Building Enduring One School, One Book Memories at Blackburn Elementary

In eight years of participating in One School, One Book, Blackburn Elementary School in Independence, Missouri has seen countless students and their families revel in the experience of reading a book together as a community. Stephanie Dimmitt, reading specialist at the school, said her “all-time favorite” student story occurred when a fifth-grader named Gabby, who has since moved on to middle school, enthusiastically shared her memories of her very first One School, One Book – from all the way back in preschool. That initial book, The World According to Humphrey, was the first chapter book she had ever read with her family.

“Then she was able to recite the rest of her One School, One Book.
“Book books over the years – all seven of them,” Dimmitt said. “It made my heart happy. She had made connections with each of our stories and still remembered them. That’s the point!”

At Blackburn, “we absolutely love One School, One Book,” said Dimmitt. It has become “a well-known tradition at our school.” The program is never far from the minds of students and their families. “I’m always getting asked what our next book will be,” Dimmitt said. “Families look forward to this event each year.”

“Leading up to the reveal of the current year’s title, students are constantly asking staff if they know the title, if their guess is right,” Dimmitt said. “When speaking to the students, they are so enthusiastic to learn what the next book will be. So much so that they even come to me with ideas for next year’s book title.”

Students’ enthusiasm for each book is obvious from the moment they first get their hands on it. Some of Dimmitt’s favorite photos taken during One School, One Book occur during dismissal after a new book launches – the images capture students reading the new book while waiting to be picked up. She loves the conversations she has with students about the books and the depth of engagement the students demonstrate.

At the conclusion of One School, One Book, Blackburn awards students for their participation in the program with prizes, such as a skeleton key ink pen when the school read The Indian in the Cupboard and a pair of science goggles for Zoey and Sassafras.

Dimmitt said a critical component of Blackburn’s success with the program has been the involvement of the school’s stakeholders – from staff and students to parents and community members. “We need everyone talking about the book to keep the momentum going,” Dimmitt said. “This program is a great opportunity to build a sense of community through the joys of reading.”

Blackburn uses a variety of activities to maintain a high level of excitement throughout a reading, such as daily trivia, daily read-alouds, and a family night. The closing assembly often is a highlight, as with their most recent book, A Boy Called Bat.
For that closing assembly, an animal rescue center presented a program called “Don’t Touch That Baby,” showing students baby animals they might see in backyards or parks that they should steer clear of. The assembly tied nicely into _A Boy Called Bat_ because the book features an orphaned baby skunk.

_One School, One Book_ offers an array of positive outcomes for Blackburn – none more important than the way the experience joins the school together with a common aim and experience.

“The biggest benefit is the sense of community and accomplishment,” Dimmitt said. “We [go] on this two-to-four week journey together. At the end, many are wanting more.”

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One School, One Book is a beloved feature on the annual calendar at Northfield Elementary School in Northfield, Ohio, so when the COVID-19 pandemic relegated the school’s students and teachers to their homes in the middle of this spring’s program, it was doubly devastating. However, the school community didn’t let the outbreak put an end to their collective reading of Nim’s Island. Instead, the school adjusted and eventually shifted the rest of its One School, One Book experience – the school’s fifth book with the program – to make it virtual.

Kelly Mileti, first grade teacher at Northfield, said the program offered a way to help “reconnect the entire school in a turbulent and unknown time. This is something none of us have ever experienced, and we felt like [the program] could help bring us together,” Mileti said. “It’s something nice for both the students and the staff, because the staff loves it as much as the students do.”

Adjusting to a virtual One School, One Book required creative thinking, but Northfield staff members were quick to embrace the challenge, brainstorming ideas to give students and families a rich experience within the new limits imposed by circumstances. Among the adjustments was holding a soft kickoff to refresh readers about the story and to restart One School, One Book, setting a new calendar for chapter readings, providing recorded readings of the book’s remaining chapters, and scheduling new spirit activities. One activity had school community members dress up in tropical attire and chalk sidewalks with island images.

Even out of school, Northfield still incorporated trivia questions and class discussions of readings (via Zoom). Teachers added inventive strategies for building community around the book, including a heightened emphasis on families using social media to share their experiences. The school also created events when the school community could be together even while apart, such as a virtual closing assembly when teachers in tropical attire thanked students for their participation. The Northfield community has embraced One School, One Book from the first year the school adopted the program and read Kenny and the Dragon. “Our mascot is the Squires and our high school is the Knights, so it was a great
fit,” Mileti said. From the start, the school enjoyed widespread buy-in from both families and staff, including nine committees formed that first year to tackle various aspects of the program planning.

Northfield has widened the scope of the program each year by building in a service component, such as a donation drive for a local animal shelter and collecting plastic for recycling, and increasingly involving local businesses, who post images of characters from the book selection for kids to find on their premises.

