WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

Time and time again, Jarred Amato has proven himself to be an educator who successfully manages to get the most reluctant of students to choose reading and engagement with literature over myriad other forms of entertainment. In *Just Read It*, we get an inside view of his methods and practices presented in ways that are easy to emulate. This book should be required reading for every middle and high school ELA teacher.

—**Nic Stone**, #1 New York Times Bestselling
author of *Dear Martin*

Without a doubt, books are hope and a location for healing. Jarred Amato recognizes this and many of us across the nation—teachers, scholars, and literacy specialists—have benefited from his teaching leadership and expertise, especially his dedication to promote youth agency, literacy, and brilliance. Jarred Amato's superpower has always been his willingness to listen to young people as experts of their lives and to increase their access to engaging, diverse texts. This is why *Just Read It: Unlocking the Magic of Independent Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms* is such a phenomenal resource. Here, Jarred offers multiple steps for creating a positive literacy culture for students to write, to reflect, to analyze, and to participate across numerous communities. Amato reminds us that we must know our roles as educators, what our data tells us, and how the views of young people can inform our everyday practices. Jarred's expertise is irreplaceable. At last, the great work of Project LIT within his classrooms is shared in a new book for all of us to read!

—**Bryan Ripley Crandall**, Connecticut
Writing Project Director, Associate Professor
of English Education at Fairfield University, and
co-host of the National Writing Project's The Write Time

Jarred Amato's Read and WRAP method has been invaluable to my literacy efforts with my students. This book is full of incredible ideas and practical activities to help enrich the reading lives of our students while still developing the skills that are most critical in an engaging way. This is a book I will come back to regularly and a MUST READ for any educator.

—**Carrie Friday**, Media Specialist

Fostering a culture of passion and purpose through independent reading in classrooms empowers students to explore diverse perspectives, fuels their curiosity, and deepens their understanding of the world. Jarred Amato's book helps educators grow their practice to initiate a love of learning to cultivate lifelong readers that actively engage with ideas and contribute to a meaningful society.

—**Nikki Healy ("Mrs. G"),**
Assistant Principal MNPS Early College High School

Engagement, access, and a love of reading aren't just for elementary school! Jarred Amato will inspire you while carefully guiding you on how to make literacy real for your middle school and high school students. You'll feel his love for teaching, books, and kids on every page, while quietly transforming your practices.

—**Tom Marshall**, Principal and Author

I first heard about Project LIT Community and the work Jarred Amato and his high school students were doing in Nashville in 2018. What a life changing experience! Every moment of that June Summit I was inspired, incredibly excited and hopeful that my students and I could bring similar energy and love of reading to our high school in Washington. What I've experienced since then: witnessing dozens of my students step into leadership opportunities, participate in authentic and meaningful learning through literacy, connecting with incredible authors and rallying hundreds of others in their community to join in spreading the joys of reading. Jarred Amato has changed many lives already through his unmatched generosity of sharing what works—this book guarantees that what he and his students have done will truly live forever and continue to impact readers, educators, and whole communities in ways that they may have never imagined.

—**Kristin Fraga Sierra**, Teacher Librarian and Project Lit Abes Advisor at Lincoln High School in Tacoma WA

JUST READ IT

UNLOCKING THE MAGIC OF INDEPENDENT READING IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

JARRED AMATO

Foreword by
KWAME ALEXANDER

CORWIN Literacy

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For downloadable resources related to *Just Read It*, visit the companion website: **resources.corwin.com/justreadit**

Foreword

I don't remember the circumstances around the first time I met Jarred Amato in person, but I do remember it was in 2017, and I do remember his energy—endless. I do remember his passion—inspiring—and that he was teaching high school ELA in Tennessee. I do remember that he kept going on and on about this Project LIT organization he and his students were starting and how it *aimed to eliminate book deserts and inspire all Nashville children to become lifelong readers*. And, I do remember that two years before that, he'd sent an email via my website:

> *Good afternoon, Mr. Alexander . . . I wanted to thank you for writing books that reach ALL kids . . . I know firsthand that your books (The Crossover and Booked) engage even the most reluctant readers, so I am writing you with a specific ask . . .*

As I was reading his note, I mistakenly read "task" and thought to myself, Wow, this dude is intentional and a little presumptuous. He doesn't know me.

> *I would love to provide all students involved in our project (approx. 50) with a copy of one or both of your novels. Once they read (or in many of their cases, re-read) they will be tasked with passing on the book(s) to other children in their community, who will then do the same . . .*

I remember reading this and thinking this guy is bold. And ambitious. Seemingly eliminating book deserts in a WHOLE city is an indomitable feat, but if you're gonna do it, you gotta believe you can, which means you must be bold and highly enthusiastic. Or naïve. Jarred was all three. Plus, it appeared that his vision was limitless.

> *I envision using your books as a way to hook hundreds of children on the power of reading. Therefore, my question is this: what would be the most cost-effective way to purchase class sets of The Crossover?*

I don't remember how I responded, but I do remember that I did, and it began what has become a near decades-long conversation around literacy and empowerment. I've watched over the years as Jarred's Project LIT has grown in size, scope, and impact. The little project that started at Maplewood High School in Nashville has spread to over two thousand schools across the United States and around the world. I'm proud to say that I was there with Jarred and his students in the early days, that my book *The Crossover* had such impact. And I'm excited to be able to share with you Jarred's first professional book now.

So many teachers tell me the biggest challenge in middle or high school ELA is getting kids excited about reading. I see a lot of kids in a lot of schools, and I want to make it clear: The kids in Jarred's classes are typical kids. They have Snapchat, after-school sports, theater, homework, family drama, and jobs contending for their attention just like the kids in your classes. They come into his room at the start of the year uninterested, disengaged, maybe even with a chip on the shoulder, hoisting whatever baggage they bring from other ELA teachers and classes in years past. Aside from Mrs. Virgil in first grade, I don't remember a single ELA teacher creating an environment that made me WANT to read. But Jarred's students (and some of yours, I'm sure) leave class with a blazing love of reading. Because Jarred has learned—through his own teaching successes and setbacks—how to create the conditions that make reading books engaging, exciting, and even fun! Oh, and it's not just that they become avid readers and begin to appreciate the beauty and power of literature. Oh no, these kids are also achieving better on state tests, getting into good colleges, and creating change in their communities.

