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# Using Place Conscious Education and Social Action to Plug The "Rural Brain Drain"

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USING PLACE CONSCIOUS EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ACTION TO PLUG THE  
“RURAL BRAIN DRAIN”

By

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A THESIS

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USING PLACE CONSCIOUS EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ACTION TO PLUG THE

“RURAL BRAIN DRAIN”

Danielle M. Helzer, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2012

Adviser: Robert Brooke

The following thesis will explore the Rural Brain Drain phenomenon as outlined by researchers Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas and its relation to a rural Nebraska school. In order to take action against the exodus of small-town America’s best and brightest, I propose a pedagogical solution that is a blend of Place Conscious Education and Social Action. The last part of the document features a narrative section describing how I’ve implemented the aforementioned solution into English 9 classes at Ogallala High School and the impact this had on students involved.

## **Problem in My Classroom**

Since I've started teaching I've noticed a disconnect between my students and the community and my students and their learning. My teaching experience has been in rural schools in southwest Nebraska where a close-knit community seems to be a driving value among many families residing in this area. So when I began incorporating Place Conscious work into both my English 9 and English 12 courses two years ago, I was surprised to notice that a good portion of my students seem to be disconnected from their communities and are anxious to leave. Perhaps this is a symptom of youth. But I suspect it's more than a lack of maturity. When I probed my seniors about their knowledge of the community, their responses were more romanticized than knowledge based. I found they hadn't been given chances to think critically about the community and involve themselves in bettering the community. When I began teaching my seniors about this, I found I was too late. They already had jaded perceptions about the community that hadn't reached out to them and most made plans to leave and never return. I decided that I had to do something about this. I continued with a focus on examining place throughout my English 12 course and encouraged students to have conversations about their communities, but I took a more vigorous approach with my younger students in my four sections of English 9.

## **Class Background/Survey Results**

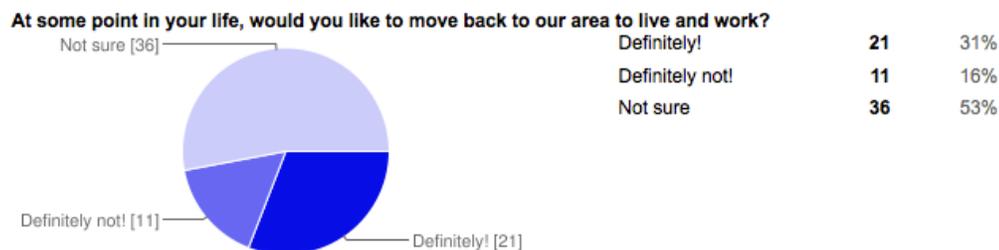
At Ogallala High School, English 9 is a required year-long course and follows a traditional English/Language Arts curriculum with an emphasis on writing and literature. Major components of study include the 6 Traits of Writing, *The House on Mango Street*,

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, several short stories, and a Social Action unit revolving around Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's text, *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*. Typically, students take the course during their freshman year of high school. Ninth grade students needing to develop basic reading and writing skills, however, take Reading during their freshman year and then take English 9 during their sophomore year. If students fail a semester of the course, they are required to make up the credits by either taking the semester again or completing a computerized credit recovery program. Thus, English 9 is comprised of students from grades 9-12 ranging in ability levels. Of the 66 students in English 9 during the second semester of the 2011-2012 school year, twelve students qualified for Special Education and had Individualized Education Plans, four students had 504 plans due to medical impairments that can interfere with their learning, and seven students have been identified as "at-risk" students who may receive extra accommodations from classroom teachers and the Student Assistance Team. The Federal Government also considers Ogallala High School a low-income school. I saw a drop in numbers from the first semester of English 9 to the second semester due to a change in the master schedule and reassignment of students in English 9 to another teacher.

In December of 2011 students in English 9 were surveyed anonymously about their motivation in school, connections to the community, perceptions of the community, and their future plans (Appendix A). Out of seventy-eight students, sixty-six completed the survey. Several factors including absences from school, recent transfers to the district, malfunctioning technology, and others prohibited some students from completing the surveys.

One of the questions I posed to my students in the aforementioned survey was, *How connected do you feel to your community?* 44% of my students revealed they either did not feel connected to the community or were unsure if they were connected. I would anticipate this type of response in a larger, more urban area. However, Ogallala boasts a population of around 4,800 people. Our community gathers every September for the Indian Summer Rendezvous celebration, puts on several parades throughout the year, has a thriving tourist industry in Lake McConaughy (the largest man-made lake in the state), and is rich with volunteers. In a town this size, it's difficult for a person to go unnoticed. So, it was a surprise to see that nearly half of the responders mentioned they felt no connection to our community. This lack of investment in the community can be problematic for rural communities with little industry to bring students back. If students don't feel connected to our community while in school, they may never come back.

Another question on the survey was, *At some point in your life, would you like to move back to our area to live and work?* The following graph shows a breakdown of student responses:



*Figure 1: Student responses to initial survey*

As can be seen, 69% of student responders are either wavering on their decision or have strong convictions about not returning to our community. These numbers do not look good for a county that has seen a 5.7% decrease in its overall population from 2000-2010 (United States Census Bureau) and a 15.5-25.5% drop in population among youths under 18 from 2008-2009 (Andersen B1).

### **Research Surrounding the Problem and Solution**

My students' disconnect with their community aligns closely with current research on the Rural Brain Drain phenomenon. This issue threatens much of Middle America, and I believe schools can work to plug the Rural Brain Drain by incorporating a pedagogy of Place Consciousness and Social Action into curricula. In this section, I will describe the Rural Brain Drain and some of the main work in Place Conscious Education that I believe might help combat the hemorrhaging of Midwestern youth.

In 2001, writers and researchers Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas were tasked with examining "the experiences of young adults from nonmetropolitan America" via funds from The MacArthur Foundation (Carr and Kefalas x). The two picked a small, northeastern Iowa town (assigned the pseudonym "Ellis") to conduct their research. They moved to the community in order to collect the stories of many young adults who had attended that community's high school in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Beyond simply hearing how their entrances into adulthood compared or contrasted with that of their peers on the coasts and metropolitan areas, they began to notice a common thread: these young adults' concern for their decision about whether to stay or leave the community that grew them. Their research took a sudden twist as most good research does, and they

found themselves investigating the hollowing out process that many small towns in the Midwest experience, better known as "The Rural Brain Drain." While acting as sort of historians for this northeastern Iowa town, the two noticed an emerging pattern in the stories told allowing them to categorize these small-town students into four categories: achievers, stayers, seekers, and returners (Carr and Kefalas).

