Richland Elementary School’s first foray into the One School, One Book program got the whole school community talking in Auburn, Alabama this spring. For three electric weeks, conversation about The Enormous Egg, Oliver Butterworth’s story of a boy and his newborn pet dinosaur, dominated the hallways at Richland’s K-2 elementary school. Kristi Weeks, instructional coach at Richland, said debate and discussion about the tale and its prehistoric protagonist were everywhere she turned.

“I would hear students walking down the hall talking about Uncle Beazley and how they would love to have a dinosaur for a pet,” Weeks said. “This program created a sense of community with our students and teachers. Teachers were more intentional with their daily read aloud as they reread the chapter from the night before. Students had something in common to discuss during lunch or recess.”

Increased interest and enthusiasm could also be found in the students’ reading logs. Logs that had remained stubbornly blank for long stretches were turned in promptly with The Enormous Egg listed “over and over again,” Weeks said. A big reason for
this enthusiasm was that reading became a family event. Some parents told Weeks that they included other children, not just their own children, in their daily readings! Parents sent in photos of their families reading together and the pictures were featured on a bulletin board at the school with the phrase, “When we read together, we learn together.”

“This program really got the students reading more at home with their families,” Weeks said. “Parents started making reading aloud a priority again.”

Richland built a sense of expectation and suspense around its first OSOB experience. Teachers and staff dressed like detectives the morning of the program launch and informed students that something was missing. A news report to the children – issued by a local reporter and a parent – informed the kids that the missing item was an egg. The egg was soon recovered, but its contents remained a mystery. The children could solve the mystery by reading *The Enormous Egg*.

Excitement reigned in the ensuing weeks through activities such as a daily trivia question (with prizewinners), student artwork displayed prominently in the hallways, and an enormous egg contest, in which classes created their own decorated, themed enormous egg. Classes wrote a story about their egg, and the eggs were displayed in the school’s media center. Class themes included a fiery dragon egg, a dolphin egg, an American egg and even a Dalmatian puppy egg named Fido.

Weeks dressed as a dinosaur toward the end of the three weeks, carrying a sign that said “Save Uncle Beazley!” Many students responded by chanting “Save Uncle Beazley! Save Uncle Beazley!” The program concluded with a schoolwide parade – a memorable finish to an unforgettable three weeks.

“Our first experience [with OSOB] was outstanding,” Weeks said.
A two-time Grammy award-winning artist, Bill Harley uses song and story to paint a vibrant and hilarious picture of growing up, schooling and family life. Harley is the author of a number of picture books and novels, including the popular Charlie Bumpers series. His first book in that series, ‘Charlie Bumpers vs. the Teacher of the Year’, won the Beverly Cleary Children’s Choice Award.

The Charlie Bumpers novels have proved very popular with young readers. What do you think draws them to Charlie as a character?

They will give you a better answer than I can, but: I think Charlie’s dilemmas are relatable – they’re possible, and even probable for many kids – dealing with annoying siblings and relatives, negotiating your way through peer relationships, not being able to control events, and having to deal with adults – some on your side, and some not. I think adults often forget that negotiating childhood, even a childhood surrounded by well-meaning adults, is a tricky business. We see Charlie wrestling with all these things. He’s also a pretty astute observer of people’s behavior, and even his own. Plus, he’s got a pretty sardonic view of the world. He’s funny without trying to be.

Do you worry about maintaining a balance between entertaining and teaching your readers?

I don’t worry about it, but I think about it. I’m not interested in being “educational” per se, but in trying to show the world honestly and openly. Everything is “educational”, and I’m suspect of stories that are intentionally didactic. I’ve often said I’m more interested in being descriptive than prescriptive, and leave the audience or reader the space to take the step of making meaning. Most of the Charlie books have to do with Charlie making a deal with the world – he can’t always get what he wants, but he can find something that’s worthwhile and satisfying. Borges said about poetry “It’s not an argument, but a suggestion,” and I feel that way about good stories – they’re one possible way of looking at the world, and I assume the intelligence of my audience in drawing the connections. But if a child just likes it because it’s funny or a good story, that has an important function, too. Really, if you get a child to love reading, that may be more important, in that instance, than teaching them a lesson. The lesson is in the action.

What has been your experience with Read to Them’s One School, One Book program?

As an author, the One School, One Book program has been one of the best things that has happened to me. That I’ve been able to write something that has resonance with a broad group of children, both in age and diversity, is really gratifying – I know from speaking with teachers that they look long and hard to find a book that will fit their whole school. And in my visits to schools that have read the book, I get to feel like a rock star for the school day. And after a day of assemblies and an evening concert at the school I can even be in bed at a reasonable hour!
Students at Forest Heights Elementary School in Harrison, Arkansas found a peer in the pages of *Nim's Island*, the story of a young, spirited girl who lives on an exotic island. Through her curiosity and adventurous spirit, the protagonist, Nim, reminded the K-4 students who participated in *OSOB* of themselves.

“Our students were able to put themselves in Nim’s footprints as they read of her heartache and excitement,” said Ryan Oswalt, Forest Heights principal.

Oswalt said the appeal of Nim helped grab the students’ attention and fill them with the mystique and wonder that infused the book from page one. Nim’s story sparked lively discussions in class and at home. Reading time became a favorite activity for many Forest Heights families.

