

The Reading Rule that Changed Lives



**Principal Dr. Richard J. Hutnik
changed his students' lives
with books!**

Dr. Richard J. Hutnik was born to teach. Why? Because he loved kids, loved being with them, and always went the extra mile to engage them. While teaching Reading and Social Studies, he hooked his students with hands-on activities, such as creating an in-school museum and conducting historical community research in a neighborhood graveyard.

But perhaps his greatest impact on the lives of his students was the simple rule he implemented, as the principal of Sammy McClure Middle School in Atlanta, Georgia. When he arrived at the school he realized that the students' test scores did not reflect their true ability— and while Dr. Hutnik

is the first to decry the inadequacy of standardized tests to measure the full spectrum of student achievement, they've become the measure of success for both kids and their teachers.

Still, Dr. Hutnik found a way to raise test scores—and so much more— through a simple, yet profoundly impactful and, therefore, ingenious way to encourage and nourish children's reading lives. He implemented one simple rule that ultimately changed his students' lives: "Every student will, at all times, carry a reading book with them." And Dr. Hutnik set about making sure that every student followed this reading rule.

He began patrolling the hallways, making sure he could see each student's reading book and engaging them in conversations about what they were reading, how it was going, and if they'd recommend the book to others.

If he discovered a student without a book, his response was immediate. He'd whisk the child into the school library and help him or her find a book that appealed ... and then follow up to make sure the book was a good match.

Imagine the impact on every student! The message Dr. Hutnik’s “book talk and tracking” sent was inescapable! And the added bonus? The kids began to notice and talk about each other’s books—recommending, swapping, and talking books. And the natural end result: a robust reading culture! Soon, it wasn’t just Dr. Hutnik engaging kids in conversations about books, but also, every adult in the school—from the football coach to the custodian.

There’s no doubt that the physical proximity of books is key.

Mamaroneck, New York Assistant Superintendent Annie Ward has long noted that kids who love to read always have a book on them or within easy reach. The lack of a book in hand is a telltale sign the child isn’t hooked on books! And book proximity should extend to the home as well (Harvey, Ward, et al 2021):

Encourage families to keep books in the places kids spend time, such as on the kitchen table and next to the sofa. Kids are likely to squeeze in a few extra minutes of reading when a book is within arm’s reach during unexpected moments of downtime.

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Literacy researchers Susan Neuman and Julie Knapczyk (2020) found much the same: “Close physical proximity to books and greater adult support for reading enhances children’s learning opportunities.”

While Dr Hutnik wasn’t a reading researcher in the traditional sense, he knew kids, he understood the power of reading, and he knew that the two belonged together. He achieved that goal and so much more through his one simple rule: “Carry a reading book with you at all times.”

References

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