

Students spearhead reading campaign

Learning Curve

By Robert Nott | The New Mexican

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"It is what you read when you don't have to that determines what you will be when you can't help it," Oscar Wilde said. Students from the Santa Fe School for the Arts & Sciences — a private nonprofit pre-K through eighth-grade school with about 120 students — has initiated a community-wide movement to get kids in grades three to 12 to read anything they want. They have formed an Alliance for Literacy to start a Hooked on Books campaign.

"We just want to get kids reading," explained Rayna Dineen, who runs the Santa Fe School for the Arts & Sciences, to a group of Santa Fe Public School librarians at Ortiz Middle School last week. Dineen had three of her school's students — Kendra Carmona, Beckett Maestas, and Brass Burapa — with her to plead their case. They want all the schools, City Hall, parents and local businesses to help them with an ambitious 2012 campaign that includes providing incentives for reading.

This student-driven Alliance for Literacy meets every other Saturday at the school, and any youth may attend one of these meetings or join the group to help design the campaign. They're looking for ideas to encourage reading, and students in grades 3 to 12 can email their ideas in essay form (500 words or less, typed) to allianceforliteracy@yahoo.com, by Nov. 15. The writer of the winning essay will win an iPad.

The alliance is raising money for prizes to continue offering incentives via reading contests. So far it raised \$10,000 from the Albertsons Community Partners Challenge. When one of the librarians at the Ortiz meeting said she liked the idea but wasn't crazy about the incentives, noting that, "Reading should be its own reward," Dineen and her students agreed but said that reading contests should be set up just like art or science contests. Carmona said some kids who have not been introduced to reading outside of the school system may not understand how reading can stir their imagination and creativity more than a video game or television show. "If they don't start reading, how can they understand that reading is its own reward?" she asked. Dineen supported that point when she added, "Nobody ever said art should be its own reward," when it comes to contests.

Some studies rank New Mexico 48th in literacy, and the state's new Secretary of Education-designate Hanna Skandera is continuing to push her end-social-promotion bill — which would put an end to the tradition of promoting third-graders who can't read but also include intervention practices to ensure children can read to grade level by the end of the third grade. So the Hooked on Reading movement seems to be riding a wave of good timing. "I think it helps if your friends tell you to do something rather than your parents," said Maestas — who said he is named after playwright Samuel Beckett because his parents love reading and instilled a similar passion in him. He said the alliance wants to get kids "reading books that you want to read."

The alliance is trying to get businesses, schools and the city to sponsor and set up book-swap shelves at public locales where readers can take books for free (and ideally leave a book). On a more ambitious scale, the alliance wants to raise financing for professional tutors who can work over the summer with children who have reading challenges. In December it will start putting out a call for book donations.

Dineen said she and the students met with Mayor David Coss last week, and he pledged to proclaim 2012 the Year of Reading in Santa Fe — a point the mayor confirmed via phone last week.

The alliance has started a Facebook account — Hooked on Books, Reel Kids into Reading. It will soon set up the www.NMAllianceforliteracy.org site. You can call Dineen at 438-8585 for more information.

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