



Broward schools benefit from reading program

By Julie Landry Laviolette, Special Correspondent
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Marilyn Perlyn's goal is to teach children about empathy, one book at a time.

Three years ago, the Delray Beach mother of three started The OCHO Project, which encourages children to read and gives them opportunities to donate books to kids in need. OCHO, which stands for Opportunities for Children to Help Others, also is the Spanish word for eight. To date, the program has been used in 15 schools across the country and has distributed nearly 15,000 books to needy children.

Children are encouraged to read eight books and earn eight OCHO points, which they can do by completing literacy-based projects such as a book report or poster. During the program, kids bring in change, which is collected along with any grant money the teacher has secured to buy books to be given away at a school book fair.

This school year, the Broward Education Foundation has given \$400 each and the Leo Goodwin Foundation has given \$600 each to six participating schools in Broward.

This year, the following Broward schools have participated: North Andrews Garden Elementary and Larkdale Elementary in Fort Lauderdale, Lanier-James Education Center in Hallandale Beach, Heron Heights Elementary in Parkland; James S. Hunt Elementary and Coral Park Elementary in Coral Springs, and Henry D. Perry Middle and New Renaissance Middle in Miramar.

At the book fair, participating students use coupons they have earned to exchange for a free book.

The next component gets students involved in community service. About three months after the book fair, students can bring in books to donate to a school or organization that cannot afford to buy their own books. To date, books have been donated to children in Tanzania, India and Africa, as well as to the Miami Rescue Mission and Miami Children's Hospital.

"Children can understand that they can make a difference," Perlyn said.

At New Renaissance Middle School, teacher Bonnie Greene said the 125 students who participated in The OCHO Project benefited academically and emotionally.



Students in Gudar, India, celebrate the donation of books made possible through The OCHO Project. (Submitted photo)

"My students cultivated a great desire to read independently since they were allowed to make their own selection of books and take them home," she said. "... My students also grew in developing the character traits of kindness and empathy. When we sent books to India, for example, my students saw the pictures of the Indian students, and my students immediately said, 'Can we send them shoes now?'"

At Lanier-James, behavioral change instructor Debra Kash said her students, who each received four books, responded to the project in ways beyond expectations.

"Those who monitored the project could not have guessed, in their wildest dreams, the effect the project created among our population," Kash said. "Staff caught kids reading their books on the bus, at lunch, in the cafeteria and in class."

Students there also donated 400 books to a school in Africa.

Perlyn said she got her inspiration for the program from her grown daughter, Amanda, who as a first-grader helped a teacher who had just lost a child to cancer.

"What it taught me as a parent is you should teach kids empathy, and they will grow up to be empathetic," she said. "My kids all grew up giving back."

Perlyn chronicled that experience in a children's book, "The Biggest and Brightest Light: A True Story from the Heart." Her daughter was the illustrator.

When a teacher kicks off The OCHO Project in a classroom, the first thing they read to the children is Perlyn's book.

For more information, visit <http://www.biggestandbrightestlight.com>.