Cultural Literacy Curriculum

The Cultural Literacy curriculum is designed to create citizens who can read critically, are culturally literate, and are able to communicate ideas effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences. The four-year course combines English Language Arts and Social Studies disciplines in a team-teaching, project-based approach designed around thematic units rather than a strictly chronological approach. The curriculum is comprised of English foundation skill sets, while the Social Studies provides the context for applying these reading, writing, and discussion skills. In addition to fiction and nonfiction texts, course reading materials are selected from newspapers, published reports and periodicals, and primary sources such as political speeches and legal documents.

Reading instruction focuses heavily on five key principles:

- It is more important to engage students in reading than it is to teach the literary cannon.
- Course books should foster a high degree of independence and require little to no teacher intervention to engage students or establish basic comprehension.
- Active reading strategies reinforce engagement while emphasizing independence.
- Active reading strategies are most effectively taught with print materials rather than electronic formats.
- Reading groups, shared inquiry discussions, and other opportunities for peer-to-peer discussion foster deeper understanding of a text.

Writing instruction focuses on three key principles:

- Frequent writing reinforces content learning and higher order thinking while teaching students how to communicate through writing.
- Use of a multi-stage writing process with heavy focus on multiple drafts and peer-editing emphasizes the attributes of good writing.
- A writer makes choices based on the interconnectedness of tone, audience, and purpose.
Current Event activities primarily use print copies of newspapers and are governed by four principles:

- Knowledge of one’s community and world events is essential for developing an active sense of citizenship and empowerment.
- Current events serve to widen students’ perspectives and sphere of awareness.
- The application of active reading strategies, such as marking the text, is more feasible and hands-on with the use of print materials.
- Print materials help remediate reading readiness and develop literacy skills that students may not receive without school intervention or primarily through electronic texts.

Students who complete four years of Cultural Literacy will be prepared to participate in the world around them while understanding different perspectives in relation to his/her own. This is represented in the culmination of the curriculum, which is the Independent Learning Model of senior year when students engage in individualized reading and formal discussions exploring citizenship and social responsibility.

Each year of Cultural Literacy is designed to prepare students for this culminating experience. The freshman year introduces students to discussion and small group protocols, critical reading, and the writing process while examining social themes seen through a focus on the American experience through WW1. The sophomore year continues developing communication and analytical skills while exposing students to socially and culturally significant issues that have shaped present day America. The junior year applies 9th and 10th grade skills and procedures to a global, multi-cultural perspective.

Each year of Cultural Literacy counts as 2 credits -- one for English, and one for Social Studies -- and four credits in each discipline are required for graduation. The Cultural Literacy curriculum is aligned with the Pennsylvania Academic Standards in English Language Arts and Social Studies as well as the Common Core English Language Arts Standards.
9th Grade

The freshman Cultural Literacy course is team-taught as a daily two-hour block class over the course of two trimesters. The combined English and Social Studies curriculum is structured around essential questions in the following thematic units: Education in America, Pittsburgh Neighborhoods (Industrialization), the Clash of Cultures (Native American Experience), and the Clash of Nations (WWI). Students will learn the basic skills necessary to clearly communicate ideas while gaining insight into the forces that shape an individual’s, a community’s, and a country’s identity. Reading instruction focuses on the use of active reading strategies, while writing centers on teaching the basic steps in the writing process and the use of textual evidence through the creation of analytical and reflection pieces. Formal discussion models and a shared inquiry approach are introduced as a vehicle to actively engage students in the exploration of complex themes. The texts used in these units are The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, The Other Wes Moore, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian or Yellow Raft in Blue Water, and selected WWI poetry.

Essential Questions

- What is the role of public education?
- How do your educational values relate to education practices and values of the past and present?
- What is identity, and how is it shaped by environment and the past?
- Who writes history and how do recorded viewpoints shape collective identity?
- How do innovations and social progress affect traditions?
- How are push and pull factors related to social change and community identity?
- How do we draw the line between “us” and “them”?
- How does violence or conquest affect the quality of life of the survivors?
- What is the nature of power?
- When, if ever, is war justified?
- What is worth fighting for?

