A Creative Project Involves Older Students with Summer Reading

by Susan Moyer, Director, Dorothy Bramlage Public Library

Summer Reading is bread and butter time at the public library. While our stock in trade has traditionally been quite successful with most age groups, the Dorothy Bramlage Public Library has struggled with extending that success into the upper third of the school-age tier.

Participation in teen summer reading has traditionally been concentrated in the lower grade ranges of the program. Older students, particularly those in, or on their way to, high school tended to "stay away in droves." For some, it was because they felt they were too busy with summer jobs, camps and other activities while others held the perception that this was more of a younger kid's activity and that they had already crossed that bridge. This was particularly true for those who had been participating in some level of summer reading since they were very young.

As an alternative, the library began to offer high school students the opportunity to participate in the summer program for adults. Adult Summer Reading has been offered in various forms for more than twenty years, ranging from a fairly structured activity with some degree of mandatory reading, to the current readers' choice format that includes audio as well as print materials and a list of suggested titles that enrollees may or may not choose to use.

While some students did take advantage of this, participation was still modest and lack of time was the reason most cited for lack of enrollment. With new choices adding daily to an already-long list of how kids could spend their limited free time, reading was consistently being bumped on the list and in the wrong direction.

To elevate its position, the library teamed with the faculty of the English Department at Junction City High School to create an incentive for their students to make books and reading a priority during the summer. The result of that collaboration was an easy addition to the program that turned out to be a big hook that landed a record catch.

The premise was very simple. Students who enrolled and participated in Adult Summer Reading could receive points toward their next year's English class at a rate of ten points per book for a maximum of one hundred points. The titles read would be recorded by the students on the same reading charts used by all of the program's participants with the students' understanding that their charts would be shared with their future instructors to verify the number of points to be added.

With this project, enrollees had the potential to add one hundred points to their credit before the first bell rang on their first day of school. At the same time, those students who preferred to participate in summer reading but not in the incentive, or to not include all of their readings in the program, were also free to do so.

More than one hundred students did seize the opportunity and added their names to the summer reading incentive ranks. While some read more than others, all added at least one book to their chart and at least ten points toward their grade. Many went the distance and beyond, including one who recorded the most items read by any of the program's participants at twenty-nine titles.

The response by the teaching staff after the school year began was equally encouraging. They were thrilled at the number of kids who took advantage of the opportunity and were already making suggestions for next year. In turn, the library staff was thrilled that any question mark over whether there would be a next year had been removed and replaced by an exclamation point.

Providing a school-related incentive for free-choice reading during the summer was a win-win-win situation. It was a no-sweat way to bring a sometimes reluctant group into the fold and an opportunity for everyone to benefit from that success.