



The Many Fibers of Reading

BY DENNIS LELOUP

Never be afraid to promote reading for fun and look for opportunities to connect this reading!

How can we encourage kids to read outside the curriculum and maintain this reading beyond elementary school? What does it take to get children involved in recreational reading and turn their focus to books? At Sycamore Elementary School in Avon, Indiana we have organized reading programs which have consistently seen high percentages of our children reach new heights in reading. Last year 96% of our students achieved their recreational reading goal, which was a new school record. In previous years, we have consistently scored in the low to mid-90s. How was this accomplished? Why are Sycamore students encouraged to read and what are the principal components of our reading programs? How did this reading craze come about? What engineers the success behind Sycamore's reading programs, where recreational reading is promoted as much as curriculum driven reading?

PROMOTING INDEPENDENT READING

In its inception, Sycamore's recreational reading was loosely based on Books and Beyond (Books and Beyond Non-Profit Corporation, Solana Beach, CA), a national reading program designed to motivate independent reading among children, and engage parents as partners in their children's education. Our program has evolved over the years and changed to a different entity from its inception. Each year the program has a different theme and student reading is connected to this theme, complete with a variety of incentives and gold medals. The theme infiltrates the entire school; our school counselor even connects with the theme through her life skills program. Although the program has been restructured several times, the primary component has always been the books or pages each student has read. Pages read have been the predominate measure over the past 13 years, with chapter books for older readers counting for more "books" based upon the number of pages in the title. Usually, a free book was given to each student immediately upon achieving their reading goal, along with a certificate and a gold medal in a special awards ceremony at year's end. Along the way, incentive prizes were provided for achievement at various levels. For students in grades two through four, these prizes were disbanded for "book bucks"; \$10 in book bucks was awarded for every 10 books read. This connected with the school's math goal at the time. Additional prizes were also given to students achieving several gold medals, usually three or more. We also provided special recognition to the top two students reading the most in the school; sometimes this recognition focused on the top boy and girl reader, but lately it has recognized the top reader in the primary and intermediate grades.

GOLD MEDAL READERS

During the latter years of the program, kindergarten through second grade students have read 100 books for a gold medal and students in grades three and four have read 70. The program usually begins in mid-September and continues through mid-April. Since learning never stops, students have always been encouraged to continue their reading after the first medal. Many students earn multiple gold medals. The media assistant managed the program and met with her parent volunteers at the beginning of each year, explaining the program and its focus for the year. Parent volunteers counted the submitted sheets, with one volunteer usually assigned to two classes. The

volunteers came in each week and picked up the class sheets for their grade level. Grades one to four were color-coded for easy student recognition. There was room to list 10 books per sheet, and each sheet had to be signed and dated by an adult to verify the child's reading. Kindergarten students had a packet. They would color a different shape for each book read, with room on each sheet for 10 shapes. Students would graduate to writing a number, and ultimately a word from their book, on each shape. Parents, staff members, and other adults would record the pages they read on white sheets, with 2500 pages being their goal. Parents and other family members are invited to a gold medal ceremony celebrating our reading success, typically held in mid-May. All staff and students are in attendance for this program. School enrollment for the last two years has dictated two ceremonies in the middle school auditorium, with each ceremony targeting different grades. The auditorium is usually filled to capacity for both ceremonies. Some district administrators attend the ceremonies, and our qualifying students walk across the stage as if they are receiving Oscars!

THEMES WORK!

We've had a different theme each year, with all aspects of the program tying into the theme. Our staff buys into this theme each year, creating bulletin boards and other displays targeting student success. A variety of themes have been utilized, including the ocean, Y2K, Arthur the Aardvark's 25th anniversary, rock 'n roll, animals, racing, camping, and western to name a few. We've also had parties and special events, including a trip to the Indianapolis 500 race track and museum during our "racing year." One of the Indianapolis 500 drivers met and greeted each student personally, along with his chief mechanic.

"Go Hog Wild! Read!" was the theme last year. The principal and I challenged students to reach a goal of 470, which would have been 95% of our student population. We volunteered to spend the night on the roof if students achieved this goal; in addition I promised to kiss a pig! 488 students achieved their reading goal, so the principal and I spent time on the roof, and I kissed a real pig in front of the students, many parents, and the local news media. The response was phenomenal for a record-setting year! Many students and parents came by during the evening to visit and see if we were on the roof, including some in their pajamas at 9:30 that evening. We were on the roof when students left school that afternoon and still on the roof when they returned next morning.

