In March, when each of the 34 elementary schools in the Norfolk Public School System read *Cleo Edison Oliver: Playground Millionaire* by Sundee Frazier as part of the second annual *Virginia Reads One Book* program, Gwen Collins could go from school to school in the district and know everybody would be focused on the same thing: Cleo and her story. Collins saw walls covered with photos of student winners of Cleo-related trivia questions, ran into reading specialists dressed as Cleo, and encountered breathless conversation after conversation about the previous night’s reading.

“You could go in the cafeteria or walk down the halls or go into a classroom and everyone was talking about the book,” said Collins, who is senior coordinator, English, curriculum and instruction, for Norfolk Public Schools. “It was just contagious.”

Norfolk’s nearly 15,000 elementary school students each received a copy of the book and kicked off the reading on March 1 to coincide with Dr. Seuss’ birthday, along with thousands of other participants in the state. The feedback from parents in the ensuing weeks was full of enthusiasm. One mother told Collins that her three children would come home every night and launch into detailed discussions about the book’s characters. Another mother sent a thank you note to her daughter’s principal because the experience had prompted her daughter, who had proved to be a reluctant reader, to not only complete reading her first novel but to declare it her favorite book ever.
“Reading had been this difficult challenge for her but she had gotten excited about it, and she felt so proud and successful that she had read an entire book on her own,” Collins said. “It really is a powerful thing when you read a book as a community together.”

In its second year, *Virginia Reads One Book* experienced major growth as it expanded its reach across the state, according to Cathy Plageman, program director, districts and states, for *Read to Them*. The program saw an increase in readers of approximately 50% from its inaugural year, growing from approximately 40,000 students to around 60,000. More than 140 schools participated. Schools were represented across the spectrum - rural, suburban and city schools - and stretched through every region of Virginia.

“The main thing that we’re excited about is that we’re getting more and more children reading with their families and learning about literacy,” Plageman said.

In addition to Norfolk, the entire public school systems in the cities of Richmond, Petersburg, and Portsmouth participated.

“In those pockets of super concentration - where every school was participating - it really brought a lot of excitement for the children,” Plageman said. “There was a real sense that something special was happening.”

The Virginia Bankers Association Education Foundation served as lead sponsor of *Virginia Reads One Book* for the second year in a row. Financial literacy lessons from the book were tied into discussions of the book with help from the foundation and the Virginia Council on Economic Education. Monica McDearmon, communications and financial literacy director for the Virginia Bankers Association, said the *Virginia Reads One Book* program serves a critical role for young readers and their families.

“We believe that lifelong readers turn into lifelong learners,” McDearmon said. “We think it’s so special that the reading for *Virginia Reads One Book* is not only done at school, but there is an at-home, family component to it as well.”

The Washington Redskins Charitable Foundation also served as a sponsor. Alexandra Smith, coordinator for community and charitable programs, said the foundation was excited to work with *Read to Them* because their mission closely aligns with that of its Redskins Read program. Redskins players Chase Roullier and Tyler Catalina served as mystery readers, reading from the first chapter in a broadcast to the schools to kick off the program.

“Both programs strive to promote youth literacy and the benefits of reading in every aspect of life. Partnering with the *Virginia Reads One Book* program helps...
us expand our reach and impact we have on our communities,” Smith said.

Essential to *Virginia Reads One Book*’s success this year was the growing support of Virginia’s banking community. McDearmon said the VBA Education Foundation and banks in Virginia contributed more than $100,000 to the program in 2019, sponsoring more than 28,000 students and staff. Twelve member banks directly sponsored local schools in addition to the foundation’s efforts.

Plageman said the support of banks expanded the number of schools that were able to participate this year. In total, 46 schools across the state were sponsored this year by either the VBA Education Foundation or an individual bank. McDearmon said the foundation recognizes the opportunity *Virginia Reads One Book* offers for its banks to support local schools. She said the foundation was drawn to the program’s flexibility and its capability to be implemented in any elementary school in the state.

“We were especially excited that the book had a financial literacy theme and that it was a program for elementary-age students,” McDearmon said. “So many of our member banks have existing relationships with the schools in their communities and are in schools regularly making financial literacy presentations. *Virginia Reads One Book* is a perfect complement to the great work that our banks are already doing statewide. Our bankers love getting out of the bank and into the classrooms.”

“There are so many ways that our bankers are involved during the three weeks of this program, from attending kickoff assemblies to being guest readers in classrooms, to making financial literacy presentations,” McDearmon said. “The opportunities are endless. As one of our bankers recently said, it’s a ‘win, win, win for the banks, the students and the schools.’”

Allison Daniels, vice president/loan quality control officer with First National Bank in Altavista, Virginia, said her bank jumped at the opportunity to help not only students, but their families, particularly because the bank had designated financial literacy education as a key area to target for community support.

