

READ LIKE ME:

Rockwood reading program features books reflecting culture of students of color

Wildwood Middle School is on the leading edge of a new book club program for minority students in the Rockwood School District.

Many students in the voluntary transfer program in the Rockwood School District thrive in their educational pursuits. But Brittany Hogan, coordinator of the education equity and diversity in the district, noticed that the reading material for those students often didn't reflect their culture.

"I think it's really hard when you look at all the books you read at school and you realize there isn't a face or story that sounds similar to your own," Hogan said. "Children need to feel like their stories and culture are represented within their education experience. It supports their growth, development and social emotional health."

With that in mind, Hogan created the "Read Like Me" program in 2016 to expose minority students to more books with characters to which they can relate. Librarians, principals, guidance counselors or social workers host the club and give students a once-a-week time after school to talk about the book, talk about things they see that are like them, Hogan said.

"While there are parts of mainstream stories students can relate to, it's really important for minority children to read stories about people who look like them as well," Hogan said.

The program started small and is still ramping up, but at Wildwood Middle School, it is in full swing. This fall, the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade girls are reading "Children of Blood and Bone," by Tomi Adeyemi. The book is the first in Adeyemi's "Legacy of Orisha" series. The students have already read "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas and "Calling My Name" by Liara Tamani.

The groups read one book per semester. In some cases at Wildwood Middle, sixth graders may read a different book than the seventh and eighth graders.

In the program, a reading group is assigned chapters to read at home, then discusses the reading at the weekly session, said Twylaa Taylor, a social worker at Wildwood Middle who leads the Read Like Me sessions.

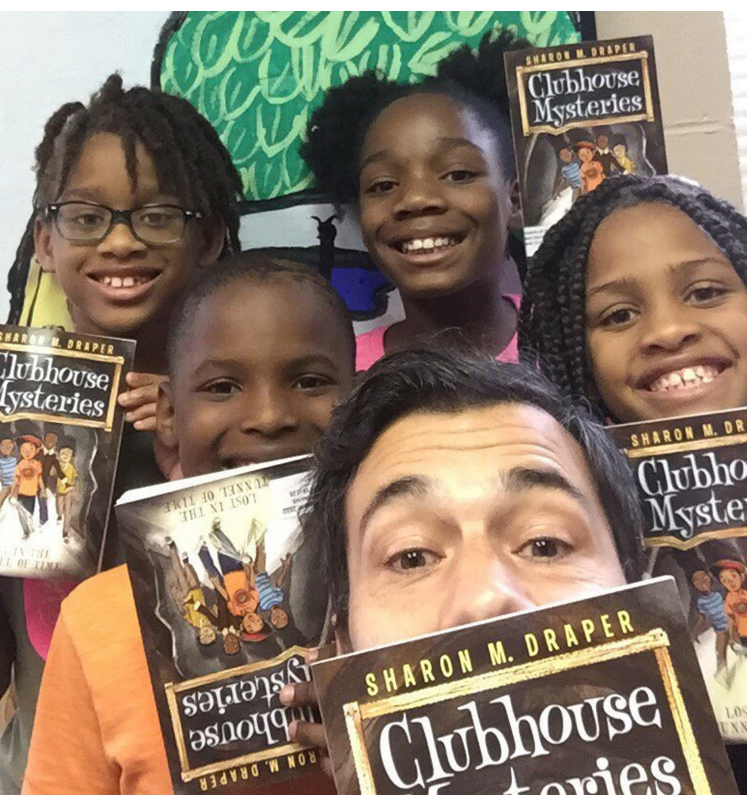
"The majority of the students are engaged in the book discussions and share their thoughts," Taylor said. "The students have guided questions while reading, which helps with group discussions."

About four to 10 students typically participate in the discussions in each group. "Even if the students aren't exactly openly discussing the book, they are still happy with being a part of Read Like Me as a safe space," Taylor said. "A place where they can be themselves and be comfortable in the skin they're in."

Hogan emphasizes that "Learning happens in and outside the classroom. There are so many things that, when you're in a space where you don't see a lot of people who look like you, there are reflections of you that you don't see, and that can be challenging at points. That's why I started Read Like Me. I bought books for the elementary schools to run small groups with our fourth- and fifth-grade girls and boys."

The program also strives to match up students and books, when possible, by gender. Hogan notes that it's good for girls to read books about girls, and it's important for girls to see good role models, good protagonists and antagonist characters in their literature.

"As we focus on becoming more culturally competent in the district," Hogan said, "this is a way to support Rockwood's efforts and also introduce quality narrative novels about people of color for our kids to read."



Young Rockwood readers pose with their Clubhouse Mysteries books.



Seventh-graders at Wildwood Middle School relax while reading their Read Like Me selection, "Calling My Name."

In addition, each student has a bookmark reading:

- Comment: You'd like to make?
- Connection: How were you able to connect?
- Clarification: Tell me more about ...
- Questions?



MESSAGE from the CEO

A common theme of many of the stories included in the current issue of the ParentLink relates to how student involvement and participation in the lives of others can make a big difference.

