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When I began this mini-grant, my first excursion into the grant process, I was curious to see how the process would unfold. I found it to be both exciting and challenging. My students were very accepting and eager to purchase books of their own choosing. I wanted to find out if students would feel more comfortable reading books they chose. I wanted to see if their comprehension of texts improved with the help of free-read books. Students began and ended this process with a survey about reading and their interests. These surveys helped me guide students in their book choices and see their feelings about reading. Students completed recommendation reports in their books to help other students who might like to read the books. It was great to see several books were read by four or five different students, based solely on the recommendation reports. While students' journal entries about their free read books gave me great information about their texts, my conversations with students were the most productive in seeing how students' free read books were progressing. At first I thought the data collection might be difficult, but once the students began giving me feedback (through surveys, journals, recommendation reports, and conferences), I found that the data collection went very smoothly. The data collection helped me individualize lessons for students and guide them in choosing books they would enjoy.

Students completed a twenty-question survey that I created using Survey Monkey. The results were very interesting and allowed me to guide my students in their choice of books. The first question was: How do you feel about reading? 19.5% hated it, 24.4% thought it was ok once in a while, 41.5% (the majority) liked it sometimes, 9.8% enjoyed it, and 4.9% loved it. Of what the students read, most often they read websites, songs, email/instant messages, and text messages. Students were least likely to read plays, essays, self-help books, inspirational books, and newspapers. This part of the survey helped me in guiding students in

what books to choose. Also, by completing the survey, students became aware of what genres and topics they enjoy (and don't enjoy). The survey asked students to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 10 for their reading confidence. The average score was 7.12. Students felt they were good readers who could understand the material. I asked students to describe themselves as readers, and they used the following descriptors: interested reader, picky reader, bored reader, horrible reader because it's "soo boring", fast reader. When students wrote their favorite books, they included books from elementary school and middle school. Many students loved The Outsiders and several different series (like Bluford High and Crank). 70% of my students thought that "Reading is something you either can or cannot do well" while 30% disagreed. Of 41 students surveyed, 27 stated that English class was the one that did the most reading, 9 stated History, and the rest varied. 41.5% of my students enjoyed reading if it's something they like, and 39% liked reading once in a while. 7.3% loved reading while 12.2% hated it. Another survey question asked students when they read. 53.7% stated they read when they're bored, 41.5% stated that they're forced to read for school, 34.1% stated they read when they want to learn something, and there was a three-way tie of 14.6% who read to escape, read the same thing as their friends, and read to think about something. Students then checked off the genre of reading they enjoy; many of them found they enjoy reading the same genre of books as the genre of TV and movie that they enjoy the most. This helped them in choosing a book they would enjoy. I asked students about their beliefs about reading. Tied for first place (at 34.1%) was that reading is crucial to success and reading is more important now. Students also stated that 56.1% of the time in school they sometimes enjoy what they read. 19.5% of the time they never enjoy their school reading and 17.1% of the time they usually enjoy their school reading. Students had to evaluate when they began losing interest in reading. The majority of them (36.6%) lost interest in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade, while 22% lost interest in 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Students then had to explain why they lost interest. The vast majority of them stated that their lives had gotten busier and they didn't have time to read. Many stated that the school books got boring and didn't grab their attention. Many also stated that the internet was faster and easier than a book. After that question, students answered a question about their expectations for school reading. Their answers were very closely split between the reading being boring, interesting, and useful. Only 9.8% thought school reading would be difficult. For the final questions, 82.9% of the students stated that they thought they would enjoy a book

they could purchase on their own. This survey confirmed some of the ideas I already had about my students. This survey also let students think about their own reading and interests.

After students completed the survey, I told them about the Connecticut Writing Project's Mini Grant. The students were very excited to learn that they could purchase a book of their own choosing. I gave students several Scholastic Book Club catalogs. Students had hundreds of books from which to choose. Because I had studied these catalogs, I knew the book titles and summaries. I had an idea of which books would match up with which students, based on students' personalities and interests. The majority of students chose their own books individually. A few students asked for advice, and I guided them to books they might like. When I gave the students the Scholastic catalogs, I encouraged the students to read through the summaries of the books and pick books that they might enjoy reading. Students then filled out forms that included the title and author of the book as well as the reason why he or she chose that particular book. Granted, having the books in class for the students to peruse would have been helpful, but the students did a nice job reading the summaries. Many of the students gave the same reasons for choosing the books. These include:

- It seemed interesting (to me)
- Looks cool
- Movie connection (saw movie or movie trailer)
- Read books by the same author
- Continue reading a series
- Can relate to topic and/or characters
- Seems similar to other books read
- Love mystery, suspense, sports (genre)
- Want to find out why it has that title

I was really pleased to see what books the students chose. I think that each student chose a book that fit his or her personality or interests. There were certain

trends in genres students chose: romance, sports, and vampire stories were especially popular. Although some students were disappointed with the reading level, the interest level was high for the vast majority of students.

