made available to teachers for classroom use. The State funds the *mClass* online assessment and print materials for grades K – 3rd, with the option of each school to pay for 4th / 6th grade resources if they desire. For E3’s 4th and 5th grade, the principal source of assessment is *iReady,* another district-funded program. These two programs, along with a beginning of grade (BOG), mid-year and EOG reading assessment form the largest percentage of summative testing that is used to determine strengths and challenges found at benchmark points in student achievement. Based on the survey, 100% of the teachers are aware of these assessments and use them to drive their instruction (Cunningham & Cunningham, pg. 13).

The library/media center is a hub of literacy activity at least once a week for every student at E3. Not only are children able to check out books before and after school from the library, but media is included as one of the specialty area classes that meets as a block of 45 minutes in grade-level rotation each week. Here, the media specialist allows checkout, conducts read-aloud sessions, hosts Scholastic book fairs and other activities related to literacy.

E3 has a book room devoted to teacher check out of small-group reading materials arranged according to Lexile ability. Teachers also use these materials for center-work during the literacy block or as supplemental material during student free-reading, which is another researched based activity shown to improve reading proficiency (Cunningham & Cunningham, pg. 75).

A program in which E3 has spent tens of thousands of Title I dollars over the course of several years is Fountas & Pinnell’s *Leveled Literacy Intervention*. Each series contains approximately 200 book titles (with 6 copies per title), color-coded and arranged by these researcher’s reading level gradient (1996). At least two complete sets were purchased for each grade level K-5, and the texts, online resources, and assessment booklets are used extensively in small-group instruction.

Each classroom has a set of classroom books; from short stories to chapter books. The quantity of reading materials varies from classroom to classroom, depending on amount requested, texts purchased with individual teacher funds, etc.

Each 3rd – 5th grade classroom has a set of *InfoPairs* materials by Scholastic that emphasizes more complex non-fiction reading comprehension in the subjects of social studies and science and how the two subjects are intertwined.

Because of district funding, there is access to *Ready Teacher Toolkit*, which is individualized reading resources which track a student’s yearly progress in fluency and comprehension. This program has online benchmark assessments which teachers use for data-driven instruction.

With principal-designated funding allotments for Reading Proficiency, E3 pays for *RAZ Kids and Learning A-Z,* an online resource for reading and assessment materials that is open to the entire school. Each student is given a PIN number for this program, which enables them to access RAZ kids on their personal computers.

My literacy survey revealed an abundance of programs and materials that have been purchased with individual teacher’s personal money or teacher allotments designated (between $100-200) for individualized spending at the beginning of the academic year. Some of the reading and literacy programs named were:

1. Mystery Science, Inc.
2. Words Their Way ®
3. Unique Learning Systems (used for Autistic and Exceptional Learners)
4. Engage NY ®
5. Wheatley Portfolio (greatminds.org)
6. FYI Kids
7. Letterland ®
8. National Geographic Reach Books ®

The survey also revealed an overwhelming response to what teachers felt was an underserviced need at E3; *phonics instruction for the upper grades.* 4th grade ELA teacher, “Upper level vocab./phonics program used grade level or school wide. Maybe Words Their Way??” Another 4th grade ELA teacher, “A school-wide vocabulary & spelling program.” The 5th grade Writing teacher, “Phonics for reading in the upper grades.” 1st grade teacher, “…even more Phonics Instruction/Resources/Materials,” are a few of the quotes that inferred the need for more phonics related materials and possible PD on the subject.

In addition to the survey which was specifically designed to glean information and quantitative data from the leadership and instructional staff, I interviewed both the current principal (already mentioned) which gave me insight into her vision and direction for the school, and the instructional facilitator who shed light on under-utilized resources already available at the school. The instructional facilitator’s interview was extremely informative. These are some of the highlights:

“These are the phonics resources already in the school’s possession.” She points to a row of shelved materials that apparently had not been used in quite some time, judging by the collection of dust on and around the materials. “Here are the lesson plans which show the activities to do, the letter sounds they correspond to.”

I looked over the materials and asked her whether this was Fountas & Pinnell. She confirmed. (Interview, 2017) “These go along as they (teacher) does their guided reading lessons, or they can be used to teach the whole group. These are intended for K-3rd grade.” She agreed with the general premise of the survey that teachers needed more phonics resources for upper grades, but she pointed out that many of E3’s current phonics resources are more than efficient, given the proficiency levels, our evolving immigrant population and the supporting data on reading proficiency. “If a 4th grade student comes to you still having difficulty in reading,” she pointed out, “then you’re going to have to look back and see what their skill set is and use materials that are grade levels lower to close the apparent deficiency. In a case like that, upper level phonics programs won’t be effective.” Her interview gave me tremendous insight on how I might design proposed **Next Steps** in my literacy analysis.

I took an extra step in my literacy analysis by including as part of my quantitative data the interviews of a 5 chosen students of various reading levels and proficiency. Using the basic question *how did you first learn to read?* This is what I was told:

“I practiced and practiced and practiced.” “Where?” “I practiced at home.”

