

Developing a good reading habit!

CHATHAM GRAMMAR SCHOOL FOR GIRLS, KENT

Scale of the challenge

As a selective school in a relatively disadvantaged area of the country, the challenge for the English team at Chatham Grammar School for Girls is not so much about improving literacy levels - pupils typically arrive at SATs level 4 - but inspiring its pupils to develop a reading habit.

"It's surprising, but even in a selective school, we have to fight against apathy about reading," explains English teacher Diane White. "Many of the girls don't see it as relevant due to all the other things competing for their time and attention.

"They may be readers when they come up from primary school, but the habit soon starts to fall off. When I took on responsibility for Key Stage 3, I wanted to encourage reading as a long-term support for English."

Implementation

Diane initially trialled Accelerated Reader for Year 7, and has subsequently extended it into Years 8 and 9 - "although it becomes more difficult in Year 9 due to SATs," she explains.

One key requirement for success, Diane believes, is to add new material every year to keep the program fresh. In 2005 she was able to use the school's e-Learning Credits to purchase new titles and quizzes, including books such as *Silas Marner* which are taught as part of the English curriculum.

She also aims to ensure books are current with what pupils are reading in order to keep up their interest, and puts up a list of the most popular titles to encourage others to try them.

Ideas on the hottest books also come from prospective pupils attending Open Evenings, who see the scheme for themselves in the library. "They are always quick to ask if it includes the latest books from popular authors such as children's laureate Jacqueline Wilson," says Diane.

Parents of prospective pupils also see Accelerated Reader at the Open Evening, and are given information and book lists to take home.

Competitions for points are organised within forms. This works particularly well with the Year 7 pupils who have just arrived at the school and are getting to know each other and finding their feet.

"By Year 9, the form has become more unified. It's not cool to be at the top, and they don't like to see others doing badly, so we use individual reporting more."

Results

While measurement of results is "somewhat ad hoc" at the school, Diane is happy that the program has and does achieve her aim of encouraging students to read.

"It has certainly been successful enough for me to want to carry on," she says, "and I would happily recommend it to other schools."

Boxes of books are kept in form rooms as well as the library to increase access. Diane has found this both encourages pupils to take books out in the first place and to read things that they might not otherwise have done – thus expanding their literary horizons. Pupils are always more interested in books which have an associated quiz.

"The quizzes make the reading more purposeful and they are not easy – you can't just skim read a book and expect to pass the quiz, which makes it more of a challenge," she says. "The girls also enjoy using the computers to take the quizzes.

"Little by little they are developing a good reading habit."

What teachers say...

"Keeping it updated keeps their interest."

"Including books taught on the English syllabus helps us with our assessment across the year."

"I will certainly carry on with it."

What pupils say....

"The questions aren't easy – that makes it more of a challenge."

"It makes a nice change from the usual English tests."