Forest Heights embraced *OSOB* from the outset, starting with an enthusiastic rally that introduced students to the book and provided them with a bookmark that outlined the assigned nightly reading. Mornings became trivia time at Forest Heights and winners were awarded a small prize. *Nim's Island*’s readability helped students follow along easily and think ahead on Nim’s quest.

The PTA at Forest Heights was actively involved, helping purchase the program and planning a family literacy night with activities and food to spur engagement from the school’s parents. Among the features of the night was an active faux volcano that was more than 7-feet tall and erupted every 30 minutes with flying streamer flames and a thunderous roar. The students also made their own volcanoes using vinegar and baking powder. In addition, the school hosted a book fair and an open computer lab.

At the conclusion of the two-week *OSOB* program, the school celebrated with popcorn and a screening of the *Nim's Island* movie. For the students, it felt like an exciting reward.

Oswalt said Forest Heights reveled in the opportunity to read together at school and home, and the school plans to schedule *OSOB* each year.

“All *One School, One Book* experience has been a wonderful opportunity for our school community to be united as readers,” Oswalt said.

**SHARE YOUR ONE SCHOOL, ONE BOOK TWEETABLES**

EMAIL STORIES, PICTURES, VIDEOS, AND OR LINKS TO

**NEWSLETTER@READTOTHEM.ORG**
Michelle Dimnik, Learning Support Teacher, Dr. Gerald B. Probe School, Lethbridge, Alberta

I feel that the enthusiasm from the staff plays a big role in engaging our students and community. One of the best tips I would share is to send home a letter at the beginning of the project outlining the theme of the book and to share page numbers that parents may want to pre-read (or even skip over depending on their comfort level). By being proactive in this way, parents are better prepared to discuss sensitive content that they might find in the book. Once we started doing this, parents let us know that they really appreciate it.

Elizabeth Kavan, Media Tech Specialist, York E.S., York, Nebraska

My biggest tip is to get a website online! We put a website together and directed families there for all information about the program! Our website was yesreading.wixsite.com/yesoneschoolonebook. The website had information about the program, a reading calendar, and important links about the program and book content. We even had teachers recorded reading the chapters – this helped some of our ELL families because they could still be a part of the reading at home.

Whole school buy-in is VERY important. Most teachers have monthly reading goals for their students, which is to be expected, but to make this program work they need to set their reading goals aside and make their 15 minutes a night be ALL about the OSOB book selection. It is helpful to find a time of year that is the least busy. For us we are moving our yearly OSOB to January since it seems to be the “slowest” month.

Carol Mizelle, Principal, Colerain E.S., Colerain, N.C.

Involve everyone on staff! Always begin each new book with an introductory assembly, in which the staff presents to the children. The children love to see their teachers perform, and if you give your staff the freedom to create, they will. My staff became excited about the books once they worked together to show off their talents to the children. During our introductory assemblies, we have had everything from original songs, dances, rhythms, games, poetry and role playing, and not only did it get the staff excited, but because they were excited the children sensed the excitement, which in turn had everyone ready to begin the new book.
Cathy Mitchell’s relationship with Read to Them began when she attended an open house at the organization’s old offices and immediately found herself energized by the RTT mission and the potential of the One School, One Book program to strengthen family literacy.

“I walked over to the executive director and told him: ‘I have to help you. What can I do to be a part of this?’” she said.

Mitchell began volunteering with the organization and five years later, she serves as a Program Coordinator at RTT, assisting schools and districts implement reading events across the country. She largely works on One District, One Book and the statewide reading efforts, Texas Reads One Book and Arkansas Reads One Book. She strives to make sure each participating school has the support and resources they need to create the best possible experiences for students and their families.

“The main thing that we are after is the children having a positive emotional experience reading with their families,” Mitchell said. “So many families struggle to spend that time together between jobs and school and the many commitments they have in their lives. It’s really important to find the opportunity to read together as a family. When parents value reading, their children value it, too.”

Mitchell, a former first-grade teacher, relishes collaborating with educators to develop strategies for implementing the books into the life of the school. She helps design activities and events to engage the student body to get them excited about the act of reading.

“I always have lots of ideas churning in my head about how I would have presented this to my own students,” she said. “We absolutely beat the drum that this shouldn't resemble work. No quizzes, nothing that might make them feel any pressure.”

Mitchell says schools and districts find a variety of ways to capture the attention of students. For example, schools usually ask a daily trivia contest during morning announcements (asking a question from the previous night’s reading) and award modest prizes.

“We find that students get to school on time more often than they usually do because they don’t want to miss their chance at answering the day’s trivia question,” she said. “Our family literacy programs really make kids excited.”

Mitchell said the Texas and Arkansas statewide programs have been hugely successful and brought together thousands of families. RTT has eyes on expanding these state reads to even more states. Recently, a Texas family emailed her their thanks for helping to steer the Texas Reads One Book effort. The family told her their bedtime routine had changed to include reading together every night.

“We get this wonderful feedback from schools about how the program has touched so many of their families’ lives,” Mitchell said. “That’s why we do this work. I feel lucky to have a job that can have an impact like that.”