By the end of 9th Grade Cultural Literacy, students will be able to:

- Write a design plan for a fictional charter school reflecting educational values and addressing current issues in public education
- Describe a Pittsburgh neighborhood’s identity and the factors that shape it
- Synthesize main ideas and details from multiple Pittsburgh Post-Gazette articles into an informative essay using MLA citations
- Use writing process to submit a “This I Believe” narrative essay about an essential question
10th Grade

The sophomore Cultural Literacy course is team-taught as a daily two-hour block class over the course of two trimesters. In addition to civics, the combined English and Social Studies curriculum is structured around essential questions in the following, thematic units: America between the Wars, WWII and the Holocaust, America and the Cold War, Activism and Social Change. Students will learn the basic skills necessary to analyze the relationship of individuals and society while refining critical reading and formal writing skills. Reading instruction continues to focus on active reading while increasing the focus on textual analysis, and writing instruction uses the focus on the writing process to increase students’ awareness of content development and style. The texts used in these units are The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Their Eyes Were Watching God or The Ways of White Folks; Night; The Catcher in the Rye; and The Secret Life of Bees, The Things They Carried, or The Autobiography of Malcolm X.

Essential Questions

- What does it mean to be an American?
- What is the American Dream?
- How do people deal with the unimaginable?
- How does the use of language affect meaning?
- How do changes in society affect individuals?
- How do people effect changes in society?

By the end of 10th Grade Cultural Literacy, students will be able to:

- Synthesize main ideas and details from multiple Pittsburgh Post-Gazette articles into an opinion essay using MLA citations
- Write an essay using literary terms to communicate analysis of a text’s central theme
- Evaluate America’s involvement in WWII
- Analyze and evaluate an American protest movement from the 1960’s
11th Grade

The junior Cultural Literacy course is team-taught as a daily two-hour block class over the course of two trimesters. The combined English and Social Studies curriculum is structured around essential questions in the following thematic units: Diversity and Africa, Religion and the Middle East, Revolution and Latin America, and Systems of Belief and Asia. Students will apply the foundation skills and examine other cultures’ and nations’ social structures and issues in order to challenge ethnocentric perspectives while gaining insight into global cultures different from the American experience. Because the reading and writing processes are in place after the previous two years, the focus is on increasing sophistication and higher order thinking, such as the use of persuasive techniques, rather than the acquisition of new skills. The texts used in these units are *The New York Times*, *Tsotsi*, *The Kite Runner* or *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, and *The Tao of Pooh*.

**Essential Questions**

- What are the benefits and challenges of diversity?
- What makes an ideal society?
- What are your personal core beliefs, and how do they compare with Eastern Philosophy?
- How does globalization affect cultures, economy, and international relations?
- What role does America play in other areas of the world?
- How might individuals and nations atone for the mistakes they have made in the past?
- What can we do to improve cooperation in the world?

By the end of 11th Grade Cultural Literacy, students will be able to:

- Synthesize main ideas and details from multiple *New York Times* articles into an opinion essay using MLA citations
- Use persuasive techniques in a multimedia public service announcement promoting a local non-profit organization working to address social issues
- Write a genre study examining magic realism in literature
- Evaluate and analyze personal belief system and communicate insights through multimedia and written formats
12th Grade

The senior Cultural Literacy course is enacted through two distinct, but thematically linked, courses: Modern Literature and Politics and Civics, each a two trimester course involving weekly lectures, two weekly seminars, small study group experiences, and independent work.

The Modern Literature course is designed to further prepare students for the reading and writing tasks they will encounter in their specific post high school plans. The course addresses the skills necessary for each student’s differentiated needs as determined by their post-graduation plans. Rather than working from a list of pre-determined reading selections, multiple texts are chosen based on students’ interests and academic needs. Reading lists are chosen around the themes selected to compliment the Politics and Civics course work and the essential questions. Texts are purchased for students as consumable print material to allow increased sophistication in the application of the active reading skills (underlines and notation, etc.) emphasized in the reading instruction throughout grades nine through eleven.

The Politics and Civics course uses a formal discussion model and the foundation skills from the previous three years of Cultural Literacy to examine the ideas of prominent thinkers around the concepts implied by the essential questions. Course readings expose students to philosophical perspectives while encouraging the development and expression of personal belief systems as platforms for entering post high school life. The course uses selections from these texts: Bill Moyer’s: Values in American Thought and Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers.

Essential Questions

- What gives purpose and meaning to human life?
- What is an individual’s responsibility to society?
- What is human excellence?

By the end of 12th Grade Cultural Literature, students will be able to:

- Generate and communicate deep understanding of a text’s themes in relation to his/her own life and American/Global society with minimal assistance from the teacher
- Articulate a text’s relevance to post high school plans
- Communicate a personal definition of citizenship and implement an action plan demonstrating citizenship in action
- Actively participate in formal discussions to collaboratively increase understanding and to formulate personal answers to the essential questions