Just Read It shows you how he did it. How he does it. How so many Project LIT teachers are taking on the challenge of independent reading—getting kids interested, making space and time in your class periods, and giving kids practice with all the necessary literacy skills they need to master—and he breaks it down into doable chunks. Like so many great teachers who are life-giving and life-saving, Jarred is not only committed to his students, but he has an eagerness to share what he's learned with other teachers.

Jarred's Read and WRAP routines offer practical, do-this-tomorrow ways to get kids reading, talking, thinking, and writing about what they're reading—and you'll even find ways to make room for the occasional whole-class novel and required texts. In other words, in these pages you have all you need to establish independent reading routines AND teach the skills kids need to meet reading and writing standards.

There's no better time for a book like *Just Read It* to be in your hands. We live in a time when choosing what we read is critically important. A time when other people, who lack the imaginations to fully embrace all of our humanity, are trying to limit what our kids read. Ironically, it is through reading that we grow our humanity. The mind of an adult begins in the imagination of child. Right now, our kids need to have space to read and talk, listen and write, think and enjoy, learn and grow. Jarred has given us a road map for this journey. It's not THE answer, but it is an answer. And it's been proven. And, it's a multi-tool you'll use again and again as you keep striving to create the best possible learning experience for the kids in your care. Watch what happens when you make room for independent reading—simply letting kids read books they care about—amidst all the curricular challenges and standards goals.

I don't remember whether I sent Jarred autographed class sets of the books for his students (I sure hope I did, 'cause it makes for a great story, doesn't it?), but I do remember that we became friends. And he changed some lives. And I do think this book will change yours.

—Kwame Alexander
Author, *The Write Thing*

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To my students. I wish I had the space here to list each and every one of you by name. This book would not exist without y'all, and I am forever grateful. Please know that it was an honor and privilege to be your teacher. Keep reading, keep writing, keep chasing your dreams. I will always be rooting for you.

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To Kwame Alexander and Nic Stone. You have changed so many lives, including mine. Thank you for everything.

To our entire Project LIT family—every student, every chapter leader, every author, every community member—I am so incredibly proud of what we have built together.

To Tori Bachman, Sharon Wu, and the entire Corwin team for your trust, support, and expertise.

To mom. You will always be my hero.

To dad. We love and miss you more every day.

To Zack, the best brother in the world. (I don't expect you to read this book, but I'm hoping you'll at least buy a copy or two.)

To Lizzie, you make it look so easy.

To Lucca. Whenever you read this, five or ten or fifty years from now, know that mom and dad love you more than life itself.

And to you, dear reader. Thanks again for the work you do every day. It matters. My goodness, it matters.

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About the Author

Dr. Jarred Amato is an award-winning English teacher and the cofounder of Project LIT Community, a national grassroots literacy movement. Jarred enjoys reading, writing, and laughing alongside young people every day and collaborating with fellow educators to improve literacy access, attitudes, and outcomes. Jarred is a two-time MNPS Blue Ribbon teacher and the recipient of the Penguin Random House Teacher Award for Literacy and the Inspiring Educator Award from the Nashville Public Education Foundation. Jarred received his BA in English and history from Vanderbilt University, his MAT from Belmont University, and his EdD from Lipscomb University. After thirteen years of teaching middle and high school English in Nashville, Jarred recently relocated to New Jersey, where he and his wife are attempting to keep up with their two-year-old son.

To Lucca, our light and love.

Warm-Up

An Introduction

For as long as I can remember, I've been a reader. In fact, I recently stumbled upon a letter that I had written near the end of first grade at Underwood Elementary School: *Dear Second Grade Teacher. My name is Jarred Amato. I am 7 years old and My brother is 5. I am good at baseball, basketball, readding [sic], and writing.*

And here I am today, nearly thirty years later, a middle and high school English teacher, an advocate and champion of reading and our readers, and Project LIT Community cofounder, honored to share a bit of my journey with you. I stumbled upon this letter during the summer of 2019 as my brother and I sorted through boxes of our childhood, just after our dad had passed away unexpectedly. Despite his flaws (and we've all got them), my dad was one of my biggest champions (and we all need people who believe in us, no matter what). Gosh, he would have been so proud of me for writing this book. However, my dad was definitely *not* a reader. I wish he had been.

Years ago, my students and I learned that readers tend to live longer than non-readers. We determined there was sufficient evidence to support the claim. From the *Washington Post* (emphasis mine),

> Good news on National Book Lovers Day: A chapter a day might keep the Grim Reaper away—at least a little longer. A recent study by Yale University researchers, published online in the journal Social Science & Medicine, concluded that **"book readers experienced a 20 percent reduction in risk of mortality over the 12 years of follow-up compared to non-book readers."**

The data was obtained from a longitudinal Health and Retirement Study sponsored by the National Institute on Aging. The study looked at 3,635 subjects, all older than 50, whom the researchers divided into three groups: those who didn't read books, those who read up to 3.5 hours a week, and those who read more than 3.5 hours a week.

The findings were remarkable: Book readers survived almost two years longer than those who didn't crack open a book.

Accounting for variables such as education level, income and health status, the study found that those who read more than 3.5 hours weekly were 23 percent less likely to die during that 12-year period. Those who read up to 3.5 hours — an average of a half-hour a day — were 17 percent less likely.

In other words, just like a healthy diet and exercise, books appear to promote a "significant survival advantage," the authors concluded.

I wish my dad could have experienced the joy of getting lost in a great book. I wish he could have cheered for characters the same way he rooted for Mickey Mantle and Derek Jeter. I wish that his story was uncommon. However, with each passing year, more and more of us—young and old—are spending significant time in front of screens and little, if any, immersed in books. We are only just beginning to understand the effects, but as the parent of a toddler and educator of adolescents, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't concerned. And I wish more adults, particularly our policymakers and educational leaders, acknowledged the urgency of the moment. If we do not value reading, if we do not value our readers, the consequences will be dire.

If you are reading this book (thank you!), you probably believe in the power of books to change lives—to save lives. And like me, you probably know that books help us understand ourselves and empathize with others. Books have a unique ability to connect us and comfort us, to challenge us and change us. Books help us heal. Books give us hope.