True leaders are inspired by others and seek opportunities to take initiative and then make a difference in the lives of their fellow students. They do not see their background as limiting or think that it is important to be brilliant, rich, beautiful or perfect. They just care enough to be there and support others.

As Mother Theresa said, "In this life we cannot always do great things. But we can do small things with great love." Often times, we do not see the long-term implications of that first positive step we take but, rest assured, taking that first step to help someone else can lead to significant impacts that could ultimately alter the course of human history and the world.

So I would encourage you, when you see a need to take that first step, to meet that need and trust that your good deeds could lead to amazing and unanticipated outcomes. Take that first step and make a difference in the life of one person at a time, and the results very well might surprise you. What we might perceive to be a very small act of kindness could be the act that makes a bigger difference than we can imagine.

MARK TWAIN FIFTH GRADERS lead student-run dance club

Mark Twain Elementary fifth graders Anya Crawford and Keziah Jones have a passion for dance and wanted to share it with their schoolmates. So the creative duo approached Principal Trina Petty-Rice last spring to propose an after-school dance club for the Brentwood School District.

That club, Dance for Heart, now meets for one hour every Monday, with Keziah and Anya as leaders. "Inspired by local artists, the girls want to share their love of movement with other students," said Theresa Reynolds, the club's sponsor. "They wanted a club that was all-inclusive and could promote health and wellness as well as cultural awareness."

The students and their instructors choreograph dances to be performed during school assemblies throughout the school year. The performances incorporate the theme of each assembly, while also highlighting Mark Twain's leadership model, "The Seven Habits of Happy Students."

Dance styles range from ballet to hip-hop. Currently 10 students, ranging from second to fifth grade, are enrolled in the club.

Anya and Keziah have attended Mark Twain since kindergarten through the VICC program and have shown leadership initiatives since they arrived, said Reynolds, elementary science specialist and lead teacher of Project Lead the Way Launch. "They are leaders who have synergized to work for the good of their peers," she said. "They have sought to understand the need within their school community and have taken responsibility and initiative to put their passion into action."



Keziah Jones (left) and Anya Crawford are the founders and leaders of the Dance for Heart afterschool club.

Did You Know?

What to do if your VICC participating child becomes sick at school and has to go home? The VICC Transfer Program Handbook for City Families Transferring to County Schools provides answers to this question and others. Call the Transportation Office at 314-721-8657 if you haven't received your 2018-19 manual.

Cab transportation is provided for a child who becomes ill during the school day if the building principal or school nurse determines that the child should return home.

A responsible adult must be available to receive the child at home.

Transportation will not be provided to a parent's place of work or doctor's office.

ST. LOUIS CITY vs. COUNTY SCHOOLS:

Lessons in inequality (and life)

By Claire Stolze

VICC Student at a St. Louis Public School

As a current high school student in St. Louis, I am often asked which high school I attend, and I am quite proud of my response. I am white, I live in an affluent part of St. Louis County, and I am one of the few students who attend a school outside of their neighborhood district through a desegregation program. I travel about 25 minutes into the city each day to attend a school in the St. Louis City Public Schools (SLPS) district.

Although I love my school, I recognize that the resource allocation in my district, versus that of a suburban district, is very different, which often translates to lower test scores and higher dropout rates. SLPS faces unfortunate structural disadvantages that puts it in tough positions and stretches its budget thin. Costs such as transportation, building maintenance and utilities for the SLPS district are higher than those of its county counterparts, and funds devoted to quality curricula have to take a back seat. It is hard to believe that SLPS is one of the highest-spending districts in Missouri (with an average spending rate of \$14,683 per pupil), and outspends all but three St. Louis County school districts. As a student who has attended an SLPS school for my entire educational career, I can attest that this is quite a shock.

Many school buildings in the district are over 100 years old and cost more to maintain than younger buildings. When compared to the state-of-the-art facilities suburban districts tout, SLPS schools seem outdated. To entice potential students, SLPS offers 30 attractive magnet or choice school programs, which are open to anyone regardless of ZIP code. Nevertheless, low enrollment persists. Some schools have closed as a result, but SLPS has had little success in selling the properties. Condensing struggling schools has led to more transportation costs, and transportation is already a large line item in the budget because of the magnet and choice schools.

Teacher turnover rate is yet another issue. When compared to other districts in the St. Louis area with a similar spending rate per pupil, SLPS pays a very low salary. SLPS pays an average salary of \$46,615 a year and keeps teachers in district for about five years, which is much lower than a similarly spending county district. SLPS often hires first-year teachers, or teachers who have been fired from other districts, because their salaries are less expensive than that of a well-experienced teacher. After gaining experience, these younger teachers often move on to other districts that offer better pay.

In addition to having high costs, revenues are low. Factors such as a poorer tax base and high poverty rate put the SLPS district at an economic disadvantage. On top of this, population in the city has seen a significant drop since its peak in 1950, meaning the district receives less revenue from property taxes and less money from the state because of lower daily attendance in schools. SLPS schools face disadvantages even before students walk in the door.

