

Encouraging Reading

Literacy continues to be recognized as one of the most important life skills that students need to acquire. Reading at school, however, is only part of a child's learning. Parents and families can have a strong, positive influence on their child's reading abilities as well. Research has shown that enjoying books with a child for even a few minutes a day can make a measurable difference in acquiring basic reading skills, and that everyday activities - such as a trip to the grocery store - can be turned into learning experiences.

Here are some tips to help increase the literacy skills of students in school and at home:

- Organize a book fair for your school. Provide an opportunity for each class to visit. Set aside some time after school hours for families to visit the fair together. If yours is a diverse school, ensure there are a variety of books available. Find out if the distributor can also have "adult" books available so that children see their parents buying and reading books.
- For schools unable to afford book fairs, consider partnering with another school in a book exchange. Ask for donations of books from their library, classes or students that are no longer being used.
- Using "reading buddies", link older students with those in the younger grades. The older students can visit two or three times a month to listen to their younger buddies read and/or read to them. This allows both buddies to practice their reading skills.
- Hold a "Reading Olympiad" whereby classes keep track of how many books are read over a period of time. Keep a running tally outside the office and acknowledge different class' efforts during announcements each day. The winning class may be given the opportunity to visit the library for an extra period one week.
- Consider participating in an event such as the MS Read-a-Thon, which encourages reading while also raising money for charity.
- Invite key community leaders in to your school to read to select classes or to the school as a whole during a special assembly. Pick a book that will interest students in varying grades. Invite parents to attend and read as well.
- Post the hours and location of your local public library outside the office and include it in your newsletter or student handbook. Encourage students to visit the library regularly with their families. If the library is within walking distance of the school, arrange occasional class visits.
- Make a list of local bookstores, their hours and locations, and provide the list to families.

- Encourage parents to read to their children in a variety of ways - a book at night, newspaper stories, recipes, mail, directions, street signs, e-mails, traffic signs and billboards.
- Remind parents that children may prefer different types of reading materials, such as magazines, newspapers and comic books. Ensure they are age and content appropriate and make them available in the school and at home.
- For parents who are not fluent in English and may not be able to read to their children, find out if your local library, community centre or bookstore offers a “Story Time” that students can attend after school or on the weekends. Promote cross learning by encouraging students to read to their parents.
- Provide parents with information on how children learn to read. Ask teachers to demonstrate how they teach reading and provide a print-rich environment. Let parents know that repeating words, sounding out words, looking at corresponding pictures and reading the same stories over and over again are vital steps in the “learning-to-read” process.