

# Sparking Engagement and Building Confidence with Current Events



Whitnall Middle School  
Whitnall School District, Greenfield, WI

case study/teal line

## AT A GLANCE

Whitnall Middle School looked to improve the impact of their daily guided study period after receiving feedback on student and teacher surveys. With the new schedule model, 7th grade teacher Chris Bily implemented a 6-week class to engage students with current events and to build media literacy.

## CHALLENGES

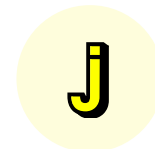
- Lack of student engagement during daily guided study period
- Providing an equitable schedule model for students who required intervention
- Lack of media literacy and dissatisfaction with video- based current events solutions

## SOLUTIONS

- New schedule model with improved instructional focus for guided study period
- Using The Juice to engage students and build media literacy



New Schedule Model



The Juice Current Events

## RESULTS

- 1 Broadened Student Knowledge of The World**  
Over the 6-week course, students increased their understanding of what is happening in the world.
- 2 Increased Student Engagement**  
Attention, curiosity, interest, and motivation increased as a result of using The Juice.
- 3 Fostered Student Confidence Discussing Current Events**  
Students gained confidence discussing current events by making connections to the articles in The Juice and their lives.

## WHITNALL MIDDLE SCHOOL STATS

The Whitnall School District is a small suburban public school district located outside Milwaukee in Greenfield, Wisconsin.



579 students



21.4% open enrollment



26.9% economically disadvantaged

<https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/home>



## A NEW SCHEDULE MODEL

As part of their continuous improvement strategy, school leaders at Whitnall Middle School, a small suburban school outside of Milwaukee, routinely survey teachers and students to gauge engagement and satisfaction with the academic schedule. In a recent annual review, they noticed a trend in their results that indicated their scheduling model might not be meeting the needs of their students. The issue seemed to lie in their Connect class. In previous years, the class was used as a time to accommodate students who received math or reading intervention without pulling them from their core classes. Students who did not receive interventions would attend Connect class during this time, which mostly functioned as a study hall for students. Not only were leaders concerned over the lack of equity between students receiving intervention and students who were not – students receiving interventions did not have the opportunity to finish their homework at school – staff also noticed that there was a lack of student engagement and consistency in how students were expected to spend their time in Connect, which led to an increase in behavioral issues during the class.

Chris Bily, a 7th grade teacher at Whitnall Middle School, decided to talk with the school leadership team and recommended a replacement schedule model after seeing its success in his prior school district.

“It was an extension type of course, that the teachers, for the most part, got to choose what they taught,” he said. “ It could be a passion project, or even just another curriculum that doesn't fit neatly into a core class.”

School leaders decided to implement Bily's suggestion with their version of the model this year, calling the class time "Flight." The goal of the new model was to provide more structure and consistency across the school and increase student engagement during that time. Teachers were given the freedom to decide what they wanted to teach, with the class cycling on a 6-week rotation. By the end of the school year, all students (except for the students receiving intervention) attend each of the Flight classes provided at their grade level.

“  
The Juice provides the active learning and engagement my prior solution lacked. Plus, it allows students to move at their own pace to better process the information they are consuming.”

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Whitnall Middle School,  
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## **THE NEED TO BUILD NEWS LITERACY**

Bily knew right away that he wanted to teach a news and media literacy class if he was ever given the opportunity to teach an extension course and believed that teaching students how to navigate the information they consume online is a valuable life skill that all students need to develop.

Last year, The Pew Research Foundation came out with a study on teens, the news, and social media, highlighting that a large majority of teens ages 13 to 17 in the US (78%) say it's important to them to follow current events. However, 54% of teens get news from social media (Facebook, Twitter), and 50% get news from YouTube at least a few times a week.

"I teach US and Ancient Civ. Those are two subject areas that I have predominantly taught and trying to convince kids that 2,000-year-old dead people are interesting or important to their lives is a tough sell," he said. "When I go into the hallway, I see how many kids are on their cell phones and think about the rumors that they hear online. That's what they need to learn how to navigate, so just in terms of life skills that my students need access to, it's important and it should be a part of the curriculum."

## **USING THE JUICE TO ENGAGE STUDENTS**

After learning about The Juice from a colleague, Bily thought that the content would work in tandem with the Checkology curriculum from The News Literacy Project. Throughout the six weeks, students in Bily's class read The Juice and answered the questions three days a week, with Mondays and Fridays as more flexible days for students to get extra help from teachers. He said that many students still choose to read The Juice on Mondays and Fridays since it has become a part of their routine, though he does not require it.

Bily had previously used a video-based current event platform with students during Connect, but he was unsatisfied with students' passive consumption of current events and noted that most students "zoned out" while watching. He noted that other students may not have had the time to process the information before the class moved on. After being introduced to The Juice, Bily recognized the potential to increase student engagement, personalization, and interaction, while providing students with access to quality current event content.

"The Juice provides the active learning and engagement my prior solution lacked. Plus, it allows students to move at their own pace to better process the information they are consuming," said Bily.

Throughout his course, he helps students build critical thinking skills in regard to media consumption. After teaching the media literacy lesson, Bily then has students apply what they learned to the articles in The Juice. For example, after teaching a lesson on how students can determine the credibility of a piece of information by identifying its primary purpose or "InfoZone," Bily then engaged students in discussion around the articles in The Juice after they have classified them.

## EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE AND ENGAGEMENT WITH RELEVANT CONTENT

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"Current events are so important for students and there are not many platforms out there that give students an unbiased approach, as The Juice does," said Bily.

Bily said one of the biggest successes he has noticed with using The Juice is students' awareness of what is happening in the world and increased confidence in discussing important issues.

"Making those connections for kids is a big success, but I think the easy one to suggest is just kids being able to feel confident or comfortable, having some context on what's going on in the world," said Bily

He also noticed how student engagement with reading current events increased because students saw the relevance to their lives.

"This week, for example, there was the story about Montana being the first state to ban TikTok. You want to talk about a story that most of my students clicked on first because we have been talking about that being a Supreme Court issue and how that impacts what sort of things you can have on school devices versus personal devices, said Bily. " It's stuff that's impacting them so they clearly care about it."

By using The Juice content to connect students to their world, Bily is empowering students to better understand the world around them and how to critically think about issues that will impact them today and in the future.

## ABOUT THE JUICE

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Designed for grades 5+, each academic day, The Juice delivers five timely current events articles at four reading levels to help students build literacy. Educators and students receive daily rigorous short-form content, vocabulary, infographics, videos, embedded scaffolds, formative assessment, progress monitoring, data-informed instruction, and more! Standards-aligned, The Juice provides educators with flexibility and can be used with core instruction, intervention, enrichment, credit recovery, and extended day/year programs.



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