First, the achievers are the town's best and brightest. These are typically spotlighted in the community newspaper each week for their successes in athletics, academics, and leadership roles in the school. According to Carr and Kefalas, achievers are destined to succeed from elementary school due to an extraordinary amount of talent or because they were born into a fortunate family. Achievers can be found padding their college resumes and are often the students teachers pay the most attention to because of their academic success. These are the students that small town communities should want back, but these are the very students who will leave after high school to attend college and be successful somewhere else, only to return to their small hometown for occasional visits. Small towns exert much energy, attention, and often funds on these students, but communities are not receiving the return--thus contributing to their own hollowing out (Carr and Kefalas).

On the opposite end of the spectrum from the achievers sit the stayers--the ones who make up the future of small communities. The stayers typically fare poorly in school, either dropping out or just making it by causing many teachers to dismiss them as lazy or unreachable and turn their efforts instead to the achievers. Though the stayers' academics may be nothing to boast about, their commitment to work is admirable. Unlike

many achievers, the stayers run headlong into the working world as soon as possible.

Stayers are typically from lower-income families whose parents do not place a priority on education or careers. After graduation, stayers stick around; many start families soon after and continue working jobs in or around the town, but despite their collection of years of work experience, they don't see a significant growth in income brought home. Starting "real life" so early closes the stayers off from opportunities--namely education and training--that would perhaps provide them more financial stability. Because these stayers will make up a large portion of the community's future population, more efforts and attention need to be spent equipping these students with skills necessary to combat the hollowing out phenomenon facing small towns (Carr and Kefalas).

The third group of students described in *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* is the seekers. As the label implies, the seekers have a strong desire to break free from their small hometowns but lack the grades, test scores, padded resumes, or financial resources the achievers have. The way out for the seekers then becomes the military (Carr and Kefalas). And while we in the Midwest can take pride in knowing that our boys and girls make up a good chunk of the armed forces, more and more seekers are returning from overseas missions with “‘training’ [that] does not translate very well into meaningful job experience in the real world” (Carr and Kefalas 102).

The final category of students described in Carr and Kefalas’s research are the returners who are divided into two sub-categories: the high flyers--professionals with four or more years of schooling whose return back to the community is greatly desired

and sought after--and the boomerangs--students who leave their hometowns to pursue trade school or community college and then come back. The high flyers are professionals whose return is sought after by community and state leaders with incentive programs. But as Carr and Kefalas report, this particular demographic is more likely to return to these rural areas for more practical reasons: they want their kids to experience life in a small town. Therefore, it would seem that efforts spent on incentive programs aimed towards high flyers are often pointless since the reason many high flyers have for migrating back are unassociated with the incentive programs. The second sub-group of returners, the boomerangs, return more skilled than the stayers but often with a mentality that they couldn't make it in life outside of their small hometown or that the only option for them is to move back since life in a more urban area is radically different from their homogeneous upbringing and therefore is overwhelming. Carr and Kefalas argue that the aforementioned incentive programs should be aimed more towards this group of returners.

Schools are the heartbeat of small towns. Friday night recreation is often attendance at the local athletic games or fine arts performances; much of the newspaper in these communities is devoted to featuring honor roll students, lunch calendars, and activity updates. After all, schools are largely responsible for creating the community's next generation of citizens. The four categories of students described earlier, then, have major implications for schools. In the conclusion to their book, Carr and Kefalas state,

We certainly recognize that small towns must be able to flourish in a global economy, and based on our conversations with Stayers and Returners, we

acknowledge an urgent need to revamp the rural educational system (namely, in its chronic underinvestment in its non-college-bound students) to offer opportunities for people to acquire new skills, along the lines of the equalizing of opportunities we discussed earlier. (147)

Traditionally schools have invested heavily in its achievers and have often underinvested in the stayers, seekers, and boomerangs contributing to the gradual hollowing out of its community. The burden of plugging the rural brain drain rests largely on school districts. While the writers suggest major changes to course offerings and tracking students towards either college bound or vocational bound, these solutions are simply not feasible in many districts, especially in this standards-driven educational era. However, schools can and must do their part to prepare their students to be productive citizens willing to contribute in their communities, and one way districts can accomplish this goal that often graces the mission statements of districts is by dedicating themselves to providing applicable, real-world experiences to its students.

Throughout our drive to achieve proficiency and meet certain standards, American education has become separate from the “real-world.” In *Place and Community Based Education In Schools*, authors and Place Conscious educators Gregory Smith and David Sobel bring us back to John Dewey’s *School and Society* written in the late 1890s; Dewey predicted the disconnect students would have towards their education. Smith and Sobel quote Dewey,

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and

free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school. That is the isolation of the school---its isolation from life. (26)

Too often, students must set aside their own interests and backgrounds in order to learn what schools or policy-makers perceive as important thus decreasing their motivation. When educators and policy-makers begin to value students' experiences enough to incorporate them into the curriculum, then we will see an increase in student engagement possibly causing our stayers to invest more in their own education.

Furthermore, under our current educational system heavy on standardized tests, students are not always learning skills that encourage critical thinking or help develop them into skilled and responsible citizens in a global society contrary to what many district mission statements profess. In his book, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire writes, "If men are unable to perceive critically the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality, they are carried along in the wake of change" (7). If our task as educators is to create students who are capable of being productive citizens in a global society, then students must be given chances to think critically about their communities and participate in real-world activities. Our current trend of one size fits all bubble tests do not encourage this kind of active participation. Wary of the era of standardized testing, Smith and Sobel write, "It is not clear at all whether students raised on a diet of standardized tests will possess the knowledge, skills, or dispositions required to join in this process [of community problem-solving and collaborative invention]" (41). So if districts are going to devote themselves

to “educat[ing] students to become skilled, knowledgeable, responsible citizens in a global society” (“About OPSD”), they must first commit themselves to reshaping curricula to encourage students to “intervene actively in the reality” of the local community (Friere 7). Students cannot begin to think and act globally until they are given chances to think and act locally.

Without chances for students to develop the kind of critical consciousness Friere writes of, we are creating naive students who are more likely to withdraw from civic involvement. “When people feel as if their actions are incapable of improving the quality of their lives, withdrawal from civic involvement is not far behind” (Smith and Sobel 37). If Carr and Kefalas are accurate in their research (and I believe they are) and if rural communities are made up largely of stayers who have little investment in their community and few skills necessary to better situations, seekers who return back to their hometowns with training that is often irrelevant to civilian life in a rural community, or boomerangs with more skills but negative mindsets about returning to their hometowns, then schools have an obligation to instill this critical consciousness into its students. Education must include concrete activities that encourage students to participate in order to protect and maintain the vitality of rural communities.