Four First National Bank representatives provided classroom lessons tied to the reading to a group of third-grade students. Daniels said the bankers noted how much material the students covered, how receptive they were to the program and lessons, and how excited they were to read the book and share what they had learned. First National Bank also provided a budget workshop for students’ parents.

“It was a rewarding experience to extend the financial literacy education to the parents with the *Read to Them* program as the gateway to this opportunity,” Daniels said. “The parents that attended learned how to budget, what factors make up a credit score, explanations of the different types of bank accounts, and the importance of saving.”

Plageman said books are selected first and foremost for the quality of the story itself, but compelling stories can pave the way for lessons on a range of topics. Financial literacy was
a natural topic for Cleo Edison Oliver: Playground Millionaire, as it was for Jacqueline Davies’ The Lemonade War, last year’s Virginia Reads One Book selection. Plageman said the financial components dovetail with teachers’ lesson plans and help them bring new life and layers to stories.

McDearmon said the financial literacy theme encouraged students and their families to have conversations about money management, budgeting and bank accounts, among other topics.

Read to Them and Virginia Reads One Book sponsors are already gearing up for 2020. Next year’s book will be The Toothpaste Millionaire by Jean Merrill. The book opens doors to explorations of dental health.

“We can’t wait to see the creative and exciting things that the schools come up with for Virginia Reads One Book 2020,” McDearmon said. “We are looking forward to watching Virginia Reads One Book grow over the next several years, just as the other programs that the foundation supports have done.”

Collins and the Norfolk school system didn’t wait until 2020 to build on the momentum of Virginia Reads One Book. Instead, the system’s summer reading curriculum was rewritten to incorporate Cleo Edison Oliver in Persuasion Power, the second book in the Cleo Edison Oliver series. In addition, the school district enlisted Frazier to come to Norfolk during the final week of summer school to speak with the students about the book and its life lessons.

“This really was the perfect thing for us,” Collins said. “It was a lot of fun to be a part of it.”

**Thank you to our 2019 Virginia Reads One Book sponsors!**

Virginia Bankers Association Education Foundation (lead sponsor), Bank of Botetourt (returning from 2018), Burke & Herbert Bank, Chesapeake Bank (returning from 2018), Farmers Bank of Appomattox, Fauquier Bank, First National Bank, Fulton Bank & Fulton Mortgage, Powell National Bank, Skyline National Bank, SunTrust Foundation, TowneBank of Suffolk, Wells Fargo

**Check out more of our Family Financial Literacy titles!**

Remember, local banks can be a ready source of sponsorship for One School, One Book when you choose a Family Financial Literacy title.
When Matthew Turner Elementary School in Benicia, California read Victoria J. Coe’s *Fenway and Hattie*, a story of a girl and her Jack Russell Terrier, as part of *One School, One Book* this spring, students and teachers explored entertaining and educational ways to understand a dog’s-eye view of the world. They designed dog houses, built a dog park with Legos, created and explored an obstacle course for dogs using coding robots, crafted origami dog figures, and made dog blankets to donate to a local animal shelter. They even played the part of dogs themselves when students expressed emotions and thoughts as though they were Fenway. Using a green screen, thought bubbles appeared above the children’s heads with the dog’s thoughts.

“He can’t communicate in English, so how’s he going to tell people that he’s scared or feeling something else,” said Lisa Saari, librarian and media technician. “So they had to bark or whimper or whine to show what they were trying to communicate.”

The reading of *Fenway and Hattie* marked Matthew Turner’s third *One School One Book*, and Saari said the school has grown more ambitious and adventurous with each new iteration of the program, building a comprehensive, compulsive and immersive experience that uses the breadth of the school’s resources to ensure every student joins in the excitement surrounding the act of reading a book together.

“It’s about literacy but it’s also about this big shared experience that pulls everyone together,” Saari said.

Matthew Turner first adopted *One School, One Book* after Saari learned about the positive experiences nearby Walnut Creek Elementary School had enjoyed with the program. During its first two *One School, One Book* programs, Matthew Turner read Grace Lin’s *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* and Tony DiTerlizzi’s *Kenny & the Dragon*. *Fenway and Hattie* proved to be a perfect fit for the school’s third choice, Saari said, because it managed to engage students at every age level, allowing for a true school-wide read. She said animated discussions of the book and its characters were ubiquitous from kindergarten spaces to fifth grade ones.

“There’s a real sense for all of the kids of wanting to be a part of the conversation,” Saari said.

Saari said it has been inspiring to see the program evolve within Matthew Turner with each reading as the school community finds more ways to make it memorable. The program’s staying power has inspired teachers to get increasingly creative with how to engage with the reading in the classroom setting, and Saari said students and their families seemed especially ready to embrace the reading and full *One School, One Book* experience from the outset this year.

“Our fourth and fifth graders have been doing it for a while now and they know to look forward to it,” Saari said.
“And our teachers and families have learned more ways that they can really support it and make it be a great experience for everyone. It’s really grown.”

