One School, One Book Update

Summer Dreams

A year after embracing One School, One Book with a reading of The Lemonade War by Jacqueline Davies, Robeson Elementary School in Birdsboro, Pennsylvania renewed its dedication to family literacy by diving into Summer According to Humphrey, one of author Betty Birney’s titles in the beloved Humphrey series. Bitsy Galaska, a teacher and librarian at Robeson, said teachers stoked enthusiasm for the book and its tiny protagonist with a host of activities. For instance, when students came upon a new word they searched for a definition and submitted it to librarians so it could be posted on the Humphrey Word Wall, prominently located for other students to view. The school held weekly trivia contests, with five winners each week, and teachers organized clever classroom activities, such as encouraging students to predict what happened next to sharpen critical reading skills.

Predictions for Humphrey.

During last year’s reading of The Lemonade War, Robeson featured a series of posters promoting One School, One Book.

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Cynthia Peterson believes “anything worth learning is worth celebrating,” so when Paschall Elementary School in San Antonio, Texas, read Beverly Cleary’s classic *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* for *One School, One Book*, Peterson made sure students had sufficient opportunity to celebrate the book and the act of reading it.

Students got a close-up look at a motorcycle during a kickoff event, enjoyed trivia contests during morning announcements (with prizes for winners in each grade), grabbed the microphone for lunchtime book Q&As in the cafeteria, and dined on a meal inspired by Ralph Mouse’s favorite fare while watching the movie based on the book at a celebratory “banquet.” Throughout, a pet mouse resided in the Paschall library with a toy motorcycle nearby to trigger the imagination and help the students picture Ralph clearly.

Peterson, a library media specialist at Paschall, said children reveled in the book and the process of collective reading, thriving on the shared experience it provided for them with both their classmates and their families.

Paschall distributed a survey to parents after the program and respondents overwhelmingly said they would participate again. Parents cited tangible improvements in their children’s reading abilities, particularly in the areas of vocabulary and reading fluency. They also provided constructive feedback that Peterson hopes to incorporate with a new *One School, One Book* effort next year.

Some parents said the program helped build a routine of reading aloud together as a family that they plan to continue.

Several said they planned to try more books in the Ralph Mouse series, while others said they would seek out similar titles to explore together.

“It’s really a great program,” Peterson said.
Melissa Thomson


Can you tell us about the origins of the Keena Ford character?

I got the idea for Keena when I was teaching an all-girl class of second graders in Washington, D.C. My students were such creative thinkers and writers, and I loved the way their voices came through in their stories. Many of my students began reading early chapter books in second grade, and series books were so important to building their confidence and enthusiasm as chapter book readers. So I was really excited to write a chapter book series inspired by my fun, smart, wonderful students. (To be clear, all of the charming aspects of Keena's personality are inspired by my students. Her mix-ups and foibles are all me.)

Why do you think she has struck such a chord with readers?

I love that she seems to have struck a chord with readers! I tried to make sure that Keena acts with honesty in all situations, and I want any humor in the books to grow out of those honest reactions. And she really is trying her best at all times. She's just learning as she goes.

What has been most rewarding about the books finding an audience?

It's rewarding to find an audience because I wrote them with my audience clearly in mind. I wanted to write books that my elementary school students would want to read! I also LOVE interacting with readers. It's always so much fun to visit schools, libraries, camps, and after-care programs. But I also love virtual visits and hearing from readers on social media!

Were you a big reader as a child?

Yes, absolutely. I was obsessed with the Baby-Sitters Club books, the Ramona books, and anything by Judy Blume, especially Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing. I read voraciously before people started telling me what I should or shouldn't read! There's a well-known line in Ramona the Brave where Ramona's sister Beezus tells her to grow up, and Ramona yells "Can't you see I'm trying?!" I think this aspect of Ramona's character is one of the things that stuck with me the most as I drew inspiration from my childhood favorites while writing about Keena.

What's the key to writing for elementary school students?

I tend to start with a particular problem or scenario that a character might face. I think more in terms of themes or questions rather than lessons. Like what does it mean to be a good friend? How do you react if something is unfair? What do you do if you make a mistake and it seems really hard or embarrassing to admit it? I also try to be mindful of the many ways in which my students' backgrounds are diverse. I try to make characters as specific as possible, even when not all of those details make it onto the page. There are lots of unused character details in files on my laptop!

Keep up with Melissa Thomson. Follow her on Twitter at @melissathomson or on Instagram at melissathomson1.
Coming Soon: Middle School Selections

After fielding scores of requests from schools around the country, Read to Them will soon unveil its new Middle School version of One School, One Book. Some middle schools will use existing titles from our recommended lists and receive augmented packet resources with materials targeted at middle schoolers. Other middle schools will select age-appropriate books that explore adolescent themes, including award-winning titles such as R.J. Palacio’s Wonder. All participating middle schools will receive Suggested Activities for middle schoolers, Discussion Questions, and Role-Playing Ideas to explore characters and ethical scenarios. Look for the full reveal of One School, One Book for Middle Schools on readtothem.org soon.

Heard On the Airwaves

In February, Read to Them founder Gary Anderson appeared on Education Talk Radio to discuss “Building a Culture of Reading in Your Schools and Community.” Fellow guests included José Parra, Superintendent in Irving, Texas, and Mary-Margaret Zehr, Assistant Superintendent in Watertown, New York. The trio spoke with host Larry Jacobs about the major strides schools have seen after embracing Read to Them programs. Parra said Irving’s work with One District, One Book led to improved family time and literacy. Parent engagement has long been elusive for most schools, but Parra said, “One District, One Book showed us how.” Zehr agreed, saying her district saw staggering growth in families reading together regularly—from 8 percent to 56 percent—and the program was the most effective she has seen in 21 years in education. For the full discussion, visit bit.ly/RTTedutalk.

Department of Swag

Did you know participating One School, One Book schools now receive official Read to Them bookmarks and One School, One Book book posters and stickers with all orders in 2016? Keep an eye out for the official One School, One Book t-shirt: “What will our next book be?” Coming soon!

Learn more about Read to Them’s selected titles at: www.readtothem.org/book/