

Student Book Award Programs • Keep 'em Reading •

Grades
K-2, 3-5

by | Toni Buzzeo



Dear Mrs. Skorupski: An Occasional Advice Column with Mrs. Skorupski, LMS @Your Service

I've been running the Maine Student Book Award program for quite a few years now in my elementary school for fourth and fifth graders. During

the initial years, students were wildly enthusiastic and teachers partnered with me by reading books aloud to their students frequently so that every student would qualify to vote. But now that everyone is so focused on standardized testing, I'm finding enthusiasm waning and teachers without much discretionary classroom time.

I still believe that participation in this student choice award program is beneficial to all of my students but I need a fresh approach. Can you help me to reignite the fire?

*Signed,
Flameless in Freeport*

Dear Flameless,
You are absolutely correct about the benefits of student book award programs. They encourage student reading and offer kids a purpose and focus for that reading. They also provide an opportunity for students to hone their evaluation skills. And they offer students a common core of literature to read, recommend, and discuss each year. [For an excellent in-depth discussion of the student achievement outcomes of participation in student book award programs, read "The Colorado Children's Book Award Program: Why All the Shouting?" by Sherry R. Crow, Lecturer of School Library Science/Educational Media at the University of Nebraska Kearney (*Colorado Libraries*, Spring 2004, pp. 17-20).]

One of my great pleasures in the library was to eavesdrop on groups of students standing at the state book award shelf as they recommended books to each other, taking time to construct support for their favorite titles. Imagine! Complex thinking about books with no adult prompting!

Get the Word Out

So, where can you begin as you revitalize your book award program? The best starting place is getting all members of your community (students and teachers alike) familiar with and excited about the current list of titles. Focused booktalking is an excellent tool here. Consider launching your program by inviting each class to the library—or taking a field trip to the classrooms—to booktalk each of the titles on the list. Entice students further by reading a snippet from each title as you go. Pamela Burke, librarian at Marlboro (Vermont) School generates excitement in this way. "I booktalk all the books with slideshows and the kids get really fired up about reading as many of the titles as they can. I assign at least one title to every student, and they can choose between a number of 'alternative book report' projects that I outline. I've had students make great comics from their books as well as design new book covers, bookmarks, and flyers. Close to voting time, they make posters advocating for their favorite book."

When booktalking the book award titles myself, I always handed out the list before I began my talks, so that students could mark their copies with titles they were most intrigued by. In addition, I passed out reserve slips and allowed each student to place three titles on reserve immediately. My assistant and I would then enter the reserves on our circulation program and keep the books moving. (Note: We had a one-week circulation period

for our award program books, although we were happy to renew the longer titles.)

You might also want to consider joining forces with another librarian or educator to booktalk the books. Consider asking your reading specialist to present them with you or your local public librarian. Cathleen C. Moore, library media specialist at Myrtle Beach (Florida) Intermediate School has always teamed with the children's librarian from her public library to booktalk the award list. "Doing the booktalks together offers the partnership appeal that I love. We always segue off each other, and the children get to know that we work together in different capacities."

You can also reach kids individually to provide information about the titles throughout the program as they choose which to read. Kerrlita Westrick, media specialist at Verrado Middle School in Buckeye, Arizona, creates a set of folders for the Grand Canyon Reader Award books. Using color file folders, she prints a copy of the cover of each book and attaches it to a folder. Inside, she attaches a copy of the first page of the book to the left and attaches reviews to the right. She notes that other librarians may want to add student reviews to the back of each folder as well.

Make Them Accessible

Of course, once you have excited student interest, it's important to have a readily available collection of the books. It was my policy to buy two copies of each book that was available only in hardcover, one hardcover and three additional copies of books available in paperback, and one copy of each book available on audio. Our local public library branch also stocked a complete collection of the books and students were welcome to check them out or reserve them there as well. In fact, at the end of the school year, I checked out my entire state book award collection to the branch library so that students would have access to the books throughout the summer. Likewise, library media tech Joanne Ladewig at Lawrence Elementary School in Garden Grove, California, partners with her public library branch to be sure there are enough copies of the books to keep kids reading and meet their award program goals.