Higher rates of poverty and less money for textbooks, technology and teachers translate to low test scores. The Valley Park district (which spends less per pupil than SLPS) has almost a 30 percentage point lead in proficiency ratings (based on MAP score data) in the areas of math, science, social studies and English, when compared to SLPS. As of 2017, the dropout rate for SLPS was almost 15.6 percent, which is almost 13 percent above the Missouri average.

About 40 percent of students at Metro Academic and Classical High school were living in poverty in 2014, which is the lowest percentage of students in poverty among schools in the SLPS district. Coincidentally, Metro is the highest achieving school in the district and the number one public school, as reported by U.S. Best News, in the state. As shown by the high achievement of SLPS' top three high schools, there is no

shortage of smart students in the SLPS system. Again, I must reiterate that these are the three schools with the lowest poverty rates in the district. Poverty and lack of resources hinder students in every other school. Although there are still students living in poverty in county schools, it is not such a widespread epidemic.

Personally, I don't feel that we can hold public city schools and public suburban schools to the same standards in their current condition. The SLPS district faces so many challenges, and gets only about \$2,000 per student per year from the state. It makes me angry when people who speak about the low test scores and therefore lesser education provided by the SLPS system blatantly ignore the existing disparities. How can anyone try to equate county and city public schools when the resources are not the same?

How can anyone equate two school districts when nothing about them is equal? Time and time again, we see that higher rates of poverty means lower achievement, yet we do nothing but point fingers at the SLPS district for the troubles they face.

Despite the troubles my school faces, I still choose to attend. My school is small, and my teachers devote time to get to know me. My school is diverse, with students from all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. I think the best thing my school has offered me, however, is insight. I get to listen to all types of perspectives and stories from people whose lives are different than mine, and, unlike many others, I am not scared to be in the city. Because of my school and the time I have spent with people who live in the city, I have realized that there is a 1:1 ratio among people. I have just as many thoughts, feelings and ideas as anyone else, and this has made me unafraid of people who look different than me or have situations that I could not understand. I have become more empathetic and want to help those who ask for it.

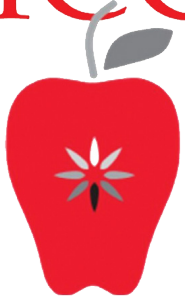
I feel that the life lessons my school has offered me are more important than anything I could learn from a book. I have listened to people from all different backgrounds and learned to appreciate the good things in my life. Being with people who do not look or live like I do has made me aware of systemic oppression of minorities and how the poverty cycle affects generation after generation. Seeing all of this has helped me realize that I want a career in public service and that I want to make positive change in St. Louis city. Without the opportunity to attend a public school, I would never have realized this. When I had to choose a high school, I knew that I would be attending a city school, and I am happy with my choice.



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Sources include:

- <http://graphics.stltoday.com/apps/payrolls/salaries/teachers/www.slps.org>
- <http://occasionalplanet.org/2018/08/07/st-louis-city-vs-county-schools-lessons-in-inequality-and-life/slpsmagnetschools.org/>
- <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/st-louis-population/>
- Additional statistics provided by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp. per the Department of Elementary & Secondary Education website.

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CONGO REFUGEE

conquers English and cultural shock, wins hearts at Hancock Place

Faila Mbukani arrived at Hancock Elementary School about three years ago as a refugee from The Congo. She landed in the middle of fifth grade knowing no English but being bilingual in Swahili and French.

Now, the eighth grader is an accomplished member of the Hancock Place School District community, respected by peers and teachers.

“In a nutshell, Faila is a tenacious ball of energy and positivity that has captured the hearts of teachers, staff and students at Hancock Place School District,” said Kari Brand, Faila’s English Language Learner teacher at Hancock Place Middle School. “Faila is a unique individual because she has struggled day after day to overcome obstacles — language barriers, bullying, poverty and, above all, cultural differences that led to a period of true cultural shock.”

In her three years at Hancock Place, Faila has learned to speak, read and write in English and is now keeping pace with her peers. “She was able to accomplish this great feat by being motivated, creating goals and staying positive at all times,” Brand said. “Faila’s greatest asset is her ability to spread positivity among the masses.”

“Faila is well loved among staff and students, and she has always made it her business to represent Hancock in the highest regard,” Brand said.

Faila has participated in intramural soccer and is active in 6:1, a club that focuses on kindness in order to break down barriers and differences.

First a resident in the Hancock Place School District, Faila moved to St. Louis City in September 2017 and has stayed in the Hancock district through the VICC program.

“Her story, positivity and work ethic merits recognition,” said history teacher Mike Adreon, who sponsors Faila in the 6:1 organization, which he started about five years ago.

Because Faila is such a good student, her teaching team nominated her to be spotlighted at the annual VICC parent meeting, which was held Oct. 25 in the high school library. “She is hard working and has come such a long way since coming to our school,” said guidance counselor Amanda VanHorn. “She is a joy to have in class and always has a smile on her face.”



Eighth-grader Faila Mbukani