However, I have to admit: in the years that it took me to complete this book, I often felt hopeless. I found it nearly impossible to focus. I struggled to block out the noise. And, in talking with colleagues in my school and across the country, I know I was not alone. Being an educator in today's climate is not easy—and that's putting it lightly. It wasn't easy before March 2020, and it's infinitely harder now. Somehow, we have been asked to do more with less. Incredible educators everywhere are exiting the profession, or at the very least, seriously considering it. Perhaps you've had your doubts, too; I know I have.

Of course, everyone has their own reasons for leaving, but ultimately, it comes down to this: the "highs" of teaching no longer outweigh the "lows." Low pay. Low morale. Low respect. Most educators aren't leaving because of the students; we are leaving because of the adults. Adults who are using educators and students as pawns in their political games. Adults who continue to pile more and more on our plates without taking anything off. Adults who prioritize programs over people. Adults who find room in the budget for scripted curriculum while forcing teachers to crowdsource for books and supplies. Adults who ban books before reading them. Adults who care more about keeping their job than keeping students and educators safe. Adults who value compliance and control more than creativity and innovation. Adults who don't support us enough. Who don't trust us enough. Who don't respect us enough. Who, in far too many places, don't pay us enough. Educators are finally saying: *Enough*. And I get it. Believe me, I totally get it.

But here's the thing: Our students need you. They need us! Our students don't need martyrs. They don't need saviors. However, our students deserve to have educators who give a damn. Courageous educators, like you, who love and believe in them no matter what. Who have their back in the classroom and cafeteria. Who always seem to know exactly what books to recommend. Who recognize that the little things are, in fact, the big things. Who care about strengthening our communities and building a better future for *all*.

That's why I'm not going anywhere. I am committed to this work for the long haul. At the same time, I believe wholeheartedly that teaching should be sustainable. Teaching should be rewarding. And yes, teaching should be *fun*. Despite the challenges, teaching middle and high school English for the past decade and a half has often been all three of those things for me, which is one of the reasons I decided to write this book. To remind myself—along with all of you—why this literacy work still matters. Why this work is still worth doing.

I also wrote this book for my son, Lucca, who was born in the fall of 2021. He devours books —quite literally. And I hope that he never stops. Because my dream for Lucca is the same dream that I hold for every child in this world. That he is always surrounded by books. All sorts of books. Books that make him laugh out loud. Books that move him to tears. Books that he implores his mother to read to him before bedtime. Books that he wants to stay up late reading under the covers. Books that teach him all sorts of wonderful things about himself and the messy, magical world around him.

My hope is that reading always remains meaningful. That it never feels like a chore or punishment. That when Lucca gets to school, he is showered with an abundance of patience, love, and support from incredible teachers who receive the same. That he can always find refuge and community in the library. That when he returns home, while we are sitting around the kitchen table, he will ramble on in excitement about the stories he's reading and the conversations he's having. That his third-grade teacher will help him publish his first "book" and make him feel like a real writer, the way Mrs. Madsen did for me.

My hope is that Lucca's love for literacy and learning does not fade as he heads into middle and high school, like it does for so many of today's adolescents. That expert educators will encourage him to read widely and read often. To engage with different ideas and perspectives. To find his voice. To pursue his passions.

I wrote this book because I believe, with all my heart, that all of this is possible, not just for my son but for every child. I have a feeling you believe it, too. At the same time, we know there are closeminded people working relentlessly to limit what we read, what we teach, and what we can imagine. We cannot be naïve. Yet we cannot lose hope. It's a delicate balance.

Parenting, like teaching, feels overwhelming, if not impossible, at times. The doubt. The fear. The big questions. *Am I good enough? How can I keep my child safe? How do I sleep at night knowing that I can't?* The small ones. *What in the world are we going to have for dinner? How has he already outgrown that shirt? Why is fruit so expensive?* In these moments of stress, I try my best to be present. To sit on the floor with Lucca as we build a block tower or read *Brown Bear, Brown Bear.* To get outside and play in the sprinkler. To walk to the library. To run around the bookstore. (My apologies to the Barnes and Noble staff for the titles Lucca routinely pulled from your shelves and left scattered across your store during the summer and fall of 2022.)

I try my best to seek out and savor these moments of joy in the classroom, too. In a society where teachers and parents are constantly told what they are doing wrong, I take time to appreciate all that we are doing right. There is no such thing as a perfect parent or teacher. I wrote this book to remind myself, and all of you, that our good is good enough—more than enough.

I also wrote this book to honor and amplify my former students—Adrian, CJ, David, De'Montre, De'Sean, Faith, Gerrick, Jakaylia, Jay, Lauren, Paisley, Rodrea, Sean, Selena, TJ, Ty, and so many more. Young people who rallied an entire community around reading and ultimately transformed a class project into a national

literacy movement. The foundation of our work has been a relentless commitment to independent reading, writing, reflection, and relationships. That is the "secret" to our success, and that is what I plan to zoom in on in this book.

Admittedly, the principles of access, choice, time, and community are not new. They have been the focus of countless books; you and I have probably read many of them. Yet, our literacy challenges persist. My students and I took the principles, outlined brilliantly by the likes of literacy giants such as (but certainly not limited to) Nancie Atwell, Kelly Gallagher, Penny Kittle, and Cornelius Minor, brought them to life, day in and day out, year after year. By any measure, we were successful. We have so many moments and memories to share. Even more, we hope to show you that the "magic" can happen in every classroom in this country, no matter the barriers, no matter the obstacles. We promise.

My hope is that this book serves as a resource for schools and ELA teams as we continue to reimagine education. To be clear, reimagining does not mean overcomplicating. Let's keep things simple when we can. Let's get the "easy" things right first and go from there. Over the past fourteen years, I have taught in four schools across six grade levels (seventh through twelfth) and two states. An under-resourced middle school and high school serving primarily Black and brown students. An early college high school serving a small, diverse group of ninth and tenth graders. A suburban middle school serving primarily white students. Each experience was different. However, in many ways, each classroom functioned and felt the same, and that's because of our commitment to independent reading.

Instead of searching for (and often arguing over) the "best" book to teach, trying to write the perfect lesson plan, or finding time to "do SEL," let's focus on establishing a positive literacy culture from day one—and cultivating it throughout the year—one step, one book, and one conversation at a time.