Colette D. Eason, librarian at Marsalis Elementary School in Dallas, Texas, has been even more proactive. "I petitioned to have a bookmobile stop right across from our school; they now come twice a month for about an hour and a half. Our nearest library is more than five miles away. The others in the area are much farther, so we are glad to have the stop. I requested they carry the Bluebonnet Award list books; they were happy to oblige my request."

Have Some Fun

While kids will read for the intrinsic pleasure of story, it pays to also consider activities to keep them engaged as the program goes along. Consider trying this clever idea from Pamela Burke: "In Vermont, we have the Red Clover picture book award for students in Kindergarten through fourth grade. I try to use these books in my curriculum every year, but there are always one or two I can't fit in. To ensure that all the students have at least seen the nominees and encourage them to bring them home, we do something I call 'speed dating' where small groups of students spend eight minutes examining each book. It's a riot, and the kids enjoy it. They have a checklist of things to look for and evaluate, such as illustrations and setting. I really love the excitement for reading that the book awards generate with my students."

At my school, a classroom teaching colleague and I hosted book discussion lunches throughout the year. We would select a title (usually one available in paperback, so that it was easier for students to obtain) and everyone interested in attending the lunch would read it in advance. On the day of the discussion, we'd all bring our lunches to the library and eat together while discussing the book, with an added sweet treat I would provide.

Many state book award programs also have activity guides at their Web sites. Be sure to check out yours. For example, Colette D. Eason notes, "The Texas Bluebonnet Award committee provides a fantastic video every year. Last year, they played a mock game show featuring several kids from around the state, and a local newscaster as the moderator." (See www.txla.org/groups/tba.)

Kerrlita Westrick joins in the recommendation to search online. "I am also the co-chair of the Grand Canyon Reader Award committee for

Arizona. I maintain our Web site at www.grandcanyonreaderaward.org. Under “general information,” there is a document that has promotional ideas I gathered from various sources (such as other reader award Web sites) as well as from a workshop we had at our library conference one year where everyone shared ideas on how they promoted the program.” So be sure to check online to see what your award committee has available to you!

Read to Compete

In addition to activities, consider friendly competition to keep your program high-profile and exciting. While Marcia Bernard, library media specialist at Shutesbury (Massachusetts) Elementary School gets her kids involved in a host of activities to keep excitement high, she has really seen a boost from the competitions she has added. “We do the Massachusetts Children’s Book Award up in a big way with grades 4–6 here at Shutesbury Elementary. We hold a rally to kick it off and sponsor book projects, trivia contests, and a battle of the books. We have a contest between classrooms where the class with the highest participation (most books read and participation in the other events) wins a party in the library. The ‘25-Club’ is for students who read all 25 nominated books; their names are added to a plaque in the library. The final activity is Books in Action, an evening event with food and activities planned around the books for the four schools in our district. You should hear the cheer when we announce the winning book! MCBA has become the central theme of our reading program at school, and adding the little bits of competition has gotten boys involved like never before. We love the MCBA!”

Janette Fluharty, teacher/librarian at Avon (Indiana) Intermediate School East also plans a host of activities throughout the year including a culminating competition for her fifth and sixth graders. “I have hosted a Battle of the Books for the past three years using books from the Indiana Young Hoosier Book Award list. The kids LOVE it. They are put on teams at the beginning of the year and divide the list of books between team members. Each student is responsible for reading at least five Young Hoosier titles. During the year, I give away books, play ‘Jeopardy’ with the books, host a dress-as-your-favorite-character day, and

more. Then, in May, we begin the battle. The first week is classroom eliminations. Then, on Battle of the Books day, students dress up, paint their faces, make posters, and do battle with each other. We play all day with a culminating battle between fifth and sixth grade for the grand championship. It’s just AMAZING to see the kids so excited about books and reading.”

Also in Indiana, media specialist Pam Hollenberg of Schmucker Middle School in Mishawaka involves her students in a competition at the public library branch with two other middle schools. “Each school selects its top ten program participants to compete. The three school librarians and the public librarian each write five plot statements from each Young Hoosier book. The four librarians take turns reading the statements to the teams of five students who then have ten seconds to consult quietly. When time is called, the captains of the teams declare the book’s title. One point is awarded for each correct title and the team with the most points after an hour wins. All students who participate get a certificate, a medal, and refreshments.”

