

YES! WE DO TEACH SPELLING!

Chances are, many people learned how to spell principal the way I did – ‘*the principal is your PAL.*’ I can still remember my third grade teacher, Mrs. Donhoff, teaching me that little mnemonic device, yet I can’t remember any of the hundreds of words I had to memorize for my weekly spelling test.

Teaching spelling and learning spelling should not be confused with ‘spelling tests.’ Hopefully I can share some information about spelling based on what the research says and the practices Buckner has in place to teach spelling to every student at Buckner.

For those of you who have been at Buckner more than one year, I’m sure you can attest our teachers have abandoned spelling tests. Does this mean that some teachers choose to teach spelling and some do not...that some children are learning to be good spellers and others are robbed of this learning? Absolutely not. Every teacher at Buckner teaches spelling. The only thing that is different is the way spelling is approached now vs. the way most of us were taught spelling in the past. We even assess spelling all time. Every time we look at a student’s writing in the editing phase of writing, we work on spelling. We look to see what students have spelled incorrectly and we work on teaching students how words should be spelled instead. We just don’t do it through a spelling test. (Spelling tests are just that – tests. Spelling tests do not teach spelling.)

Like most parents and teachers, I did a lot of writing in elementary school that involved a lot of copying paragraphs, sentence diagramming, and identifying parts of speech. Spelling instruction was usually done separately and almost always focused on memorizing lists of words that came from an obscure list in a grade level textbook. (By the way, these words lists were developed by textbook writers, not educators.) There seemed to be little connection between effective writing instruction and the spelling words on which we were tested each week.

According to Dr. Richard Gentry, a leading expert in research related to spelling, strong instructional practices are found in classrooms engaged in the spelling process: finding words, inspecting words, mastering words, and developing good spelling habits. (Gentry, 1995) Research on effective writing instruction continually shows that spelling is an integral part of reading and writing. It is the teaching of spelling strategies and specific skills in context that drives the most effective spelling instruction.

Buckner continues to build a culture of writing – a writing culture where students are encouraged to write on topics of interest to them that have a focused purpose to a specific audience. As they work through the writing process, students start with brainstorming (getting their ideas down), drafting (writing the actual piece), revising (adding or deleting details to improve the piece), and then editing. And what does editing involve? Spelling! The results of our students’ performance on the state assessment in the area of on-demand writing provide proof each year. Our fifth graders must compose pieces of writing, independently of teacher input, during a section called “On demand writing”. This portion of the state test assesses student writing by providing students a prompt on which they have to write a well organized piece of writing that attends to purpose, organization and conventions. Conventions is the portion of writing that addresses verb tense, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Based on our results over the years, our students are demonstrating writing knowledge to high levels of proficiency. In 2010, over 82% of our students scored in the proficient/distinguished range. These pieces were written by students who have not had a “formal” spelling test in the years they’ve been at Buckner, yet they have learned out to spell words through word study and the

development of good spelling skills. Teachers continue to focus on the importance of spelling just as they always had: they just eliminated the task of memorizing a list of words from week to week.

As Buckner brings more focus on a school-wide approach to reading instruction, teachers will make a more concerted effort to help students make the reading-writing connection. As students receive reading instruction on phonics, word patterns, vocabulary, word studies, fluency, and comprehension, teachers will also be reiterating spelling strategies.

For students to learn to be successful spellers, there are critical components that must be included in spelling instruction. Look for these components being taught in your child's classroom and take opportunities to reinforce them at home:

- Children must write daily in order to learn to spell. Spelling is a skill of constructing words, not memorizing words.
- Children must read daily. If they read a lot, they will see standard spelling and, with direct instruction given by teachers, begin to apply conventional spelling to their own writing. Better readers tend to be better spellers.
- Children need to learn specific strategies that include:
 - Match sound with letters (especially for young children)
 - Study word and word patterns (word walls, rhyming words, etc.)
 - Learning how a word is used (example – what happens to the meaning of word when *-ed* or *ing* is added)
 - Learning the meaning of a word (example – ‘please’ and ‘pleasant’ have the same vowel combination, even though they are pronounced differently. It’s the meaning that gives you the correct spelling, not the sounds.)
 - Explicit teaching and application of spelling rules in daily reading and writing
 - Learning and applying strategies that writers use as they write, spell, proofread, and edit

So what does this all mean? It means that if your child does not come home with a spelling list to memorize and take a test on Friday, it doesn't mean spelling isn't being taught in your child's classroom. It's evidence that your child's teacher is using best practices in spelling instruction. Your teacher is teaching spelling with an emphasis on spelling strategies and spelling patterns within the context of authentic reading and writing experiences.

So – do we teach spelling at Buckner? Sure we do! Call me if you have any questions.

Lisa Cheek, Principal

References

- Fact sheet about spelling #5: questions and answers about spelling.* CELT, 1991. Revised, 1998. A project sponsored by the Center for the Expansion of Language and Thinking (CELT), c/o CED, 325 E. Southern, Tempe, AZ 85282. CELT Crisis Hotline 602-929-0929.
- Gentry, J.R. (1996). *My kid can't spell!* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- (1995). *Spelling workshop guide.* In *Spell it-write!* Columbus, Ohio: Zaner-Bloser.
- (1987). *Spel...is a four-letter word.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gillet. (1993). *Teaching kids to spell.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Wilde, Sandra. (2004). Spelling: what we still worry about. 2004. *School Talk*, National Council of Teachers of English.