"JUST READING"

Before we get too far in this book, I must make two quick points:

1. **There is nothing wrong when students are "just reading."**

   Shouldn't that be one of our goals? Instead of asking educators, "*Why* are your students reading all the time?," we should be asking, "*How* are you getting your students to read all the time?" Why are we shaming teachers who have

successfully managed to get teenagers off their phones and into books? Shouldn't we be asking them to share their strategies and secrets? Why are we making educators feel like they are breaking the rules to provide students with the positive literacy experiences they deserve? Shouldn't we be thanking them for going above and beyond to nurture the next generation of readers? Why are we okay with students "just sitting" in rows listening to a teacher lecture for an hour, "just answering" low-level recall questions from a textbook or TPT handout, or "just Snapchatting" with their friends because they finished their work for the period? Shouldn't we want all students to be engaged and empowered?

2. **Getting to a point where all students are "just reading" (and *actually* reading) is a lot harder than it looks.**

   If you walk into an ELA classroom and all twenty or twenty-five students are "just reading," it means their teacher has done a lot of wonderful work behind the scenes (work that we will attempt to name and unpack in this book). It means their teacher deserves praise, not ridicule. It's also worth pointing out that our students are never "just reading"—they are thinking critically, asking questions, developing empathy, gaining confidence, relieving stress, setting goals, building stamina, discovering themselves, expanding their vocabulary, connecting with others, improving their concentration, fueling their imagination, acquiring knowledge, sharpening their writing and communication skills, exercising their brain, and so much more.

I have no problem admitting that it took me a long time to get to a point where every student was "just reading." Too long. In fact, there are still plenty of days where we fall short of 100 percent. That's okay! Every student has a different relationship with reading; every student enters our classroom at a different point in their literacy journey. I try my best to meet them where they are and to embrace progress over perfection. And I encourage you to do the same.

WHAT I HOPE YOU'LL GET FROM THIS BOOK

My sincere hope is that the activities, ideas, inspiration, and strategies shared over the next eight chapters strengthen your conviction and empower you to make an even greater impact in your classroom, school, and community. While this book can be read from start to finish, I know that if you are like me, you may

want to jump to specific sections, depending on what you need (and how much time you have). Therefore, here is what you can expect to find in each chapter:

PART 1 – THE FUNDAMENTALS OF INDEPENDENT READING

In Chapter 1, I bring you into our classroom and recount our journey with independent reading— our difficulties with the "traditional" ELA approach, the important distinction between literary and literature, how we developed our Read and WRAP framework, what it looks like in practice, and why we continue to stick with it year after year. (WRAP is an acronym that stands for Write, Reflect, Analyze, and Participate.)

In Chapter 2, I outline what it's going to take for all students to establish, or reestablish, a positive reading identity—a strong sense of purpose, a clear understanding of our readers, and a simplified approach (that hopefully includes our Read and WRAP routine).

In Chapter 3, I show how we can transform the principles of access, choice, time, and community into actions. In other words, I offer specific tools and strategies to increase book access (especially on a teacher budget), promote choice, guarantee time, and build community.

PART 2 – STRATEGIES TO SUSTAIN INDEPENDENT READING SUCCESS

In Chapter 4, I walk you through our "Intro to Lit" unit, which includes a wide range of activities, texts, and tasks that help us hit the ground running (or in our case, reading and writing) from day one. From our student surveys and book tasting activity to our "Best Nine" and "Ten Things" writing assignment (along with much more), this chapter includes more than a dozen resources to start the year strong, build community, and invest students in our Read and WRAP routine. My hunch is that you, like me, will return to this chapter each fall.

In Chapter 5, I share our extensive collection of WRAP prompts that help us engage and empower readers day in and day out, week after week. This chapter attempts to answer the question "When the timer goes off and our notebooks come out, what does it look like to WRAP?" Book reviews and narrative continuations, grammar and poetry, character analysis and creative projects—this chapter is jam-packed with prompts varying in length, difficulty, and purpose to help you meet the specific needs of your students.

In Chapter 6, I outline several meaningful end-of-year projects and activities, from "For Every One" and our "Lit Awards" to "My Ten" and our sample "Independent Reading Project," that help us come full circle and end the school year even stronger than we started.

PART 3 – LEVELING UP AND MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF INDEPENDENT READING

In Chapter 7, I discuss how to leverage student feedback (via WRAP prompts, one-on-one conversations, quarterly reflections, and formal reading surveys) to fine-tune our Read and WRAP routine throughout the school year.

In Chapter 8, I reflect on our Project LIT journey and invite you and your students to join our movement and launch a "chapter" of your own. It would be an honor to continue leading and learning together.

PART 1

The Fundamentals of Independent Reading

CHAPTER 1

Developing the Read and WRAP Framework

At its core, this book is about why independent reading (IR) matters, what it looks like in action, and how we can unlock the "magic" of IR in every ELA classroom, every day. Specifically, we will zoom in on the Read and WRAP *(write, reflect, analyze, participate)* framework that I developed with my students: ten to twenty minutes of independent reading followed by meaningful writing, reflection, conversation, and community building. When we maximize this time, when we protect this time, the rewards and possibilities are endless—for students, for educators, for everyone.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that far too many of our nation's middle and high school students—in small towns and big cities, before and after the pandemic, and due to a wide range of factors—do not

- have access to books they are interested in reading;
- read or write frequently enough (volume);
- identify as readers and/or writers;
- enjoy reading and/or writing;
- feel engaged or empowered in the learning process;
- have authentic opportunities to discuss their reading, writing, and thinking;
- feel connected to their classroom community; and
- have tools to address the various mental health challenges.

While I certainly do not have all the answers, I believe, with all my heart, that creating a solid, daily framework for independent reading in middle and high school ELA classrooms should be part of the solution. Here is how the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2019) defines independent reading:

Read the full statement on how NCTE defines independent reading.

> a routine, protected instructional practice that occurs across all grade levels. Effective independent reading practices include time for students to read, access to books that represent a wide range of characters and experiences, and support within a reading community that includes teachers and students. Student choice in text is essential because it motivates, engages, and reaches a wide variety of readers. The goal of independent reading as an instructional practice is to build habitual readers with conscious reading identities.

As we continue the process of reimagining education, and reimagining adolescent literacy instruction, one thing is certain—every school should make independent reading a priority. When we do, we begin to address the challenges listed on the previous page (lack of access, volume, belonging, identity, enjoyment, etc.) and increase the number of students who possess the literacy skills to thrive in this crazy thing we call life.