On the Campaign Trail

Because the culmination of student book award programs is voting, you may want to consider activities that revolve around campaigning. Joanne Ladewig hosted a special “campaign” for the fourth graders in conjunction with the California Young Reader Medal, Picture Books for Older Students category. After hearing the three picture books read aloud, “Two of the three classes took me up on a challenge—to ‘campaign’ for their favorite one before voting. I allotted two weeks for them to work together creating a campaign poster and speech, which they did by forming groups of up to five (two to three works best) and then gathering together at recess and after lunch to work together. All this was voluntary, and their teachers gave them one sheet of white poster paper but no time in class. They could also come to the library at recess to look over (but not check out) their ‘candidate.’”

After two weeks, Joanne visited classrooms where each group presented their posters and speeches. Students then came to the library to vote by ballot. “When the campaigning was over, I

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matted the posters with bright construction paper, added on the speeches, laminated each, and laminated student photos onto additional construction paper; and, with parental permission to use photos (without names), their posters were put on display at our local branch library! Our local public children's librarian did a lovely job of displaying them along with the books in the children's area. She received many positive comments from visitors and many visits from our students and their parents. Not only did our students get a taste of the campaign process (and practice writing and giving a speech before a group), but many of them visited the local public library, some perhaps for the first time."

Put Them to a Vote

After a season—or a year—of ambitious reading and exciting activities, the time will come for a vote. While the voting can be done simply, by having students check off their favorite title on a written list, you might want to consider adding some excitement to election day itself by spicing up the voting process like Joanne Ladewig does with her voting "booth" for primary students. "I sewed a very pretty curtain of patriotic fabric, and, using a length of clothesline with hooks at both ends, I create a private voting area. I set up five small coffee cans with pictures of the books on them, and set the books directly in back of the cans. The students enter one by one and drop their voting 'chit' (a small square of colored construction paper) through the lid into the can of their choice. Each grade level has a different color chit, so at the end, for example, I know how many kinders liked which book best. Having the chits in the cans is much easier and quicker to count than a paper ballot, and I reuse the chits each year."

And, of course, you can add prizes to reward readers. Pam Hollenberg gives each sixth grader who has read at least five of the Young Hoosier titles a free paperback book and a pencil. Then, at the end of the year, those students who qualify to vote have a celebration pizza party. At my library, any reader who read all of the titles on the list received a hardcover copy of a book from the next year's list. Other top readers received a gift certificate to a local independent bookstore. All par-

ticipants had equal chances at copies of the year's winning titles while they munched on muffins and juice at our celebration breakfast.

Okily dokily, Fireless in Freeport. I hope you've got more than a coal bucket full of ideas to rekindle the flame of your student book award program. Keep in touch and let me know whether your fires are burning brightly!

*Signed,
Mrs. Skorupski, LMS @ Your Service*



Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of eight picture books, most recently The Library Doors (UpstartBooks, 2008) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.

Web 2.0 and Student Book Award Programs

In this era of Web 2.0, of course, it also makes good sense to make use of the interconnective tools available to us. For instance, Stephanie Labert, library media specialist at Calico Rock (Arkansas) Elementary School set up a blog in 2008 for the Arkansas Book Awards. "Library media specialists across the state were asked to join through our state association's listserv. The kids, kindergarten through third grade (Arkansas Diamond Primary Book Award) and grades 4–6 (Charlie May Simon Children's Book Award) were encouraged to read the books and participate in the blog to discuss the books." Not only does the site include a blog, but this year, Stephanie has added booktalks via podcasts as a new feature! See them at arbookawards.edublogs.org.

Pamela Burke is also a blog creator—for the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Book Award targeting fourth through eighth graders at dcfbooks.edublogs.org. She makes use of wikis as well. "I have my students write short blog comments with their opinions on all the books they read. We also create a wiki for our school only. For the wiki, each fifth and sixth grade student 'adopts' one of the thirty nominated titles. I like them to choose ones they haven't read yet. Then they create a wiki page about the books with links to the author's site, book reviews, and other info they get from doing some background research on the Web."