

BROCKTON STUDENTS AND TEACHERS SEEK BOOKS FOR LIITLE KIDS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BROCKTON, MONT. -- This small -- population 250 -- community on the edge of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation suffers from its rural remoteness and a grinding poverty census statistics only hint at. With more than a third of the population below poverty income, with the average household income half the state average, and with double-digit unemployment, Brockton's schools struggle with the resources to educate a population desperately in need of learning.

But, what Brockton does not suffer from is the hope for a brighter future that learning can deliver which is why a partnership of educators and students has initiated a project to help its smallest citizens. As part of a "learn and serve" effort, a core group that includes the school principle, an art teacher, a kindergarten teacher and the library media resource specialist are working with Brockton junior and high school students to jumpstart reading among the community's pre-schoolers.

"The students actually came up with the idea of reading to our youngest kids," said Tiffani Anderson, the library media resource specialist.

The project developed after teachers and students attended a workshop in Miles City in early December called Montana Behavior Initiative (MBI) Youth Days. One of the critical issues to Brockton's students was being able to read before starting school, something that was handicapped in Brockton by simply not having children's' books. Secondly, with parents who often have learning disabilities having someone in the home to help pre-schoolers read was an additional challenge.

"They (our students) want to be able to go to homes, read to children, and also leave books with them so that they will continue read," said Jennifer McClure, who teaches K-12 art. "They know if the y can get this done that children who come to school for the first time will be exposed to reading and be more prepared."

For Brockton 's only principle, Olivia Johnson, recognizing the reading problems without being able to address them was frustrating.

"We have an after school reading program for children up to seven years old and we knew there were a lot of children who wanted to come. The problem was having parents to bring them," Johnson said.

Laurie Wilson, who teaches kindergarten and administers the family story hour (the after hours program), echoes her principle's concern. For 15 years as a kindergarten teacher, Wilson had her hands full and felt wearied by students who were not receiving early literacy training.

"I have dedicated much of my continuing education towards early literacy," she said. "Finally, this year, I got motivated and started a family story hour one night a week for families and children up to age 7. But, it's been slow going."

The idea of the students after the "learn and serve" workshop was "like a light bulb" coming on.

"This would work so much better if, first, we had books to actually give to the kids, and, second, if we had students willing to go to the homes and read with the kids," she said.

It has the additional advantage of utilizing the respect many of the younger kids show toward older students, McClure noted.

"Our younger children really look up to the high school students so it is also a mentoring program," she said.

Addressing one of the main problems began with a unique relationship McClure, Anderson, Johnson and Wilson all shared. They are graduates of Rocky Mountain College and valued the connections RMC alumni and the community forged. Johnson is also a 2009 graduate of Rocky's first Masters of Educational Leadership class.

"I knew if I called on the Rocky community to help, we would be on the right track," McClure said. McClure, who was a work-study to the equestrian program when she attended Rocky, contacted her former employer, Barb Skelton, owner of the Intermountain Equestrian Center and the current RMC Board Chairman.

"What's great at Rocky is you make friends with teachers not just other students and calling on Barb was just like calling a friend," McClure said. "It felt natural. Since RMC is like an extended family, I felt I could ask for assistance. RMC faculty, staff and students have always been giving."

Soon the call went out to Rocky faculty, staff, alumni and friends and just as quickly donated books started arriving, said Shari VanDelinder, RMC executive director for development.

"We've just started and we already have books to give Jennifer (McClure) when she comes to Billings over the holidays," she added.

The help with this project has been a blessing, said Johnson, and “being on the receiving end of it definitely proves what I always believe, once a Battlin’ Bear, always a Battlin’ Bear.”

For anyone who wants to donate children’s books to the Brockton “learn and serve” program, contact either Jennifer McClure at Brockton Schools, 406-786-3311, or the RMC Development Office, 657-1006.

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