The solution to engaging withdrawn students and developing critical thinking skills necessary for students to be productive citizens within our community lies in Place Conscious Education blended with Social Action.

By resituating instruction in the world beyond the classroom, place- and community-based education gives students a reason to invest themselves in

learning and communities a reason to support their schools. Education becomes not merely a vehicle for advancing the interests of individuals but a means for sustaining neighborhoods and towns in ways that will advance the common good.

(Smith and Sobel 42)

Opening the classroom doors to the community allows students to explore issues that are relevant to their lives and allows them to develop deeper connections with the community, and when students feel connected to their community, all four groups of students mentioned in *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*, achievers, stayers, seekers and returners are more likely to invest in it as adults or even come back after receiving training to make a living. Several organizations across the country have developed initiatives that work to include rural youth in this investment process. Carr and Kefalas write about one of these initiatives happening in South Dakota: the Rural Learning Center. The Rural Learning Center confronted the hollowing out process South Dakota faced in its many small towns (particularly focusing on Miner County) by inviting young people to become part of the problem solving process. The leadership of the Rural Learning Center refers to this as a “grow your own” philosophy whereby the community invests in its youth in order to grow future community leaders. Carr and Kefalas write, “The active involvement of area youth not only helps create a better understanding between the generations [...] it also helps to initiate future leaders by having them lead the discussion” (187). In the Afterword of *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*, past president of the organization, Randy Parry, mentions that after the center

was established and achieved some success, he was “[...] contacted by Howard Achievers [from Howard in Miner County] who are eager to help. Many want to either ‘come back or invest in what we have going here’” (189). On a more local perspective, this “grow your own” philosophy espoused by the Rural Learning Center in South Dakota is implicit in the Nebraska Community Foundation’s Home Town Competitiveness program established to bring economic development opportunities to rural Nebraska which “uses a ‘come-back/give-back’ approach to rekindle residents’ belief and hope in the future of their hometown” and works to slow the hollowing out process facing many rural towns around the country (Home Town Competitiveness).

These all seem like noble initiatives happening in rural communities, but how do these relate to education? Rural schools can model their classroom instruction after initiatives like these to incorporate a blend of Place Conscious methods and Social Action in an attempt to connect students more to the community, empower them to make positive change, and grow future community leaders. Both Place Conscious Education and Social Action can appeal to achievers, seekers, stayers, and returners.

### **Implementation of Place Conscious Education and Social Action**

The 2011-2012 school year marks my third year of teaching high school Language Arts with the Ogallala Public School District and my third year taking Master’s courses primarily through the Nebraska Writing Project. Throughout this time I have heavily explored Place Conscious teaching and Social Action within the K-12 classroom in order to engage students, motivating them to come to school and do their best and to develop their problem-solving and critical thinking skills. While completing Place

Conscious Teaching from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln during the 2009-2010

school year, I began to understand the need to make room for this type of teaching in my own rural classroom. I collaborated with other educators from around the country to explore the best way to incorporate Place Conscious methods in my classroom. Here are just a few of the many quality ideas garnered from the 2009 course:

- Create brochures or videos promoting the community to be placed in local offices
- Create community trading cards to hand out around town that feature local businesses or community members who work hard to promote the community
- Team up with the Chamber of Commerce or other community promote or to develop a program designed to attract students back to the area
- Compose “I am From” poems and allow students to take photographs to accompany their poems
- Capture local history with a digital storytelling project that requires students to interview long-time community members
- Research projects about career opportunities in communities
- Engage in writing retreats or marathons designed to immerse students in local wonders and inspire place-conscious writing
- Create a Google Map of a community featuring local “hot spots” with student descriptions of each
- Create multi-genre biographical collages “mapping” community members’ lives

Feeling overwhelmed without a clear starting point for Place Consciousness in my own classroom, I decided to take this dilemma to my English 9 students. I explained that I

wanted to create a unit that would allow them to explore their place and express their appreciation for it in a way that was meaningful to them but that still incorporated writing. I also made clear that this unit would have a second phase: improving their community. I wanted to give them chances to act, but before they acted, I wanted them to think about and then express what they appreciated about their community. So for a few days that first year, we brainstormed together. We watched the Nebraska Educational Telecommunications (NET) news story featuring teachers and students from around Nebraska who were engaging in Place Conscious work as a way to stimulate our thinking. After watching this, the majority of students voted to complete a photography and writing project similar to Sharon Bishop's Place Conscious work at the Heartland Community Schools.

Local art students visited our classes to give mini-lessons about photography, we practiced writing descriptively about photographs, and we read and discussed articles from *Nebraska Life and NebraskaLand* that featured local attractions like Ash Hollow, Haythorn's Ranch, and favorite area hunting spots. We poured over local history books to learn more about Ogallala's history as a cow town. After being steeped in the local, students began thinking about their own favorite places. Following Nebraska Writing Project teachers, Cathie English and Sharon Bishop, we created deep maps exploring our places. Eventually students selected their favorite spots, photographed these places, and then composed pieces of writing to accompany their photos. Working in cooperative learning groups, they were required to create a visual display that fit all of their group

members' pieces. They created posters to display their work; we laminated them and then hung them in store windows around town.

After students articulated what they appreciated about their place, they set out to discuss what needed to be improved and then were required to take action. I was rather lenient in my requirements for their action projects since it was the first year; I instructed them to take action to make their world a better place. Many students picked up trash in the community and at Lake McConaughy, held bake sales to raise money for the Red Cross to donate to Haiti for the earthquake relief efforts that another organization in our school was leading, visited with residents at nursing homes, and helped teachers in our district. They had to create a PowerPoint or iMovie presentation about their efforts and then present this to the class. Finally, students wrote reflection letters over the unit. This was a nice starting point and gave me a foundation for which to build my unit. While students enjoyed this photography and writing project, it did not develop the kind of critical examination I was hoping for. It allowed students to reflect on what they enjoyed about their community, but it didn't lead well into the second phase: taking action. The photography project simply didn't act as an effective bridge to the second phase. I also felt that student buy in on the action component of the unit was not high enough. I felt that students would invest more if they had the chance to broaden their audience.

In the two years following, I've re-vamped the unit to make it more effective for developing student learning and student connections with the community. During my first year at Ogallala High School I participated in an inquiry group through the Nebraska Writing Project that explored the concept of social justice and gave me many ideas to use

in my own unit. So in my second year at OHS (2010-2011), I scrapped the photography/writing project and instead incorporated many of Jessica Singer-Early's ideas from *Stirring Up Justice*--a book we studied in that inquiry group.

