

Books for Bikes keeps students motivated for reading

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

DALLAS — Oakdale Heights Elementary students were buried in books through the month of April, hoping for a chance to win a bike.

For the eighth year, Oakdale gave away bikes as a reward for reading books outside of school.

"The whole idea is to keep them reading," said Susan Fischer, an Oakdale kindergarten teacher, who collects donations for the program.

After having their noses in books for the entire month, the kids eagerly awaited the presentation of the bikes, one for each class, on Monday afternoon.

Physical education teacher Jon Petersen emceed the presentation and congratulated the students on their hard work.

"You all did really great on reading a lot of books. The main goal was to read a lot of books," he said.

The "Books for Bikes" program provides one bike for each classroom. The students are given reading session sheets, with three sessions on each one. Once a student completes all three — a parent or guardian has to sign off on them — they are turned in for a chance to



JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-Observer
The Books for Bikes program gave away one bike per class.



JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-Observer
Students receive their bikes at Oakdale Heights Elementary School on Monday afternoon.

win the bike. Students can turn in as many sheets as they can complete in a month.

"I would guess that we've seen an increase in out-of-school reading," Peterson said.

He said 16 bikes were given away this year — 15 on Monday and one in the middle of April to remind the students what they were reading for.

One of the lucky winners was third-grader Zeric Reed. He wasn't sure how he was going to get his bike home Monday. Maybe the bus?

"I'm going to try," he said, smiling.

Of course, the school made sure all bikes got to their proper destinations.

Zeric said his new bike is "great" because he has bikes at home, "but they're all broken."

As he waited to leave the school's gym with his new bike, another student bounded up to Zeric.

"Hey Zeric, high-five dude," the boy said, congratulating his friend.
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Oakdale teachers ask district to reconsider cuts

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

DALLAS — Teachers from Oakdale Heights Elementary School asked the Dallas School District to reconsider cutting the school's teaching staff in the 2017-18 budget.

In the budget proposal, there's one less licensed staff position at the school.

The next meeting of the Dallas School District Budget Committee is Wednesday (today) at 6 p.m. at the district office, 111 SW Ash St., Dallas.

Heather Anderson, an intervention specialist at Oakdale, spoke before the Dallas School Board at its May 8 meeting. Other Oakdale staff

members attended the meeting in support.

"If you reduce our staff, we're increasing class size for our youngest, most vulnerable learners," she said. "We know statistics show us that if these children don't leave third grade reading, we have mountains for them to climb the rest of their educational career."

Anderson said more than a third of students at Oakdale are not meeting benchmarks in math and reading. Also, 35 percent of students are "time intensive," which includes those who have behavioral challenges. She added 44 students should be receiving extra instruction in reading and/or math, but

the school doesn't have the staff to fit them in.

Anderson said she understands the budget pressure the district is facing. District administrators recently met with school staff to discuss the proposal.

"We're just here to really implore you to reflect on the decision we are making by reducing staff at Oakdale," she said.

Superintendent Michelle Johnstone said based on projections, there will be 30 fewer students at Oakdale next year. Also considered in the decision is the positive impact of talented teachers, even with bigger classes, Johnstone said.

She also acknowledged

that projected class sizes are not ideal, especially given the number of students in need of special education or behavior intervention.

"We are looking at the dynamics there, but unfortunately when it comes down to budget, you have 30 children leaving your building," Johnstone said. "That's 30 less children that we are anticipating. That's where we start looking at how do we adjust the FTE (teachers)."

To help with students who need counseling and special education, the district is proposing adding a school psychologist to work with students and families, and a full-time special education teacher, Johnstone said. An-

other possible solution is looking at the boundaries between Lyle and Oakdale to balance the number of students attending each school.

"We are hearing you," Johnstone said. "Please know that we are hearing you, but there's also a budget piece that we have to clearly deal with."

Oakdale third-grade teacher Jennifer Casalegno said with some classes estimated to have as many 28 to 30 students in them next year, struggles will continue.

"It hurts to be able to look out into my room and know what's going on is not what is best for the kids," she said. "There are too many of them. We can't build rela-

tionships with the kids. They are not building positive relationships with each other. It's a constant battle."

Board member Mike Bollman said the district will continue to search for solutions, but also hopes that the state Legislature will boost the K-12 budget before the session concludes. Anderson and Casalegno said staff at the school are getting in touch with lawmakers to plead for that as well.

"It's a massive challenge and there's no easy remedy. I think Michelle is listening to concerns and we are hoping to see some positive budget news from the Legislature at some point," Bollman said. "We can't guarantee it."



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