Saugatuck students, staff and families bond over a book

When the K-5 students at Saugatuck Elementary School in Westport, Connecticut participated in the One School, One Book program this spring, they discovered that their age differences meant little alongside their shared interest in Appleblossom the Possum, by Holly Goldberg Sloan. Sloan’s novel is about a young possum and her wild adventures with her brother and sister when their mother leaves them to survive on their own. In a video about the OSOB experience, one Saugatuck student said his favorite part of the program was that “everyone has the same book, but they can have different opinions about it.”

“It was nice for students to have one common book -- on the bus, a fifth-grader could talk to a kindergartener about the book,” said Rae Anne Locke, a teacher and librarian at Saugatuck who helped organize the school’s OSOB program. “Classroom buddies (a younger class paired with an older class) could do activities together around the book. Some students shared that they liked the fact that regardless of your own reading level -- since it was read-aloud at home -- it created a commonality.”

That sense of community was among many positive outcomes Locke cited from her school’s experience with OSOB this year. The school had first participated in
OSOB the year before, with a group read of *Kenny & the Dragon*. In an anonymous survey after this year’s experience, more than 93 percent of parent respondents said they would like the program to continue and the school’s staff unanimously agreed.

Parents, Locke explained, pointed to the value of the structured family bonding time the read-aloud routine created in the service of literacy. Caroline Evans, co-president of the Saugatuck PTA, said her family enjoyed the experience so much that they sought out a new book when *Appleblossom* was finished.

OSOB “gives families a structure for reading aloud, an impetus to do more reading together,” said Sheela Bhatia, another Saugatuck parent. “Today, with family life filled with sports and other activities, it is nice to stop, take a breath and read together. We cuddled on the bed.”

Locke said OSOB has thrived at Saugatuck because of widespread investment of time and resources in the program from the school community. The PTA bought a book for every family in the school. Faculty and staff embraced the program and helped to build and sustain student interest in the book. The program launched at a special schoolwide assembly, and a popular staff reader’s theater skit program later provided some memorable entertainment. The school’s morning news TV show featured trivia questions about the previous night’s chapters and older students discussed the book on an online discussion board. In the library, a glass display case showed off the possums each class created in honor of the book’s adorable heroes.

Locke said OSOB was a lot of work, but “helping to organize such a happy community event around literacy is worth it all.”

“Our OSOB committee believes that reading aloud at home helps to grow literacy skills, empathy, language, family bonding, school community and the overall joy of reading,” Locke said. “We want to grow lifelong readers.”
Arkansas is pioneering a dynamic new Read to Them family literacy program offering. It’s called Family Financial Literacy.

Participating schools will read two titles together during the 2017-2018 school year.

In the fall, each participating school or district will choose their own RTT title and read and share and explore it together with their families. (Last year most schools read RTT’s great intro title, The World According to Humphrey, by Betty G. Birney.)

In the spring, all participating schools and districts will read a common title — a tried and true family literacy title that also includes an economic and math component. That’s Family Financial Literacy.

Last year’s title was The Lemonade War, by Jacqueline Davies. The title for spring 2018 is Lunch Money, by Andrew Clements.

Thanks to the leadership of Little Rock School District Superintendent, Mike Poore, and the support of Economics Arkansas, Arkansas pioneered the debut of Family Financial Literacy in the spring of 2017.

This year, all 11,000 elementary school students from Little Rock will participate again. Poore, Economics Arkansas, and Read to Them expect AROB to spread and include much more than the 8000 additional Arkansas students who read and shared and explored The Lemonade War last year.

“This is a game-changer. What schools are doing in Little Rock is such a model for schools across the nation. I just visited 2 summer schools and they are still continuing to build on the story with other activities. There’s business leaders who need this and there’s kids who need this. There is hope in the air.”
—Mike Poore, Little Rock School District Superintendent

To start things off, Governor Asa Hutchinson and his wife, Susan, will launch the program in style with a videocast kick-off. With the support of Arkansas’ business community and Read to Them, students and their families will have a second opportunity to share a great family story and also explore lessons in the basics of financial literacy. Read to Them hopes this unique collaboration can provide a model for similar initiatives in other states.
You are an educator as well as a writer. How does your teaching background inform your writing?

