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Want to Honor Barbara Bush? Read to a Child

By Chris Braunlich

4/25/2018 -- “So there's a reading circle and all the kids have a book and they're passing the book kid to kid and they passed it to me and I couldn't read.”

That’s a dyslexic Neil Bush, describing the moment his mother took on the challenge of literacy and reading.

The passing of former First Lady Barbara Bush offers an opportunity to remember, among her other attributes, her work as a pioneer of the family literacy movement.

The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy focused simultaneously on developing early childhood preparation and adult literacy, so low-income parents and their young children would boost their respective cognition and literacy skills together. Developing reading skills, she believed, would strengthen families and the nation – and was key to solving the critical challenges of social and economic mobility and quality of life.

By the time they reach kindergarten, low income students are exposed to 30 million fewer words, a deficit that shows up in reading ability. Low-income children are less likely to have their parents read stories to them – either because of sparse time, few books in the home, or simply because their parents themselves are not literate.

This lack of literacy cascades in their lives until they arrive at their first job with weak reading skills – or with no skills, and no job to match.

That gap exists here in Virginia, too. In the recently-released fourth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress reading scores, only Massachusetts, New Jersey and Department of Defense schools perform at a statistically higher level than Virginia students.

But 75 percent of low-income Virginia fourth graders cannot read proficiently – a gap 31 percentile points higher than other fourth graders. And a student who does not read proficiently by the third grade is four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma.

What can schools and communities do about it? Better yet: *What Would Barbara Do?*

She would probably say “Start by reading to them.” And that’s precisely what nearly 40,000 Virginia children in 92 schools found themselves doing this year: reading the same book at the same time.

Virginia Reads One Book (VROB) is a project of Read To Them (RTT), a national non-profit headquartered in Richmond and operating on a simple concept: Children who are read to learn to read more easily and become better readers. Schools can purchase more than 100
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heavily discounted titles – including such classics as E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Their “One School, One Book” campaign offers tools so that everyone in a school – students, parents, teachers, administrative staff -- follow along together, building a community of readers. By organizing the entire school, young students have the opportunity of being read to through a variety of platforms: “celebrity readers,” older children reading to younger children, on video tape, during the breakfast period at school and ... for one small community, over the local radio station.

This year’s “Virginia Reads One Book” campaign took the project even further. Kicking off with a video from Washington Redskins Guard Arie Kouandjio reading the first chapter of *The Lemonade War*, students throughout the state found themselves reading a new chapter each day.

RTT’s Program Director Cathy Plageman notes that “We want them to understand that reading is something you can do for joy, and not just for an assignment.” So RTT provides ideas for Assemblies, daily trivia questions, Lemonade-themed group and class projects, contests, and tips for parents reading at home.

And, having selected a book featuring two siblings who open competitive lemonade stands -- RTT added a financial literacy component developed by the Virginia Council on Economic Education covering “math that seems real to kids,” basic economic concepts and savings.

Does the simple act of reading to children make a difference? Northumberland Elementary School, with a low-income population of more than 60 percent, has been involved with RTT since its inception. Prior to starting a robust reading program, the school’s reading pass rates hovered around the 60 percent mark. Since then, its pass rate has soared to well over 80 percent.

Reading to children ... reading *together* ... facilitates that, helping children learn language and speech development, innately building attention span and honing listening skills, learning appropriate behavior exhibited in the books, understanding grammar and sentence structure, and simply giving children the attention they crave and the bonding time they need.

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney is looking to see the program expand to every Richmond City elementary school next year. Getting a *One Richmond, One Book* program underway in a community that has educationally struggled for years would be the kind of tribute Barbara Bush would have especially appreciated.