

PCS Building Wings Readers Theater

This is a student presentation of the Don Johnston's story as told in his book, *Building Wings*. The students read the book and shared their connection to it by participating in the reader's theater and other activities that were involved. They shared the book with classmates and teachers and it allowed the students to explore their own learning style and what works for them. As the project evolved so did the ideas and opportunities for student advocacy. Students came to appreciate what their struggle was, what strategies worked for them, and how to share that with their peers and teachers. By inviting their parents in for the presentation it brought even deeper understanding that was then shared by family members.

The students rehearsed together, helped to create the scenes, and designed the art work. They had a lot of fun and really learned a lot about each other. They realized that they were not alone and that they were all capable students learning in different ways. It was a message they wanted to share with their teachers and would do so by showing their presentation to the Pomfret Community staff.

Students were encouraged to reflect and share those thoughts as they made the connections to Don's story and his message for success. We celebrated our production with a party and the students were presented with Certificates of Achievement at the end of the year Awards Assembly. For most, it was their first awards certificate. They were most surprised to receive their own autographed copy of *Building Wings*, which would be their keepsake and reminder of the successful experience we shared. It was to inspire them to always be their own advocate and strive toward the success they wanted, even if it was difficult at times.

The students, grade five through eight, took ownership of this project and truly started to build their own wings. They have shared the presentation with their classmates. One group of students read the book to their entire class and it prompted discussion and writing prompt about student strengths and learning styles.

Our entire school is excited about our project and it is now the goal of the principal to have every teacher read the book, *Building Wings*. We will be showing our PCS Building Wings Readers Theater to the staff in its entirety when we return in August. What better way to start the school year. I have already talked about doing follow-up in-service about learning styles and classroom accommodations with our principal. I will be team teaching with our 6th grade English teacher who wants to use the presentation and ideas for student writing in her curriculum. It is our goal that our performers become *Building Wings* ambassadors and continue to show their presentation to classes and lead discussions about their experiences. We have only begun our fight!

The students will be anxious to hear results of the contest. They are also really hoping Don Johnston will come and visit Pomfret Community School. They love his book and are using a lot of his material and software to facilitate their own successes in school.

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The Pomfret Community School (PCS) Readers Theater presented the opportunity for our students to explore their own learning style and to understand that all students learn and think differently. We had a lot of fun and are very excited about our project. This started with a special book, *Building Wings* by Don Johnston. It's a story that everyone can relate to and it's a story about success. At our end of the year Awards Assembly my students were awarded a certificate of achievement and success for their participation in the PCS Building Wings Readers Theater - I Can Do It and You Did. For some, it was the first award they had ever received. Our principal commented to me that this was a group of students who never get any recognition.

I have been a special education teacher for thirty years and I would have to say that doing the readers theater project this spring has been a high point in my career. It started with an idea, then a discussion, and it began. It seemed to be an ever evolving process and I like to think it is just the beginning of the flight and that my students have truly started to build their own wings.

My vision for this project was that it would start with the students and then be shared with their teachers. It would be a way for the students to offer insight to their teachers and would help them understand those struggling to accept themselves and their differences, that as teachers we would also accept and be there to connect them to the learning process and give our students the tools they will need to be successful.

We were fortunate to be introduced to Don Johnston's company about three years ago as we launched into the use of technology in our special education program at Pomfret Community School. Since then we have been using the software and materials with great success and have had the pleasure of visits and in-service by Kevin Johnston. On one of those visits my students had the opportunity to speak with Kevin and he shared with us that his father was in the process of writing a book to tell about his school experience. Kevin told us that he heard his father pacing the floor at night as he worked to put his story into words because his father had struggled in school and that he did not learn to read until ninth grade. I waited anxiously for the book to come into print because I had a particular student that I knew should read his book. I ordered the book, and it was quickly read by that student. Since then I have shared the book with many students and they in turn have shared it with their peers. I have had parents, teaching assistants and teachers read the book. It still amazes me to see the individual responses to Don's story, *Building Wings*.

When I saw your contest offer I thought, what an opportunity. I discussed ideas with my teaching assistants in our grade five through eight resource room. We started a Building Wings bulletin board and everyone who read the book signed it. We posted key ideas from the book and our students posted their responses. It showcased students' work, Building Wings book reports, letters and accomplishments. It became a graffiti success board. We could not pass the few copies of the book around fast enough. Students would take it home and read it in an evening! My sixth grade student told her eighth grade sister that she never saw her read a whole book before! It brought tears to one of my student's parent's eyes. She really thought it would be important to include the parents perspective in this and she believes that students want to come to school to learn in spite of their

difficulties and that teachers need to appreciate that these students are not doing what they do to be difficult. It is hard to watch your child feel so much angst about going to school each and every day. She is also a teaching assistant in our resource room and became the inspiration for the presentation that we would embark upon. Her creativity and enthusiasm facilitated the entire production.

We presented the idea to our students, resource room grade five through eight, and those that were really interested became involved. I had a group of fifth graders who read the book with our fifth grade teaching assistant and then shared it with their class for their book report. The entire class heard the story and the response was pretty revealing. Their classroom teacher launched a discussion and followed up with a writing prompt that led the students to explore their own strengths and what works for them. As this fifth grade teacher shared in our presentation, the important thing was that everyone, even the most capable students, has had a “Mrs. Arns experience” at some point.

