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An Interview with Alice Ensley: District Literacy Coordinator at Dalton County Schools

Dalton County is an ethnically and language-diverse school district with the majority of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Alice Ensley is a Dalton County Curriculum Specialist who has been recognized for her leadership in literacy education, particularly in regard to facing the challenges of the Covid-19 virus.

Tovey: Alice, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. As you know, you were identified as one of Georgia's leaders in literacy for the work you have done with digital content in your school district. Can you please begin by explaining your title, current role, and education experience, along with an overview of the demographics, funds of knowledge, and challenges within Dalton and Whitfield County?

Ensley: My name is Alice Ensley and I am the Curriculum Specialist for Literacy and Social Studies along with Jennifer Hastings. I work most closely with grades K-5 and Jennifer works with grades 3-8. Jennifer and I are responsible for curriculum work such as pacing, standards based report cards, and common assessments. We also work with our school-based instructional coaches and provide professional learning to our teachers. This year, the focus of our work has been overseeing the creation of digital content in literacy and social studies.

I am in my 32nd year of teaching for Dalton Public Schools. My EdS is in Curriculum and Instruction. I have trained as a District Literacy Trainer and Literacy Coach from Lesley University with Irene Fountas.

Dalton Public School serves 7,903 students. 70% are Hispanic, 20% White, 5% Black, 2.5% Asian, and 2.6% other. Over the years, our student enrollment has changed as our city has grown. Not only has our enrollment increased, but it also reflects the growing diversity and downward economic shift in our community. Today, 75 percent of our

students qualify for free or reduced lunch, come from 43 countries and represent 22 native languages. At the same time, we have a nationally recognized high school by *US News & World Report* and the first Georgia Department of Education STEM Certified school north of metro Atlanta. Our elementary schools offer dual language programs in Spanish and German. While the shift in demographics and economics is certainly a challenge, our focus has remained on helping all students achieve their highest potential.

Tovey: This has probably been the most challenging year ever for teachers. What have you seen to be some of the biggest challenges with the teachers you support as a result of the Covid-19 situation?

Ensley: I feel the biggest challenge has been the constant change and uncertainty. I have found that elementary teachers are planners and doers, and this year they had to begin with so many unknowns. Our teachers had to learn to use a digital platform that was somewhat unfamiliar to them, create learning environments that were new and different, and navigate cleaning protocols, temperature checks, and quarantines. And they, and their families, were going through the same pandemic!

Tovey: Please explain some of the ways that you were able to support your teachers in literacy instruction during this time.

Ensley: Our district was fortunate to have already begun a 1:1 digital device rollout prior to the pandemic. We had already experimented with digital learning days as well. In March, when schools closed, our team of Instructional Coaches and Instructional Technology Specialists began creating digital content for our students. We had a few days to get ahead of our teachers and students and we paced out the remainder of the year and created lessons for that content.

When it became evident that we would need to continue digital learning in the fall, we met as a team and redesigned our digital platform. We wanted to create digital content that was like the instruction in the classroom. We wanted students to have a grade-level minilesson that was standards-based and taught by our teachers. We wanted students to have opportunities to meet in small groups and to practice skills independently. We thought it was important to include review and extension opportunities. Finally, we wanted to create parent resources, as we knew parents would be instrumental in the success of our students. We knew that district pacing would be important due to the fact that students would most likely be coming in and out of face-to-face and digital instruction.

We formed a team of Instructional Coaches and experienced teachers to begin creating videos of the reading, writing, and word study minilessons. Classroom teachers then could add their own application and practice activities to meet the needs of their students. We have continued this all year, creating digital lessons and assessments for both face-to-face (if needed) and digital learning.

Tovey: What accomplishment or accomplishments regarding digital literacy content are you most proud of?

Ensley: I am most proud of the hard work of our Instructional Coaches and teachers who have helped with this digital build. This work was done in addition to their other responsibilities, but they have persevered because we know that this is what is best for our teachers and students. This is what we call the Dalton Difference!

I am excited that we have these lessons for future digital learning needs but also for professional learning. These video lessons have also been a great support for our newer teachers who have not had as much

professional learning in literacy as we have been able to provide in the past.

Tovey: How are you able to measure how effective these initiatives have been?

Ensley: We have received positive feedback from parents and teachers but we will need to gather more feedback as the year ends. We will also want to survey students in order to measure engagement and effectiveness. We have looked at reading and writing assessments throughout the year but at this time, it is difficult to determine the factors that may be contributing to, or hindering, that growth. Hopefully, our end of year assessments will help us know the impact of our work and our next steps.

Tovey: What do you see as lingering effects or future effects on literacy education on the Dalton students and teachers as a result of the Covid-19 situation? What do you have in mind for combatting those challenges?

Ensley: I hope there will be positive effects from all of this. For instance, I hope our students realize how much their community and teachers care about their health, their well-being, and their academic growth. As for challenges, I worry about those students who were not able to come to school and who might not have had enough support at home. I hope we will give ourselves, and our students, grace and time to assess where we all are when we return and that we will take the time to meet the needs of our students and teachers.

As we speak, we are discussing ways to begin to address these needs. One way we are thinking about helping both our students and our teachers who missed professional learning opportunities this year, is to have a clinical experience this summer. Students will come in for

specialized tutoring and the teachers will stay for discussion, learning, and planning led by our coaching team.

Tovey: A lot of our readers are aspiring or current leaders in literacy. What advice do you have for them regarding facing literacy challenges either now or in the future?

Ensley: One thing I have learned in my 33 years of teaching is that there will always be challenges in education and especially in the area of literacy education. I encourage teachers to continue to read, learn, and perfect their craft. Programs do not teach children to love reading and writing, teachers do. The best investment is always teacher expertise!

Tovey: Is there anything else you like to add?

Ensley: I want to thank all of the educators this year who rose to the challenge and continued to educate the students of Georgia, whether face-to-face or virtually. I hope everyone will have an opportunity to rest, reflect, and renew as we begin to think about the 21-22 school year!

Tovey: Thank you so much for sharing your expertise and ideas with us, Alice. The GJL readers will really appreciate getting the inside scoop on a Georgia literacy leader.