“Those connections have definitely been powerful for the kids, and it’s made things only more exciting for them,” Mileti said.

One of the crucial strengths of the program is the way it unites students throughout the school. It’s clear that the program helps inspire a love of reading for all students, while bringing them closer together. “For the kindergarteners, they’re getting to do something that the big, bad fourth graders are doing and they feel really cool, and the fourth graders love that they get to help the younger kids,” Mileti said.

Ultimately, One School, One Book has helped students step outside of their comfort zones and pushed them to grow in a variety of ways, while building a sense of community”, Mileti said. It’s no wonder the school was eager to continue the program, even in the face of a pandemic. “It’s become really important to us,” Mileti said.
Cece Bell is an author and illustrator whose works for young readers include *El Deafo*, *I Yam a Donkey*, the *Inspector Flytrap* series (with her husband, Tom Angleberger) and the *Sock Monkey* series, among other books. *El Deafo*, which won a Newbery Honor and an Eisner Award in 2014, is a Read to Them selection. The graphic novel is a funny, poignant and loosely autobiographical account of Bell’s childhood living with her deafness. The book chronicles everything from her hearing loss at a very young age to her adjustment to “the Phonic Ear,” a powerful and awkward hearing aid. All of the characters in the book are bunnies.

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

I like trying to reward them with humor. Like, read this book, and you’ll laugh and laugh and laugh! My drawing style is also more attuned to the kid world than to anything in the adult world, so it’s a win-win for me.

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

Probably the humor. And I think they always respond to what is most honest in my work — kids embrace honesty above all else.

**What has been the most rewarding part of your books gaining so many devoted readers?**

When young readers say, “I know exactly what that’s like.” What a connection! Finding out that you’re not alone in a feeling or an experience never gets old. It’s as meaningful to me as an adult as it was to me when I was a kid. AND … I LOVE to get fan art!

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

I was NOT a big reader as a child. But I loved “how-to” books, especially the drawing books by Ed Emberley, and this awesome book by Steven Caney called *Kids’ America*. It had all these old-timey/
A group of college students ensured that the thousands of Spanish-speaking students in the elementary schools of Richmond, Virginia had access to a translation of Jean Merrill’s *The Toothpaste Millionaire* when the book was read as part of this year’s *One Richmond One Book* program.

TaLees Owens, a program coordinator at Read to Them, reached out to Indira Sultanic, an assistant professor of Spanish translation and interpreting studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, for help when she realized a Spanish version of the novel wasn’t yet available.

Sultanic enlisted eight students to tackle the translation, and their completed work became an online version of the novel made available to students on the *One Richmond One Book* website. Translators emphasized not just word-for-word translations, but staying true to the story’s themes.

“The work VCU did was phenomenal. We appreciate having a professional-level translation done for no charge. They did this out of the goodness of their hearts,” Owens told VCU News.

Maria Clavel, one of the student translators, told the site the experience was rewarding.

“It reminded me how a small action can affect others,” she said. “By just giving some of my time and reading the chapters, I might be helping a family.”
Lori Eckert, Literacy Coordinator
St. Cloud Area School District 742, MN

Our media sneak peek begins two weeks before we reveal the title of the book. Of course, students know that February is the big month, so they are already excited. Other things change each year. Morning Muffins, teachers in costume, all-school assemblies. There is no one perfect way to begin the month, but the big reveal day creates the momentum. Involve principals, academic leads, media specialists, and teachers in the video read aloud to build anticipation in discovering the mystery reader of the nightly chapter. Of course, coming to school the next day knowing there will be a chance for your class to win the trivia contest is another way to hook the students. Our district communications team sets up our read aloud website so that all families know exactly where to go to find the chapter read for the night. They design posters for the buildings and blast social media to create a buzz. We have also partnered with local businesses: a sporting goods store sponsors the purchase of the book, a craft store has Saturday “Make and Take” to match the book, and an ice cream store creates flavor mix-ins to pair with the book! The more excitement you create, the more engagement you will get out of students and staff!

Amy Belew, Intervention Specialist
Gurney E.S., Chagrin Falls, OH

We always ask ourselves how can we immerse the children in the book? How can they be absorbed into the book everywhere they go in the building? We start examining the book looking for hooks which we could build upon to connect to all areas of school and the community. Then, we research what resources we have available to us and then expand out. These hooks evolve into activities which expose the children to more than just great literature. We have had our high school drama club perform. Opera singers have performed, community members have shared their professions. When we read *Lunch Money* by Andrew Clements, we paired our younger and older students to create a comic book because the characters in the book created comic books. A local artist, author and illustrator, Pam Spremulli, taught our students about her artwork and then helped them paint a tiger on our cafeteria wall.