When the books arrived in the classroom, the students were extremely excited (and so was I)! They couldn't wait to get their hands on them. This was very exciting for me to see. In the thirteen years I have been teaching, I have not ever seen that excitement about reading books. Students had impromptu conversations with their classroom neighbors, showing off their books and explaining why they chose their books. Some students even “called dibs” on being the next person to read a book. That was exciting! As the school year progressed, it was very nice to see how students would recommend books to their peers in an informal manner. They talked about books in conversations, not in class discussion. This was a big event. Normally, students would speak about books at all. I even had other students, who I didn't teach, from the school come by my room to borrow books that their friends recommended. Of course I let them, how could I say no? My students' journal entries helped me see their comprehension of texts and their interest in their choice books. The journal topics I provided were loosely based on Readers' Workshop. Students would sometimes link their free read book back to the content we were studying in class, i.e. character development, theme, symbolism, conflict, etc. Other times, students would write a reaction to the book. These journals were helpful in letting me see the students' comprehension of the text. None of my students had difficulty reading the texts. Several students found their texts to be extremely easy to read, but they still enjoyed the content. I only had a few students who did not enjoy reading their books. When they told me this, I immediately encouraged them to order a new book or I guided them to another book they might like. I wanted students to read books they enjoyed, and the students did just that. My impromptu conversations with students or my more formal conferences with students led me to the conclusion that students really enjoyed this activity. They liked picking their own books and having the freedom and independence to do that encouraged the students to read.

When students finished reading their choice books, they completed an anonymous Recommendation Report. This report included:

**Book Title:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Author:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interest :** Very 1 2 3 4 5 Not

**Difficulty:** Easy 1 2 3 4 5 Hard

**Recommend:** Yes! 1 2 3 4 5 No!

**Your recommendation & why:**\_\_\_\_\_

Students completed the report and glued it to the inside cover of the book. About half the students read more than one choice book, and these recommendation reports guided students in their choices. They also gave me an idea of what books were popular, difficult, etc. Students took these mini-reports seriously, because they wanted to let future readers know about the book. I found that most of the reports listed the Interest as # 1 (Very) and the Recommend as #1 (Yes), but the Difficulty was never #5 (Hard), it was usually # 1 (Easy) or #2, rarely # 3 or # 4. Although the difficulty of the text may not have been challenging, the interest level was high. Students enjoyed reading the books, and that was wonderful. Most of these students hesitate to read independently. Perhaps reading a book of their choice will encourage them to continue doing so in the future.

As our school year came to a close, I had students complete a final survey (using Survey Monkey) to evaluate themselves and this activity. About half of my students stated that “sometimes I like reading” while almost one-third stated “it’s ok once in a while”. The remainder of my students were evenly divided between “I hate it” and “I love reading”. Compared to the original survey at the beginning of the year, more students rated reading positively and fewer students rated reading negatively. This was an overall improvement. In one of the first survey questions, students rated their reading ability on a scale of one (horrible) to ten (wonderful), students gave themselves an average of 7.38. This was a slight improvement from their evaluation of themselves in September. At the end of the survey, I asked a similar question, but worded differently. Almost 60% of students thought they were a better reader now than in September. The rest

thought that they were the same. These answers seem to differ, but the overall answer is the same. Students feel better about their reading ability. As a teacher, I saw their reading ability and interest level improve. For future reference, I asked a survey question about the reasons students chose their books. The highest rated reasons were: book looked interesting, subject was interesting, cover looked good, and summary of book (in Scholastic flyer) was appealing. I then asked if students chose a book that they liked. The majority (35.3%) answered “yes, absolutely!” followed by 32.4% answering “yes, it was good”. 17.6% stated “the book was ok”, and the remaining students weren't interested in book or didn't like it. Overall, students enjoyed their books! I asked students how many books they read this year. The average number of books was 4.47. The majority of students (17.6%) admitted to reading only one book this school year. The next highest number of books, two and five, were tied (at 14.7%). Several students admitted that the only book they read this year was the free-read book they were able to purchase through the CWP Mini-Grant. I asked students, “How did you feel about being able to choose your own book?” 85.3% stated that they were pleased. When asked to explain their answer, students overwhelmingly stated that they were happy to be able to choose something they liked rather than having a teacher choose it. Over half the students thought that their choice book was easier to read than their normally assigned school texts. Over 75% of students stated that they would recommend their choice book to someone else. My final question asked students if they would go to a library or book store to choose their own reading book. Over 47% stated yes and over 38% stated maybe. These answers leave me optimistic. It is my hope that, now that students see they have found books they can enjoy independently, that they will go out in search of other books they might enjoy.

Overall, I found the process of the Connecticut Writing Project's Mini-Grant and its results to be extremely informative and enjoyable. I've been teaching for almost thirteen years, and this is my first foray into the world of grants. The positive results from the grant make me see that, besides my everyday efforts in the classroom, grants can help positively support students. Thank you for this opportunity!