After approval from my administration, year two at Ogallala High School (2010-2011 school year) led to the implementation of an actual project night where students were required to come for one hour on a designated evening to show their projects. Since this was a new component, I relied heavily on students to provide me with ideas. Students busied themselves writing business letters, inviting community members to attend our project night. The excitement among students was high, and this year they *wanted* to show off their efforts. They suggested I contact our local news organizations. Before project night, a reporter from our local paper came to interview students and then wrote an article about their projects that appeared on the front page of *The Keith County News*. And the day of project night, a reporter from KNOP News in North Platte visited one of my classes who were later featured on the news channel in the story: [“Students Pay It Forward.”](#)

Students took on bigger projects than the year prior, and more of them directly benefited the community. Two girls organized a soup supper to help raise funds for a woman in Keystone, a tiny neighboring village, who was battling a rare form of cancer. Together they raised nearly \$1,000 to help the family pay for medical bills and expensive trips back and forth to Omaha where she was receiving medical treatment. A few months later, this woman passed away, but the impact these girls had on the family in an extreme time of need was incredible. Nearly 100% of my English 9 students showed up for

project night. Three students could not make it due to unforeseen, emergency circumstances. Convinced that I needed to complete the project again for the 2011-2012 school year, I began searching for ways that I could improve the unit and develop students' connections to our community even more.

### **2011-2012 Social Action Unit**

As explained earlier, English 9 is a required course for ninth grade students and includes a diverse population with students in grades eight through eleven. The first semester of the course includes the following units of study: *The House on Mango Street* where my primarily white students' eyes are opened to what it is like to grow up poor in a Mexican-American family in an inner-city. Next is our Facing Monsters unit where students read *The Most Dangerous Game*, *A Sound of Thunder*, and an excerpt from Richard Wright's memoir, *Black Boy* and then compose a personal narrative essay about overcoming or struggling with a monster they've faced. This launches us into our 6 Traits of Writing unit to finish out the first semester. The third quarter is devoted to our Social Action unit while in the fourth quarter students read and study Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

I start the third quarter with our Social Action unit primarily because after the winter break, students are typically refreshed and more willing to take on new challenges; the unit also sets a positive tone for the last semester of the school year. Each year I have expanded it adding something more. The breakdown is as follows:

1. Background Information
2. "An Invitation to Music"
3. Local Anonymous Extraordinaries

4. The Civil Rights Movement and *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*
5. Action Projects
6. Project Night
7. Reflection letter

## 1. Background Information

The first few days back from break we spent talking about the unit ahead and then what students are passionate about in order to key them into their own interests and hobbies. We discussed that it's hard to make change in a community when you're not passionate about what you are doing. Then we looked at the definition of Social Action written in the National Writing Project's *Writing for a Change: Boosting Literacy and Learning Through Social Action*: "Social Action is a process whereby young people consider *what* issues and problems concern them, analyze *why* they exist, consider *how* they can act to change them, take these *actions*, and then *reflect* on what they have done and what has changed" (Berdan 5). I started with this definition because it gives students a clear view of the process that is ahead of them, and this explanation relates well to Dr. Martin Luther King Junior's text *Letter From a Birmingham Jail* which we read during this unit.

## 2. "An Invitation to Music"

Next, I used ideas from Jessica Singer-Early's text *Stirring Up Justice: Reading and Writing to Change the World*. Singer-Early writes about an assignment she calls, "An Invitation to Music" (105) (Appendix B). So after students looked at a definition of Social Action, they complete the "Invitation to Music" assignment selecting their own songs that deal with either an issue in society or the concept of taking action and making

positive change to share with the class. Thanks to Spotify, I created a playlist of all the school appropriate songs students turned in so we could listen to them in class and then examine and discuss the lyrics. This year we listened to and discussed issues present in Ani DiFranco's "Subdivision," "Where is the Love" by the Black Eyed Peas, "Good People" by Jack Johnson, "How to Love" by Lil Wayne, and many, many others. Students loved listening to and discussing the songs their peers brought in. In his reflection letter, Evan wrote, "When we got to pick our own songs as a learning tool for this unit it allowed others to see what we have that inspires us." Jake dug a little deeper in his reflection of the "Invitation to Music" portion of our unit, commenting on what he learned during this time,

Studying song lyrics taught me to look deeper into what words mean. It may sound this way but it means something else. I have learned to listen more and dissect little sections, instead of the whole song. I have learned to appreciate music more and what people have to go through to write it, they are sometimes risking their life by writing about their beliefs! Listening to the music put me at ease and calmed me down.

### **3. Local Anonymous Extraordinaries**

After hearing music that presents many societal issues, we narrowed the scope to examine our own community. This portion of the unit has evolved greatly over the years. I want students to see the positive side of our community before they take steps to change it. As mentioned earlier, the first year I implemented this Social Action unit (2009-2010)

students photographed their favorite places in the area, wrote pieces to accompany their photographs, and then mounted their writings and photos on poster boards that were later laminated and displayed in downtown shop windows. And while this project was creative and enjoyable for most students, it failed to be the appropriate lead in to the actual Social Action project portion, which is students' final project in the quarter. I wanted a project in the middle that would work to foster a deeper appreciation for our community and one that would inspire students to take action. So this year, we transitioned from music to actual activism by examining people who were making positive change right within the bounds of our own community with our Local Anonymous Extraordinaries project (Appendix C). Students first watched and discussed a TED Talks video where speaker and activist, Natalie Warne, discusses her journey in activism with the Invisible Children organization. In her lecture, she presents the concept of *Anonymous Extraordinaries*: "people who work selflessly and vigorously for what they believe in; people who are motivated by conviction and not recognition" (Warne).

A few days later, on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, fourteen Local Anonymous Extraordinaries crammed into my classroom to talk with students about their roles as change agents in Keith County. Earlier, students prepared questions to ask the panel of adults, and for four, fifty-two minute class periods it seemed the walls that often lay between teenagers and adults were momentarily removed. These fourteen adults spoke lovingly, honestly, and openly with my students about the struggles they've encountered as they've pushed on to make the community better, to give back to a community that has given them so much. Students' eyes were opened to all the positive happening here.

