



TEXAS READS ONE BOOK

Campaign spreads love of reading across the state

In Irving, Spring, Mission and dozens of other school districts across Texas this past spring, reading was “the talk of the town.” Elementary students and their parents in nearly 150 elementary schools in Texas read “Charlotte’s Web,” by E.B. White, over the same period of time through the second annual Texas Reads One Book program.

Once again, Dallas Cowboys head coach Jason Garrett kicked off the festivities with a video-recorded introduction and reading of the first chapter that was streamed over the internet into participating schools.

“If you want to become a better football player, you have to practice,” says Garrett in the video. “If you want to become a better reader, you have to practice. It’s fun to read!”

The program grew by more than 50 percent in its second year, with the number of students involved jumping from 32,000 to 52,500. Participating districts reaped valuable benefits, and many already are planning for 2017.

A tale of two cities

To see the program in action, let’s examine the experiences of Irving and Spring ISDs. José Parra, Irving ISD superintendent, and Rodney Watson, Spring ISD superintendent, both say they believe the program offers them the opportunity to show how they are “literacy leaders” in their communities. It also places the focus back on encouraging a love for learning in the elementary schools.

“The primary benefit is the ability for all students, teachers and staff to read the

same material,” says Watson, “but, more importantly, it is creating for some — and bringing back for others — the joy of reading that has been lost due to the testing movement across the country.”

“This is a wonderfully connective experience for both parent and child,” says Parra, adding that it also creates a strong bond throughout the school community. “The whole idea of everyone on campus reading the same book at the same time is really powerful. We are all working together on something that gives us a sense of belonging, a sense of joy and a sense of accomplishment.”

The program has an impact on all students. Approximately 40 percent of Irving ISD’s students are English language learners, with most citing Spanish as their first language. The district provided copies of “Charlotte’s Web” in both languages, enabling all students to participate.

“You get a shared reading experience between parent and child, and among students,” says Parra. “That’s how you build a culture of literacy.”

“Our students and staff love the program,” Watson adds. “There’s always power when people come together in unity around a specific goal.”

Finding funding for any new program can be challenging. Parra says Irving ISD uses Title I funds to help finance Texas Reads One Book. He views the program as an invaluable investment that pays a rich dividend by engaging family involvement and boosting student reading interest. Spring ISD uses grant money, support from the Education Foundation and general funds.

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“In education, we always find money for those initiatives we feel are important,” Watson says. “We are making this a priority.”

Both Irving ISD and Spring ISD find the program so compelling that they are doing a second book this fall. They realize that reading multiple books boosts the power of the program by cementing the reading habit among families and promoting a culture of literacy across the district.

The Texas connection

The Texas Association of School Administrators formed a partnership with the national outfit, Read to Them, in 2015 and 2016, providing publicity and other support for Texas Reads One Book. The

Texas connection for this national program will become even stronger in 2017, with a committee composed of Texas superintendents providing leadership for Texas Reads One Book and exploring strategies for expanding it statewide.

“We are excited to be part of Texas Reads One Book and about the exponential growth the program has had in just one year,” says TASA Executive Director Johnny L. Veselka. “Going into the program’s third year with the support of a committee of superintendents, we look forward to expanding the program into more Texas schools and districts so that even more students and families will benefit from this special focus on literacy.”

As chair of the committee, Parra hopes to generate broader support for the program.

“The committee will help other people see this as an opportunity that’s worth investing in, because the ROI will come in several forms. Districts can expect to see increased parent engagement, an appreciation of the shared experience of reading together and a system that emphasizes literacy,” he says. “Part of what I am hoping for is that years later, when our students become parents, they will recall with fondness and with joy the books that we all shared together and be inspired to share reading with their children as well.” ■

Students at Brandenburg Elementary School in Irving ISD read “Charlotte’s Web” by E.B. White as part of the Texas Reads One Book program.

