

Excerpt from Leaders of Their Own Learning

Ron Berger, Leah Rugen, Libby Woodfin

Preparing Students for Celebrations of Learning at King Middle School in Portland, Maine

Celebrations of learning strengthen over time as teachers gain experience in preparing students to be successful. A seventh-grade learning expedition, "Small Acts of Courage," illustrates how preparation and support are key to setting students up for success. The expedition was an inquiry into important events and people involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Students interviewed local citizens who were connected to the movement in some way and wrote the story of their interviewees, taking their work through multiple drafts and revisions. The stories were compiled into a four-volume oral history that was presented to the interviewees and donated to the African American Special Collection for the state of Maine.

The culminating event featured ninety students on stage, sharing excerpts from their biographical narratives, accompanied by images and period music. It was not by chance that all students were able to successfully present their work with confidence at the celebration of learning. Preparation for the culminating event began in the early stages of the the learning expedition when teachers identified the content and skills that needed to be taught and made the targets clear for all students. As figure 6.7 demonstrates, a celebration of learning should be a forum for students to show evidence of meeting the standards. The standards for "Small Acts of Courage" learning expedition flowed into student-friendly, long-term learning targets, and the celebration of learning was designed to showcase students' mastery of standards. Students knew from the very start what the purpose of the event was and what it would take to be ready for it.

Preparation for the event itself began several weeks in advance. In language arts class, students viewed video of a similar presentation by a class two years previous. Using a rubric, they critiqued the former students against speaking and oral presentation criteria (e.g., eye contact, voice projection, posture). Students then moved to selecting and practicing their lines with their teachers and their peers in language arts and social studies classes. As the event got closer, the seventh-grade teaching team arranged their class schedules so that all ninety students could come together for four full rehearsals. Students rehearsed each part of the presentation, including the introduction, all individual speaking parts, the conclusion, and the protocols for entering and exiting the stage. All media-pictures and music- were also incorporated into the rehearsals. As students recited their lines on stage, language arts and social studies teachers Karen MacDonald and Caitlin LeClair took notes and gave each student a sticky note with feedback. Students who were not on stage also provided feedback to their classmates.

The expectation that all students will participate in a celebration of learning raises the bar for teachers and students and created a need for teachers to build a culture in which students feel safe, supported in taking risks, and will persevere to do their best work. Social studies teacher Caitlin LeClair stresses the importance of supporting all students to be successful: "Teachers need to know their students and differentiate so that students feel like the goal is attainable. It is important for students to understand the expectation that everyone will participate in the culminating event and that they will get the support they need to be successful. It sends the message that we are in this together and we will work together to reach our goal." The culture of the school supports students to take risks and persevere when they meet challenges. preparation for celebrations of learning is an opportunity for students to meet challenges, learn from mistakes, and move forward. "Students persevere because they know the expectations and feel supported in being successful. Celebrations of learning are a time when we want all kids to succeed and we do everything we can to make that happen."

The "Small Acts of Courage" culminating event was a success for the students. It also was an emotional experience for many of the interviewees who were in the audience. Ida Gammon Wilson, an interview, reflected on the experience at a reception following the formal presentation: "Textbooks are often behind the times. They do not reflect who we are, where we have come from, and where we have come to. This kind of presentation by these young people would be an absolutely wonderful experience for everyone to have."