Saari said Matthew Turner has been fortunate that the school’s families have recognized *One School, One Book*’s positive impact, serving as enthusiastic participants and advocates. Social media has played a major role in the way parents have engaged with the program and helped build momentum behind it. For instance, during the most recent *One School, One Book* Saari said someone posted a photo of their child reading *Fenway and Hattie* to their dog and soon similar posts were popping up on social media.

Saari said it is fun to see not just kids excited about the *One School, One Book* stories and discussing them in detail but also to see the parents of those kids joining in. Saari said Matthew Turner works to create a conversation of the books online, where families can participate in the dialogue and continue it with their children, and the school puts information about in-school activities on social media so family members can see how students are interacting with the text at school.

“Our parents have just really, really bought into the value of this program,” Saari said.

Saari said she is excited to find new ways to expand *One School, One Book* at Matthew Turner, including trying to team more with local middle school and high school students on related activities and perhaps pursuing a *One District, One Book* collaboration.

“I’m curious to see where it goes next,” Saari said. “We want to challenge ourselves to make it even bigger.”

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**School of the Year**

Read to Them is proud to announce Matthew Turner Elementary School as 2018-2019 *One School, One Book* School of the Year! We thank Matthew Turner ES for their enthusiasm and ingenuity throughout each reading celebration.
Elana K. Arnold is the author of a collection of award-winning books for children and young adults. Arnold’s novel *Damsel* received a Printz Honor, and *What Girls Are Made Of* was a National Book Award finalist. Her novel *A Boy Called Bat*, which tells the story of a boy on the autism spectrum who befriends a baby skunk, is a *Read to Them* selection. Arnold teaches in Hamline University’s MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults program and lives in Southern California with her family and pets.

**What interests you about writing for younger readers?**

One of my core beliefs is that children are whole people, already. This means that I take their readership very seriously, and I understand that the things they are experiencing are not small, but are as important as the issues adults or teens deal with. All this said, the truth is that when I work on a story, I do my very best not to think about readers at all. My job is to tell the very best story I can, to explore my characters and their lives in ways that challenge and surprise me. Readers come later.

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

Even though I just said that I try not to think about future readers while I write, I have been absolutely astonished and humbled by the interactions I’ve had with young readers. Kids love to tell me about their pets, and their siblings, and the things that are challenging for them, the ways they feel connected to my character Bat.

**What was the inspiration for *A Boy Called Bat?***

*A Boy Called Bat* grew from so many things - the whole fabric of my life, of my own experiences, the way I think about and interact with the world and other humans and animals - so I find it very difficult to pin down “an inspiration” for this story. I think the Bat books are a reflection of my core beliefs - in empathy, loving kindness, and sincerity.

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

Not long ago, I walked into an auditorium of a school that had read *A Boy Called Bat* as a whole community. The youngest class of students - kindergarteners - each was wearing a stuffed animal in a homemade sling, like Bat carries...
Thor. These children were all nurturing their animal babies just the way a parent cradles a child - soft expressions, gentle hands, some even rocking back and forth. I felt my heart crack open, seeing all these young people taking such good care of something even more vulnerable than they themselves were. It was absolutely beautiful.

**Were you a big reader as a child? Which books most inspired you growing up?**

I have always loved to read. I didn’t really fit in as a kid - in fact, the ways I felt as a child persist even today. I had a lot of anxiety and fear, so recess and lunchtime were very hard on me. A book was a friend I could count on, and I always kept at least one close by. I remember being especially affected by books that paid close attention to the enormities of childhood that could be overlooked - *Ramona Quimby* and *Harriet the Spy* were special to me because of their flaws, their social foibles, their imaginations, and how much time they seemed to spend alone.

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

One good thing about having written a number of books across the spectrum of young people’s literature (I have titles published and forthcoming in YA, middle grade, chapter books, and picture books) is that I can see with a bit of perspective the ideas and concerns I center in my work. Particularly, I seem interested in the quiet, internal moments when we wrestle with who we are, and what it means to be human; the relationships between animals and people; the joy in singular moments of connection; and the satisfaction of being seen for who we are.

I imagine that I continue to return to these thematic issues because they are the places where I focus in my own off-the-page life. I spend much of my time in my own head, wrestling with who I am and what it means to be human; I surround myself with animals, and hours each day are focused on their care and keeping; I find deep satisfaction and joy in connecting with other people one-on-one, and have, I think, a clear appreciation of being alive that I return to over and over again.

**What projects are you excited about right now?**

Currently, I am working on my next middle grade novel, which I love. It’s called *The House That Wasn’t There*, and it’s a gently magical exploration of the spaces between people and the mysterious interconnections that bind them — with feline teleportation, school research projects, and a taxidermied opossum named Mort.

I also have two picture books that will soon be in the world, *What Riley Wore* and *An Ordinary Day*. I’m so excited for those to be on the shelves and in the hands of readers!

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