Katherine responded, “When we had the Anonymous Extraordinaries come in and tell us what they do to be apart of the community, it opened me up and made me feel more apart of it because I was learning about things in my community that I didn’t even know of.” One of our panel members who is the director of Grow Keith County--an organization dedicated to promoting growth in the population and business sector of the community--encouraged my young students to go to college, earn an education, and then move back here to make a living. This stood out to Jake, a definite achiever, who wrote in his end of the unit reflection, “They [Local Anonymous Extraordinaries] want us to go out and experience the world and bring that knowledge back here and apply it to our community. They are trying to build the community so that we want to come back.” Panel members encouraged students to involve themselves in the community and reaffirmed the value of the teenage voice in community development. Not only did these community members expose students to the positive change happening in our area, they served as role models for students to look up to. “Listening to the panel of Local Anonymous Extraordinary really gave me an idea of how to help the community and how to be a good citizen. They were great role models or people to look up to,” wrote Will.

Next, students selected their own Local Anonymous Extraordinary to spotlight. After hearing from a local reporter about the basics of conducting a solid interview and then converting that information into an effective news story, students set out to interview these community members capturing their selfless spirits and recognizing their contributions to the community via a blog post on the [blog](#) we set up together. The blog features tributes to 38 individuals or organizations in the community who students

consider to be Local Anonymous Extraordinaries. It was exactly the bridge students needed to take them from merely identifying issues to preparing to take action.

Describing his experience interviewing his Local Anonymous Extraordinaire, Will wrote,

Randy taught me that people that help out the community, put forth a lot of their time to better our environment. Some people don't recognize these people who do great things for our community, so that's why I liked this assignment. I wanted to show the Local Anonymous Extraordinaries that I appreciate their help in our community, so that's why I really tried very hard on all my Social Action Project assignments.

#### **4. The Civil Rights Movement and *Letter from a Birmingham Jail***

During this time students also read a portion of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's famous text *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and studied the Civil Rights Movement to give them an historical context of Social Action. Of course there are many instances in history, past and present that could be used in the classroom to introduce Social Action. I choose the Civil Rights Movement and *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* because Dr. King's text introduces his four steps for non-violent direct action: "(1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive; (2) negotiation; (3) self-purification; and (4) direct action" ("Letter From Birmingham City Jail"). Once translated into common terms for teens, these steps and Dr. King's narrative of how he and the Civil Rights Activists utilized these steps in Birmingham becomes a blueprint for students when taking their own change. Jake addressed these steps in his reflection letter:

I was taught how to take non-violent direct action. Instead of revolting with violence I need to take a step back, gather my thoughts and use words. Not harsh words, but words that will make an impact on them and get them to think. I now know how to handle myself in any situation that I feel disrespected in. I am so glad that we read this writing.

For the past three years, students had lively conversations about why these steps are important before choosing their own Social Action projects. Another reason why I use the Civil Rights Movement to segue into Social Action projects is because each year study of it causes students to experience an inner tension that causes them to ask difficult questions and then connect it with injustices committed against people today as they struggle to understand the injustices committed against African Americans. The Civil Rights Movement is not covered in our high school History curriculum until students are in tenth grade, so students come to this unit with limited knowledge of the Movement; they know of Rosa Parks, the March on Washington, the Birmingham Bombing, and have a general idea of Brown vs. Board of Education. But when we discuss and read about the murder of Emmett Till, the assassination of Medgar Evers, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Little Rock Nine, and Project C in Birmingham, students are enthralled. Once we delve into the Civil Rights Movement and read Dr. King's text, students' emotions are heightened and they begin to grapple with the tough realities of our country's history. In his unit reflection, M.S. Most wrote,

The Letter from a Birmingham Jail and Civil Right Movement segments of the unit were rather depressing, but they are some of the best examples you could have used. Seeing how a group of people used non-violent Social Action to combat the status quo showed me that I could fight complacency over issues in the community.

Students begin to ask tough questions like, *Why did it take so long to bring the three suspects from the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing to justice? Why did those men have to beat Emmett so bad? Why did white people hate black people so much?* Of course, these are questions that I cannot answer, but they are questions that must be asked. They lead to discussions regarding the inequities facing people today. Students discussed how difficult it would be to be a minority in a small, primarily white Nebraska town like ours; they shared about their reactions to people of Middle Eastern descent after 9/11; they discussed the Occupy Movement and the inequities associated with it; and some mentioned the recent Arab Spring. I've found each year that discussing the Civil Rights Movement opens doors for students to discuss injustices facing people today. Typically, students in my English 9 class have a fairly limited worldview, so these conversations are enlightening to many and cause that tension that is needed to inspire action that Dr. King writes about in his letter to Birmingham Clergymen. Hayley responded to this portion by writing, "Dr. King taught me that everyone is an activist and extremist in some way, shape or form, and we get to decide what kind of activist or extremist to be." A fantastic revelation for a ninth grade student.

## 5. Action projects

After studying Social Action during the Civil Rights Movement and in our own community, students are generally ready to take on their own projects. This year students were encouraged to use their passions to help some part of the community. Students were required to talk with me about their project during in and out of class conferences, gather credible research to prove the legitimacy of the project and show a need for it, take action documenting their journey along the way through photos, videos, and interviews, compile a list of 15 vocabulary terms and definitions associated with their project and research, and then create a visual presentation to summarize their efforts, and then show up at project night (one hour in the evening) to display their projects in a fashion similar to a traditional science fair (Appendix D). Students took part in the planning component of project night by learning how to write block style business letters and then used this style of writing to explain our unit and invite people and businesses from the community to attend project night (Appendix E). One student this year used this opportunity to write to a nearby television news station in North Platte, Nebraska inviting them to come to project night. A few days later a reporter called me to explain that she had received the letter and wanted to schedule a time to come interview students about their projects. Students were featured in a video titled: [“Making Their Community A Better Place.”](#) This is the second year the students’ projects have been featured on this news station. This year, students were also featured in *The Keith County News* again. Not only is seeing their efforts featured in the local media a gratifying experience for the students, it is also

excellent publicity for our school district at a time where low test scores and a declining student population seem to be plaguing the headlines of local media.

A handful of students committed to large projects. Two girls, Jenna and Maaika, used their passion and love for basketball to organize a free basketball clinic for girls in grades three through six. They met with our school's Activities Director to work out details including scheduling a time where they could use our gym, create a registration form, and including a liability waiver for their registration form. After this they advertised the event at the elementary and middle school and utilized their knowledge of social media to post the event on Facebook. The day of the clinic (a Friday afternoon), the girls mentioned they had five registrants. I sensed they were a little disheartened but encouraged them to press on despite the low numbers. That evening when I arrived at our school's gymnasium, I found Jenna and Maaika leading 38 little girls in dribbling drills. I later learned that our community and school have not offered any sort of basketball camp or clinic for young girls in many years. Interested girls have to travel to nearby communities to attend these events. About this experience, Maaika wrote:

My favorite part of this whole unit was the project. It was my favorite because we were able to pick something that we enjoyed doing, but it still would help our community. We were able to have a voice on improving this community and I liked that we were given a chance. As teenagers, people think we can't do anything to help out anyone, but if we are given the chance we are able to make a difference. This project allows us to try to show others what we did eventually accomplish. I think this Social Action Project was good for all of us, learning new

skills and how to take our own action without anyone telling us exactly what to do.

