Last year, Newport School District in Newport, Pennsylvania decided to participate in the One District, One Book program for the first time. Ryan Neuhard, the district’s superintendent, worked with fellow officials to build support for the program off school grounds by enlisting businesses and community groups to join the effort. It wasn’t a tough sell.

“People were like, ‘Wow, that sounds like a wonderful program,’ ” Neuhard said. “Then they’d ask, ‘How do we get involved?’ ”

Newport’s small, tightly knit community rallied around the literacy effort from the onset, and businesses were among the most enthusiastic advocates, Neuhard said. For instance, many restaurants and stores placed a copy of Newport’s ODOB selection, The World According to Humphrey, near their cash registers and prominently displayed posters of Humphrey in their windows. When children inevitably volunteered that they were reading the book, business owners and employees were ready to get the kids talking about it.

“It was something small, but it was a great way to share with the kids their interest in reading and to show them that everyone reads,” Neuhard said.

In some ways, widespread community participation was not just a boost
to the program - it was a necessity. Neuhard said Newport has a large free-and-reduced lunch student population, and some students did not have family members available to read with them every night. So every day during ODOB a different community member came to school and recorded a reading of the day’s chapter. The recording was placed online, where students could watch with headphones and read along. Volunteer readers came from a range of walks of life and included political leaders, business owners, retired teachers, parents and school board members, among others.

A pet store lent Newport two hamsters that the school could share among the classrooms, and one restaurant provided a powerful incentive for students to keep up with their daily reading requirements. Any student who completed all of the prescribed reading - by checking off a reading sheet - received free pizza at the end of ODOB.

Middle school and high school students were among the biggest and most active cheerleaders for ODOB, participating in the kickoff event, serving as readers and speaking with the younger students. In one especially popular activity, elementary school students wrote individual letters to Humphrey and middle school students responded to each letter in the voice of Humphrey.

Neuhard said the success of Newport’s first experience with ODOB was obvious and evidence of increased enthusiasm for reading was apparent. He said the school and local libraries couldn’t keep their copies of books in the Humphrey series on the shelf for weeks after the program concluded.

“By the end, people were coming up to us and asking how we could keep this moving,” Neuhard said.

Newport will hold its second ODOB in February, and Neuhard expects participation in the program to grow on the foundation of the inaugural experience and the strengthened relationships the school district now enjoys with the community.
Murwood Elementary School in Walnut Creek, California makes *One School, One Book* a centerpiece of every academic year, strategically integrating the program into the school calendar to maximize its appeal and impact. Murwood leaders announce the year’s title in January at a large, hyped kickoff event that provides students with some much-needed excitement upon their return from holiday break and some positive momentum for the second half of the year.

“The enthusiasm the event generates is genuine,” said Carol Nenni, Murwood’s principal.

“This program is a part of our culture,” Nenni said.

Nenni said Murwood has made *OSOB* an annual occurrence “because our families keep asking for it.” The school’s PTA and Site Council support the program with participation and financial resources, while families diligently keep to the nightly reading ritual.

“I have had parents tell me that this is their favorite event because it provides an opportunity to be together as a family without distractions and to have meaningful conversations around literature,” Nenni said. “What could be better than having the privilege to promote that in your community?”

Nenni said the sense of shared experience that the program promotes strikes a particular chord at Murwood. She makes sure each family, staff member, volunteer and even board member gets a copy so that no one is left out. If a member of the school community needs the book in a different language, she works to secure it if it is available.

“The most crucial benefit of the program is that it provides an opportunity for our community to come together and look at essential questions from multiple points of view,” Nenni said. “For example, when we read *Charlotte's Web* our first year, we formed the essential question, ‘What makes a good friend?’ It was the point we returned to over and over in our discussions. I think that anything that evokes common language and provides a positive shared experience in a school lifts engagement of the entire community.”

Highlights of Murwood’s *OSOB* experience include a marionette company’s performance during the school’s reading of Kate DiCamillo’s *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* and Elise Broach’s inspiring talk to students during a visit to discuss her novel *Masterpiece*.

Nenni said Murwood’s most touching *OSOB* moment came when Janet Kirkpatrick, a former teacher, and her husband, Rick, purchased copies of *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* for the entire school community because they believed the book offered such valuable life lessons.

“That became their lasting legacy to a community they loved,” Nenni said. “What a lesson in itself!”
WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST REWARDING PART OF FINDING AN AUDIENCE WITH YOUR BOOKS?

The fan base is the big reward; children, teachers and parents. I so appreciate them sharing their enthusiasm for the series with me. I am especially moved when I hear from kids who said they used to hate to read, until they found Humphrey. Grateful parents also write on that theme and the books seem to work well with kids on the spectrum who relate to the character of Humphrey. That hamster’s fans are the best! Over the years, I’ve had the opportunity to visit schools all over the US, Canada, and the UK, so I’ve been fortunate to have a peek inside every kind of school imaginable, from a royal school in England to schools with very newly arrived children from war-ravaged countries. Kids are pretty much the same everywhere I go and they give me hope for the future.

WERE YOU A BIG READER AS A CHILD?

I was madly in love with books, even before I could read! I thought books were so wonderful, I knew right away I didn’t just want to read them, I wanted to write them. So I sat down and wrote a little chapter book called Teddy Bear in the Woods. When I presented it to my parents, I announced that I was going to be a writer. I was seven, but I was very sure! Some of my favorites relate to Humphrey. I adored Ben and Me about the clever mouse who helped Ben Franklin. Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle books delighted me, and she also came up with humorous solutions to kids’ problems. Wilbur in Charlotte’s Web shares Humphrey’s empathetic approach to life. I also loved the Betsy-Tacy books, the Little House books, the Dr. Doolittle series and all the Mary Poppins books, plus Little Women. I liked biographies as well.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE READ TO THEM PROGRAMS?

I have nothing but gratitude for the Read to Them programs and the way school communities have enthusiastically embraced the concept. The staff puts enormous creativity into making the program a memorable experience and they share their experiences with other schools. I am in awe of their energy! And let’s be honest, the program has greatly enlarged Humphrey’s fan base. I love to picture families reading about Humphrey together at night. Unfortunately, I can’t visit or Skype all the schools because of time demands, Humphrey deadlines and some recent surgeries, but I created a video tour of my office and if they sign up on my website, I’ll send a personalized letter. I am also happy to help out with questions. I probably can’t visit schools, but I do other types of favors all the time. I really encourage people to contact me through my website: bettybirney.com.

WHAT PROJECTS ARE YOU EXCITED ABOUT RIGHT NOW?

I have just finished my eighth book in the Humphrey’s Tiny Tales series, which are short chapter books with illustrations. But even more exciting is the fact that I am currently writing my second According to Og the Frog book. Og is the second classroom pet in Room 26 of Longfellow School, introduced in the second book, Friendship According to Humphrey. Since the Humphrey books are told from Humphrey’s hamster-eye view and he can’t understand Og, we never know what that frog really thinking. Flipping the point of view to Og’s has been challenging, mind-bending, and very exciting. The first book, Life According to Og the Frog, comes out in July and I’m working on the second one right now. Of course, Humphrey and all his friends play prominent roles.
Ever since Read to Them’s founding, our hometown of Richmond, Virginia has been a special place to us. One of our newest programs, the Richmond Family Literacy Initiative, is helping to deepen that relationship while promoting family literacy and literacy-based programs.

RFLI is a specialized program founded by RTT to support Richmond’s underserved elementary schools and communities. The program fosters student growth and parent engagement through a collaboration between Read to Them and our public school partners. Community partners also play a key role, contributing resources and volunteer readers, mentors and support staff.

Dr. Maia Kling, research director and ELL liaison for RTT, describes RFLI as “One School, One Book Plus.” OSOB programs roll out as usual at the participating schools, but RFLI adds the dimension of skilled RTT staff providing an on-site presence and working closely with schools and community partners to ensure OSOB makes an impact beyond reading time to build a bridge between the school and the home.

“We wanted to have the opportunity to see firsthand and up close what was happening with OSOB programs in the schools and then to have the opportunity to complement that with what we knew to be significant factors for childhood success,” Kling said. “It’s a chance for us to make a real difference in our town.”
RFLI launched this year with four schools that had a demonstrated need and a leadership team committed to engaging families. Each school has now completed a first schoolwide reading program and Kling calls each “an unmitigated success.” Educators, community partners and families have worked together to create interactive, engaging OSOB experiences, while RTT has learned fresh lessons about how family literacy programs work best in practice.

Kling said the RFLI projects serve as models for engaging families and the larger community in literacy programs and forging lasting connections through RTT programming. The example the projects provide goes beyond literacy and extends to “sustaining the momentum OSOB creates for children through the experience of reading together within the structure of the family and even the larger community,” Kling said.

“It’s about people understanding the positive impact of sharing conversations and stories with each other as a way of strengthening relationships,” she said.

Kling said RFLI will continue to evolve and has clear potential to expand and deepen its impact. The program’s success so far suggests educators, families and community members are ready to help.

“People want to participate, contribute and get involved,” Kling said. “You just have to get them started and guide the way.”

“I love this because we share in the moment with our children when we read. The books are so illustrative and creative and this motivates the children to read and to learn more.”

“This allows us to share, talk together, and spend more time with our children. Together, it provides the opportunity, the joint activity for us to all share in together.”

“A Richmond student is inspired by Keena Ford.”

“See what the Parents are saying!”

Children are motivated at a local RFLI assembly.
WHAT'S HAPPENING ON TWITTER?

DWE is embarking on our second all-school book club called Texas Reads One Book. Yesterday we launched the book, The World According to Humphrey, and we started with reading Chapter 1 as a school. Check out our site for the reading schedule. #dinosARock @1school1book

"I want to catch words one day. I want to hold them then blow gently, watch them float right out of my hands."

"I want to get somewhere in the United States. Gotta waste thru & ticket of OSGO schools to get there. Eatin' a book.

Follow us on Twitter: @1school1book
Rae Anne Locke, teacher and librarian, Saugatuck Elementary School, Westport, Connecticut

“One of the most important keys for a positive experience I believe is an enthusiastic committee with representatives of the stakeholders (staff, administrators, and parents). The committee members research possible book selections and read and make recommendations. Planning (begin early and in detail) is essential for a successful experience - and communication is essential. Have committee meetings on the calendar throughout the process.”

Check out our new book titles!

Learn more about our selected titles at: www.readtothem.org/books