

Reading Buddies

*Mill Street Elementary School
Naperville, Illinois*

It's difficult to say which group of Reading Buddies benefits more—the fourth and fifth graders at Mill Street Elementary School or the students they work with from nearby North Central College (NCC). The students enjoy reading the same books as their college buddies, have a reason to write about books, and learn that there are many ways to think about a story. Education students at the Naperville college get to try out classroom strategies in a real-life situation, incorporate best practices into the curriculum, and participate in a research project.

Win-win describes this six-year-old activity, started in 1999 when a Mill Street parent who was working on her master's degree in education had the idea to pair young readers with teachers-to-be.

Three classes of fourth and fifth graders have participated every year since. All students, regardless of their reading ability, have Reading Buddies. "The project is an equalizer," said one Mill Street administrator. "All students can be involved on the same project at the same time."

Both groups focus on Mosaic Strategies, derived from the book *Mosaic of Thought* by Susan Zimmerman. These include such techniques as connecting the known to the unknown and visualizing and making inferences—all tools to improve reading comprehension.

The project requires cooperation between the two schools on many levels, but everyone involved says it is definitely worth the effort. Staff members from the schools meet each fall to discuss how many students will

participate, what they will read, when they will communicate, and when they will meet. Classroom teachers choose the books and notify the college faculty. The students communicate via the Internet, using a web board, so technology staffs from the two schools must also coordinate the hardware and software for the Buddies.

When the project begins, the Mill Street students go to NCC to meet their Buddies and tour the campus. After that, the students start reading and writing; both the elementary and college students must post on the web board twice a week about what they are reading. At the end of the project, the college students come to Mill Street to share projects based on their reading, and to celebrate their successes with the younger students.

The elementary students seem to bond with their Buddies, who often become positive role models for the youngsters. "You know who you are talking to, you don't need to feel shy, and you can extend your voice," said one Mill Street student. "It made me think more carefully about my reading," remarked another. "I used better word choices," commented a third.

The NCC students and faculty developed a research project around the Reading Buddies program and the Mosaic Strategies. The NCC students analyze how frequently the strategies are used and the level of thinking students are involved in. The Mill Street staff is also trying to gauge the impact of these strategies with their own analysis.

One of the biggest challenges is finding time for special projects, but "the teachers have

found that the time given to this project has been well worth the effort,” said one School/Family/Community Partnership (SFCP) team member. “It’s a real life reason for reading and then talking and writing about what they’ve read.”

Administrators, staff members, and teachers from both schools evaluate the Buddies project annually. Students complete surveys with their ideas. The SFCP team meets at the end of the project to debrief and again in the fall to talk about new ideas and what can be done differently or better.

The success of Reading Buddies can be measured—albeit unscientifically—in this simple answer to a simple question:

“Will your team implement this practice in the future?”

“Definitely!!!”

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