Early in our Social Action unit, an advanced eighth grade student taking my English 9 course and a ninth grade student, both cross country runners, approached me about their desire to organize a 5K run to raise money for our local Recreation Center. We talked about the time it would take to organize this event, and soon I found out they had scheduled a meeting for them with two staff members from the Recreation Center who have experience planning local road races. Their idea quickly turned into a reality as they found themselves creating registration forms for the Leprechaun Chase 5K Road Race scheduled for the day after St. Patrick's Day. The two ambitious students used project night as a way to peddle registration forms and obtain volunteers.

Most students chose smaller projects to impact the community. Kelsey used her passion for dogs to research pet therapy programs and then took her dog (that she's spent years training) to visit residents in a local nursing home. She spent time visiting with residents about their memories of their own pets and captured their stories to use in her presentation. Sky used her passion for fine arts and creativity to research the impact of fine arts on students and then created original pieces of artwork to sell at project night. She donated the funds to our high school's fine arts budget. Several students held bake sales around the community to raise funds for local organizations or causes. Some volunteered their Saturday afternoons or time after school collecting donations for organizations; others simply volunteered to help elderly neighbors or at places like the local animal shelter or domestic violence shelter. Whatever the scope of the project,

students had to problem solve, plan, speak with community members about their projects, write professional letters or emails to gain information, and compile this into a creative visual presentation.

These Social Action projects give some students a taste of what they might like to do in the future. Aleshia, who is passionate about animals and desires to someday have a career in the veterinary field, reflected on her project by writing,

I benefited from this Social Action project because this really gave me a feel what it would be like to work with animals. I want to be a vet technician and I think that this helped because I got to see the doctor giving a dog surgery on its foot when we showed up it was really cool and I pictured myself doing that and it made me all warm and fuzzy inside.

## **6. Project Night**

This year project night was held on February 20th, 2012--a night separate from parent-teacher conferences. Parents were notified early about project night and were encouraged to communicate and collaborate with their student about the projects (Appendix F). 63 out of 66 students showed up at project night to present their diverse projects. The community turn out was fantastic; approximately 100 community members including teachers, administrators, parents, grandparents, and others unassociated with students in English 9 poured into our school's gym to visit with students. This was a huge boost of confidence for some students. M.S. Most wrote, "After project night on Monday, and seeing all of the positive reactions to my project, I feel like I can do anything I want

to if I just set my mind to it. I hope that, if/when there are controversial issues in my life, I will use the skills that I learned in this unit to stand up for what I believe.”

This year, as part of one students’ project, we provided a table with paper and a comment box by the door to give project night attendees a chance to provide feedback to students:

- “Wonderful event!! So many great causes to support. Glad the kids get go see a generous community and the needs they can help fill. Thank you!”
- “Super job! It’s wonderful to see students proud of helping others!”
- “Very good projects and good job by kids explaining their projects. The positive PR for the school is great.”
- “Exceptional! Wow! Really impressed with the students, the projects, and the presentations! I hope the press was invited. With all the negative we get to see and read, this is what needs to be put out there--real learning, positive impact! Way to go!”
- “Lots of nice, worthwhile projects. Good to see youth involved in the community.”
- “Great job! You guys and girls need to remember this spirit of giving throughout your life. You will be better people for it.”

## **7. Reflection Letter**

In the week following project night, students reflected on their efforts from the past two months (Appendix G). This allowed them to time digest all they have accomplished and to reflect on their successes and struggles. Reflection assignments help reinforce student learning and provide valuable feedback for teachers.

### **My Reflections**

The Social Action unit is the most powerful, effective unit I have taught. I have the highest completion rate in this unit than any other units. For two months while we

complete this unit, students are engaged. “Without a doubt, I would have to say that the Social Action Projects were a definite success. It is much better than just sitting and doing a boring old worksheet. If I had the option to take part in the project again, I definitely would. The Social Action Unit is a unit that I feel every English 9 class should take part in!” exclaimed Brody. Because of its hands-on nature, students who typically don’t complete assignments all year long complete the Social Action project and are successful at it because their learning becomes relevant. In her journal, Ashlen wrote, “I personally wish ‘learning’ was more like what we are doing with the Social Action Project, hands on and interactive. If all or most classes were like this, grades would go up, behavior would better, and more kids would come to our district. Kids would actually learn something, have fun, and get better grades.” I see students transform during this unit as they suddenly realize they have talents and abilities that can be used to make a difference and help others. Makenzi wrote, “[we] are ‘only kids’ and we still raised tons of money and awareness for several different causes. Now just think of what we could do if we decide to continue making positive changes as adults. The possibilities for that are totally endless and it makes me excited all over again just thinking about it.” And Celie, a high achieving eighth grader taking my course, expressed her newfound pride in herself by stating, “I also learned that I enjoy getting out in the community as a force that can make change instead of just a teenage kid. I thank you so much for introducing me to this idea and teaching us how to make positive change. This unit has instilled confidence and pride in me and my community.” Jensen, a 9th grader in one of my classes who is passionate about reading, gathered donations of picture books to donate to the local

health clinics for their waiting rooms. After project night her mother emailed me to share about the response to Jensen's project. She wrote,

I think Jensen really was touched by the heartfelt responses and it made her think about how blessed she is to be healthy and have all that she needs in life. It was a very nice experience for her to do something all on her own...no Jake or Jordan [her siblings], no Interact Club, no 4-H group...just her! Thanks for the assignment, I think it was a big success, not just for Jensen, but for all of the students and more importantly...all who [benefited] from their projects! (Geisert)

Furthermore, in their reflection letters, students commented on their new-found connections to our community. Kelsey wrote,

I remember taking a survey at the beginning of this unit asking how connected we felt with our community. I remember checking the little dot saying 'I don't really feel I am connected with our community.' Now I feel like I know more people who told me what I could do to help our community. I feel like I know Ogallala, like I know what types of people live here and what we need to do to change it in a positive way.

Many students commented that helping the community, even in a small way, made them feel connected to it. I have two students in class this year who are newer to the community; both stated that their projects and project night helped them to feel more of a part of the community. Mason stated,

In my community I feel like I was really left out because I am new and not very

many people especially adults know who I am; I was just a face in the crowd.

