

MAKING MIDDLE SCHOOL COOL BY CREATING A CULTURE OF LITERACY

Thorndike Press—Learn how large print books were a successful component to get students to embrace reading.

“Is it worth it to have these [large print] books? Absolutely. I started with just a few and put them into circulation, and I took copies of our most popular ones and gave them to one of our intensive reading classrooms where I know those kids read every single day.”



Carrie Friday
Media Specialist
Southwest Middle School
Palm Bay, FL

BACKGROUND

Located in Palm Bay, Florida, Southwest Middle School is in the southern region of Brevard County. While there are 72,000 students in the district, this school serves approximately 920 7th and 8th graders. Falling just under Title 1 level, about 68 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches. Facing tight budgets, the library often has to get creative when funding new initiatives.

Carrie Friday, a 2018–2019 Teacher of the Year Finalist for Brevard Public Schools and a 2019–2020 Space Coast Public Service Heavy Lifting award winner, is the media specialist for the Southwest Middle School. She cofounded the #swms20bookchallenge, and serves as the leader of the school’s Project LIT Community chapter.

When describing the student characteristics, Friday said, “We have a whole team of students that are gifted and advanced, and they are very high achievers. But the majority of my students come to us at least two grades below grade level in reading each year.” Over half of the students are placed in Intensive Language Arts, a remedial reading class.

ABOUT THE CHALLENGE

CREATING EQUITY IN READING

Friday finds, the biggest challenge for middle school students is “trying to figure out who they are, who they want to be, what makes them cool, [and] what is cool. They’re trying to fit in. And typically, middle school is when students stop reading for pleasure, even though it really is the very best thing that they can do, because it transfers to all of their other academic areas.”

Four years ago, Southwest Middle School started a school-wide 20-book reading challenge, with the goal of increasing interest in reading. Students and teachers were challenged to read 20 books from 20 different categories. Friday said, “We wanted to give the kids choice. We wanted this to be something that they could buy into and they could feel accomplished. And it would push them to read more, and the more they read, the stronger they would get. But as our students started to read more, I started to see that reading was not equitable for all our students, and maybe that’s why they’ve been struggling as much as they have.”

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“When students are successfully reading, their self-confidence goes up, and so does their literacy confidence. It . . . makes reading cool, and in middle school, that’s a really hard thing to do.”

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■ BRIDGING THE GAP

POPULAR LARGE PRINT TITLES MAKE A BIG IMPACT WITH A SMALL BUDGET

“One of the things I really love about large print books is that there’s more white space on the page if you look at it,” Friday said. “It’s much easier for the kids to read. There are fewer words per page, but it looks the same as a regular book. It really addresses the needs of our struggling readers, but it doesn’t have . . . big flashing banners around it that says, ‘This is for the students who struggle.’ Everybody really loves them.”

To combat the obstacles the students were having with reading, Friday began to introduce large print. She started by ordering titles off the library’s top reading report. To round out the collection, Friday noted, “I take our state award list because those are our top-read books, and I know those are going to be our big books for the next year.” She also makes sure to include book club selections and titles that teachers will use for class reads.

■ THE RESULT

GETTING EVERYONE’S BUY-IN

Many of the students who used large print finished a book for the first time ever. “Our students specifically will come and ask me if I have a copy with the bigger words,” said Friday. “Our ESL students, or students that speak English as a second language, they have more access; they have more success; and they really like these when they’re trying to read a book in English.”

Plus, Friday sees the impact of having large print copies on hand for high-demand titles. “When they’re really desperate to read this one new book that came out or this book that we have an author coming for, it makes more copies available and it makes it easier for those students to accomplish those goals,” she said.

According to Friday, more of the students are adding large print copies into their reading challenge, including those who don’t struggle with reading. She believes this is helping them think more critically about what they’re doing. “They’re owning the story a little bit more, and they’re working towards a bigger goal, which puts a lot more investment into our school. It really builds this culture of reading . . . The teachers get excited about it. They start buying in, the parents are buying in, and it really becomes this . . . beautiful thing.”