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Banner day for young writers

With sheer delight, students celebrate an undying art

By CATHERINE BAUM
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Wednesday, October 21, 2009

SOUTHAMPTON - Elementary school students quickly filled the National Day on Writing banner with their responses to the question "What do you like to write about?" So sixth-grade teacher Kevin Hodgson simply extended the paper trail 30 feet.

More than 500 students took part in the activity Tuesday at lunchtime, which celebrates the first annual National Day on Writing. Earlier this month the Senate passed a resolution declaring Oct. 20 the National Day on Writing to draw attention to how integral writing has become to daily life in the 21st century.

In Southampton, students celebrated with what Hodgson described as "organized graffiti."

"They're very excited - I have to keep reminding them to go eat their lunch first," said Hodgson, who learned of the initiative through his involvement with the National Writing Project.

Students crowded around the banner on the cafeteria floor, picked up a marker and scribbled their favorite story subjects: Dogs and horses, Poland, bunnies, race cars and sports.

"I like football stories," wrote Nick Pellegrini, an 8-year-old who noted he loves to tackle players, make touchdowns and intercept passes on the football field. In addition to practice, he said writing about the sport helps to make him a better football player.

"To write a story you have to know a lot about it, so writing it could help you to learn more," the third-grader said.

In addition to story topics, students drew illustrations and jotted down their favorite genres, including mystery, adventure and fairy tale. Anne Nomakeo, 8, said she recently wrote a story about witches and monsters with a "to be continued" ending, while Abbigale Connelly, 9, focuses her journal entries on favorite TV shows and soccer games when her team wins.

Just in time for Halloween, Autumn Fallon, 8, wrote a fiction story about a young girl who walks in a graveyard and returns home to find her family is gone. A vampire in her home takes the little girl's blood, but she curiously survives.

"She's a ghost the whole time," Fallon said. "I love to make up stories."

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Second- and fourth-grade students write on the banner during lunch.

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- New cafe heads for Northampton's Green St.
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The variety of responses on the banner is what Hodgson said he had hoped for.

"I think they probably appreciate just being able to write with freedom," Hodgson said.

"Writing is so motivating to kids because if it's presented to them as a form of self-expression, that's what it is," said Margaret H. Riddle, principal at R.K. Finn Ryan Road School in Northampton. "There's this whole, ¿this is about myself, this isn't about a teacher telling me I have to do something' and there's really a joy in that."

The newly minted National Day on Writing was news to a few area schoolteachers and administrators, including Riddle, who had coincidentally lined up writing assemblies and speakers in their schools today.

Today at R.K. Finn Ryan Road School in Northampton, writing workshop facilitator Lynn Bowmaster will give fifth-grade students a list of prompts to choose from to write about for 10 to 15 minutes, such as fiction, poetry or personal narrative. Bowmaster will then read their work out loud and model how students can respond to their peer's writing using specific feedback.

"Over time the kids get in the habit of doing that kind of reflection for each other," Riddle said. "She encourages them to love to write. We found that it really works."

Meanwhile, Jeff Nathan, award-winning children's author and creator of PunOETRY, is set to teach students about writing and poetry in a humorous way today at Center and Pepin Elementary Schools in Easthampton. Principal Robert Orlando said he contacted Nathan because he believes Nathan's assemblies are a fun approach to learning poetry, language and vocabulary, which are typically more "daunting" lessons for elementary students than narrative and creative writing. The speaker will also help students prepare for MCAS because his lesson topics, including poetry, are included on the MCAS tests.

And although it is by accident the activities are held the day after National Day on Writing, it is with purpose the educators seek new and exciting ways to make writing fun.

"Writing is an intricate piece of what we're doing on the elementary level," Orlando said.

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