



Great Neck Public Schools Office of Instruction

What Students Should Read:

Supporting Secondary Literacy at Home

By Dr. Stephen C. Lando, Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Education
with English Department Heads

Gabriel Carras, Michael Greenberg, David Manuel, and Kathlyne Snyder

What SHOULD our students read? This recurring question has been raised at a variety of District meetings. Parents at one Great Neck secondary school noted that, “There are specific reading requirements that many fine private schools have. [Given that] we view ourselves as their equal, what kinds of books are they reading on a secondary level, and are we reading similar literature?”

The Great Neck Public Schools recommend that students spend significant time reading outside of the school setting. And what should they read? Students should read any appropriate material that interests them! They will gain the most from reading fiction and non-fiction that is both challenging and appealing. Among their choices, they should consider classic works with timeless themes. However, frequent, sustained reading in any format (including electronic) is truly beneficial (Wolk). Also, reading literature that may eventually be part of their studies is perfectly acceptable; we all gain deeper understandings when we revisit complex texts.

Yes, we rightfully view ourselves as the equal of many private schools but, in fact, we serve a much broader population with vastly different interests and needs much more effectively than any private school might hope to. We also attend to State and Federal mandates which private schools are not obligated to address. None-the-less, a review of their practices provides helpful information for assessing our own approach to literacy.

One might be under the impression that private schools focus on the classics, and to some degree, that is correct. Choate’s 9th grade reading list includes *The Odyssey*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Genesis* and *Exodus* (yes, from the Bible); a British Literature course includes *Beowulf*, selections from *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Hamlet*. Their Comparative Literature course description notes, “Students are exposed to a group of core texts—a Greek tragedy, a Shakespearean tragedy, a major modern novel, and some lyric poetry—in addition to other works drawn from world literature. Exposure to non-American literature is stressed. Individual teachers determine the thematic kinship of the literature to be assigned.” Their Classical Traditions course notes, “Principal works studied include *The Iliad* (excerpts), *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Bacchae*, *The Aeneid* (excerpts), Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and *Hamlet*” (Choate Rosemary Hall). However, according to their web site, the typical English class size is 12 students. Similar works can be found in the course of study at Lawrenceville which also has very small classes and uses a seminar approach (The Lawrenceville School).

Phillips Exeter limits when texts may be introduced and notes that “teachers are not required to teach any of the texts listed....” The school also espouses a range of books including

classics, but not limited to them. Titles range from *Julius Caesar* to *This Boy's Life*, from *To Kill a Mockingbird* to *The House on Mango Street*, and from *Frankenstein* to *Shoeless Joe* and the graphic novel *Maus* (Phillips Exeter Academy).

The approach at Philips-Exeter supports the viewpoint of a *Kappan** article entitled “What **Should** Students Read?” The author states that “schools should assign readings from magazines, graphic novels, newspapers, songs, and other forms of text. When schools broaden the types of reading they assign, they will bring immediacy and spontaneity to students’ learning” (Wolk). Our English departments are following this approach. We recommend that you adopt it as well.

How can you help? Although more easily said than done, let your child’s interests guide you. Those with “tween” and teenagers know questions such as, “What are you interested in reading?” or “How was school today?” are conversation stoppers that invariably receive one word answers. Instead, ask yourself, “Whom will they listen to?” Is there an aunt, uncle, or grandparent with whom they are especially close? These individuals may have their own ideas about books that will interest your child. What’s more, their gift of a book is very likely to be read. Send your child to <http://whatshouldireadnext.com/>. This sponsored website suggests future titles based on inputting the names of books that they have already enjoyed. They may also benefit from visits to the [New York Times Bestsellers List and New York Times Book Review](#) or [The New Yorker](#) . Furthermore, their English teachers are already making suggestions here at school.

Once in your child’s possession, read the books that they read. Whether the *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* series or non-fiction such as Michio Kaku’s *The Physics of the Impossible* (one of my son’s favorites—the universe in eleven dimensions), having a common experience becomes the foundation for future discussion. Once again, avoid conversation stoppers such as, “What did you think about...?” One simple “I don’t get it!” may be all that you need to start them talking. Remember, it’s more important for them to process what they read than for you to venture your opinion.

After reading a common book, one simple “I don’t get it” may be all you need to start your child talking.

Below you will find links to a variety of resources. Consolidated middle and high school reading lists appear first. They represent titles of plays, novels, and non-fiction works from among which teachers (and for independent reading and book clubs, students) choose for school coursework. Among the reasons for the difference between the two lists, it is “essential for [middle school students] to find out what kinds of books they like to read and how to read all kinds of books, whether they choose them or not” (Greenberg). High schools then build upon this prior learning. More specific information and examples of shorter works of literature may be accessed by following the links to each building’s specific English department web pages.

Useful Links

[Consolidated Middle Level Reading List](#)
[Consolidated High School Level Reading List](#)
[English Department Pages Containing Reading Lists](#)
[Great Neck Public Library Reader’s Advisory Page](#)

<http://whatshouldireadnext.com/>
[NY Times Bestsellers List/NY Times Book Review](#)
[The New Yorker](#)

**Kappan’s publisher, Phi Delta Kappa, is a society of professional educators committed to the improvement of teaching and learning.*

Works Cited

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http://www.lawrenceville.org/academics/academic_departments.asp?Dept=English

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