

Teaching kids to speak up

Curriculums emphasize importance of mastering oral presentations

BY MATT ALDERTON

Each year, Jennifer Criss gives a speech in front of her sixth-grade students. She clings to the podium, avoids eye contact, sways nervously and plays with her hands. *Um, and, but* and *like* are her four favorite words. In short, she does everything she's not supposed to do. On purpose.

Criss, chair of the language arts department at South Middle School in Arlington Heights, is introducing her students to the art of public speaking.

"People fear public speaking more than they fear death," Criss says, which is why she and teachers across the country are making public speaking a central fixture of their curriculums. Reading and writing remain a key focus of the classroom, but teachers increasingly are stressing speaking and listening as valuable learning tools and the keys to a successful future.

"Oral speaking skills are essential for effective interviews and presentations, besides allowing a person to be engaging during normal daily discourse," says Dan Brace, principal of Lincoln Junior High School in Naperville.

From kindergarten on up, kids are learning to talk their way to the top.

Kindergarten-second grade

Even among knee-high desks, crayons and glue sticks, public speaking is a skill of the utmost importance.

"Public speaking is an important skill we all need," says Melinda Orzoff, head of the lower school, grades K-4, at Roycemore School in Evanston. "It needs to be taught at a young age so there is a comfort level that is established."

Show and tell, along with informal reports on themselves, their families or storybooks, are all ways teachers say they expose even the youngest kids to the experience of speaking in front of group.

"Our children really start to write reports and start to share them with their class as early as first grade," says Terry Kowalski, principal of Kirby Elementary in Tinley Park. His students do plenty of public speaking. Every day a student delivers the morning announcements in front of a camera that feeds to TV monitors throughout the school.

By second grade, students at many schools begin receiving more formal instruction. Kowalski's second-graders, for instance, learn about maintaining eye contact. The second-graders at Elmwood School in Naperville partici-

pate each week in "Friday oral language." Teacher Margo Toth says her students start the year speaking informally on topics such as hobbies and move on to slightly more formal topics that require research, such as the life of a president.

grades learn to use note cards and how to speak loudly, clearly and slowly in front of a group. Most schools have "book buddy" programs where older students read out loud to younger ones, giving them informal practice speaking to an audience. Older kids,

kids speaking for longer periods of time on more formal topics.

"As the grade levels go on, the expectations get higher and higher," Kowalski says.

Sixth-eighth grade

Middle school is like a boot camp for public speaking education. Many schools offer speech, drama and foreign language classes, which focus almost exclusively on developing students' oral abilities, while national learning standards outline the integration of public speaking into the coursework for most core subjects.

Middle schoolers move beyond book reports and informal presentations to speeches and debates. They learn about different types of speeches—extemporaneous, persuasive, demonstrative, informative—and have the opportunity to deliver them. Students at South Middle School are required to give four speeches a year, one every quarter. Eighth-graders, Criss says, write graduation speeches, the best of which are delivered at the end of the year. High school, college and career become educational focal points for middle schoolers, teachers say, and oral communication is stressed as a necessary skill for future success.

"So often we think of the essential communication skills as being reading and writing. These are the areas that we mostly test students in since they are paper-and-pencil assessments that can be efficiently and fairly scored. The reality is that speaking and listening skills are equally important in daily living and in advancing careers," says Brace.

But public speaking is about more than job prospects, says John Novick, head of Roycemore's middle school division, grades five through eight. It's about self-esteem. Public speaking is "ideally suited to preadolescents," he says, "who have so much to say, and so much going on inside of them and around them, but often feel like they lack the forum at school to express themselves." After successfully delivering a speech to their peers, Novick says, "you can literally see their self-confidence grow."

"It's a valuable experience for everyone—part academic preparation, part life skill, part social outlet. It's a unique opportunity to build self-esteem and for kids in need of additional attention from their peers to get it in a positive, constructive way."

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She says, "If children learn at an early age, it won't be so hard for them."

Third-fifth grade

In third grade, Kowalski says, public speaking education "really takes off."

Students in the third through fifth

teachers say, also take part in classroom performances, spelling bees and schoolwide assemblies that give them further exposure to public speaking. They're expected to give book reports and researched presentations on current events and history, designed to get