

School on a literacy mission

The \$62,000 question: With a Love of Reading grant, which books shall we buy?

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When principal Liz Rivard learned her elementary school had won a \$62,000 grant that will allow it to buy books for the school's library and classrooms, her reaction was swift and vocal.

"I ran screaming through the building and gave everyone high fives," Rivard recounted at Orchard Elementary School in LaSalle.

"It's like Christmas and Easter all rolled into one."

The small community school is one of 20 elementary schools across Canada with students from under-privileged backgrounds that were awarded literacy grants by the Indigo Love of Reading Foundation.

Tomorrow, the school will make its first book purchase with the \$62,000 literacy grant, which is spread over three years.

Two buses will take 60 of Orchard's 200 students to the Chapters store in Pointe Claire where each student will get to pick out a book for the school's library.

Kyle Castelli, a Grade 4 student who said he reads "mostly every night," sounded interested in choosing a book about sports, "hockey maybe."

Rivard said research suggests a Grade 6 class where students will succeed should have 1,500 books. Rivard estimates the average classroom collection at Orchard is between 20 and 40 books - mainly bought by teachers on their own dime.



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Orchard Elementary teacher Caroline Goyette holds her "class library." The school will include students in its book-buying spree.

"If we're talking about kids who are in homes where there are no books, where there is no exposure to print, where there is no celebration of reading, it behooves us to have it here, and we don't," Rivard said.

The grant is a welcome windfall for a school on a literacy mission. At the start of the school year, Rivard told staff she wanted Orchard to be known as "the school that reads."

At least half the school's 200 students come from under-privileged backgrounds. Some children start kindergarten behind the 8-ball because they don't have such pre-reading skills as knowing the alphabet and numbers, Rivard said.

"If you're fighting to survive working at a low-paying job and coming home and you have to feed the kids, do the laundry and cope, there's not a lot of time for quiet reading," she said. "It's not like Beaver Cleaver days here. It's a tough go."

The school started a buddies program last year, with older children reading to younger ones.

"It's modeling the behaviour that we want the young kids to think is important," she said.

The school's Home and School association has also launched a story-telling initiative.

Rivard said reading levels at the school range from advanced to students who are two or three years behind, as well as emerging readers.

Yesterday, Grade 1 teacher Caroline Goyette held up a small green bin with about 30 books and declared: "That's my class library."

Geneviève Binette, who teaches Grades 1 and 2, said having nice books with lots of pictures encourages students who are learning to read.

"I've found it makes them interested in reading," Binette said.

The school has a \$15,000 deficit. But Rivard has looked for other ways to help fund student activities since she came to the school in 2006.

The school won a CBC School Needs Project grant last year to offer guitar lessons and martial arts.

"At the school board now, people run the other way when they see me because I hit up one director for a computer lab. I hit up another one for buses for field trips.

"For me, kids who come from a less-privileged background deserve more than their privileged counterparts because we have to level the playing field," she said.

In the school library, many of the bookshelves are covered with garbage bags because of a recent flood. The roof is scheduled to be repaired this summer.

Rivard describes the book collection as "pretty thin," although the school received \$12,000 for its library last year in Quebec government funding.

With the literacy grant, Rivard said the school will be able to choose books based on student interests and needs.

"I don't think kids value books these days and I want them to realize what treasures they are."

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