Of course, components of our ELA block can and should change depending on the day and week, lesson and unit, standards and objectives, students and grade level, and school and community. Independent reading, however, should remain a constant. When done with intention and care, independent reading—coupled with our WRAP time that follows—provides significant social-emotional and academic benefits that we will explore in more detail later this chapter and throughout this book. Ultimately, independent reading is an essential practice if we are serious about nurturing a generation of readers, writers, and leaders; if we are serious about educating the whole child; and if we are serious about centering students in our classrooms and schools.

Independent reading is an essential practice if we are serious about nurturing a generation of readers, writers, and leaders; if we are serious about educating the whole child; and if we are serious about centering students in our classrooms and schools.

Educators reap the rewards of independent reading, too. Since committing to our Read and WRAP routine, I have become a more optimistic and empathetic educator. I have become more

efficient and effective. I have yet to "burn out" (although I've certainly been close at times) and plan to stay in this profession for the long haul. (This is another benefit of our Read and WRAP routine—it increases the likelihood that schools retain teachers and maintain strong, stable ELA departments.) Before looking too far ahead, however, I think it's important to first look back. To return to the fall of 2015, which turned out to be an inflection point in my teaching career.

MY JOURNEY WITH INDEPENDENT READING

In 2015, I decided to make the "loop" from a middle school to a high school in the same Nashville community, which meant that I had the honor of teaching many of my eighth graders again as ninth graders. I also had the opportunity to work for an incredibly supportive leadership team. For one of the first times in my career, I felt truly empowered. And what a difference it made.

When Ms. Travis or Dr. Jackson walked into our classroom and students were "just reading," they smiled. They knew how much work went on behind the scenes to make that happen. They knew how much our students benefited from this routine. Sometimes they'd turn off their walkie-talkies, grab a book from the shelf, and join us. Not once did they disrupt, doubt, or question. They championed innovation. They championed students. They championed teachers as we worked together to build a schoolwide literacy culture.

There was only one big problem: time or the lack thereof. Our high school ran on a traditional block schedule, which meant that I saw my students for roughly eighty minutes, every other day. When you factor in two weeks for semester exams, another two weeks (at a minimum) for end-of-year state tests, and another day or two each quarter for district-mandated benchmarks, we were already down to 150 school days. Cut that in half and we were at seventy-five days. Not to mention teacher and student absences, field trips and fire drills, pep rallies and assemblies, and (fingers crossed) snow days. Seventy-five days. That's it!

In seventy-five days, there was no way anyone could teach every standard. Well, let me rephrase that: in seventy-five days, there was no way students could "demonstrate mastery" of every standard, especially when many entered high school with significant literacy gaps. In seventy-five days, the "traditional" way of doing high school English was simply not going to work. We tried.

I remember passing out copies of *Lord of the Flies* after we found them in a bin in the back of the library (clearly access was another challenge, but more on that later). We had a few options from there:

- Read the entire book aloud together?
- Have students read it silently in class?
- Assign chapters to read on their own each week? With quizzes?
- Facilitate in-class discussions, even if half the group hadn't done the reading?

Spoiler alert: None of the options were ideal. Even the most enthusiastic readers were hesitant. While some decided to "play the game" like I did in high school (skimming and Sparknoting), many chose to stay on the sidelines, checking out completely. And who could blame them? I certainly didn't. While I didn't poll this particular group of students, consider a survey (example below) I administered to fifty of my ninth graders at the beginning of the 2018–2019 school year.

FALL READING SURVEY

1. How many books did you read independently last year?

   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. How do you feel about reading?

   1 (hate it) 2 3 4 5 (love it)

   Explain why: _____

3. Reading is boring.

   1 (strongly disagree) 2 3 4 5 (strongly agree)

4. Reading is important.

   1 (strongly disagree) 2 3 4 5 (strongly agree)

5. How often do you read outside of school?

   Never Rarely Sometimes Often

   Explain why: _____

6. What was the best book you read in middle school?

online resources

The findings were significant:

- Fourteen out of fifty reported that they read zero books independently the previous school year. Another fifteen reported reading just one or two.
- Thirty-five out of fifty said they rarely or never read outside of school.
- Twenty-seven out of fifty literally could not name the best book they read in middle school, responding with "I don't remember," "No idea," "None," or a teacher's three favorite letters, "IDK."
- Thirty-two out of fifty reported a neutral or negative attitude toward reading.

To be clear, this was/is an adult problem, not a student one. As I told my students then, and as I tell new groups every fall, I get why they stop reading. In fact, if I were in their shoes, sitting in a classroom without engaging texts to choose from or consistent time to read, knowing that many adults in education simply see them as scores and numbers, I would feel the same way. Shoot, I often do feel that way as an educator.

Every year, more and more of our students are asking, *Why? Why do we have to read this? Can't we do something else? Why don't we have a voice in our education?* Again, these are legitimate questions. We should all be looking for ways to enhance the ELA and school experience for everyone. We cannot continue to do things the way they have always been done, especially when "that way" didn't work particularly well in the first place.

Sometimes we forget that books are competing against several formidable opponents for our time and attention. For better or worse (and probably both), smartphones and social media have changed our lives and our world forever. Teens are turning to YouTube and TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram, for both entertainment and connection. Teens, like all of us, crave acceptance and belonging. They thrive when engaged and empowered. They despise boredom and being told what to do. A student might debate various options:

> Hmmm, I could slog through *Lord of the Flies* for hours on my own or I could use ChatGPT to help me write the essay? I could struggle through Shakespeare or I could spend that time writing my own music? I could complete this "test-prep packet," or I could eat dinner with my family for the first time all week and then hop on NBA2K with my friends to unwind a bit? I could

complete the homework assignment that my teacher probably won't even look at, or I could finally catch up on my sleep?

For a lot of our students, it's an easy decision—whether adults agree with them or not. (And to be clear, I'm not excusing all student behavior but rather trying to explain it.) Instead of judging our students ("Why don't they just . . . ?") or blaming the latest technology (ChatGPT arrived on the scene while I was writing this manuscript), let's take a deep breath and begin to understand where they are coming from. Let's acknowledge that for a young person to a pick a book over a controller, the experience has to be meaningful.

