The city of Richmond, VA, Read to Them’s hometown, enjoyed the successful launch this fall of an ambitious reading program that will bring family literacy to the lives of students throughout the city over the course of the next decade.

One Richmond, One Book will feature citywide reading together programs in the fall, winter and spring during each of the next 10 years.

One Richmond, One Book inaugural reading this past fall, featuring Friendship

According to Humphrey, included participation from 26 city elementary schools.

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney said the program provided a welcome jolt to the city.

“Seeing students and families reading across the city this fall demonstrated this is a program that can truly energize and unite our city,” Stoney said. “I loved being able to talk about Humphrey during my school visits across Richmond this fall.”

Dr. Maia Kling, program director for One Richmond, One Book, said the program enjoyed a promising introduction. The
schools shared a common purpose, but also brought “their own ideas and energy” to the experience.

“It was a great start,” Kling said. “We are building upon this baseline, learning from this pilot year, and crafting the program and community participation as we go.”

Kling said One Richmond, One Book is a community-driven initiative with support from a range of partners, including the mayor’s office, the school superintendent’s office, Richmond Public Libraries, and local public safety departments, among many more. Read to Them and the Richard S. Reynolds Foundation provided sponsorship support. One Richmond, One Book builds on the Richmond Family Literacy Initiative, a Read to Them program to bring additional resources and expertise to One School, One Book readings at various Richmond public schools.

Kling said One Richmond, One Book is inspired by a commitment to bring access to literacy to all, keeping with the themes of engagement, equity and excellence in the Dreams4RPS strategic plan marshaled by Jason Kamras, Superintendent of Richmond Public Schools. Kamras said One Richmond, One Book was an obvious match.

“It was great to see so many of our elementary students enjoying Friendship According to Humphrey during the fall,” said Superintendent Jason Kamras. “I have my copy of Cleo Edison Oliver ready to go and I am looking forward to joining our elementary students across the city as they explore this book together as part two of One Richmond, One Book begins.”

Each of the 13,000 students at the participating schools received their own copy of Friendship According to Humphrey. For some students, One Richmond, One Book marked their first experience of reading together.

“Together with classmates and teachers, students read the story, enjoyed assemblies, answered trivia questions, held discussions, and talked about the story’s characters, scenarios, and themes,” Kling said. “Students offered opinions, noticed details, learned new vocabulary, and had fun with a book that everyone was reading together.”

The community embraced the program with enthusiasm, and One Richmond, One Book gained widespread visibility in the city. Kamras and Stoney attended events at schools, and their likenesses were seen with characters from the Humphrey series on 8-foot-tall standees in schools, at the mayor’s office and at Capital One. Local luminaries and others volunteered their time in various ways, including NFL Hall of Fame linebacker Willie Lanier, who was recorded reading a chapter of Humphrey aloud.
Penguin, the publisher of *Friendship According to Humphrey*, teamed with Read to Them to develop a large banner ad that was placed prominently on eight city buses, and large banners promoting the program were hanging outside of every Richmond Branch Library. *One Richmond, One Book* also attracted media coverage from local print, TV, and radio outlets.

Kling said Read to Them was “delighted” at the response to the event and the opportunity to engage with the entire city in the first ever literacy event to involve each of the public schools’ students and their families. She said the program can have an enduring impact on thousands of children.

“At the elementary-school level, and in the context of this enjoyable reading program, we can introduce students to some of literacy’s established pathways that are attainable and navigable with the support of both home and school,” Kling said.

Read to Them is devoting new resources to back its commitment to hold three readings a year for all 26 Richmond schools. Program assistants will work exclusively on ensuring that every school receives guidance and support during their readings, helping to prepare materials and organize and implement events and activities. *One Richmond, One Book* also requires dozens of volunteers, and Read to Them hired a volunteer coordinator dedicated to the project.

A family survey in the aftermath of the inaugural reading showed that 97 percent of parents and family members who responded said they enjoyed reading together, an overwhelming majority of parents/guardians believed *One Richmond, One Book* would lead to their child reading more for pleasure, and approximately 80 percent of respondents said the experience helped demonstrate to them how to participate in their child’s learning and school life.

The findings showed that “school-driven family literacy across the community can be an effective tool for engaging students and family members, peers and community members, teachers and school staffs,” Kling said.
Something to Talk About

Compelling conversations mark school’s first year with One School, One Book

Literacy is a top priority at RP Connor Elementary School in Suffern, NY. Kelly Benadi, the school’s principal, places an emphasis on encouraging independent reading and building a schoolwide commitment to books. When she learned about One School, One Book, she knew it would be a perfect fit for the school’s mission. This year, RP Connor dove headlong into the program by holding both fall and winter One School, One Book programs, reading first The World According to Humphrey and then The Lemonade War.

“Everything has just been amazing for us,” Benadi said. “It’s been such a great experience.”

