

SUCCESS STORY:
MCCOLLUM HIGH SCHOOL,
SAN ANTONIO, TX



“COWBOYS READ!” Removes Barriers & Spurs Student Love for Reading

Learn how McCollum High School opened a new chapter for emerging bilingual students with large print



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BACKGROUND

Located in the smallest of San Antonio’s 19 school districts, McCollum High School (MHS) is home to roughly 1,400 students. The student body is 97.9 percent Hispanic, and 19 percent of those students take part in the school’s Bilingual/ESL Education Program.

The school librarian, Terrie Sharp, has been at MHS for over 30 years—and she’s also an alumna. She began her career as an English teacher and later moved to the librarian role to share her love of reading throughout the school. Since the beginning of her tenure, though, she noticed that her students just weren’t reading.

“Many could successfully participate in their communities without having to learn how to read English very well,” Sharp said. But by avoiding reading, students weren’t setting themselves up for academic success.

ABOUT THE CHALLENGE

Identifying Barriers to Reading

It all began when Sharp noticed that many of the school’s English language learners (ELLs) would retake their accountability tests up until their senior year. These tests require students to master English reading comprehension to receive a passing score. Although the district had invested in bilingual books and worked to boost reading proficiency in other programs, students just didn’t seem motivated to read.

When Sharp asked students why they avoided reading, she received some unexpected feedback. “They didn’t like the idea of taking out library books and owing fines,” she said. “It wasn’t about them not wanting to read it; they were telling me that they didn’t want the financial responsibility of possibly losing material.”

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92% of our students are considered economically disadvantaged. A lot of our kids are living with their grandparents or in single-parent homes. And the idea of what is a typical family doesn't really gel here. So, to find books that help kids see themselves, that's what I need to do to get kids involved in the program. Cowboys Read! allows me to get these books to the kids who need them.

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Even by erasing library fines, Sharp still heard students say they were afraid to take out a book and lose it.

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TRYING A NOVEL APPROACH

Finding Solutions for Reluctant Readers

Sharp knew she needed to get creative. She couldn't distribute free books to students with a modest annual library budget.

When the pandemic suddenly closed the school district for the rest of the 2020–2021 school year, though, Sharp received a new opportunity to utilize federal relief money. She wanted to engage students with books they didn't need to check out and that she could let go without penalty if lost—but Sharp knew the only way to draw student attention was with books that were interesting, popular, and looked new.

“I knew that old, donated books wouldn't capture students' interest,” Sharp explained. “I wanted new titles. When I looked into ordering new books, I noticed that [Thorndike Press youth large print](#) books had new titles in large print under the same cover.” To start changing the culture of reading at MHS, Sharp worked with Thorndike Press representatives to curate titles for her first order of large print books.

By the fall of 2021, the school's library was still closed, and 75 percent of students were still learning remotely. To get her new books into the hands of students, Sharp brought them into the school cafeteria. Weary from learning on screens and open to reading new books, students took an interest in the new large print titles, inspiring Sharp to launch the “[Cowboys Read!](#)” program.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Removing Restrictions on Student Books

During the 2022–2023 school year, the Cowboys Read! book “stations” were in full operation. Students and teachers could choose from four new titles introduced monthly and pick them up at five different locations. Sharp ordered 15 copies of each title, bringing 60 new books to the high school every few weeks.

To participate in Cowboys Read!, students simply pick up a book, read it, and return it to the library or one of the book stations. They can also take books home and keep them without consequences. By removing restrictions like due dates and fines, Sharp said, the school can make books available to the entire campus at all times.

“Those who do start liking the books, they do take care of them and bring them back, or they share them with their friends,” Sharp said. “(But) you just have to let (the books) go and be free; and that's what's important, getting books in kids' hands.”

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The dream of every librarian is to put the right book in that child's hands that they need at that time.

And what is wonderful with Cowboys Read! is, yes, I'm still choosing the books, I'm still looking at books, but as I'm looking at the list from Thorndike... I'm thinking about my kids and what we're experiencing here in our neighborhood. And I'm just trying to see my kids in these books, and I've found a lot of them. So, every month I'm able to offer six titles that may not fit everybody—all 1,400 of our kids—but that one book found its way to that one girl who needed it, and that was the success.