NEW PROGRAM IDEAS

In consultation with our principal and some parents, we have completely reorganized this year's program. Each grade will have a different sheet, and students must read various types of books, including different genres, favorite authors, or favorite book characters, such as Arthur or Curious George. The number of books on each sheet will vary by grade level and there will be a new beginning for every student each grading period. All students will be rewarded at year's end, meaning that students not reaching their goal during any grading period will receive a certificate of effort. Students will also be rewarded according to the number of grading periods they achieved their goal. Those students achieving their goal for one grading period will receive a

Parents will respond to success when they see how their children react to you and the media program. Show parents how students react to reading activities that are fun and engaging.

certificate, while students achieving their goal for two, three, or four grading periods will receive a bronze, silver, or gold medal respectively. Students achieving multiple goals during multiple grading periods will receive a gold medal and a special pen. Staff members and parents will be recognized at our gold medal ceremony.

EXTENDING OUR REACH INTO OUR STATE BOOK AWARD PROGRAM

While enjoying success with our recreational reading program, I became concerned this success was not transferring to our Young Hoosier program in terms of the number of students able to vote for their favorite book. I was particularly concerned about fourth grade, since the number of students able to vote for their favorite book was 20% of all fourth graders. This was particularly concerning since fourth grade students only had to read five of the 20 nominated books, and it made no difference when they were read. I coordinated a plan to restructure our program, which meant increasing my personal reading of the books. I also researched most of the books online and loosely structured each of them into seven or eight different themes appropriate for primary and intermediate grades. Each month focused on a different theme and I brought in related material from a variety of Web sites, many obtained through personal research and the Indiana Library Federation. Besides reading book excerpts, I also planned a variety of projects covering all aspects of the curriculum. I've also plotted the central cities of each of the books on a map and asked fourth grade students to measure the distance between cities. At year's end, I review all 20 books on each list and ask the students to vote for their favorite. In fourth grade alone, the number of students able to vote for their favorite book increased by 25% during the first year and almost 60% the second year! Last year, 86% of our fourth grade and MAP students were able to vote for their favorite book. I also see more interest in reading within this grade level and feel comfortable it is carrying over to fifth and sixth grades at the intermediate school.

PLANNING, PLANNING AND MORE PLANNING

Planning is very important to the success of any reading program. Verify details and attempt to ensure that all components of your programs are covered prior to introducing them to staff and students. Whether planning for your recreational reading program or your State Book Award Program, plan early. Try to plan your recreational reading theme for the next school year during January and February. Program details are planned and verified prior to developing or revising student and staff record sheets. Excel spreadsheets are prepared to assist volunteers with record-keeping. Promotions and prizes are ordered by year's end.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

Sycamore has always had tremendous parent involvement, and this is integral to a successful reading program. Parents and other family members are valuable assets. Solicit their involvement in newsletters, blogs, and on your Web site. Show parents specific areas where their assistance is needed and would be appreciated. Be available at open house functions and parent-

teacher conferences to promote your program and engage their interest. Parents will respond to success when they see how their children react to you and the media program. Show parents how students react to reading activities that are fun and engaging.

ADVOCACY FOR YOUR PROGRAM

Be involved with Title I or similar curriculums within your school or district. Model reading through your agendas, programs, ideas, and contests. Show how the media center connects with different curriculums, and how you interact with other professionals on school projects. Use special convocations to promote reading and highlight curriculum initiatives. We have a convocation the first Friday morning of each month, which highlights student achievement in writing or other curricular programs. A life skill is also parodied with select students in different classrooms. I am always last on the agenda with a zany skit and wild costume, in an effort to motivate our students in reading. I have dressed as a race car driver and cowboy, parodied personalities from George Washington to Elvis, literary characters from Clifford the Big Red Dog to the Man in the Yellow Hat, or a variety of animal characters. Get students and teachers buzzing with your programs and parents will be buzzing. Be indispensable to all staff and teachers. Formulate technology opportunities along the way to foster reading.

Create storytelling occasions. Group books into basic themes or genres, which connect with the school's curriculum and promote student interest. Never be afraid to promote reading for fun and look for opportunities to connect this reading! Children will identify with fun programs and become motivated to read certain authors or particular genres. Use this connection to involve children with other books in different genres and with other authors. Broaden student interests.

CHANGE IS GOOD!

Set goals and inform students of these goals at the beginning of the year. Carefully explain your program. Have all details planned, from prizes and rewards to dates for ceremonies or special activities. Invite students to ask questions and let them feel involved with the program. Give them ownership and something worthwhile to work for. Don't be afraid to change if something is not working. Evaluate your program regularly. Solicit student, parent, and staff input. Be a change-master! One of the keys to reading program success lies in the ability to change. Be willing to change when elements of a program become stale. Be willing to change for continued student motivation. Be willing to change for the sake of change! 🌈

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