I gave careful consideration to the presentation and tried to match students to the chapter and part in the script that would be most fitting for them. I attempted to give everyone that read the book, and seemed to have a special reaction to it a part. We really did involve a diverse group of learners across three grade levels. We rehearsed the script and they added their input. The goal was to create our own readers’ theater. Credit is due to the School District 54 in Schaumburg, Illinois for sharing their original script. I thought about how we were going to create our own presentation and showcase our students. So we went through the script and planned the scenes and pictures that would depict each chapter and the performers. We had a few artists that created the back drop for a lot of the scenes which included the picture of our own Pomfret Community School. It really became a team effort and the students continued to have input. They came up with the few props we used and had fun dressing up Mrs. Arns! It was exciting to see them become so involved.

Our technology people at school helped out a great deal and introduced us to Photo Story. We took digital pictures and then uploaded them and recorded the script to the background. The students passed the mike to each other and the story unfolded. We inserted the student responses from our bulletin board at key points in the story: My Secrets to Surviving in the Classroom, What Works for Me, and My Successes. We also included all of our staff that work with these students and became involved in our production. At one point, our sixth grade teaching assistant was Don’s father and later read Don’s vision. Julia’s teaching assistant played Mrs. Tedesco. It was the perfect part for her. Julia wanted *Building Wings* for Christmas this past winter! Our seventh and eighth grade special education teacher read the introduction as Don. I had the opportunity to share my thoughts about Don’s book at the beginning of our presentation.

The project just kept growing. One day I had an end of the year PPT for Nick and he had read Don’s book and after the first chapter told me that it was his favorite book. Nick had done a timeline book report on *Building Wings* and used his artwork from that to design our invitation and cover for our presentation. He was also one of our artists for the backdrops. His mother had read the book and we invited her down to see what we were doing. She thought it was great and I asked her if she would be a part of it. She was somewhat hesitant, but said that she would do it for her son. She said that if he could do it she needed to. She also had struggled in school and told me that by doing this she would not be letting them win. She went home that night to think about what she would say and

Came back the next day to share her thoughts as a part of our production. The day that we highlighted our presentation at the staff meeting she came and she told me that she was sitting in a room full of teachers and was really facing her enemies!

Our readers' theater production became a way to illustrate the whole story from student to special education teacher to parent to teacher to principal to a learning community. It was a way to share Don's vision. It let students advocate for themselves and demonstrate the importance of working as a team so that every student experiences success in school. Every teacher should be a Mrs. Tedesco at some point in their career for at least one student in their journey through school.

The students really enjoyed our project and it was nice to see the connections they made with each other. I think they came to realize and believe that they weren't alone. For many, it offered a sense of belonging and acceptance. They gained new respect for each other and truly became more supportive of each other. One of my students wrote in his fifth grade reflections writing prompt, "The thing I liked the most this year was the *Building Wings* project because it was a lot of fun, and I got to spend a lot of time with my friends that I usually don't get to during the day because they're in different classes. It was fun to show it to all the fifth grade classes because they got to see what we did!" My goal is that these students will become Building Wings ambassadors next year. They would be available to show our presentation to many different classes and participate in a follow up discussion. They will continue to advocate for themselves as they also help other students to do so.

We showcased our presentation with a glimpse of our readers' theater at an end of the year staff meeting and received great reviews. With support from my principal and special education director, we had a premiere showing of our presentation for the students and their parents. The students sent invitations, and we had a remarkable turn out. It was a wonderful evening and it was pretty incredible. We had lots of parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters there. The students were so proud of what they had accomplished and pleased to share it with their families. They were beaming as they saw themselves in the presentation. The parents were so proud of their kids and so appreciative. It brought people together and made me realize that we have that support daily, but for these families it is not always there. Here was another part of the advocacy, the parent component. Again, we were a diverse group that night and yet there was a common connection that we all felt and applauded. We cut the cake and the students served their parents. Many had brought a dessert to share that this offered a time for people to mingle and meet. I presented each student with their own autographed copy of *Building Wings* and they were surprised and thrilled. My message to them was that this was a very special book and that they should treasure it and let it always remind them of our PCS Readers Theater experience and the success it brought. They should continue to believe in themselves and know that they can do it, even when it seems difficult. They needed to be their own advocate and continue to be as successful as they were now.

My principal graciously offered to reimburse me for the books for the students and also wanted to purchase enough copies for a classroom set for our school. She said she would like to show our presentation in its entirety at our first staff meeting in August and that she would like all of the teachers to read the book. I told her that I would like to follow up with some in-service about different learning styles and classroom modifications and accommodations. I believe it is our role as educators to help our

students have successful learning experiences. Success does build success. I wish that every teacher would believe and honor that. To this end, we will continue to share our presentation.

This project clearly demonstrates our resource room students' and staff's connection to Don's book and their commitment to Don's vision. Our Pomfret Community School's Building Wings Readers Theater let students build their own wings and share their own experiences. Our flight has just begun and we look forward to the journey.

I want to thank Don Johnston and his company for the opportunity to embark on this project. Don, your book has been such an inspiration and has touched so many of us. I am especially grateful to you for telling your own story and sharing it with us. In all my years and experiences this has been the most amazing and rewarding venture. My students and their families would love for you to come and visit us at Pomfret Community School and I extend that invitation to you. I also know that we are curious about your sequel and looking forward to it!

Thank you,

Linda Bates