My students, some of whom didn’t like to read the assigned texts, were my inspirations. I wanted to write something that young people could read that would be contemporary and exciting, yet have a solid literary base for teachers to use. I had been working on a novel for young people, so I decided to see if I could get it published. *Tears of a Tiger* is written for high school students – on their level, in their style, about their world. I sent it to 25 publishing companies and got 24 rejection notices. The very last letter I almost threw away (rejection can be depressing!), but I opened it and enclosed was a letter of acceptance from Simon and Schuster. My students walked with me through the entire publication process – the edits and rewrites and corrections. We learned together how a book gets from idea to draft to bookstore. It was a monumental experience for all of us.

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

I love it when one community comes together for one book. The story becomes a shared experience for everyone. Discussions and projects emerge. Understanding abounds. Conversations that might not have occurred before become natural. I always enjoy coming to those communities to join in the discussions of the book.

Were you a big reader as a child? Which books most inspired you growing up?

I was a reader as a child. I’d check out ten books at a time from our local library, gobble those and check out ten more. I read every single book on the children’s side of our local branch by the time I was eleven years old. So the librarians (who knew me VERY well) allowed me to take out books from the adult side. They tended to direct me to the classics, but eventually they let me roam unhindered, and I inhaled hundreds, maybe thousands of books by the time I graduated from high school. So I have no favorite. My only rule was that the book had to be GOOD. I wasn’t aware of writing styles at the time, but I’m sure the better writers held my attention, while writers who had no style or command of the language got set aside. There were too many great books to read.
For more than a dozen years, Jan Bates has seen firsthand — and from different vantage points — the benefits of families reading aloud together. Bates first observed the phenomenon as a teacher at Northumberland Elementary School in Heathsville, Virginia, where she helped to coordinate the school’s participation in Read Aloud Virginia, the predecessor to Read to Them. Northumberland’s experience was such a hit that the school helped spread the movement to other schools in the Northern Neck region of Virginia, eventually leading to a collaboration spearheaded by Bates called Five Schools, One Book, in which the families in five neighboring elementary schools read the same book simultaneously.

Then, following her retirement from the elementary school, Bates began to work at the Northumberland Public Library as children’s program coordinator, where she ensured that the library played an active and encouraging role in her old school’s annual engagement with Read to Them activities. Over the years, Bates, who recently retired from her library post, has seen the program evolve and grow, but its powerful effect on young readers has remained consistent.

One piece of the program that stands out to Bates is the way that families take to it. She believes that families initially grow engaged because other families are involved, but soon reading aloud together becomes something personal and unique for each family.

“I believe that this program prevents generational illiteracy,” Bates said. “We have many parents who have not picked up a book since they were in school themselves. Now those very parents are the ones reading aloud at home and bugging us about what book will we read next year? What a great problem to have! We liked the kids to stay on the nightly readings, but we know (because parents told us) that many parents cannot stay on the assigned chapter. They HAVE to read to the end.”

Bates said libraries can serve powerful community roles when local schools are participating in a RTT program. The library can provide supplementary materials and books or stage events related to the featured book to stoke enthusiasm. For instance, a library could hold a “hamster party” to complement one of the Humphrey novels or ask a school to share student art projects related to the reading for display in the library. According to Bates, those activities not only provide encouragement for students and their families, but they also aid the libraries in building relationships with their constituents.

“This connection is powerful,” Bates said.

Learn more about our selected titles at: www.readtothem.org/books
LORRAINE WILLIAMS, PRINCIPAL, PERRY HILL SCHOOL, SHELTON, CT

The community of readers – both at home and in school – that is created by this project is amazing. The conversations between students and all the staff members of our school while we are doing our **One School, One Book** are captivating. Feedback from parents has been nothing but positive with most parents commenting how great it is to read a book with their family together. To keep everyone on the same page, we create a brochure, which also serves as a bookmark, that goes home with each book. The dates and pages to be read for those dates are listed. We also give parents some tips for reading aloud to their children. Each morning we ask a daily trivia question from the reading the night before and have fun prizes for the winners. We also kick off the project and end it with school-wide assemblies – the enthusiasm and excitement are contagious!

KAREN VALLIER, TITLE I TEACHER, CHANUTE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, CHANUTE, KS

We have found that the more teacher buy-in we have, the more successful the program. Having some kind of contest between classrooms has worked quite well. For example, when we were reading **The One and Only Ivan**, we had a billboard contest (like the billboard that was an integral part of the story). Each of our 35 classrooms in the building decorated their door in some way that went along with the book. It was fabulous and the students were all involved!

We also have a “Wall of Readers” where families send in their “selfies” of the family reading together. This has proven to be quite popular and the students love seeing themselves and their friends’ pictures displayed.