

Understanding Instructional Tools

The teachers at Elizabeth Ziegler School embrace the use of instructional tools because they are known to contribute to improved learning for all students. Evidence of their effectiveness has been demonstrated by successful classroom, school and school board practices as well as through research. The implementation of each of these tools require careful thought by the teacher in regard to the needs of the class as a whole (i.e. grade level, developmental stage of the students, etc.) and to the individual learners in the class.

The high-yield instructional tools identified by WRDSB are:

- Anchor charts
- Nonfiction writing
- Student exemplars
- Graphic organizers, and
- Open ended critical questions

Anchor Charts

Anchor charts are visual references of important content and procedures that teachers and students create together. These charts are prominently displayed in the classroom. Students refer to the anchor charts to develop, assess, and refine their work. As students' understanding of concepts and procedures develop, anchor charts are collaboratively revised to incorporate new learning.

Some examples of anchor charts include:

- charts for work habits, problem solving and independent work
- comprehension-strategy charts with sentence starters
- examples of what the assigned work should look like when it is completed effectively
- writing elements or traits

Throughout a unit of learning, anchor charts are visuals of concepts and understandings that students can refer to as needed.

Nonfiction Writing

Nonfiction writing involves the use of sustained time for students to practice writing with facts or about real events. These writing opportunities encourage students to write for a variety of authentic purposes, audiences and contexts using persuasive, procedural, narrative, informational or graphic forms. Non-fiction writing can include words, pictures, diagrams and symbols. Writing in order to persuade, describe, explain or recount information develops skills of analysis and improves a student's ability to reason and communicate.

Teachers allow students to write about what interests them and to express their own thoughts. When a student is given opportunities to identify a purpose and express his or her own identity and interests, enthusiasm for nonfiction writing increases. Each teacher is explicit in making connections between reading and writing. Teachers provide opportunities for students to engage in purposeful talk and to integrate content area topics into the writing instruction. As students progress through to the higher grades teachers allow students opportunities to choose appropriate text forms for specific purposes.

What are Graphic Organizers?

A graphic organizer is a chart, graph, diagram or picture created to organize ideas and concepts. They are often used in preparation for an oral presentation or a writing experience. Teachers model the development and use of various forms of graphic organizers by creating them collaboratively with students so students are able to use them on their own.

Creating these visual communication tools help students:

- generate ideas,
- compare information,
- make connections,
- identify cause and effect,
- sequence events,
- highlight elements of a text.

When the graphic organizer is in front of the students, it is easier for them to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and communicate their thinking during the writing process or oral presentation.

Student exemplars

A student exemplar is an authentic example of student work used to illustrate what the work looks like at a specific achievement level. These examples demonstrate the characteristics of success and the quality of work required for students to achieve at a high standard in a subject area. Teachers rely on student exemplars to illustrate what students are expected to know and be able to do.

When teachers examine exemplars with their students it helps students to understand what success looks like and demonstrates next steps in a student's learning as well as the teacher's instruction. Student exemplars highlight the curriculum expectations so that teachers can provide precise feedback for the students and so that students can develop self-assessment skills.

Open Ended Critical Questions

Questions that require more than a yes/no or one word answer provide opportunities for a wide range of responses and encourage students to explore ideas and search out information. These rich questions ask the learner to apply skills such as: comparing, analyzing and justifying and give the learner the opportunity to think deeply. Teachers model 'open ended critical' questions to encourage students to develop their own questions so they can actively analyze and critique what they read, write, speak, view and hear in all areas of the curriculum. Students develop the ability to clarify, construct meaning, evaluate messages for purpose, credibility and bias and reflect on their own thinking.

The Elizabeth Ziegler staff members view the curriculum and the act of learning through the lens of 'critical thinking' and create a variety of lessons that promote higher-order critical thinking in their students. This method engages students as active participants in their learning as they make judgments based on evidence they receive from their open ended critical questions.