
Students benefit from book program

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RECORD STAFF

These days, the students at King Edward Public School have a library full of fun new books. They also have bins of books they can choose to take home for their home reading program, plenty of books in their classrooms and a roomful of teacher resource books.

Their enthusiasm for reading is measurable. Though the downtown Kitchener school is in a lower-income area that wouldn't normally be expected to do well on provincial testing, 59 per cent of Grade 3 students are at or above provincial standards in reading and 66 per cent are in math.

That's at the school board's average in reading, above in math.

In 2002-03, the picture was much different. That year, the first round of provincial testing found only 15 per cent of Grade 3 students met expectations in reading, far below the 50 per cent provincial average that year.

In 2004, the school was doing a fundraiser at Chapters in Waterloo when then-principal Darlene Stubbs found out about a new grant program Chapters-Indigo was establishing to help high-needs schools buy books.

Stubbs figured her school met the grant criteria and applied to the Indigo Love of Reading Foundation. At the time, the grant was to be worth \$10,000.

It wasn't until spring of the next year that Stubbs heard back. She was shocked and delighted to learn King Edward had not only been chosen as one of 10 schools across Canada to receive the grant, the grant was now worth \$150,000 over three years.

The idea for the foundation was born in 2002, when Indigo chief executive Heather Reisman visited an inner-city Toronto school.

"She was really shocked at what she saw," said foundation director Jennifer Gay. "Their library was pretty much empty."

Across Canada, school library budgets have been "drastically cut" in the last few decades, so many resources are dated, said Gay. "There are still children going to school today who are reading about Dick and Jane . . . We're literally going back and replenishing books from the last 30 years."

Part of King Edward's grant was \$5,000 a year in cash, which it spent on activities to teach about the environment, health, heritage and citizenship.

It also got \$45,000 a year in store credits to buy books and resources. To decide what to get, the school formed a committee of staff. Besides books, the school got resources such as audio books for students with special needs, Stubbs said.

Not all the credit for the students' improvements can go to the books. School staff have put a heavy emphasis on literacy for the last several years. But more resources for teachers and kids has definitely helped, said the current and former principals.

"The quality of books and number of books has been just wonderful," said current principal Janet Hale.

"It's been amazing how much more respect students have for reading when they're holding a book that's not ripped in their hands."

The foundation's program has grown. This year, 20 schools across Canada will be getting grants of up to \$160,000 over three years. King Edward will advise two of those schools on how to spend the money.

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