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Another factor to keep in mind, our young people are exhausted. The school day is tiring enough on its own, and when you throw in extracurricular activities and after-school responsibilities, it becomes unsustainable. Something has to give. For many of our students, many of the assigned texts, whether we are talking whole-class novels or the steady diet of "close reading" passages and accompanying questions, are not working. We need to recognize that a text is not "rigorous" if no one reads it. A lot of lesson and unit plans look challenging and "complex" on paper, especially if they have the seal of approval from a testing company or district office. However, walk into that ELA classroom and pay attention to the person who is doing all the work—the teacher. Meanwhile, the students are participating passively, at best. Some politely nod along and take notes while others choose to shut down, doze off, or find their own entertainment. (Even in classrooms where students are generally compliant, consider this: when is the compliance the goal of education? We can do better!)

MAKING ROOM FOR BOTH INDEPENDENT READING AND WHOLE-CLASS NOVELS

While we could argue about the merits of *Lord of the Flies* and other ELA department staples, I am not going to waste the time or energy here. I believe that is the wrong way to frame the conversation. In today's climate, people are expected, if not encouraged, to have a "take" on everything. Sports. Politics. Parenting. Education is no exception. *Pick a side. Get off the fence. Yes or no. For*

or against. Prior to the pandemic, I occasionally took the bait and engaged in unproductive Twitter spats with strangers. No longer. I spend far less time online and refuse to accept interview requests from those who are looking to perpetuate the reading "war" narrative. The rhetoric is harmful and counterproductive. I am troubled by the lack of nuance. I am troubled by the fact that those outside of the classroom continue to pit educators against one another—either for "clicks" and dollars, or even worse, to sow distrust and undermine public education.

There is too much polarization and not enough collaboration. There is too much teacher shaming and not enough support. To paraphrase a line from Ray Bradbury, there is too much burning and not enough building. Speaking of Bradbury, I recently made a big personal and professional move—from Nashville to New Jersey. My new middle school featured *Fahrenheit 451* in its eighth-grade curriculum. Since I had not taught the book before, I was skeptical.

Ultimately, however, the novel turned to be an overwhelmingly positive experience. We created one-pagers for each of the three sections. We explored powerful themes, such as happiness, technology, conformity, and censorship. We wrote powerful personal narratives and brilliant novel continuations that Bradbury himself would have admired. We spent time observing and appreciating nature and reading poetry from the likes of Mary Oliver and Robert Frost. Inspired by StoryCorps's mission—"to preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world"—we also completed a digital storytelling project where students interviewed family members about their childhood, changes in society, overcoming hardship, immigrating to the United States, career advice, their happiest memories, and so much more.

Which brings me back to this point: there is more than enough room for both choice and the required, whole-class reads, "classic" or contemporary. We do not have to pick one or the other. In fact, when we do choice well, it enhances our experience with the required texts. In Chapter 7, I will detail how we can balance independent reading with our required texts. In the meantime, here is the CliffsNotes version:

- We dedicate the first month to our "Intro to Lit" unit (see Chapter 4) and establishing our independent reading routine, which sets the tone for the rest of the year.
- We are intentional with our whole-class reads. We set clear learning targets and assign relevant, meaningful writing tasks. We read the texts at a quick pace and avoid

over-teaching them. We encourage choice, collaboration, conversation, and critical thinking.

- While there is no perfect or magic ratio, we spend roughly two-thirds of our 180 days reading books of our choice. We dedicate the remaining one-third, then, to our required texts. Of course, with some groups, the ratio may be closer to 75:25 or 80:20.
- Whether a choice book or required read, we start nearly every one of our 180 class periods the same way—with our Read and WRAP routine. This ensures that by the end of the year, every student has read often (a minimum of ten to fifteen minutes every day, not including the time outside of school) and read widely (a minimum of five or six genres).

There is more than enough room for both choice and the required, whole-class reads, "classic" or contemporary. We do not have to pick one or the other.

I am not "for" or "against" *Lord of the Flies*, especially without context. I am, however, *for* any text, old or new, that gets our students back into reading and helps our classroom come alive. I am *against* any text, old or new, that pushes our students away from our ELA classrooms. I am *for* whole-class novels when taught with care and intention. I am *against* whole-class novels when taught without students in mind. I am *for* literacy experiences that spark joy and growth, and I am *against* those that cause harm. I am *for* students and educators working together to develop a literacy game plan that makes sense for their classroom, school, and community. I am *against* one-size-fits-all programs and top-down mandates. Finally, and most emphatically, I am *for* a daily independent reading routine, where students in all ELA classrooms and in all schools are encouraged to read and respond to a variety of beautiful, rich, and complex texts.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LITERATURE AND LITERACY

In 2021, the *New York Times Book Review* asked eight authors under forty to "name the writer or writers who have most influenced your work and explain how." (The article, "The Books That Made Me: 8 Writers on Their Literary Inspirations," could serve as a delightful mentor text to help students write their own "The Books That Made Me" piece.) As I read through the eight interviews, it became clear that each list differed drastically.

However, what did the eight writers have in common? What could we learn from their respective journeys? For me, the biggest takeaway was that all eight read often and read widely . . . eventually. Every author had someone in their lives—whether it was a parent, sibling, neighbor, teacher, or librarian—who ensured they had book access, who respected their reading choices, who built relationships, who understood the importance of representation, who encouraged them. I also found it telling that even our world's most prolific writers tend to succeed in spite of school, not because of it.

Read the original article, "The Books That Made Me."

For example, Tommy Orange, author of *There, There,* did not finish a single novel in high school and only began reading fiction after college. Orange said, "No one was telling me what to read then, I was out of school and doing it all on my own, so I read what I liked" (Qasim, 2021). Meanwhile, Alyssa Cole spoke about the value of reading broadly: "I'm a multigenre writer, and this is the result of being a multigenre reader — picking up anything and everything I could get my hands on as a child." Cole credited authors such as Stephen King and Toni Morrison for inspiring and influencing her in a multitude of ways. She also credited manga, a genre often dismissed by educators. (Here's one more quote from Cole that's too good not to share: "I think what we read as children — what makes us feel seen or, for marginalized readers, not seen — plants the seeds of the stories that grow in us over years and decades." Wow.)

Gabriel Bump grew up reading *Sports Illustrated* "as all mildly athletic teenage bookworms once did." (Guilty as charged.) Eventually, Bump moved from sports writers such as Scoop Jackson and Gary Smith to literary giants such as Hemingway and Baldwin. The key takeaway is that Bump started with what he loved and developed a positive reading identity. Later, with the support of his teachers and family—but notably not his school's ELA department—he began to explore different authors and genres, which is precisely what we should be doing with each student: meeting them where they are, building confidence, and continuing to support them on a reading journey that will hopefully continue long after they leave our classroom. And even if that journey stalls when they move on to the next teacher or the next school, we have done our part. One rich reading year is better than none. One rich reading year can change a student's entire trajectory.