Although now after Project Night when people see me they might recognize me or I might even see an orange and black paracord lanyard on their keys and talk with them asking how it is going and thank them once again for contributing to my cause.

The project helps students develop pride in themselves and their community, bridges the gap between school and community, helps students experience academic success, teaches practical skills, and positively impacts the community.

This year I received an outpouring of support for the project from community members. Emails and cards of gratitude flooded my inbox and school mailbox. I was invited to speak to Kiwanis members and the Xi Gamma of Beta Sigma Phi members about the unit, and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program has contacted me about collaborating with students next year during a portion of the unit.

I tell students each year that I hope this is a moment they remember for many years. And when I say this, students always look at me like I am crazy! However, this year a few students commented on this in their reflection letters. Tresann wrote,

You even said this is going to be a lesson that we are going to be able to carry with us and use our entire lives. I'm going to be honest, at first I didn't really see how this was going to be something I was going to use my entire life, but now I see that by making change for the better, for something I'm passionate about will make me a better person in the future, and by making me a better person I could make better people out of anyone that I come into contact with. I realize now you

are making the difference by spreading this lesson throughout the entire English 9 class. It's an amazing lesson and I'm so grateful that I got the chance to experience it.

### **Conclusion**

Rural Nebraska will continue to experience the Rural Brain Drain if it refuses to address the exodus of our best and brightest; schools can and should play a part in this solution. Schools have an ethical obligation to do what is best for students; they can merge this priority with the needs of the community to create meaningful learning opportunities for students. The first step schools can take is to energize flat, dull curricula that fail to motivate and engage learners. Place Conscious Education and Social Action can breathe life into any curriculum because it places value on students as creative, individual learners and it seeks to bridge the gap between school and community. When schools and teachers begin to let the community into their classrooms, when they allow students the freedom to examine local issues that matter to them, then students will begin to feel connected to their communities. Developing these connections increases the likelihood that achievers, stayers, seekers, and returners will invest in their hometowns as adults thus working to plug the Rural Brian Drain.

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[Initial student survey](#) (XLS, 61 KB)

**An Invitation to Music\*:**

Songs are powerful tools to build understanding, and they are an important part of Social Action movements. Some songs bring out the stories and struggles of people whose voices have been left out. Some are songs of resistance, a way for oppressed peoples to show their anger and their solidarity. Some are tributes to struggle and others are songs of activism.

This is an assignment to post a song of social change to share with the class. It can be an older song, or one performed by one of your favorite groups that you listen to now....but it needs to be clean! You'll need to include a link to the lyrics AND a link to the song on YouTube.

To turn in this assignment:

1. Click on ASSIGNMENTS in the far left side beneath your profile.
2. Click TURN IN beneath the assignment title.
3. Type your information in the text box below the assignment description.
4. Click TURN IN ASSIGNMENT.

**Example:**

Song title: "Subdivision"

Artist: Ani DiFranco

Lyrics: <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Subdivision-lyrics-Ani-DiFranco/F58AABF0BB45691548256AE1002D28E2>

Recording: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JprRiwBXZGI>

Due: Monday Jan. 9<sup>th</sup>

Points: 10 (5 for the lyrics, 5 for the recording)

\*From Jessica Singer Early's book *Stirring Up Justice: Writing & Reading to Change the World*

### Local “Anonymous Extraordinaries” Writing Assignment

For this portion of our project you will be required to choose a local person or agency who/that is working to make a difference in our community. We don't want any repeats, so each person will need to choose someone different. You may work in partners **IF you run it by me first, and I approve it.**

Once you have your choice approved by me, you will need to contact this person or agency to introduce yourself, the project, and ask if they're okay with being interviewed. **Be sure to state that you will compose a blog post based on the interview to be posted on our class blog (include the web address).** If you receive confirmation that the interview is a go, then the next step is to figure out the best way to accomplish this interview and schedule this with your subject. Interviews may be completed over the phone, through email, or face-to-face. You may schedule a phone interview or a face-to-face meeting to take place during our class time, but the face-to-face meeting will need to be conducted at school. **Please communicate with me if you'll need to miss class to interview this person; you will be expected to make up all class work PRIOR to missing class just as if you were missing for a school activity.** 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders cannot email outside of the district, so if you choose email as your main form of communication, you'll need to use an email other than your school account.

The next step of the project will be writing interview questions. Mary Pierce from the Keith County News will be visiting our classes on January 17<sup>th</sup> (1<sup>st</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>) and January 18<sup>th</sup> (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>) to teach you about writing quality interview questions; she will also cover the basics of writing a story based on an interview. You will receive a grade for these interview questions (10 points). These are due **January 24<sup>th</sup>.** Type your questions on a Google Doc first so you have them stored; then copy and paste these questions to the interview assignment on Edmodo.

If possible, during the interview take a photo of your subject to accompany your post. If you need a camera, let me know.

After the interview is conducted and you have gathered enough information about the person/agency, you'll need to write up a story reporting on this person's service to our community. Use the techniques discussed in our discussion with Ms. Pierce from the Keith County News and follow this format:

1. A short, catchy intro.
2. Who (describe who this person is)
3. What (describe what qualifies this person as a local "anonymous extraordinary"; what does he/she do to make a positive difference? Describe what this person believes about activism and social change.)
4. How (explain how this person has inspired you)
5. A closing

Your story will need to be edited for the 6 Traits of Writing; pay close attention to your conventions as this writing will be published on our class blog which will be linked to the OPSD website AND the Keith County Chamber of Commerce's website! Once your writing has been edited and is ready to publish, I will help you post the story and photo on our class blog. This post will be worth 40 points and is due **January 31<sup>st</sup>**.

Use a calendar to help keep you organized throughout this project. Be sure to record important deadlines and due dates!

### **Local Anonymous Extraordinaries Blog Post Rubric**

**Lead** \_\_\_\_\_/10 points

- Clearly contains the 5 W's
- Draws the reader in right away

**Body** \_\_\_\_\_/15 points

- Contains at least one direct quote (be sure you're quoting accurately!)
- Details work together to expand the topic giving the piece a strong sense of focus
- The amount of detail is just right—the article is understandable, enlightening, interesting, and free of irrelevant information.

**Organization** \_\_\_\_\_/10 points

- The piece has a strong sense of direction and balance
- Organization flows so smoothly the reader does not need to think about it

**Conventions** \_\_\_\_\_/5 points

- The writing contains fewer than five errors in conventions (spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc)

**Total** \_\_\_\_\_/40 points

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**Keep in mind:**

- Collect as many direct quotes as possible
- Keep yourself out of this story...it's not about you
- Don't reveal information that might exploit this person or someone this person knows
- Photos are great to include with this story!!!
- Compose on Google Docs---if you're working with a partner, be sure to share one document between partners. I want to see evidence of you BOTH working on the document. So, be sure you each are working on your own accounts.
- Keep this single-spaced, size 12 font...no indentations before paragraphs. There should be one line separating each paragraph.

