

# City teens lead Hooked on Books project

By LAUREN SARKISSIAN |

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I've always believed everyone has the ability to change the world, no matter how old they may be. It's one thing to look at the problems of society and take no action, and it's another to do something about them.

Gandhi said, "We need to be the change we wish to see in the world," and that's what a group of teens and I set out to do. I'm in eighth grade at Santa Fe School for the Arts & Sciences, and in September we decided to make a difference in our community.

One of the key elements to success in life is being literate, something with which our state struggles. We rank 49th out of 50 states in literacy and have a 63 percent graduation rate in Santa Fe. One of the reasons we're having so many high school dropouts is because many students struggle with basic literacy skills. If more people could read, they could get better jobs and make more money which in turn, would lead to less poverty.

Our solution to our state's reading issue is to get kids reading proficiently at an early age. By making reading cool and popular, more kids become willing to picking up a book rather than playing a video game or checking out Facebook. We thought if we created a wave of positive peer pressure, friends could impress upon their friends that reading is something kids should want to do.

We created a student-driven campaign called "Hooked on Books: Reel kids into reading," to empower the kids and teens of our generation to reach toward better possibilities for their future. We hold monthly contests based on books and reading, which gives kids the opportunity to win amazing prizes. Motivating nonreaders with prizes gives them an incentive to read a book and hopefully discover the magic of reading in the process. We have been running this campaign since September, have held five competitions so far, with close to 1,000 participants in all. Our summer reading contest begins this week.

One way I take part in our campaign is by attending meetings every other weekend as part of a Youth United group. We are a group of middle and high school students from different schools who are the steering committee for Hooked on Books. We judge the contests, buy prizes, design the competitions, and much more. It's one way I like to positively impact my community, because as a part of a community, it's our responsibility to take care of it.

We have placed eight blue Hooked on Books shelves around town, and they are filled with free books that children or parents can take home. Folks can take, borrow or donate a book to these bookshelves. These bookshelves are in hospitals and public health clinics, the Division of Motor Vehicle offices and other places where children wait with their parents. We're also holding a two-week free intensive summer camp in July to help tutor kids in need of reading help.

If you'd like to support us, you can check out our website at [www.nmallianceforliteracy.org](http://www.nmallianceforliteracy.org), "like" us on Facebook, or donate books or money to help create a successful future for Santa Fe.

It's up to us to make a difference. As Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

*Lauren Sarkissian is an eighth-grade student at Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences who is looking for ways to make a difference in the world.*