“When I learned how to read, my grandma had two jobs. It was at a summer camp when I was in pre-K, she (grandma) worked there. This guy named T\_\_\_ who played the drums and would spend his time with me, then he would even bring 2nd grade books sometimes so when I didn’t know a word, he would make me sound it out (decode). And like, I knew the words *the* and *is* and all that (high-frequency words), but the hard words I would have to write them down (writing as a support of reading) to practice and learn.”

“I was born in Honduras, but came here (immigrated) and went to pre-K, where the teacher told me I was reading okay, but I had to practice reading faster (fluency).”

With qualitative and quantitative data in hand, surveys completed and analyzed, and interviews interpreted, I had enough information to form the next step in this literacy analysis of E3.

**Next Steps**

Michael Fullan’s forward of Booth & Rowsell’s book refers to school leadership as the driving force, the pivot of literacy based school change (pg. 15). The admission of E3’s current school leadership that her first-year focus should have been on English-language arts instead of math is the beginning of a strategic shift back toward academic literacy. The principal most recently (see APPENDIX II) began steps to have conversations about a new vision and school culture shift toward literacy as the focus for the 2017-2018 year. As the principal shares leadership roles, facilitates professional development and supports teacher leaders in a visionary effort, E3 should see positive outcomes in student literacy.

Empower and direct specialty area teachers to teach content-specific vocabulary during that block. Differentiate the vocabulary by grade levels and degrees of difficulty.

Initiate PD on how fully utilized the phonics program and resources that are readily available in the media room. Designate an accomplished teacher-leader to learn the program an devise best practices for its use.

Re-implement the LIFT program that proved to be effective in previous years. Principal designate that 30 minute block of time as uninterrupted instruction and come up with a functional rubric for assessment and proficiency.

Principal budget Title I funds specific to Parental Involvement and purchase resource materials that may be used for the parents of English Language Learners which helps to establish the school as a true community of learners, and increase cultural literacy at the ground roots level.

Mandate and incorporate *writing* into every curriculum, across every grade level. Create rubrics for grading and maintain writing journals for formative assessment.

Because the lack of funding for the 2017-2018 has eliminated the instructional facilitators in each school, transform the media specialist (librarian) into a Reading Resource Specialist – the go-to person for what to use and where to find it within the school.

Establish a school-wide culture that promotes each student during the school day in their transitions (walking through hallways, to lunch, in lunch, to recess, between classes, etc.) to have ‘a book in hand – reading if they can.’ I would rather see a group of children with an open book as they walk down a hallway than a virtual bubble in their mouth, saying nothing.

These and other steps will establish E3 as a school well on its way to cultural and literal proficiency in every subject, and will bridge the divide between what is needed and what we have in college and career ready students.

We on improving academic achievement for all students and committed to ensuring that all students graduate from high school prepared for college, careers, and life. We strive to provide excellent teachers in every classroom, set high expectations for every student, meet the needs of our diverse learners, and prepare our students to excel. Are focused on improving academic achievement for all students and committed to ensuring that all students graduate from high school prepared for college, careers, and life. We strive to provide excellent teachers in every classroom, set high expectations for every student, meet the needs of our diverse learners, and prepare our students to excel.

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*Administration (principal) of E3 (fictional name) Elementary School.*

