

reading up

Author: Dums, Linda

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Abstract:

The caterpillar is the theme character for the 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten literacy program, a free program that provides families with opportunities to build literacy skills in their kids and helps form a love for reading.

Full text:

Fox Valley families are hungry for books, as is evident in the colorful stickers that cover the large, paper caterpillar on the wall in the children's department at the Menasha Public Library.

The caterpillar is the theme character for the 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten literacy program, a free program that provides families with opportunities to build literacy skills in their kids and helps form a love for reading.

"The program promotes reading between the parent and the child or with the whole family," said Kathy Beson, head of children's services at MPL.

The program, which uses the theme from "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" by Eric Carle, began in 2008 in Menasha.

The fact that the program continues to be popular is "a testimony to the quality of the program," Beson said. "I think that this is one of the best preschool literacy programs I've ever seen."

Participants receive a binder in which to write down the titles they have read. After completing 100 books, they get incentives like educational CDs and a sticker to place on the hungry caterpillar. When they complete 1,000 books, they get to place a sticker on the big paper butterfly also on a wall in the children's department. They receive other incentives as well as a certificate of completion and a chance to participate in a graduation ceremony.

The incentives and stickers are great, but the kids are also benefiting in huge ways, Beson said.

"Studies have shown that if a child has had at least 1,000 books read to them before kindergarten that they are not only ready for kindergarten but have an advantage going into kindergarten," she said.

She noted too often kids go to kindergarten without simple cultural literacy, like knowing Mother Goose rhymes, how to hold a book or colors and numbers.

But the 1,000 books program helps children to develop that cultural literacy as well as a high level of conceptual understanding.

The program also fosters a bond between parent and child.

"It raises their self-esteem because the parent is taking time to really interact with them," Beson said.

Jenni Oeftger of Neenah, a mother of three children, joined the program shortly after it started. She loves how it promotes early literacy concepts and an exposure to all kinds of books.

"It's just so important for kids to come into school with that," Oeftger said.

Reading for the program became part of their bedtime routine.

"You have to find time to do it," she said, noting that some nights are easier than others but "you have to find out what works."

Mikol Neils, a mother of three in Menasha, also praised the benefits of the program.

"I think it exposed them to reading," Neils said. "They were able to see there were so many kinds of books out there. They would have fun trying to find books they hadn't read yet. They both caught on early to reading.

"We've loved doing it. I'm so glad it's around for other families to take advantage of it, too."

Beson said the demand for the program continues to grow. Currently 860 families from the Fox Cities have joined the program.

"It's been so popular that originally we were planning on a five-year length for this program," she said. "But

we're going to keep it going indefinitely."

She also has received interest from other librarians across the country and worldwide, like in New Zealand. Locally, the program is also available at the Kimberly-Little Chute Public Library.

Ann Hardginski, youth services librarian at Kimberly-Little Chute Public Library, was the project coordinator for the 1,000 books program when it started in Menasha.

When she took on a position at Kimberly-Little Chute library, "I knew I wanted to bring this important and successful program to my new service communities," she said, noting the program uses the Old MacDonald's Farm theme and had 50 participants the first year and now has 365 signed up.

"I greatly enjoyed reading to my four children, and I am so happy to be able to help parents discover the joy of reading with their children," Hardginski said. "It's fun and free and one of the best things you can do for your child."

-- Linda Dums: pcfeatures@postcrescent.com

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