



Case Study: Belleville West High School

Belleville, Illinois

Reading for fun earns Belleville West High School a \$30,000 reward

When Mary Barteau, Library Director at Belleville West High School, first heard about the Follett Challenge, she knew her school had to enter. A few years earlier, Belleville West implemented a groundbreaking reading program that had students reading millions of pages a year – for fun.

“At Belleville West, we felt we had created something really special with our ‘Community of Readers’ program,” says English department chair John Lodle. “Over the last four years, we watched our students become avid and engaged pleasure readers. This resulted in a change in the whole culture of our school, and it also resulted in some impressive gains on our school’s standardized test scores. When we heard about the Follett Challenge we saw a way to share our excitement about what we are doing at our school.”

That excitement came through in Belleville West High School’s winning video application, which highlights the “Community of Readers” program that challenges students in each grade level to read 1,000,000 pages for fun. “Their program is helping create literate, confident readers who are ready to tackle college and career challenges,” says Follett School Solutions President & COO Tom Schenck.



At Belleville West, the students enthusiastically join the Community of Readers program, and they share their love of reading with family, friends and community. Their voracious reading has helped improve achievement and test scores.



Turning over a new leaf

Teachers in the school's English department were exploring ways to get students more excited about reading – to take them from reading as an assignment to reading for pleasure. “We saw too many students who were apathetic about reading, and we watched as our own classes sometimes settled into ruts,” says Lodle. “We wanted to share our personal passion for books as well as spark new enthusiasm for reading in our students.”

At the same time, teachers and administrators were diligently working to help their school emerge from a period in which standardized test scores gradually declined. “Based on professional reading and research – and based on our own gut knowledge – we knew that reading was key to increasing student performance on these tests. We knew we needed to try something new, and the ‘Community of Readers’ program seemed like a promising idea.”

The school created a “Community of Readers” that would tackle a million-page challenge. In its first year the freshman class far exceeded expectations. “They read an average of more than 2,300 pages each,” says Lodle. That was roughly 1.4 million pages. At the same time, library circulation increased by 40 percent. Students were reading more than ever. They were sharing their excitement about books with friends and family, and they had numerous opportunities to hear from and interact with the authors of the books they were reading – either in person or over Skype. And test scores were going up.

But the great results didn't stop there. They kept building. “There are measurable things that are a slam dunk,” says Assistant Principal Jan Patrick-Hayden. “Test scores were so much higher than in previous years and I think the million-page challenge had a huge impact on that. But I also see a huge difference in how these students work as a community. They talk about what they're reading – even eating lunch, they're reading. It's brought them together.”



As part of the Community of Readers program, students have the opportunity to meet and interact with the authors whose books they are reading, either via Skype or in person. They also have the opportunity to ask authors questions about their books, as shown below. These author visits add to the students' interest and investment in the program.



Building on success

2014 marks the fourth year of Belleville West's "Community of Readers" program. Lodle says the school's unique program demonstrates the importance – and power – of pleasure reading for students as they make their way through their secondary years. "The program has been embraced throughout the school," says Lodle. He emphasizes that the library and the English department aren't the only places where you'll find students reading. "Teachers in social studies, science, world language and even math have participated in the school's reading program. We've had incredible support from administrators, parents, and community members."

The program even found its way to the school's football team in the form of an off-shoot program with the focus on 'One Book, One Football Team.' The team read Chris Crutcher's *Deadline* together over the summer then discussed the book with the author during a Skype session. The team's quarterback coach says, "We do all these different drills to get their muscles bigger, stronger, faster. But we want them to use their brain." The 'One Book, One Football Team' program gave coaches and players a way to do that. It also gave them an opportunity to form an even stronger bond as a team.

Lodle says, above all, the program is about the students. "You'll see students sitting beside their lockers before and after school with books open in their laps. They read in the cafeteria after finishing lunch and will pull out books for pleasure reading after they finish a test or assignment in class. Students sit in the hallway outside the library every morning, waiting for it to open. They talk together about what they're reading, and then have the opportunity to interact with authors on campus. It's really gratifying to see so many of our students engaged with books and excited about their reading."



Since the Community of Readers program began, it is not uncommon to see students reading in the cafeteria, in class after a test or an assignment, or sitting in hallways reading together. Teachers and parents agree that seeing students reading for pleasure, anywhere and everywhere, is gratifying.



Spirit of sharing

The \$30,000 prize that comes with the school's semifinalist standing will be quickly put to good use. "We plan to add a lot of new books, eBooks, and subscriptions from the Follett catalog to our school's library," says Lodle. The prospect of being able to increase its eBook offerings is especially exciting, he adds. "As we see more and more of our students reading on tablets and laptops and cell phones, we're especially excited about the opportunity to add a lot of new eBooks to our library's collection."

They also plan on spreading the wealth.

"One of the greatest things about being a semi-finalist in the Follett Challenge is it has allowed us to share this incredible program with other schools across the country," says Lodle. "Knowing that teachers in other districts have learned about what we're doing through the Follett Challenge is very gratifying. We'd like to use our success in this contest to work with other schools in our district to develop similar programs."

Belleville West is one of two high schools in the same district. If Belleville West wins the grand prize, part of its plan includes sharing it with the other high school. "Winning the grand prize would allow us to share our program and the resources [books, eBooks, subscriptions] necessary for such a program with our sister school," says Lodle. "Teachers and students at our district's other high school were graciously voting for our video along with us, so it would be great to share some of our winnings with them."



Faculty and students promote the program and foster momentum by adorning doors and hallways at the school with book-themed decorations.