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*That attend E3 School.*

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**APPENDIX I**

**HVE *Literacy Survey for***

***Titus Pollard, NCSU Principal Fellow 2017***

**GRADE LEVEL** (circle one) K 1st 2nd 3rd 4th 5th \*Specialty/ Resource

**Do You Teach…? ELA Math Science Soc. St. Other\_\_\_\_\_\_**

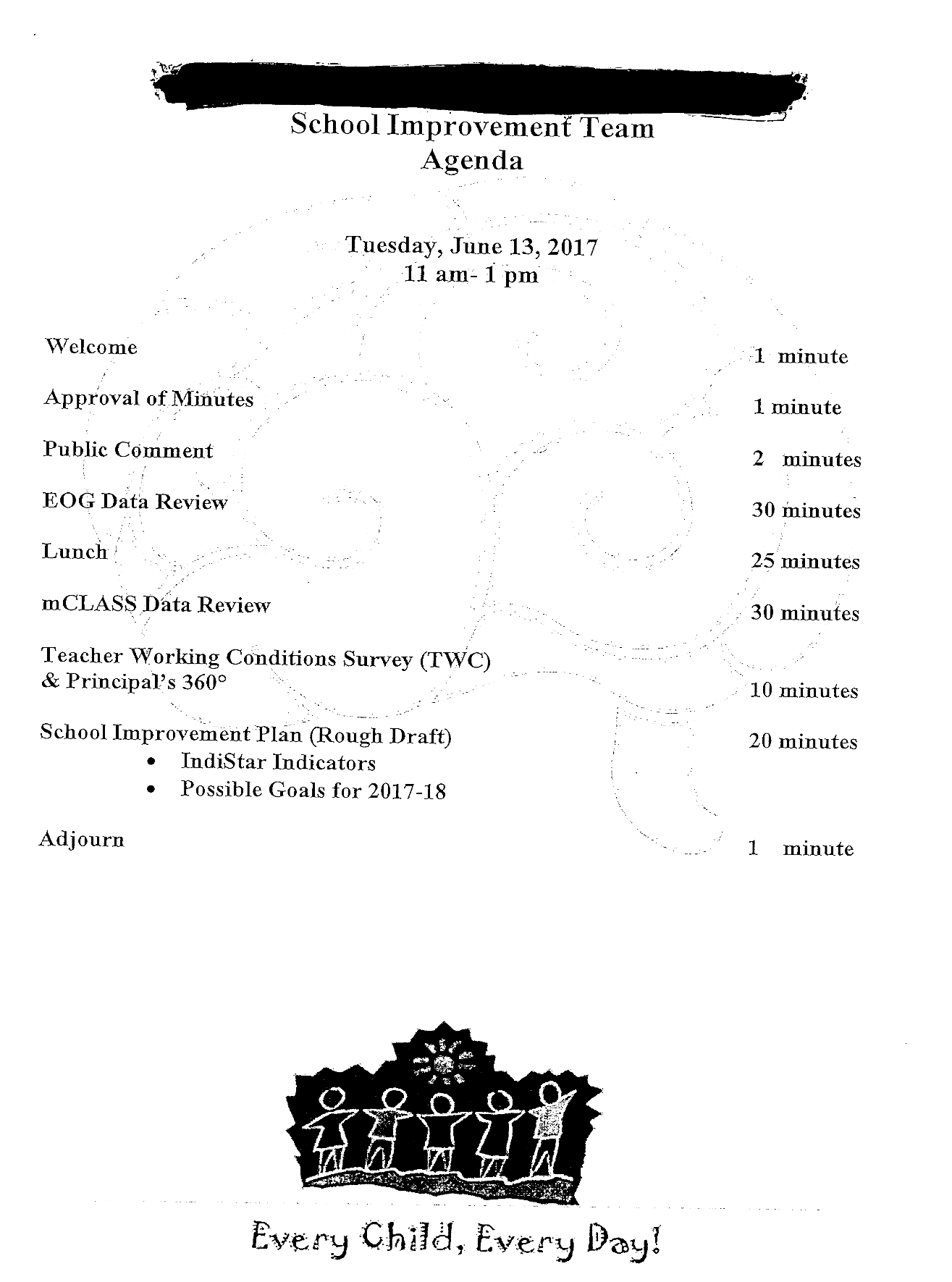
**Utilization of Resources:** *please check if you use any / all of these literacy resources*

* **SRA**
* **Leveled Literacy Intervention Programs (print & online)**
* **HVE Book Room**
* **Library – Media Area**
* **Classroom Texts**
* **Guided reading (Sundance or Series) Books**
* **Scholastic Reading Skills Kits**
* **InfoPairs (Science & Social Studies) Kits**
* **iReady/Ready Teacher Toolbox**
* **mClass Lessons**
* **Reading Street Texts**
* **RAZ Kids and / or Learning A-Z**
* **Please lists any other literacy products not previously mentioned**

**Kindly Check . . . Yes No**

1. I consider every course that I teach as a part of Literacy o o
2. I have a Word Wall in my classroom o o
3. I consistently update my classroom Word Wall / Vocabulary o o
4. I combine whole-group with small-group instruction o o
5. I regularly maintain a class record of outside student reading o o
6. I use both formative and summative data to drive literacy instr. o o
7. I use the term LITERACY to mean only ELA instruction o o
8. I collaborate with Special’s teacher(s) to support Literacy o o
9. I utilize Literacy in every subject that I teach o o
10. I have elements of Cultural Literacy in my instruction o o

**Additional Notes: *Is there some program or resources related to LITERACY that you’d like to see in our school?***

**APPENDIX II** 

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Possible Pts** | **Earned Pts** |
| **Data Collection from multiple sources (observations, interviews, experiences)** | 5 | 5 |
| **Analysis of culture, practices, assessment** | 10 | 10 |
| **Identification of gaps, opportunities (include references from readings, APA style)** | 10 | 9.5 |
| **Thoughtful/explicit description of next steps** | 5 | 4.5 |
| **Comments**: Titus, this is an in-depth analysis of your school, with the appropriate level of [[1]](#footnote-1)background, data, and best practices. I appreciated the very rich and comprehensive sections on culture, practices, gaps and opportunities. I would have loved to have seen your next steps grounded and referenced even further with data and research. Overall, the paper flowed nicely, was easy to read, and engaging. There were scattered grammatical/APA nuances that I highlighted and changed via track changes for your future reference. I hope you found this task beneficial and meaningful to you in your current work and next steps as a leader! It has been a pleasure working alongside of you. | | |

**29/30 graded by Brian Brander : not bad!**

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)