Involving High School Students in Read Across America Day

By Kelly C. Paynter and Jo Zarzeka

Many U.S. elementary and middle schools celebrate Dr. Seuss’ birthday on March 2nd via the National Education Association’s (NEA) Read Across America Day (RAAD). Not as many high schools participate in this joyous ode to reading. As media specialists at Sprayberry High School in Marietta, Georgia, we facilitate the involvement of approximately 100 high school and 1,500 elementary school students in RAAD each year. We were honored to be recognized as the state of Georgia’s 2009-2010 Exemplary Library Media Program.

THE PROCESS
Self-selected pairs of high school students read one to two books aloud to two elementary school classes. The readers pass out decorated bookmarks to the children and lead them in a reading pledge. The classroom teachers fill out short constructive evaluation forms and give them to the students after they finish. Each high school student dresses like the Cat in the Hat, including red and white striped hats, red bowties, and all black clothing. A few creative students have made their own Seuss character costumes, such as Thing One and Thing Two.

HISTORY OF THE PROGRAM
As the brainchild of a former media specialist, the RAAD project began over ten years ago, in the late 1990s. Initially conceived as a service project to inspire a love of reading in teenagers, the media specialists at the time solicited participation from students in service clubs, such as the National Honor Society and the Key Club. These clubs provided the readers. They also raised money to help fund the program. The high school students visited one feeder elementary school. Word spread among other elementary schools who also wanted to participate, so the program grew due to popular demand. To have enough high school participants, the opportunity to be readers was offered to the entire student body.

PREPARATION
The event requires an extensive amount of pre-planning. In the fall, we order the bookmarks and arrange the field trip details with administration. About two months before the event, we contact the librarians at four local elementary schools. Eight elementary schools feed into Sprayberry, so we rotate bi- or tri-annually among the various schools. We place life-size cutouts of the Cat in the Hat and the Grinch outside the media center doors and make announcements about RAAD informational meetings, which are held during lunch and after school.

At the informational meetings, we hand out permission forms and explain the process. Since there are so many interested students, the first ninety students to return their permission forms and attend RAAD workshops can participate. Students must attend at least three workshops, which are held on Tuesdays and Thursdays before school, after school, and during lunch. At the workshops, students select the classrooms in which they will read and choose appropriate books for the age level. They practice reading the books aloud to each other and to the media specialists and decorate the bookmarks for the children.

READ ACROSS AMERICA DAY
On March 2nd, all the hard work and preparation pays off. The high schoolers meet in the cafeteria and receive their hats and bowties. We review proper behavior expectations, including no chewing gum and walking quietly through the elementary school halls. After taking roll and making sure everyone has their bookmarks and read-aloud books, we board the two buses. Each bus travels to two different elementary schools. At the first school, the students stream out of the bus and proceed straight to the elementary school library. They are greeted by the elementary school librarian and over twenty student ambassadors, one from each participating classroom. Each student ambassador leads his or her assigned high school student back to the classroom. This avoids wasted time spent looking for the correct classroom location.

STUDENT REQUIREMENTS
RAAD is so successful because we allow anyone in grades 9-12 to join the fun. We do not have GPA or service requirements, nor do we require any financial contributions from the students, allowing a broad spectrum of students to participate, particularly non-traditional and at-risk teenagers. Many Sprayberry students cannot afford club dues and do not drive, so by offering workshops during lunch periods and making the RAAD experience free, bus riders and cash-strapped teenagers can still participate. The students are always exceptionally well-behaved and represent the school in a positive manner. If a student is failing a class, however, we encourage him or her to stay on campus instead of missing valuable class time.

VOLUNTEERS
We utilize a host of volunteers for RAAD. Local church members, volunteer moms, a retired family and consumer sciences teacher, and a few crafty students help us get ready for this event. The Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) donates money annually for expenses, such as fabric and new children’s books. Parent volunteers act as chaperons...
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and photographers. The Sprayberry principal generously pitches in the money to pay for bus transportation.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT
None of this would be possible without the assistance of the feeder school librarians and classroom teachers. Each participating elementary school media specialist encourages approximately twenty classrooms to participate. K-3 classrooms are the high school students’ first preference, but some teenagers enjoy reading parts of chapter books to fourth and fifth graders. We visit all sorts of learning environments, including self-contained special education, traditional, and English Language Learner (ELL) classrooms. Encouraged by their teachers, some of the elementary school children dress up for our arrival, wearing paper Cat headgear or other literary-inspired attire. Many teachers send hand-drawn thank you notes from the children after the conclusion of RAAD, much to the high schoolers’ delight.

Most classroom teachers sign up willingly to have high school students come to their classrooms to read. Our feeder elementary schools are quite large. No teacher is forced to participate. We inform the teachers about the extensive preparation and training process that we undertake with the high schoolers. If classroom teachers have special requests, we do our best to accommodate them. For example, some teachers have asked that the students read books that fit with a unit theme, such as fractions, weather, or holidays. They quite often ask our students not to read Dr. Seuss books, since they want to avoid Seuss saturation. The teachers’ suggestions from the feedback evaluation forms guide our program for future years.

RAAD has both longevity and community goodwill. Current high schoolers can remember when they were in elementary school and the first batch of teenagers came to their classrooms to read to them. Many teenagers request to read books aloud in their former elementary classrooms. It is always an uplifting experience to see sometimes jaded high schoolers abandon their ennui and eagerly hug their former teachers while informing them about their current pursuits.

HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER COLLABORATION
The RAAD project has morphed into a wonderful collaborative effort with two ELL and special education reading remediation classes at Sprayberry. The collaborating teachers weave practice for the RAAD field trip into their daily lesson plans. In fact, one teacher invites a cadre of assistant principals, department heads, and parents to be a sample audience for her students. It is a wonderful experience for students who have struggled with reading to perform successfully in front of a classroom filled with a receptive, positive audience.

CONCLUSION
If you are seeking a fun way to incorporate RAAD into your library program, give our idea a whirl! Don’t let the size of the Sprayberry project intimidate you—start small. Try visiting just one elementary school with a dozen high school students. If geographical distance is a problem, visit a closer middle school instead. In fact, this field trip idea can also work successfully using middle school students as readers. If you can’t afford the buses for a field trip, film the older students and send the elementary teachers the recordings. Some other ways in which Sprayberry has celebrated RAAD in the past include reading aloud to severely disabled high school students, raising money to buy books to donate to homeless shelters and juvenile detention centers, participating in DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) in the high school setting, and designing and ordering t-shirts to celebrate the occasion. You may be limited by funds, but you are not limited by imagination!

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