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Promoting Reading for Pleasure

In order to encourage students to read for pleasure year-round, I think that there are three relatively broad key areas one must hit as a media specialist. The first area would be media activities – initiatives that are introduced and discussed during media time throughout the school year. The second area could be summed up as formalized literary programs, specialized days arranged to shine a spotlight on reading. Finally, the third area that needs to be addressed is the summer reading program so that you can continue to guide your students in their intellectual development even when you are apart.

Media activities to promote reading throughout the school should be fun and contain elements of games and competitions. One idea would be to set up a reading bingo board for your students. You would create a five-by-five bingo card for each grade level or certainly at least separate ones for the primary and intermediate grades. Listed on the different spaces of the card would be authors names that you thought would be appealing and fun but also represent quality literary recommendations for your students. You would group the authors under category headings by column on the card. For kindergarten through second grade, you might have such headings as Picture Books, First Chapter Books, Nature Nonfiction, Fairy Tales, and Poetry. For older students, you might have sections such as Poetry, Historical Fiction, Realistic Fiction, Science Fiction, Nonfiction. You could make the categories as specific or as general as you wanted, depending on how you were structuring that class’s media time and what subjects were being covered in the curriculum for that grade. For instance, you could have categories by more specific subject-area units, such as Native Americans and Space, which might include both fiction and nonfiction titles. You would give your students the challenge of reading 5 books by 5 different authors on the card. The students could also fulfill the challenge by having an older family member read the books aloud to them, which might especially be helpful when encouraging primary students to read their first chapter books. The length of time spent on the bingo activity could vary from grade to grade. For primary students, you might give the children two weeks to complete their reading, meaning that they should read one of the books every two days or so; this could be advisable given that their books would be shorter and that you would want the activity to be at the forefront of their brains the entire time you were working on it. For older students, you might set up a time limit of up to 5 weeks, given that the texts they would be selected would be much lengthier. A portion of their media time each week could be devoted to searching for their next books. No matter the age level, there would be two different goals for achievement with the bingo activity. If a student read five books by any five authors on the card, he or she would receive a small prize such as a special pencil or a cute eraser, even if all the authors fell under the same category. In this way, you would not be hindering your students from reading what they are truly interested in. However, in order to encourage a broader range of reading, there would be a second level of achievement. Any student who read five books by five different authors, one from each of the five categories would qualify for a larger prize. This larger prize might be the selection of a new book. Or it might be a special lunch bunch get-together where the students talk about what they read and enjoyed, receive a certificate of achievement, have the excitement of getting to eat lunch with their school faculty, and of course, share a few delectable treats.

For formalized literary programs, there are a number of different interconnected methods and activities that one might consider. Firstly, an extremely simple method of promoting reading would be to hold annual or biannual book fairs. Naturally, it is not enough to just have your students pick out books willy-nilly from the shelves of the book fair. You should lead up to the event by book-talking series and specific titles that you know will be available. You should also utilize any resources that come along with you book fair materials. Kathleen Brunnett, media specialist at North Carroll Middle, always gets students geared up for the book fair by showing them a short compilation video put together by Scholastic. Every year, the video features some of the book fairs newest titles. It gives an introduction to each story line, shows illustrations and acted-out scenes, and gives the students the opportunity to hear the authors talk about their own books. Providing this kind of time for your students would make the book fair a more satisfying and meaningful experience for everyone. Other important literary programs include literature days and/or reading nights, depending on the preference of the administration and/or teachers at your school. You would preferably do one a semester. One great program already in place is NEA’s Read Across America Night, which places a particular emphasis on Dr. Suess books. You might also try other themed programs, such as a pajama reading night where all the stories shared dealt with the night in some way. During these types of programs there should be different activities and stations, read-alouds, literature-related crafts they make, video clips, themed snacks, teacher/student performed skits. If you hold your reading programs in the evening, you should make it a family affair – letting students bring their parents and siblings to share in the fun, so that the whole family gets jazzed abut reading and conversations and literary exploration can continue at home. You can then also add in more flexible options, perhaps giving the student the choice of what stations to visit. You would, of course, want to allow larger spaces for the activities you anticipate being the most popular, and you could even have the students sign up ahead of time. You may consider adding a pizza dinner – one less thing for the parents to worry about that evening. It would be great to have a guest author speak, but if that is not within the realm of your school’s budget, you can always utilize the SKYPE virtual author visit. Something I myself was exposed to in middle school that always struck me as being particularly effective was having prominent community members come in to the school and read aloud to the students; having a county delegate read to you is pretty cool.

For the Summer Reading initiative, I would recommend setting up a calendar for the students where a parent or guardian could sign off for each day that student read or was read to for a designated period of time. It would also have a blank for the title of the book the student read that day. The same title might be place on multiple days for a longer text, but this way the student would have a record of what he/she read. For primary students, the designated period of time might be fifteen minutes a day, whereas for secondary students, you would want the period of time to be thirty minutes. You would also send home a list of recommended authors and books, so that the students and parents would have a starting point. When the students returned from summer vacation, you would collect their calendars and assign each student a colored sticker with his/her initials on it or each day that he or she engaged in reading for the designated time. During the second media lesson of the year, you would have the students place their stickers on a summer reading poster, perhaps of a particularly cute picture book character, like Mo Willems’s Piggy. Underneath, where the students couldn’t see, would be a replica of the summer reading poster with a star marking a particular spot on that character. Similar to “Pin the Tail on the Donkey,” whichever students’ sticker landed the closest to the star would win a prize such as an autographed book or a book with an accompanying toy. Every student who read over the summer would have the chance to win the prize, but the more the student read, the more chances he/she would have of winning. You might give each participating student a little certificate of achievement, so that no one feels left out.