

Boost Involvement One Book at a Time

by Bruce Coffey Jr.

Principal Magazine, Nov/Dec 2010

So there you are. Your school has just finished a brand new, month-long reading program that students, teachers, and parents are by and large ecstatic about. Among its many benefits is an increase in parental involvement and awareness in your school. And now you're headed off to a citywide principals meeting. How do you tell them about the program without coming on too strong and feeling like a saleswoman giving them a pitch? If you're Lisa St. John, principal of Apple Glen Elementary School in Bentonville, Arkansas, the answer is natural and easy. You give them a copy of the book.

Apple Glen tried the One School, One Book program in February 2009, sending home a copy of a chapter book—Kate DiCamillo's *The Mysterious Journey of Edward Tulane*—to every family in the school, and asked them to read the book at home over the course of the month. During that month, the school coordinated in-school activities (such as daily trivia questions) to curry and spark conversation about the book. All of a sudden Apple Glen had parents across the school, in every grade, reading the same chapter book at home to their children.

How It Works

One School, One Book is a nationwide “community building” reading program promoted by Read to Them, a nonprofit based in Richmond, Virginia. One of the organization's goals is to promote reading aloud to children. By reading to their children, parents better prepare children to become better readers or enable current readers to make more progress. However, many families stop reading aloud once their children can read to themselves. For many others, life gets more complicated when they have more than one child, and making and sustaining the time to read chapters is more challenging. There are also families who never considered reading a chapter book aloud. These are the ripe, waiting, target audience for such a reading and community-building program.

St. John says, “not enough parents were reading at home,” so she was excited to begin the program. However there were problems to solve. How could she achieve 100 percent participation? What about homes with parents unable to read English prose in paragraphs? How could she reach and make sure the needs of students in these homes were addressed? Apple Glen's solution was to have two reading periods early in the school day. Students could come in and hear St. John or the assistant principal reading the previous night's chapter early each morning. Nightly reading assignments were never more than 15 minutes, so this hardly created a significant disruption.

According to St. John, the program's execution was so simple because it was easy for families to know what to do and participate. As St. John describes it, “If you send a book home to parents, they know what to do with it. That part is self-explanatory.” But to make sure everyone followed along and read as a community, Apple Glen followed the One School, One Book model. She sent home a letter to parents explaining the purpose and methods of the program. The book came home with a reading schedule, so families knew how much to read each night. St. John says most families were ecstatic not just to receive a book, but to be able to share and experience it together. Apple Glen held an opening assembly to introduce the program at school, and then a closing event with food and games to celebrate their participation. Parents were

Boost Involvement One Book at a Time

invited to both assemblies. (And as One School, One Book became One District, One Book in Bentonville, other schools followed their example, following the same simple, easy-to-follow, outlined procedures. Several schools took their own initiative and made their own bookmarks to send home to families.)

“The program is easy for parents because they don’t have to bother with the sometimes intimidating task of choosing a book,” St. John said. “We choose it for them. And for many of them, that is a wonderful revelation in itself.”

And the plaudits came rolling in. “We love this book,” one parent wrote. “As we read the book to our daughter, we can see all of the suspense and emotion cross her face. We love this program!” A student admitted, “I turn off the TV when I read this book, it is that good.” Another parent commented, “Even parents are enjoying the story.”

Citywide Participation

The program was so rewarding and fun, St. John knew that not only would she be doing it again, she also knew she had to share her ideas with others. So when she attended that citywide principals meeting that summer she just brought 12 copies of *The Mysterious Journey of Edward Tulane*. Two months later, all nine elementary schools in Bentonville had signed on, agreeing not only to try the program, but also to read the same book (in this case, E.B. White’s *The Trumpet of the Swan*) during the same month across the city.

Naturally all the schools were concerned about funding. The schools were each looking at an annual outlay expenditure of \$1,000 to \$2,000 to purchase enough books to enable every family to participate. Four of Bentonville’s schools (including Apple Glen) are Title I schools, but in each case their budgets were already set for 2009-2010, so the schools had to get their money elsewhere. St. John helped coordinate this and most schools got their money directly from PTOs, or used their principal’s discretionary activity accounts. St. John says that in future years, Title I schools are likely to use money directly from their Title I budgets to buy the books, especially because Title I requires 15 percent of expenditures to go toward increasing parental involvement.

St. John was successful. In February, all nine elementary schools in Bentonville read E.B. White’s *The Trumpet of the Swan*. For St. John, it was especially interesting to see how each school took on the program and made it their own. To visit the different elementary schools in Bentonville in February was to see hallways lined with art depicting the characters in the book (Sam Beaver and the Louis the Swan), banners and slogans and quotes from the book adorning library walls, murals and dioramas illustrating scenes from the book. Some schools did special activities per grade level on the material in the book. Others emphasized students’ art - inspired by the book. Another school asked extra trivia questions directed at different grade levels. Still another asked directly for parent feedback and dialogue.

St. John reports that she enjoyed hearing from and talking to parents outside of the school environment. She spoke with “perhaps a 20% cross-section of my parents at the grocery store about *The Trumpet of the Swan*.” Many parents reported how much they were looking forward to a new book next year - and she heard the same from principals at other schools. St. John remembers hearing from a parent at Apple Glen, a doctor, who talked in his office with patients

Boost Involvement One Book at a Time

who were students at different schools in Bentonville - all about *The Trumpet of the Swan*. And the Bentonville Community Public Library, a late participant to Bentonville's One District, One Book effort, is eager to be a better prepared and full participant in whatever book Bentonville chooses for 2011.

St. John emphasizes that many of the gains in increased parental involvement in reading aloud will come over time. She thinks that the real strength of the program is exposing children and families to a book every year over the course of their elementary school lives. As such, any appreciable gains will be more conspicuous in just a few years.

Her favorite story about the community building extent of One School, One Book reaches beyond the Bentonville community. She describes how a departing PTO member, an enthusiastic supporter of One School, One Book, formed a partnership between her local church and a sister church in the rural Arkansas town of Wilmott. Through this partnership, her church was able to bring One School, One Book and a full supply of *The Trumpet of the Swan* to the impoverished elementary school in Wilmott. St. John concludes, "Now that's community building!"

St. John is often asked how effective the program was in spreading reading across her community. Her answer is that you can easily collect stories and anecdotes by talking to families and teachers. But there is truthfully no finer testament to the satisfaction and effectiveness of the program than to learn that every school in Bentonville will be re-upping and reading a new book together in 2011.

"We're just trying to get everybody, especially parents, involved," St. John said. "It's good for kids, good for the community. This is the way to build lifelong readers."