Sharp makes sure she orders a range of titles that appeal to various interests. Very quickly, she's learned what her students like (and don't like) to read. "They aren't interested in starting a series if a book is too big. If it's too small, they won't read it," Sharp said. "Poetry seems to be less daunting. Novels in verse are popular, too."

FOSTERING A CULTURE OF READING

Making Books Part of a School Environment

Although the idea of creating a culture of reading felt daunting at first, Sharp said she's finally seeing it unfold at MHS.

Sharp hosts Cowboys Read! "snack and chats" every month during lunch, where students can discuss the books they've read. "Students are more willing to talk about a book than they are about themselves," Sharp said. "It's a really good icebreaker. They made new friends just by being in our lunch group for the day. This isn't a classroom. There's no negative outlook if they do or don't talk to someone. It's a great time and we have a lot of fun."

The program has inspired her to branch out and involve students in new reading-focused activities like crafts, a *Harry Potter* book club, and a competition for designing Cowboys Read! posters. Sharp mentioned even the teachers read books in the hallways, modeling what reading for pleasure looks like to their students.

Cowboys Read! continues to evolve. Over the past few years, Sharp has expanded her book station to bring students six new large print titles every month.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Building Student Empathy with Books

Books don't just help kids improve their reading skills—they offer stories that help them better understand the world around them.

Sharp shared the story of one senior who, after not reading a book since middle school, had an impactful experience with the Cowboys Read! program. "She picked up Neal Shusterman's *Roxy ...* and she said, 'I wanted to read this because my brother is addicted to ADHD medication. And this made me understand how he became addicted and why it's so difficult for him.'" Sharp explained. "That's what reading does. You're able to experience something. A good writer will bring you along on an experience. She had felt abandoned by him, but after reading that book she decided to try her best to get in contact with him again."

"It's amazing how kids open up because of what they're reading and the connections that they're making," Sharp said. "[Reading] is not just about school, it's about life. So in that aspect, Cowboys Read! is successful because we are creating more empathetic readers. And that was one of my goals: to open up a world to kids and have them be more empathetic."



With this program, we have books available to everyone that are easier to read and they inspire people to read even more. Because of the large print, it's easier, you're turning the pages even faster.



WHY LARGE PRINT?

Supporting All Readers with Accessible Materials

Large print books haven't only made books accessible to ELL students; they've made them more accessible to all.

"With this program, we have books available to everyone that are easier to read and they inspire people to read even more. Because of the large print, it's easier, you're turning the pages even faster," said Sharp. "It gave them a break from all of it (online learning), and that's when students said to me, I like these books, they're easy to read."

Research supports Sharp's observations. According to a recent [nationwide study](#) conducted by [Project Tomorrow®](#) on behalf of Thorndike Press, large print text appeals to all students and is proven to improve reading skills.

The study reports that 69 percent of striving readers said they liked reading large print text more than any other class books during the school year. Teachers interviewed in the study reported that large print books helped ELL students improve decoding skills, letter and word recognition, reading comprehension, and fluency. Best of all, large print books appeared to change students' mindsets about reading, particularly in students reading below grade level.

EXPANDING READING OPTIONS

Help Every Student Discover the Joy of Reading

Large print books aren't only beneficial for people with visual challenges—they can improve students' literacy skills and shift their attitudes toward reading. With a larger font, increased spacing, and fewer lines of text per page, [Thorndike Press youth large print books](#) can help developing readers who struggle with standard print. From ELLs to students with learning disabilities, large print makes it easier to maintain focus, process information, and enjoy reading.

In 2024, Thorndike Press is publishing its first collection of Spanish-language youth large print titles to help support emerging bilingual students. Looking forward to these new reading options, Sharp reflected, "With the Cowboys Read! program, the friends who are more literate in English bring their friends over and say 'read this book.' So, I'll be excited to see what happens when we purchase Spanish titles. I'd like to offer one title a month. I think that would allow the kids who are Spanish speakers to have more confidence to get a book from the shelf."

To learn more about Cowboys Read!, tune in to the *Equipping ELLs* podcast episode: [How One Librarian Created a Culture of Reading in Her School](#)

Youth large print is a literacy intervention tool that's easy to implement in your library or classroom. Thorndike Press publishes more than 1,000 award-winning, highly acclaimed juvenile and young adult titles in large print to help you bring students a more accessible reading format. [Explore titles today.](#)

