

Burnt Church push for Literacy

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BURNT CHURCH - The dozen kids sitting at a circle of desks in Burnt Church's school library were reading in silence.



Tristan Larry (left) and Dana Augustine pore over some of Burnt Church school's books during a reading period in the library.

Some were poring over graphic novels. Others had their noses buried in adventure stories. But all of them were reading, and reading a lot.

Principal Robert Bowes said kids at the school have developed into strong and avid readers over the past five years. In 2008 alone, one class of 11 students devoured 1,200 books.

"In the hallways now, we usually see kids carrying novels," he said, adding: "You associate with books a lot, you're going to improve. I always tell them, you read more, you're going to get smarter."

The reason is a new reading system adopted a few years ago. Children are tested to get a sense of what their reading level is like, coming up with a specific number that may not necessarily correspond to what grade they are in.

Then, with this number in mind, the student can then select any book in the school's library, most of which have a level number on their front cover.

If it's the same as the student's number, or a bit above or below, they're encouraged to read it.

"That'll give us a starting point with the kids," Bowes said. "They should be in this particular comfort zone, and we encourage them to stay in their comfort zone."

It's not just numbers, though. Kids are also taught how they can tell if a book is too difficult for them.

"Don't go and pick books if it looks interesting on the cover," Bowes tells would-be readers. "Read a page. If there's too many difficult words, put it back. You can pick it out later, and do it again."

While a student's "comfort zone" may be higher or lower than that of his peers in the same grade, he says readers at a higher level don't seem to look down on those who prefer simpler fare.

"I've never heard a kid yet say to another kid 'oh, you're reading at a lower level

than I," Bowes said. "There doesn't seem to be any stigma attached to it at all. We haven't seen it, anyway."

After they've finished a book, students are tested again, to see how well they appreciated its contents. The results are marked on a sheet kept in their files by the school, so students can track what they are reading, how it fits into their comfort zones, and how they are improving.

"It's encouraging them to read," Bowes said. "They want to read."

Those records also show whether students are reading fiction or non-fiction, and Bowes notes students don't shy away from the latter. Bowes said students are appreciating the difference between fiction and non-fiction, which carries learning outside the classroom.

"They're learning without realizing it," he said. "You can't do without reading. Actually, they are becoming smarter."

The school's efforts were boosted by a grant from Chapters/Indigo, whereby the school would get \$50,000 per year over three years. Most of it goes toward buying books, but there is also a portion reserved for getting other literacy-based equipment, such as shelves for the school library.

"It's given us such a boost that you couldn't imagine what its done for the schools," Bowes said.

Eventually, Bowes hopes the school's reading programs will help students from Burnt Church integrate better into area high schools.

"We want them to be part of the mainstream of education," Bowes said. "We want them to feel better about themselves when they get to high school, so that they have a reading background."

In Grade 1 teacher Judy Saunders' classroom, there's a few baskets of books perched on the countertop. Saunders said each classroom has its own mini-library, and students are exposed to literacy through guided, shared and independent reading.

"We do all the different approaches to reading, and also reading for fun," she said.

Reading can also become an event, and Saunders said every year the school sets a goal for the number of books read, with progress marked by a "book train" along the hallway walls.

Saunders seemed to think the approach was keeping students interested.

"They're really turning on to books," she said.