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Jason Reynolds, the 2020–2022 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, understands this intimately. Reynolds admits that he, an award-winning, bestselling author, did not read his first book cover to cover until the age of seventeen. In a January 2018 *Daily Show* interview with Trevor Noah, Reynolds said,

> It's insane obviously, but it's only insane for me because I became a writer. But the truth of the matter is back then, there weren't a lot of books for kids like me. You're talking about the 1980s on through the 1990s. There weren't books about young people living in black communities, especially during the time. . . . In America, you had the crack epidemic, you had hip-hop, you had HIV, and those sort of three huge pillars were never mentioned in books for young people who were living and experiencing that life and things like that, and we just didn't see it.

Watch the full Reynolds interview

For Reynolds, it was hip-hop that gave him voice; it was hip-hop that helped him feel seen and valued. Rap music "let me know that who I already was was good enough because they got to tell the world that kids like me existed, that we walked a certain way and that we talked a certain way, and that we shouldn't apologize for any of that." Today, Reynolds's books have the same effect on young people that Queen Latifah's songs had on him.

In the interview, Noah also posed a question that many of us have been asked frequently over the years: *Why don't kids read these days? Why don't a lot of kids connect with Shakespeare and authors people deem to be "required" reading?* Reynolds's response brought me back to the fall of 2015 when we struggled to connect with William Golding's 1954 novel:

> One, young people are allergic to boredom . . . and that doesn't mean that Shakespeare is boring, it just means that often times the *teaching* of Shakespeare is boring. Two, we have to start really assessing what the literary canon is and whether or not it should remain fossilized and concrete as it is today. It's static. Why not figure out how to expand that canon to be diverse, to be old, to be young? It doesn't mean I want them to only read my books; it's just a springboard, so that they then build relationships not just with literature but with literacy.

Reynolds's distinction between "literacy" and "literature" is an important one, especially when we consider this—approximately 3.7 million US students graduate high school every year, and only

forty thousand of them will become college English majors. Put another way: 99 percent of the students we serve in our K–12 classrooms will *not* major in English. They will go on to major in biology and business, engineering and computer science. Others will attend trade school, join the military, or jump straight into the workforce. All deserve rich, relevant, and rewarding ELA experiences during their middle and high school journey.

As I was writing the first draft of this book, Jay, a former student and Project LIT cofounder, was finishing up her sophomore year at Belmont University. In late April 2021, she texted me her grades for the semester: straight As in classes like Human Anatomy and Physiology and Kinesiology. An exercise science major and sports medicine minor, Jay did not read one "classic" novel in high school. Instead, she devoured dozens of books—beautiful, complex books of her choice —and developed the literacy and life skills to thrive at an elite university.

I still remember the video we recorded in May 2018, near the end of her junior year. Inspired by a viral clip from Jimmy Kimmel, students stood took turns attempting to "name a book." Looking through my phone, most clips lasted three or four seconds. And then there is Jay, standing in front of our classroom library, challenged by a classmate to name as many books as she could in ten seconds.

"Okay, you have *Fallen, The Hate U Give, Dear Martin, All American Boys, Solo, The Crossover, Ghost, Sunny, Patina; Everything, Everything; The Poet X* . . ."

There's a quick pause.

"Uhhhhh . . . .ahhhhhhh!"

Jay's arms are out, and she's grinning from ear to ear. The ultimate competitor (she won nearly every trivia competition at book club), Jay's not giving up just yet.

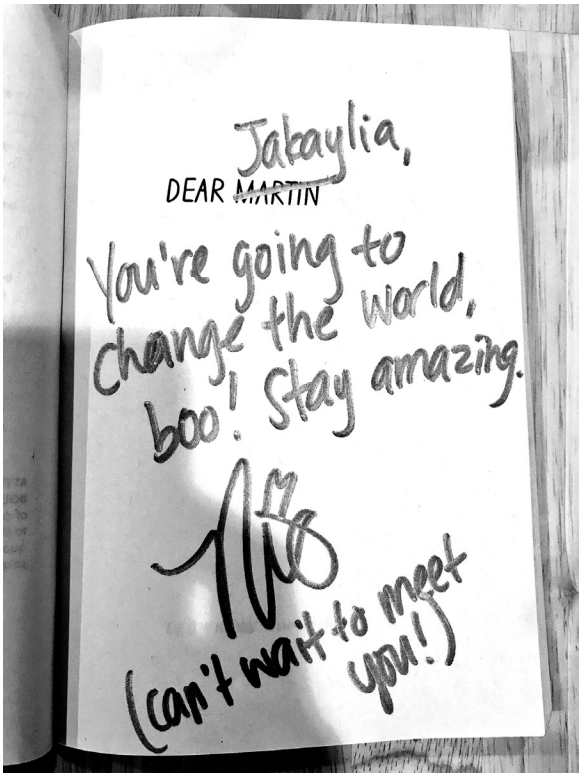
"*The Hunger Games* series, the *Immortal Souls* series, I've read that too. I've read so many series I can't even think."

You can hear Olivia—her future college roommate—in the background throwing out titles. Jay engages. *Long Way Down*? Yes. The Bible? "I don't read the Bible, which is kind of bad." *The Wild Robot*? "I've read that book!"

My favorite moment comes when someone asks about *The Giver*. Jay's perplexed face is priceless. *"The Giver?* What's that? That's a movie, ain't it?" At this point, you can hear me cracking up as I continue filming. *"I've seen the movie. I haven't read the book."*

The sixty-six-second video ends shortly thereafter, but it's obvious that Jay could have kept going. There's still a huge smile on her face. Reflecting on this moment years later, I can't help but smile, too. Here are a few observations:

- There was so much joy in our classroom that day. We need more moments like this. Joy is good.
- Think about how many books Jay could name in one minute. Shouldn't we want that for all students? On the other hand, how would you feel if every student in your school could only rattle off the same three or four books (because that's all they had an opportunity to read)? Even worse, what if they couldn't name any?
- Jay entered high school with a positive reading identity, but it very easily could have faded, especially if had we followed our district's scripted curriculum, which made no room for novels of any kind. Instead, with daily time to read books of her choice, with relevant and rigorous literacy instruction, with the support of teachers, classmates, and community members, Jay continued to soar—academically, socially, and emotionally.



