

Tribe, Willamina Elementary work to kick off StORytime initiative

By Ron Karten

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WILLAMINA — In the bleachers of Willamina Elementary School's gym, classes of kindergarteners, their teachers and parents, including a kindergarten class from the Grand Ronde Tribe, awaited the adult part of the Oregon StORytime campaign.

"Research tells us that one of the best ways to help children learn new words and unlock their imagination is by telling a story," said Eirik Thorsgard, the Tribe's Education Department manager. "Storytelling is also something that we deeply cherish and use to share our history, generation to generation, as a Tribal community."

"Reading by third grade is one of the greatest predictors of lifelong success," said Oregon's Chief Education Officer Nancy Golden to five classes of kindergarten children.

"It is one of the best ways to guarantee that you can be anything you want to be when you grow up," said Willamina Superintendent Gus Forster.

The event was the launch of a new statewide reading initiative for kindergarten students in five communities across the state, two of them Tribal. The Willamina rollout on Wednesday, Oct. 15, was a collaboration between the Tribe and Willamina Elementary and was the second of five similar events held at schools chosen as pilots for the statewide project.

The selections were not just for schools whose third-graders are reading below state standards, but also where communities could be counted on to support literacy for the long run.

The communities of Grand Ronde/Willamina and the Klamath Tribe are on the list. Other communities selected are in rural Malheur County, the south Oregon Coast and East Multnomah County.

These communities also were chosen for their lack of access to resources and support services.

Each rollout is tailored with a video of and including local students, a logo of their own and T-shirts. Use of the research on best practices for teaching reading is the same.

StORytime comes out of the Governor's Office and is administered by the Oregon Department of Education. As far back as 1997, Congress funded the National Reading Panel to get research going about what works and what barriers exist for young readers.

In 2001, Congress took the report from the National Reading Panel and came back with the Reading First program. With the research, Reading First aimed to have ele-

mentary school children reading by the third grade. Since then, from Alabama to Ohio and now to Oregon, states are taking up the challenge.

To start the rollout locally, children grouped by class sat cross-legged on the floor of the gym, listening as teachers, community leaders and state officials read to them.

Tribal Elementary Lead Matt Bucknell brought three books to read to his class: "There Was a Cold Lady Who Swallowed Some Snow," "Gus Loses a Tooth" and "Kindergarten ABC."

After reading about the snow-eating lady, Bucknell said, "Raise your hand if you liked that story." Every child raised a hand, most of them their own, with eyes shining, ready for another.

Listening to stories was held up to the group as one of the important ways that children learn to read.

Thorsgard gave the group another good example. He told a traditional Native story about Tata Klee ah, an ogre woman as tall as the trees who cooks up little children for fun. At one point in the story, she comes out of the woods while knocking down trees. She is on her way to the meadow and, not coincidentally, a young lad. As the ogre reached the boy, Thorsgard gave a boom and the young audience members jumped.

Students, many kicking the boards of the bleachers with the heels of their shoes, were down for the reading and storytelling. For the research and statistics behind the program, big items for the program's creators, maybe not so much.

"We know," Golden said, "if you are reading by third grade, you are four times less likely to drop out

of school. Knowing lots of words makes us better readers. We can be learning new words and taking advantage of reading opportunities all around us in things that we are already doing every day: talking, playing and singing."

Across the country, children from professional families by the age of 3 have heard 30 million more words, including words repeated, than children from families living in poverty.

At Willamina Elementary, 58.6 percent of Native American students are on track. Across Oregon, 55.7 percent are.

"The reason our numbers are higher than those across the state," said Thorsgard, "is because of the extra tutoring and services the Tribe offers in the local school district."

At Willamina, 55.7 percent of white students are on track. Across Oregon, 76.5 percent of white students are.

"We're not where we'd like to be, for sure," said Willamina Elementary Principal Carrie Zimbrick. "We're working toward 70 percent of our third-graders reading above the state standard. We need to beef up our effort, spend a lot more time with interventions."

The school also is starting out with too many children not ready for kindergarten. The research says that families play a major role in a child's reading success. Youth from 5 to 16 years of age, for example, spend 15 percent of their time in school and 85 percent with families, parents and communities.

Across the state, one-third of third-grade students are not reading up to state standards. However, for 85 percent to 90 percent of poor

readers, intervention and support programs implemented before third grade can increase reading skills to average grade levels.

The Oregon Education Investment Board, working under the Chief Education Officer, was created in 2011 to evaluate initiatives and make funding suggestions to the Oregon Legislature. Third-grade reading proficiency is one of its priorities.

The program is all about partnerships. The board hopes to galvanize Oregon schools, community and business leaders to create a "seamless" system helping youth from birth to college and career, said Kristin Gimbel, Communications Director in the office of the Chief Education Officer.

The state has invested \$250,000 in StORytime, part of a larger strategies investment for the coming biennium.

Private sector funder of the program is Canyonville-based Umpqua Bank, the largest community bank on the West Coast, according to Nicole Stein, vice president of Community Responsibility. The \$22 billion company has contributed \$100,000 with a match from the community to buy 80,000 books for "high needs" libraries, she said.

April Campbell, a Grand Ronde Tribal member who was Education Department manager for the Tribe and is now Indian Education Specialist for the state Department of Education, sees value in bringing together "key strategic partners" with outreach efforts.

Bobby Mercier, Brian Krehbiel, Ali Holsclaw and Kimberly Roybal drummed and sang to start the program. Umpqua Bank brought in an ice cream truck, giving out what we all scream for to end it. ■



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Kindergarteners Aven Cox, above left, and Sophie Grout look and listen as Matt Bucknell, Tribal Elementary Lead, reads "There Was a Cold Lady Who Swallowed Some Snow!" during the StORytime event held at Willamina Elementary School in Willamina on Wednesday, Oct. 15.