Benadi said her favorite part of the program was the “shared conversations” the program stimulates. For instance, RP Connor students embraced journal assignments meant to reinforce lessons from the books. During the reading of Humphrey, one student from each class would take home a stuffed Humphrey every day, write a journal entry from Humphrey’s point of view and then share it with the class the next day. For The Lemonade War, students brought home a lemon and wrote entries about a time in their lives when they had turned a negative into a positive.

Benadi said the students wrote “amazing” journals that helped drive compelling conversations about the books. During the One School, One Book reading of Humphrey, students took their stuffed hamster to a variety of fun places – IHOP, karate practice, a police station where a student’s father worked – and then regaled their classmates with tales of their adventures. During The Lemonade War, the journal-writing experience inspired kids to dig deep and look at their actions in a new, more reflective light.

“It was really powerful for kids to see that everyone is dealing with something of their own,” Benadi said. “And the classroom conversation got into ‘how do we turn a challenge around? How do we overcome obstacles?’ We had some really great conversations about that.”

Parents often posted photos on social media of their children reading with the stuffed Humphrey or the lemon, and Benadi pointed to the school community’s active use of social media during the One School, One Book readings as a key way the school built momentum around their reading effort. The school used the social media hashtag #RPCREADS and Benadi said word spread quickly through the community about For students reading Humphrey, there’s nothing better than a giant hamster to snuggle.

Humphrey activities help kickoff RP Connor’s read.

Students adore their new hamster friend!
the reading effort.

“The use of social media and the support parents showed by posting photos of their children reading really showed the kids that this was something that mattered – that this was something to get excited about,” Benadi said.

Local stores showed their support of the One School, One Book program during The World According to Humphrey reading with posters about the program in their windows. Each participating store kept a copy of the book prominently positioned in the store. When a student visited a store and mentioned the book, they would receive a ticket for a large raffle the school held.

“It really ended up being a lot of fun for the families and the stores, too,” Benadi said. “Kids were running up and down the street going to Dunkin Donuts, going into the flower shop, going to the pizza place, and collecting tickets from all of them. The whole community really loved it, and it was so cool for the kids to see the posters in all of the stores and to feel that kind of support.” Benadi said the school’s successful first year with One School, One Book stemmed from teamwork as members of the school community worked together to ensure complete commitment to the process. Benadi said RP Connor is excited to continue with One School, One Book and has been batting around ideas inspired by their experiences this year. The possibilities for the program seem limitless, she said. “I think it’s just a phenomenal program and I already can’t wait for next year,” Benadi said.

Students take a stuffed Humphrey everywhere during their read!

Why We Love Books

Read to Them staff sure do love books!
Watch our new “Why We Love Books” video series to find out what makes these stories special. Then, check out each staff member’s favorites - from our catalog and their own home libraries.
Monica Brown is the author of the *Lola Levine* chapter book series, which stars a biracial, bicultural second-grader, and more than 20 award-winning picture books. *Lola Levine Is Not Mean!,* a Read to Them selection, was named a Kirkus Reviews Best Middle Grade Book of the Year.

**In your interactions with young readers, what have you found they most embrace about your books?**

I've found that young female readers have especially loved my characters of Marisol McDonald and Lola Levine, because they can relate — to being bullied, to feeling different, to wanting to change the world and make it better, and to the humor! I've also had many profound experiences with young Latinx students all over the United States, and in Peru, Panama, and Chile, where I've been a visiting author, who have delighted and found real joy in seeing faces and lives like theirs in literature. I've also just enjoyed the laughter of children who delight in Chavela’s magic bubble ride, and Marisol naming her puppy Kitty, or Lola Levine and Bella Benitez getting into a tie-dye “fight” with paint.

**What has been the most rewarding part of finding an audience with your books?**

I can truly say that writing for children has been one of the great joys of my life. Every step is rewarding, though some of the steps, like writing, and research, and the early years of working to find an audience and agent were challenging. The rewards are abundant and continuous! I've felt that keenly in the last few years, when I've had some daunting health challenges, but I've still been able to write and create and feel like I'm contributing to the world!

**What was the inspiration for the *Lola Levine* series?**

I can tell you that the true inspiration for the *Lola Levine* series was my own family, and my two daughters, Isabella and Juliana. My daughter, JuJu, who is now a college student, was a funny and fierce soccer player, and my other daughter, Isabella, also a college student, was and is a ballerina. I wanted to create a loving, multicultural family not unlike our own, where mixed-race children were not described in fractions, but rather as containing multitudes and whole just as they are! You can find out more about Lola here: www.lolalevine.net. I'm so thrilled that the Lola books are now available through Scholastic book club and fairs, and are being translated into Spanish!

**Were you a big reader as a child?**

I was a prolific reader growing up! I loved to read, and as a young child, I had a Tía who was a kindergarten teacher. She gifted me many books, as did my nana. I credit them both for supporting an early love of reading. Later, as I got older, books played an even more important role, especially during some tough teenage years. Books were my friends, in a way — they were an escape, a comfort, and a way of dreaming my life.