Clearly, Jay was "college ready," however we want to define that term. She had the stamina, fluency, confidence, vocabulary, and comprehension to push through boring reading passages on standardized tests. (Jay and her classmates crushed the ACT, outperforming their peers by 5.7 points on the English section and 4.4 points in reading.) Jay wrote clearly and compellingly, and she excelled as a public speaker, presenting at local events and national conferences. She cared deeply about her community.

So, what can we learn from Jay, one of the 99 percent who decided not to major in English? I would argue that the ability to read and write proficiently, to think critically, and to communicate clearly is more important than an understanding or appreciation of any specific text, no matter how much you or I may love it or how long it's been in the curriculum. Besides, as Reynolds points out in an interview in *The Guardian* (Knight et al., 2022), offering choice and making room for contemporary novels actually "preserves the classics" because, in doing so, we're creating lifelong readers who will, in time, explore a wide range of novels.

I would argue that the ability to read and write proficiently, to think critically, and to communicate clearly is more important than an understanding or appreciation of any specific text, no matter how much you or I may love it or how long it's been in the curriculum.

I care that all students graduate high school with the literacy skills needed to choose their path in life. I don't care if they've read *The Scarlet Letter*. I care that Jay had daily opportunities to read books that offered refuge from a real world full of mass shootings, natural disasters, and political polarization. Books that sparked writing and conversation. Books that reminded Jay that she mattered when people in power were trying to tell her otherwise.

So, here's my challenge to readers: Watch Jay's joyful video clip with your colleagues. Smile. And then continue the important conversations I know you're having.

View Jay's video clip

How many of our students can "name a book," let alone dozens? Do our students have ongoing opportunities to read books of their choice? If not, how can we make that happen? What skills do our students need for success in the next grade level, in college, and in life? Are we focusing on the right things? What should keep doing? What should we reconsider?

I remember having a similar conversation in the fall of 2015. Sure, we could have made *Lord of the Flies* "work." I know there are incredible teachers all over the country who find ways to bring classic novels to life. (And if you're one of those teachers, please share your secrets!) However, I kept coming back to this. *Was this the best use of our limited time?* No, it was not. *Was there a different way? A better way?* Yes, without a doubt.

DEVELOPING THE READ AND WRAP FRAMEWORK

I knew that I had just seventy-five days to help my students become passionate, proficient readers and writers, to help them navigate the traditional challenges of high school along with the newer struggles brought on by technology and social media. I knew that **every text and every task had to be intentional.** And so, like any good coach, I returned to the drawing board.

I wanted to maximize the time we had together. I wanted to prioritize the most important literacy skills and concepts. I wanted to increase the likelihood that students would choose to make reading and writing a part of their lives on the remaining 290 days of the year (and the following year, and the year after that). I wanted students to feel empowered and connected to our classroom community.

None of that would have been possible if I stuck with *Lord of the Flies* for the next eight weeks, or if I had been forced to follow a scripted curriculum that was not designed with any of our students in mind. At the very least, it would have been a lot harder. What did we do instead? What was our new game plan? The general adjustment was simple:

1. **We dedicated the first ten to twenty minutes of every class period to independent reading.**
2. **Following independent reading, our classroom came alive as we engaged in five to ten minutes of authentic writing, reflection, conversation, and community-building.**

Write
Reflect
Analyze
Participate

At the time, there was no name for this powerful post-reading routine, but I eventually developed an acronym (because educators love acronyms and we don't have enough of them). Daily time to **Read** and **WRAP . . . which stands for Write, Reflect, Analyze, and Participate.** *Let's **wrap** up our reading. Let's talk and **(w)rap** about our books.*

Being literate is not simply about reading in a vacuum; it's about reading and thinking and discussing and applying what we've read to our own lives and experiences. This is how WRAP has boosted independent reading in my classrooms. It makes reading a community-building, life-enhancing experience.

One of the reasons schools have moved away from independent reading is the lack of accountability. Students "drop everything and read" while the teacher grades papers. The reading eventually ends (assuming it even began), and the class moves on to the next activity. There are no opportunities to dig deeper or to check for understanding. When "independent reading" looks like this, I understand why schools abandon the practice. That's why the WRAP piece is so critical.

WRAP is where we dig into meaningful writing and analysis. Where we review conflict and point of view and setting. Where we write book reviews, alternate endings, and author letters. Where we craft sonnets and create beautiful one-pagers. Where we appreciate author's craft and gain inspiration for our own stories. Where we learn, once and for all, the difference between a comma, colon, and semicolon. Where we collaborate with classmates and engage in authentic conversations. Where we reflect on our progress and set goals for the future.

Was this revised game plan perfect? Of course not. Was our revised game plan better than the initial one, the one with the kids on the island? Without question. Our Read and WRAP routine was, and remains, one of our most powerful practices because it allows us to do the following:

- Honor the interests and needs of each individual reader
- Build community and create a sense of belonging
- Increase engagement and investment (and ultimately outcomes)
- Hold students "accountable"
- Begin each class period smoothly and calmly
- Establish credibility and earn students' trust and respect
- Serve as a positive reading role model

Furthermore, our Read and WRAP routine helps students:

- Process what they are reading and develop "troubleshooting" strategies
- Deepen their understanding of the text, world, and self

- Get more "reps" and practice with key literacy skills and standards
- Give and receive book recommendations
- Set and achieve personally meaningful goals
- Take charge of their reading and learning
- Experience success and build confidence
- Gain inspiration for their own writing
- Think more clearly, critically, and creatively
- Reset, reenergize, and refocus during what is often a grueling school day

Upon reflection, I believe that establishing our Read and WRAP routine in the fall of 2015 was the best pedagogical decision I have ever made. Since then, I have taught in three schools across five grade levels (8th through 12th grade) and two states. I am constantly making adjustments; units get tweaked, added, and removed all the time. However, Read and WRAP remains, and I now have a decade of evidence—attendance, behavior, reading attitude, writing quality, NWEA/MAP growth, ACT scores, and more— to defend the practice.

By prioritizing access, time, choice, and community, by keeping our students at the center, and by trusting the process, we all continue to get a little bit better every day.