



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, May 07, 2015

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BEAR HUGS HELP MAKE LEARNING FUN

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(BOISE) -- At Payette Primary School, learning is spelled F-U-N.

A host of programs at the school are designed to get students, parents and the community involved in education, offering a “whole student” holistic approach to learning, from table manners to reading.

In fact, they can “bear-ly” contain themselves when it comes to teaching reading.

Hundreds of Teddy Bears can be found in the 520-student K-3 elementary school, each a reward for students from kindergarten through third grade who achieve specific, individualized reading goals as part of the school’s Be Excited About Reading (BEAR) program.

All of the bears are donated to the school. “We usually start the year with about 850 bears,” said Principal Kipp McKenzie, “and by now we’ve got about 1500.” One parent even helps out by making sure any lovingly used bears that get donated have been cleaned up so they’re like new for the next child who wants to hug them.

The reading goals are based primarily on grade-level achievement standards, but individual students may have specialized individual goals based on either helping them come up to grade level, or reaching beyond it. Every Friday, teachers notify McKenzie of students who have met their goals, and the students are called down to the principal’s office where they select one of the bears to take home with them. There are even a few “giant” bears, three or four feet high, that are available for students who meet special, difficult reading standard goals.

“It’s kind of fun watching those kids go down the hall with a bear that’s bigger than they are,” McKenzie said. It makes being called down to the principal’s office “bearable.”

To encourage students to become superheroes in math, the school has its Math Marvels program. When students meet specific goals, their names go up on a wall of fame and they’re given superhero ribbons and certificates. If an entire class meets certain school goals, McKenzie walks them a block to a local convenience store for refreshments, paid for by a private donation.

At Payette Primary, learning begins as soon as possible. A pre-school program run through the district’s special education department helps students with speech and language difficulties get prepared for school.

The school also offers a full day of kindergarten every school day. Regular half-day kindergarten classes are held in the morning, and then the school uses a 21st Century Community Learning Center grant for the second half of the day.

Typically, 21st CCLC grants provide after-school enrichment programs for students, but at

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Payette Primary that “after school” for kindergarten students is in the afternoon. It not only helps the district save on separate kindergarten bussing costs, “but the parents love it,” McKenzie said, because the free program helps with daycare issues and their kids enjoy it and are excited about going to school. While the afternoon program is optional, “all of our kindergarten students are enrolled in it,” he said.

21st CCLC programs rely heavily on community partnerships for the enrichment activities they offer, and at Payette Primary McKenzie is particularly proud of the relationship with Crossroads Music Academy in Payette, which comes in to provide music activities for the children.

The school goes beyond traditional learning. Its Responsive Classrooms program provides a start to the day with activities that get students looking forward to the learning ahead of them, and which stresses building friendships and integrity, both in the classroom and on the playground. The program, McKenzie said, “helps us build a sense of community for our students.”

That sense of community extends beyond the classroom. The school has an open door policy for parents to come in, observe and even help. A part-time member of the staff serves as a volunteer coordinator for the school. The PTO sponsors a monthly assembly where the student of the month is named, given a reward, and has their picture taken for a story in the local newspaper. In fact, another staff member voluntarily adds community public relations to their duties to help get the story of student achievements out to the public.

The school also offers a special Grandparents Day, and for students who don’t have a grandparent in the local area, elderly members of the community can adopt a child and be their grandparent for the day. The day features a number of activities for the children and their “grandparent,” including a book sale that turns out to be one of the best fundraisers for the school library. “The grandparents just love spoiling the kids” by buying them a book, McKenzie said.

Adding to the “total student” approach at Payette Primary, McKenzie goes into the classrooms to teach lessons on table manners, appropriate to each grade level. Then, each Friday, the cafeteria takes on the look of a high end restaurant, decked out in linen-covered tables, with the silverware lined up in proper order, where the students can practice the lessons learned.

“We try to do things here that are good for kids, that keep them thinking and improving,” McKenzie said.

And the more they have fun learning, the more they learn.

The Idaho State Department of Education believes the approach taken at Payette Primary School can serve as a model for other schools around the state who wish to adopt all or parts of their programs, thus improving education throughout Idaho and meeting Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra’s goals of using the State Department as a facilitator to share best practices in local schools with other schools in the Gem State.

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Note to the media: If you would like a photo to accompany this story, please contact Kipp McKenzie at kimckenzie@payetteschools.org.