

STEAM-POWERED READERS

A literacy love story in Tennessee

By **Ryan B. Jackson**



Ryan B. Jackson

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As a former English teacher, I'm of the belief that literacy serves as the indelible cornerstone of a healthy education. Recently, however, my role shifted, as I am now the executive lead principal of the Mt. Pleasant Arts Innovation Zone in Tennessee, the United States' first pre-K-12 STEAM campus.

Fortunately, my passion for literacy and the universal themes unearthed through a rich, English language arts curriculum still lie at the heart of my forward-thinking, innovative vision for education. The vision I'm referring to relates to the exponential rise of the STEAM movement.

For those unfamiliar with one of education's most recent zeitgeist-inducing initiatives, STEAM is the synthesis of science, technology, engineering/English, and math (STEM) coupled with the integration of arts across all subject areas. This consortium of content serves as an experiential learning model. Students no longer learn in silos but instead are empowered to take control of their own learning through means such as project-based learning (PBL). In the Mt. Pleasant Arts Innovation Zone, affectionately known as The Mount, STEAM is reimagining the education paradigm—and it all ties to the foundation of literacy.

The art antidote

Before we knew to add, before we thought to write, before we had the capacity to control fire, we had art. Our primordial instinct for the aesthetic traces the human race back to its origin. This innate sense to artistically create has long fascinated and propelled us toward something greater outside of ourselves. Even as early as the middle Paleolithic ages, when humans spent the majority of their time desperately hunting for food, with every move predicated on survival, even then we found time to make art.

The argument that art is an integral part of human existence, that its imperative nature is seamlessly woven into our neuro-fabric, is virtually no argument at all. We're innately artists. History suggests it, and our continued attraction to symmetry, abstraction, color swatches, and storytelling confirms it.

Why then has our current educational paradigm positioned art and its offshoots near the bottom rung of our learning ladder, where too often we're



Pictured are students and educators at the STEAM-based Mt. Pleasant Arts Innovation Zone

expected to step over this seemingly superfluous “elective”?

Education’s obsession with data and the resulting data-driven leadership and data-driven instruction has culminated in a data-driven culture where anything not quantifiable is tossed to the wayside, further solidifying our throwaway culture while systematically eroding any and all traces of humanity-based learning. Though we’ve talked at length about dispelling the standardization doctrine that has consumed the better part of a generation, we’ve yet to fully face the specific fallout and collateral damage.

The next step in our counter-programming offensive is to reposition subjects, such as art, and integral practices, such as reading, back to education’s foreground. How else will we regain the trust of students who have grown to loathe education’s current “learn this or else” landscape? How else will we paint joy back into schools that have gradually morphed into the antithesis of fun? How will this coveted data fit into a reimagined educational hierarchy with art and literacy serving as the thread connecting students’ innate desire to create to society’s incessant demand for imaginative innovation?

Rise of the reading renaissance

Education itself is changing. The shift is happening right before our very eyes, and it’s playing out in schools and classrooms across the planet. See, no matter how hard the forces that be hold on to the archaic model of education—where groupthink and standardization rule the day—there’s an even more powerful force surging

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headlong into education’s new frontier, already carving the proverbial path for a new generation of inspired readers, thinkers, and creators. Whether it’s the advanced momentum of cutting-edge technology, practical approaches like PBL, or STEAM revolutionizing the connection between student and curriculum, this bona fide shift takes the shape of each and every student who steps foot into a classroom searching for something new. This overwhelming force is slowly but surely causing educators everywhere to rethink what a great education looks like. It’s forcing us to analyze our teaching styles, redefine our measurement criteria, and—above all—listen.

A significant part of this listening has led us back to the bedrock of education, where literacy and the freedom it provides is once again inspiring a new generation of learners, thinkers, problem solvers, and creators. Specifically, the STEAM model positions literacy and the emphasis on reading as the proverbial conduit between subject areas—embedding the practices wherever possible, from geometry to geography, history to health science.

This new approach to reading will not only inspire a generation of voracious readers, who see reading as more than merely a compliance task or a means to a test-related end, but also rekindle both the creative, storytelling flame and the knowledge-power ethos that has escaped

education under certain standards and assessments.

Literacy in action

To fully paint the picture of how STEAM is empowering our reading renaissance, look no further than The Mount’s #FitLit PBL. This one-of-a-kind project asks our English language arts teachers to collaborate with our physical education teachers in order to measure the impact of physical fitness on cognitive processing, specifically reading Lexiles. The #FitLit project asks students to take pre- and post-reading Lexile tests, while in between students also get baseline health data (heart rate, blood pressure, weight, etc.) before developing an individualized workout plan that they’ll implement and record in their exercise and reading journals over the course of nine weeks.

Talk about a juxtaposition. Students are now learning the correlation between physical and mental health and are using reading as the academic earmark. This holistic approach to education is the hallmark of the STEAM revolution and further emphasizes the imperative need for and power of reading across all curriculums.

Thus, our teachers no longer solely view themselves as content-area teachers but as problem-solving specialists, inspiring a new generation of well-read thinkers. ■

