

To: Kelley Johnson; Howard Dennis
Fr: Tom Barron
Re: Parent Concern; Research Article Unit
April 1, 2014

Dear Kelley and Howard,

Based on yesterday's meeting, I understand that I can no longer have students engage in research projects that are not a part of thematically based curriculum modules (e.g., Courage Module). I want to point out, however, that research projects like the one I can no longer teach are considered beneficial for middle school students, according to New York State's EngageNY website. The EngageNY web resources for 7th grade include four "Developing Core Proficiencies Units¹," that were posted last fall as adjuncts to the PARCC Module curriculum structure embraced by the State. According to EngageNY, these three-week units can either be incorporated into curriculum modules *or* be taught as stand-alone units as part of the seventh grade curriculum. One of the four units is entitled "Researching to Deepen Understanding," and it contains many of the same lessons (choosing topics, conducting research, citing sources, etc.) that I cover in my research unit (though I can benefit from using some of the materials I discovered). More importantly, it endorses a wide range of research applications, not just within thematically based PARCC modules.

To quote from the introductory section of this EngageNY Unit Plan for seventh grade:

Teachers can choose among many approaches for integrating the instructional framework and materials of this unit into the topical context of their class. The unit is designed for adaption to the various contexts in which teachers want to develop their students' research proficiencies. Teachers can also choose whether to have their entire class investigate different areas within the same general topic, or allow students to explore any topic they want.²

¹Developing Core Proficiencies Program: Units in ELA Literacy. EngageNY.org. <http://www.engageny.org/resource/developing-core-proficiencies-program-units-in-ela-literacy>. July 5, 2013.

²Researching to Deepen Understanding Unit Plan. EngageNY.org. <http://www.engageny.org/resource/grades-7-ela-researching-to-deepen-understanding-unit>. Oct. 3, 2013.

While I foresee no difficulty in implementing a research unit within the confines of a thematically based curriculum module, I lament the loss of an opportunity for PYMS students to pursue an area of personal interest for research and writing. Some very persuasive research supports the notion that student choice in writing assignments boosts motivation and fosters a sense of agency and autonomy among students.³ I encourage you to ask our seventh grade students about their research projects as they finalize them this week; many students greatly

enjoyed researching an area of interest to them and have done an excellent job in writing well-organized, captivating articles. Many succeeded this year in conducting original research by interviewing subject-matter experts in their chosen areas, in addition to book, periodical and web-based research. I even read some great quotes from Mrs. Johnson about her cheerleading days!

Given the state's endorsement of this type of project for seventh graders, I would be interested in learning the District's rationale for disallowing research activities that are not part of thematically based modules. If it stems from a misunderstanding of the state's guidance on the seventh grade curricula, I sincerely hope the District amends its policy to put our seventh graders on even footing with their peers across the state.

Finally, I also understand from yesterday's meeting that I should no longer pursue a cross-curricular spelling initiative. I look forward to implementing a vocabulary initiative based on materials you suggest.

Please let me know any additional concerns you have regarding the 7th grade ELA curriculum.

In pursuit of high school, college, and career-ready students,

Tom Barron

CC: Tina Webber; Michele Griffin

Enclosures:

- Research Project materials
- “Researching to Deepen Understanding Unit” Plan Cover Page

³Cooper; Patall; Wynn. The Effectiveness and Relative Importance of Choice in the Classroom. Journal of Educational Psychology. 2010, Vol. 102, No. 4, pp. 896 –915.