

To the instructional leaders at KHS,

There are big changes ahead—such hopeful possibilities—in the move to a student-centered, personalized approach to teaching and learning. Leadership requires forward thinking and a thick skin, and I appreciate what each of you is sacrificing to move KHS forward. Thank you.

It was strange, however, “to witness Reading Break seemingly washed down the drain at our last faculty meeting,” Ed said to me after. “At least three different leaders on stage spoke in terms or tones that Reading Break was either not a good thing, or that it was probably going away, with a “no great loss” tenor in their presentation. I was flabbergasted to hear teachers/educational leaders talk about reading in such dismissive terms. I view Reading Break as one of our school's treasures.”

I write this letter to you hoping you will reconsider what this move will cost our students.

Engaging adolescents in reading seems simple, and I’ve made the mistake of selling it that way: a simple formula of time, access to books, and talk (conferring) with students, in order to get teachers engaged in trying. The rewards of seeing unlikely readers deeply engaged in books is a small miracle. I always hope that when teachers experience those miracles they will then seek them for every student. Every year.

What is easier is to stop trying. To pretend it’s just not possible. To say that reading break has seen its “hay day,” as if engaging students in reading is just another program we can set aside as we sprint towards the next thing. During Tuesday’s meeting, Chris said reading break is not as effective as we want it to be and I nodded in agreement. The simple truth about the effectiveness of every educational reform, idea, or research-based practice rests on the individual teacher’s commitment to it. Many teachers are not committed to reading break at KHS. We all know this. Our students know this. I realize what it costs to stay committed every day because I have 119 KHS students moving in and out of my classroom, attached to the daily addiction of their technology—sure that reading doesn’t matter. But without reading break, many students will fake read their way through high school.

We imagined reading break as a sacred space where everyone reads, knowing that engaged reading during the school day leads to more reading outside of it. Knowing that every piece of research about college success rests on a volume of independent reading. You probably know that 80% of first generation to college students do not finish. One reason: they are unprepared for the independent reading and writing expectations there. I won’t bore you with research here, but it began 100 years ago and has *never* wavered. “Engaged readers spend 500% more time reading than do their peers who aren’t turned on by books—and all those extra hours inside books they love gives them a leg up in everything that leads to a happy, productive life: deep conceptual understanding about a wide range of topics, expanded vocabulary, strategic reading ability, critical literacy skills, and engagement with the world that’s more likely to make them dynamic citizens drawn into full civic participation.” (Bridges, 2011, “RTI: The Best Intervention is a Good Book”)

The research has never wavered. What wavers is the commitment of a school. What wavers is the commitment of its teachers. We have had extraordinary leadership from Neal on reading break. His commitment of time, budget dollars, and his own Man Group of readers has lit a path for all of us. But he did pass that light on to us.

It will be easier to make reading an option during the proposed flex time—allowing space for those who like to read to do so. Our libraries will become lovely wallpaper, as is true in most schools. We will return to being just another public school that says reading is important, even states it as part of its mission, but allows students to graduate having not read a single book in the four years spent here. It will be hard for me to let go of the belief that through individual daily miracles we were stronger than that here at KHS—better than that—and we believed it was important enough to commit to making it a part of every student’s life in high school.

Do we have the professional stamina to engage with this issue again, knowing it will take an extraordinary effort to turn this school back on a path towards engagement for every student during reading break?

What could possibly be more important?

With respect,
Penny Kittle

From redesignU.org and their research into the transition from high school to college, completed in 2015:

