When Washington Redskins offensive guard Arie Kouandjio sat down to read aloud the first chapter of Jacqueline Davies’ novel, *The Lemonade War*, this February, he had the full attention of thousands of rapt listeners. The broadcast of Kouandjio’s reading served as the kickoff event for the nearly 40,000 students participating in the inaugural Virginia Reads One Book program, a simultaneous read of *The Lemonade War* in 92 of the state’s schools.

Virginia’s first statewide read together proved to be a huge hit with students, families, faculty and staff.

“It was super valuable for us,” said Amy Morris, principal of Broadus Wood E.S. in Earlysville. “I think the shared experience meant a lot to the students, especially this idea of ‘Wow, there are students all across Virginia reading the same book as us at the same time.’ That was some extra motivation for them. It was a lot of fun.”

*The Lemonade War*’s tale of canny entrepreneurialism inspired readers to tackle their own startups. At Broadus Wood, students from nearby Monticello High School read the book with a group of fifth graders and made an instructional video about how to develop and manage a lemonade stand. The Monticello students then helped their younger counterparts build three stands, which were set up at a Broadus Wood dance. Students there raised hundreds of dollars for Alex’s Lemonade Stand Foundation for Childhood Cancer.

Broadus Wood was only one of the many schools to see students open lemonade stands to raise money for charity during the VAROB program.

“The book really offered lots of opportunities for the students to learn in different interdisciplinary ways,” Morris said.

At Colonial E.S. in Blue Ridge, parents decided they didn’t want to see the reading together experience end when VAROB concluded
-- so they didn’t let it. A group of parents teamed to raise money among themselves and local sponsors to repeat the reading together experience for their students three more times this summer, focusing on the sequels to *The Lemonade War*. In June, Colonial’s families read *The Lemonade Crime* together. In July, it was *The Bell Bandit*. And, in August, *The Candy Smash* is on the docket.

With each read, the school planned family events with treats and fun, book-related activities, such as a scavenger hunt.

“Everything about this program was so well-received,” said Tammy Riggs, principal of Colonial E.S. “Our students and parents were just so excited about the experience.”

Riggs said the enthusiasm could be traced to a rediscovery of the joys of reading together.

“We live in a very busy society, and families just don’t read together much anymore,” Riggs said. “They really responded to remembering to get together and read with each other.”

**VAROB** schools emphasized widespread participation among not only students and their families, but among all members of the school community -- from teachers and administrators to bus drivers and custodians. Starting with Kouandjio’s reading, the participation of older readers in the reading together experience played an essential role in generating enthusiasm for the project among students, Riggs said.

“If the adults in their life think something is important, then they think it’s important,” Riggs said.

Morris appreciates that the **VAROB** program gave students of all reading levels a simple way of connecting.

“Even students who may not be great at reading yet but who are reading with their parents at home have a shared experience to talk to anyone in the school about, even if it’s with someone at a different reading level,” Morris said. “They’re all reading the same thing, they’re all on the same level, and I think that’s a very valuable thing for a community of learners.”

Dora Sue Black, librarian at Drew Model E.S. in Arlington, said she saw evidence of the power of that communal reading experience.

“It really was a group activity,” she said. “The kids were talking with each other about the books. They helped each other with the trivia questions. They were excited together.”

**Read to Them** honored the schools with the highest response rates to family and educator surveys, and Drew Model received the grand prize -- a visit from Davies to talk about her book with students. Black said Davies’ appearance was a thrill for students. Colonial, the second-prize recipient, won a Skype visit with Davies.

Plans are already in place for the 2019 **VAROB** program, when participants will read *Cleo Edison Oliver: Playground Millionaire* by Sundee T. Frazier, another book that will help educators explore issues of financial literacy. Black said her students began asking about participating in the program again as soon as the 2018 **VAROB** ended.

“We were very fortunate to have this program for our school community,” Black said. “The amount of excitement that it brought to reading was awesome.”
OSOB Always a Blockbuster for Arkansas School

Walnut Ridge faculty go all out to help their students be fully immersed in their OSOB read.

Walnut Ridge embraces the sense of fun surrounding OSOB. Teachers and staff decorate the school’s stage to match settings in the featured book, often with elaborate, realistic detail, and they also don intricate costumes. One of the potential prizes for student readers is the opportunity to eat lunch on stage as part of the literary scenery.

Walnut Ridge has organized a host of special activities to heighten each book’s thrills and deepen students’ connection with the story. When they read Charlotte’s Web, a local farm brought an assortment of animals for a petting zoo. Students loved the pie-eating contest for teachers and students the school organized when they read Sarah Weeks’ Pie.

Biggers said Walnut Ridge has seen extensive evidence that families read together during OSOB and that students eagerly discuss the books with each other.

“I do feel students are even more engaged when their friends are reading the same book,” Biggers said. “They can talk about important events in the book and favorite characters. They share in the excitement when something big happens in the book.”

Biggers said the success the school has seen with the OSOB program guarantees its continuation.

“We absolutely love the results and cannot imagine not implementing it year after year,” Biggers said.
Author Spotlight with Holly Goldberg Sloan

Holly Goldberg Sloan is a screenwriter, director and author whose five novels include RTT selections Counting by 7s and Appleblossom the Possum.

What interests you about writing for younger readers?

I think there is no other stage in your life when reading is more important than when you are young. This is a time of such great discovery. I write for young readers (and for readers of all ages) because I believe there is tremendous power in narrative. We tell our lives as a series of stories. This is how we understand our history and how we make connections.

Do your readers inspire or influence you when you sit down to create a new work?

My readers inspire me in so many ways. I spend a lot of time in schools, and I’m always in awe when kids ask me questions that show they are truly paying attention. Since I write primarily realistic contemporary fiction, and because I draw in large part upon my own experience in finding characters and plot, people are very interested in what things in my stories actually happened to me.

Could you talk about the inspiration for Appleblossom and her story?

This story starts from real life. My husband and I have two rescue dogs. They are devoted to ending squirrels on our planet. So far, they have been very unsuccessful, but like many obsessions, their lack of success doesn’t stand in the way of their goal. We have a fenced-in yard, so we can open the door at night and let the dogs out. This is rare. After 8 p.m. they put themselves to bed. They go to the bedroom (where they each have a dog bed cushion and they are done for the day. If they could put on pajamas, they probably would). But one night, very late, our dog June ran to the back door with the kind of interest that she only shows for ending squirrels on our planet. We let her out knowing that squirrels are not nocturnal. She returned minutes later with what we first thought was the largest rat in the world. We got our dog to drop the world’s largest rat, and we then went to get a plastic bag to dispose of the dead body. When we returned, the creature was gone. That was the beginning of my interest in possums. My husband, Gary Rosen, illustrated the book, and the very next day he started drawing pictures.

What projects are you excited about right now?

I have a novel, which I co-wrote with the author Meg Wolitzer, coming out in March of 2019. It’s the first book I’ve ever written with someone else, and that was fantastic fun. The novel is told in correspondence. Meg and I (in character) write back and forth to each other. We are both 12 years old. I live in Venice, California. She lives in New York City. I think the novel is very funny, but I think it also tells a moving story. The book is called To Night Owl from Dogfish. Meg’s “Night Owl.” I’m “Dogfish.”
While students across the country luxuriate in the long, lazy summer, staff members in the Read to Them offices have been working hard to prepare for another book-filled academic year.

Summer preparations have included a wide variety of tasks, such as adding new book titles, assembling and upgrading resource packets, redesigning the RTT website, and developing supplementary materials (flyers, swag, book blasts, website postings) for all RTT programs for the 2018-19 school year. Each year, the workload grows and summer preparations become more essential, as does the need for an enthusiastic, well-organized staff.

RTT programs grow at a steady 40-percent clip each year, and the organization features a blend of full-time and part-time staff members who tackle a range of responsibilities. Among the staff changes made to accommodate this growth was the addition last year of two part-time program coordinators, Anne Curry and Deanna Brown, who serve as the first line of contact for OSOB schools, helping to reply to queries and manage book orders. RTT soon will be adding a third program coordinator to keep up with demand. A team of skilled interns also plays a crucial role, taking on a diverse mix of duties that range from graphic design and social media marketing to proofreading and packet assembly. They even man the shipping department! Situated at our large centrally located conference/work table, they have been especially busy this summer.

RTT’s expansion stems not only from the addition of new schools to the OSOB and ODOB programs, but from an increasing number of special programs. These include statewide reading projects, such as the ones in Texas, Arkansas, and Virginia (Mississippi is up next!) but also more targeted efforts, such as the One Richmond, One Book (OROB) program based in our hometown of Richmond, Virginia.

The OROB program, which launched last year, will be held in all 26 elementary schools in the Richmond Public School system this fall with the support of private sponsors. Dr. Maia Kling, who is RTT’s research director and ELL liaison, is supervising the OROB effort. More information on the program can be found at https://readtothem.org/one-richmond-one-book/.
Yalonda Ivers, Principal, Bells E.S., Bells, Texas

Building excitement with your kickoff definitely helps buy-in. We have also added a service-learning component with our Read to Them event. Our families really enjoy this, and it teaches our students to help others. This year, to go with *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, we had a “Scurry and Scrounge” challenge where students brought items needed by our local homeless shelter. By reaching their goal, the grade level who earned the most points turned me into a giant bowl of nachos — dumping nacho cheese sauce and chips on me while the entire student body watched. (Mice love cheese, right? Plus, our closing celebration was the day prior to Cinco de Mayo this year!)

Students were also excited from the beginning about the bicycle parade we had to wrap up our reading. This was announced at our kick off celebration. This year, we began the day with quick quizzes over the chapter from the previous night, complete with small prizes for perfect scores. We also added a vocabulary component. I went through the book and found a word of the day. Students earned smiley face stickers from any adult in the building who heard them use the word correctly. Don’t be afraid to be creative -- teachers and even student leadership, such as our student council -- had great ideas!

Laura Godshall, Librarian, and LeAnn Farley, Library Paraeducator, Lee E.S., Spotsylvania, Virginia

One idea that creates tremendous excitement at our school each year is keeping the title a secret from students and families. Clues about the book are posted eight to ten days before our school wide kickoff assembly, and students are encouraged to guess the title and author, placing their guesses in an orange contest box. Interest is keen as students use the clues and our library computer catalog to search for possibilities!

On the day before the kickoff, brown paper grocery bags are delivered to classrooms, containing a copy of the mystery book for each family. At 9 a.m. on kickoff day, our principal makes the eagerly anticipated announcement, “The book we’ll read together this year is…” At that moment, classroom teachers open the brown bags and hand out the shiny new books. The oldest member in each household is charged with bringing the book home for their family to read together. Students with younger siblings at our school immediately make their way to their siblings’ classrooms to show them the book and escort them to the kickoff assembly where sibling groups sit together.

At the assembly, names are drawn from all the correct title entries. Lucky winners are invited to choose a prize for their excellent detective skills. But the best moment in the assembly comes when members of the OSOB team read the first chapter of our book aloud and everyone in the school follows along. That’s pure magic!