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Small school libraries aim to make reading fun and easy

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P-I REPORTER

As she sits on the floor of her classroom, flipping through a stack of glossy library books, 7-year-old Jillian Meisner thinks back to when she learned to read.

"It was kinda hard at first," the Van Asselt Elementary second-grader said, scrunching up her nose at the memory. "I would look at the pictures and try to guess what the words said."

Now, reading's not only easier -- it's fun, she said, smiling. She holds up a copy of "The Paper Bag Princess," a damsel-as-rescuer tale she's borrowed from her classroom library, and proudly announces she can already read at a third-grade level.

Thanks to new libraries installed in each Seattle kindergarten, first- and second-grade classroom this fall, Meisner and her peers have instant access to hundreds of books, each labeled with a letter from A to Z to indicate its level of difficulty.

The old method of choosing one book for the entire class to read at a time doesn't work well, because there's often a wide range of reading abilities among students in a single class, teacher Mary Correa said.

"To find one book that fits all their reading needs is impossible," she said. With classroom libraries where the books are all carefully divided into categories of difficulty, "it helps me point them to books that are just right for them."

Educators agree literacy is a key developmental milestone, one critical to students' future academic success -- if students are struggling to read, they'll likely have trouble with other subjects as well.

To address this, Seattle teachers in recent years have spent extra time on in-class reading, and now students will have instant access to more books.

The books are ranked based on such criteria as the complexity of the subject matter, words per page, number of pages and the vocabulary used. Students can choose their own reading material, flip through it to make sure the book is at their level, then track their choices in a reading log.

By reviewing those logs and meeting one on one with students, teachers can quickly determine whether a student is struggling, or whether he or she is ready to move on to the next reading level.



zoom

Mike Kane / P-I

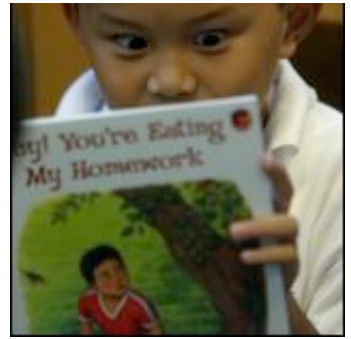
Jessie Nguyen, 7, picks a secluded spot to read Wednesday during a second-grade reading and writing class at Van Asselt Elementary in Seattle.



With roughly 600 books for each classroom, there are plenty of titles to choose from. A district committee reviewed nearly 5,000 before deciding which made the cut, said Dan Coles, the district's literacy program manager.

The committee opted for a mix of about 60 percent non-fiction titles and 40 percent fiction, Coles said, because students -- especially boys -- "get really hooked on non-fiction, the vivid colors, the vivid pictures."

Van Asselt second-grader Martin Marroquin agreed. "I like non-fiction books the best 'cause you get to learn information," he said, looking up from his book, "Squeaking Bats." He pointed excitedly to a photo of a colony of bats and rattled off two facts he's learned in the last five minutes: Bats are nocturnal, and "they're mammals, like us!"



zoom Mike Kane / P-I

Second-grader Kevin Marin, 7, is riveted by a book. The Seattle district lets young students pick reading material at their level.

Coles is delighted that Martin has absorbed what he read and has been able to extrapolate it.

While the leveled libraries and extra in-class reading time are designed to help students improve their reading fluency, he said, it's also critical that students develop strong reading comprehension skills.

The first wave of leveled libraries cost about \$1.2 million, and plans are under way to begin selecting books next month for leveled libraries in third-, fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms.

The libraries aren't intended to replace regular school libraries but complement them. The hope is that students' interest in reading will be sparked by the classroom libraries and, in turn, circulation at school libraries will get a boost, Coles said.

In another effort to get students reading, the city and school district have teamed up for the Read a Million Words campaign.

The idea is to encourage students to read 1 million words during the year, whether it's in a book, newspaper, magazine or Web site. That works out to reading for roughly 20 minutes every day, according to the district's Web site.

The campaign ties in perfectly with the district's other literacy initiatives, Coles said.

"It's really a way to wrap in the families and the community and create an excitement around reading."

ON THE WEB

For more information on the Read a Million Words campaign, including a "word calculator," visit seattleschools.org/area/readamillion/index.dxml.

The Seattle Public Library maintains a collection of online audio books; visit spl.org/default.asp?pageID=collection_digibooks.

READING TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Make real-life connections with the book by talking about things your child has done that are similar to

those in the book.

- Stop your child every few pages and ask him or her to tell you what has been read.
- For non-fiction books, have your child share three things he or she learned about the topic.

For more tips, visit seattleschools.org/area/literacy/ENGLISH,Readingaffair.doc.

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