

The Standard

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School makes literacy a priority and sees results

Aaron Oppenlaender and Alex Sitnik represent the recent success of Holy Cross Secondary School on this year's provincial standardized Grade 10 literacy test.

Before, literacy skills basically meant checking their e-mail, Facebook or sending a text message to the teens.

But after a school year of being immersed in all things reading and writing in nearly every class at Holy Cross, Alex, 15, has become an avid novel reader. Aaron, 16, picks up a newspaper every day.

Both say their writing skills have improved.

"Everything we do in all our classes, even art, everything is writing," said Alex, a St. Catharines resident. "The school really gets us to write more and to focus on that. It's important."

Says Aaron of Niagara-on-the-Lake: "Literacy is definitely big in school."

This year, a whopping 95 per cent of Grade 10 students at Holy Cross passed the provincial standardized test in reading and writing known as the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. It's a major jump from the school's 82 per cent pass rate in 2007.

Both of Niagara's main school boards saw improvements.

Across the Niagara Catholic District School Board, 88 per cent of students who wrote the test this year passed, up one percentage point from 2008.

In the public District School Board of Niagara, 83 per cent were successful, up one percentage point from last year.

Across the province, 85 per cent of students passed.

But a few schools, such as Holy Cross, which had more students pass than any other Catholic high school in Niagara, showed marked improvement.

Erin Farkas, program chair of special education and co-chair of Holy Cross' literacy program, said the entire staff is committed to improving literacy.

Teachers have taken on a multi-prong approach, including everything from having students write mock literacy tests to after-school reading and writing improvement sessions to 20 minutes of daily required reading to incorporating literacy skills into every subject — even math and gym.

"We're not just trying one thing, we're going to do everything," Farkas said.

“We know that it makes a huge difference. It’s really self esteem for students. They feel fantastic once they know that they’ve passed.”

Test scores also soared this year at St. Catharines Collegiate.

The number of students who passed the test was 76 per cent this year compared to 62 per cent in 2008.

It’s the first time the downtown school has broken the 70 per cent barrier since 2004.

“That’s a huge gain,” said principal Tracy Sacco. “Our school has really struggled with literacy results in the past.”

To get there, the school’s been working to create a focused literacy teaching approach geared to different types of learners, Sacco said.

For example, helping English as Second Language students improve their writing by using graphic organizers or visual cues to help them gather their thoughts to write a sentence.

Carol Germyn, superintendent of school support services for the DSBN, said schools are pinpointing the individual literacy skills of every student and using teaching strategies to help each one.

The public board has been instructing teachers on new ways to bolster literacy, and it’s working, said Germyn said.

“I think schools are trying to put the supports in place for all students,” Germyn said.

In a press release, Niagara Catholic District School Board director John Crocco credited the implementation of board learning strategies with improving literacy.

The test was administered in April by The Education Quality and Accountability Office, an independent agency of the Ontario government in charge of administering province wide literacy and math assessments.

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