**Are there themes or interests that you return to often in your books?**

In my picture book biographies I often return to creative people — poets and artists and activists. People like Gabriel García Márquez, Pablo Neruda, Celia Cruz, and Dolores Huerta. I wanted to honor and celebrate the people who most inspired me and share their stories with children. My fictional characters, like Marisol McDonald and Lola Levine, and most recently, Sarai Gonzalez, the character based on a real young activist, are all fun, creative, feisty, indomitable girls who want to change the world and have a good time figuring things out!
When Poplar Grove Elementary School in Poplar Grove, IL, kicked off its schoolwide reading of *Zoey and Sassafras: Dragons and Marshmallows* on Feb. 13, it marked the seventh time the school has participated in the *One School, One Book* program. Rebecca Giesecke, a school teacher, said *One School, One Book* “has become a wonderful tradition at our school. We read together in February, which is a great time of year to come together as a school.”

“The biggest benefit is getting families to read together and bringing our school together,” Giesecke said. “For me personally, I love that our families are taking a little bit of time each night to come together as a family and read.”

Initially, Poplar Grove launched *One School, One Book* with large kickoff assemblies, but in recent years the school has gravitated toward a more low-key approach that still reliably generates excitement among students. School staff place hints about the identity of the year’s selection around school and on social media. Then, on the big day, the school’s principal and an administrative assistant go from classroom to classroom delivering books, often with a twist that is a nod to the year’s book. For the launch of a *Hank Zipzer* series book, the books came wrapped like birthday presents.

“My favorite delivery was the year we read *Mr. Popper’s Penguins,*” Giesecke said. “Each classroom received a package in the ‘mail.’ We used actual postal boxes and addressed them to each class. When the teacher opened the box not only were the books in it, but so was a stuffed penguin for each classroom.”

Giesecke said the school has received extensive positive feedback about *One School, One Book* from parents. For instance, Rebecca Schulewitz-Self, a Poplar Grove mother, said she loves *One School, One Book*, especially the discussions that arise at both home and school that give students an enlarged understanding of the books and the issues they tackle.

“It also has gotten my kids to read books that they normally would not read (and away from reading the same book over and over),” Schulewitz-Self said. “On multiple occasions, my kids have asked for other books in the series after they were done.”

Giesecke said the students’ enthusiasm for *One School, One Book* is obvious.

“I love how excited the students get about the program, especially our kindergarten kids when they realize they get to take the book home to keep,” Giesecke said. “In 2017 I could not decide which book to read so we let the kids vote, which created a fabulous buzz about what book they would be getting.”

Giesecke said *One School, One Book*’s importance goes well beyond the elementary school’s reading of a single book, and the community recognizes the extent of its impact. Poplar Grove has received grant funding over the years to support the program from such entities as Target, Walmart/Sam’s Club, and Enbridge.

“One of the biggest impacts beyond completion is the amount of books the program has put into the community and classroom libraries,” Giesecke said. “Poplar Grove is a rural village of about 6,000. We do not have a public library or free access to any nearby libraries. Since 2013, we have put over 2,000 books into the homes of Poplar Grove families. The program has also added over 100 books to classroom libraries.”
Rosey Thompson, Reading Specialist
Roebling Elementary School
Roebling, NJ

I have found that in addition to getting the website for your book up and running, as well as having the video read-alouds of each chapter, having a little mascot that goes along with your selection really gets the whole school talking. This year our book selection lent itself easily to a mini-Fenway mascot (Thank you, AMAZON) that I hide everyday throughout the school, and the students have to try and find him. It is most exciting when they spot Fenway in their classroom for the day, or when he appears in the gym during lunchtime. You can literally hear the screams of delight. Every morning I am asked by at least 10 students, “Where is Fenway today?” I introduced him to the school at our kickoff assembly, and needless to say he is a big hit. I post his travels on our school’s social media pages to keep families in the loop. Last year, our school selected *The Lemonade War* and we had a mom crochet a mini stuffed lemon that we named “Harriet.” Also a big hit! Just have fun with this. It’s a rare time to go off script in our day, and the students as well as the staff enjoy a different spin on the largest schoolwide book club we’ve ever had.

Terri Gaussoin, Teacher Librarian
Janet Kahn School of Integrated Arts
Albuquerque, NM

There are so many wonderful titles to choose from through Read to Them. There’s sure to be a book that’s right for your school community. As you plan for your *One School, One Book* reading celebration think about timing, look for uninterrupted times in the calendar where reading together can be the real focus. Think of ways you can support teachers and the reading journey. Before each book I always gather activities, videos, author information and resources that I can share in addition to the daily book trivia. Share your excitement about the books and give students time to share their reading connections and experiences as well.

Learn more about our selected titles at:
www.readtothem.org/books