## Appendix D: Social Action project rubric

CATEGORY	Advanced	Proficient	Progressing	Beginning
Need for Project	Students have included a quality background section that clearly explains the need for or the reasoning behind students' project. 10 points	Students have included a background section that is mostly clear in its explanation of or reasoning behind the project. 9 points	Students have included a background section that explains reasoning behind the project, but the explanation is unclear. 8 points	Students have attempted to include a background section, but viewers have to make their own guesses as to why students chose this project. 7 points
Research/ Statistical Data	Students include 3 or more high-quality examples or pieces of data to support their campaign. 10 points	Students include at least 2 high-quality examples or pieces of data to support their campaign. 9 points	Students include at least 1 high-quality example or pieces of data to support their campaign. 8 points	Students include examples or pieces of data to support their campaign, but they may not be quality or relevant sources. 7 points
Sources-Citation	Information in all source citations is correct and in the format assigned. 10 points	Information in all source citations is correct but there are minor errors in formatting. 9 points	Information in almost all source citations is correct AND there are minor errors in formatting. 8 points	The information is often incorrect OR there are major errors in formatting. 7 points
Visual Presentation	Students create a creative, accurate and interesting presentation that adequately addresses the issue, explains the action project with text and photos, and includes 15 appropriate vocabulary terms and definitions associated with the issue/project. 50 points	Students create an accurate presentation that adequately addresses the issue, states the action project, and includes 15 vocabulary terms and definitions associated with the issue/project. 45 points	Students create an accurate presentation, but it does not adequately address the issue and is sloppy. It's hard to tell what the student's action project was. The student has included fewer than 15 vocabulary terms. 40 points	The presentation is not accurate and is sloppy. The action portion of the project is missing. Vocabulary terms are missing. 35 points

Project Night	Students attend the entire project night, are prepared, and maintain professionalism throughout the evening. 20 points	Students attend the entire project night, but they either seem ill-prepared or their behavior could have been improved. 17 points	Students attend project night but were ill-prepared AND their behavior could have been improved. 14 points	Students simply attended project night. 10 points
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**Business and Technical Writing Rubric**

	<b>Advanced</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Beginning</b>
<b>Structure</b>	Student employs correct Block or Modified Block Style. The letter contains an effective salutation and closing. <b>15 points</b>	Block or Modified Block Style is mostly correct. The letter contains an adequate salutation and closing. <b>10 points</b>	The student is still beginning to grasp Block or Modified Block Style. The salutation and closing are either missing or need serious attention. <b>5 points</b>
<b>Language</b>	Language is polite and conversational as well as clear and concise. <b>10 points</b>	Language seems either a bit structured or too informal for the situation. Parts of the letter are unclear. <b>5 points</b>	The language is inappropriate for the situation. <b>1 point</b>
<b>Request</b>	The request is stated early in the letter and is clear and reasonable. <b>10 points</b>	The request is stated, but it is a bit fuzzy. The reader may have to do some decoding in order to figure out what the request is. <b>5 points</b>	The request is either missing or unclear. <b>1 point</b>
<b>Conventions</b>	The letter is error free—spelling, capitalization, paragraphing, sentence structure, and grammar are excellent. <b>15 points</b>	The letter contains a few errors here and there that may cause the reader to stumble. <b>10 points</b>	This letter needs serious revision before it is ready to be sent out. <b>5 points</b>

Dear Parents/Guardians:

Second semester is officially underway, and students in English 9 are beginning their Social Action unit. I wanted to inform you of the exciting lessons going on in our classroom.

First, students will be investigating the positive actions happening right here in Keith County through our “Local Anonymous Extraordinaries” writing assignment. Various community members will be in our classroom to speak to English 9 students about what they’ve done to help out. Students will select a person who is working hard to help out the community, they will interview this person, and then they will use their findings to write a short news article featuring this person. Mary Pierce from the Keith County News will be a guest teacher in our class; she will be teaching students the basics of interviewing and writing news stories. By the end of the month, students will turn in their news stories to be featured on our class blog (<http://localanonymousextraordinaries.blogspot.com/>). The Keith County Chamber of Commerce and Grow Keith County have graciously offered to link our blog on their websites!

During the months of January and February we will study the Civil Rights Movement as we read and analyze Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s famous text, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. In his letter, Dr. King explains the four steps for non-violent direct action. Students will use these steps to impact positive change in their own communities.

As mentioned in a previous letter sent home, students will select an issue or a problem in the community and then will be required to take action. This could be as simple as helping a neighbor with chores or as extensive as planning a soup supper to raise funds for someone in need. Students will have class time to research and plan but will be taking action on their own time. After this, students will create a visual presentation to display their hard work at our project night that will be held this year on February 20<sup>th</sup> from 6:30-7:30 PM in the Ogallala High School gymnasium. Community members are encouraged to attend this project night. Student attendance at this event is required and is a portion of their grade. If, for reasons beyond their control, they cannot attend project night, they will be given an alternate assignment.

In the past, students have come up with incredible projects and have made huge impacts on our community during this unit. I encourage you to speak with your student(s) about this unit. Should you have questions along the way, please feel free to contact me. Thanks for supporting your student’s education!

Sincerely,

Danielle Helzer

**Reflection Letter**

*Must include what you did, why you did this particular project/who it benefited, where this took place, what struggles you encountered, and what you learned through this project.*

- Explains the project including the action you took (**2 points**), who it benefited (**2 points**), when and where this took place (**2 points**), and what struggles you encountered (**4 points**)
- The letter contains a section that thoroughly and effectively explains what you learned/gained throughout this ENTIRE unit (the study of song lyrics, listening to our panel of Local Anonymous Extraordinaries and then conducting an interview with a Local Anonymous Extraordinary to write about him/her, studying *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and the Civil Rights Movement, and then taking your own action with your Social Action projects) **20 points**
- Student gives an honest reflection of what he/she could have done better throughout the unit **5 points**
- Student answers the following questions (devote a paragraph to each):
- How do you feel this unit developed your connections with the community? **5 points**
- Do you feel more equipped to make positive change in the community now? Why or why not? **5 points**
- The writing has been edited for format and conventions (e.g., spelling, capitalization, grammar, punctuation, double spaced, size 12 font, includes a proper header) **10 points**

Total \_\_\_\_\_/60 points

