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North Slope students prepare for Battle of the Books

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What do salmon fishing, the world's greatest train, and a teenage vampire have in common?

They're all subjects of a handful of novels off this year's Battle of the Books middle school reading list.

The list includes everything from the World War II classic, "Call It Courage" by Armstrong Sperry, to the modern and angsty junior high thriller, "Eighth Grade Bites" by Heather Brewer.

"The program supports grades three through 12, so it's hitting a lot of the youth in the villages in an area where we think it's going to add a lot of value learning to read and spending time in a healthy environment," said Jodi Forsland, chief services officer for Arctic Slope Telephone Association Cooperative, the telecommunications company that helps sponsor the competition.

Battle of the Books is an annual reading competition that takes place in towns across the country and throughout Alaska. On the North Slope, there are teams in eight communities in the borough with more than 300 participating students.

ASTAC first began its sponsorship a number of years ago when it contacted the school district.

"We really wanted to be more active in the community and we wanted to find a way where we could reach all of our members. It was easy to find something in Barrow to do for all of our members but harder when we tried to look outside into the smaller communities," said Forsland. "We felt like helping the youth was where we wanted to put some emphasis."

The district had a federal grant for the program, which begins in the fall and lasts well into the new year, but didn't have quite enough money to fund it entirely.

ASTAC offered to chip in and help pay for ordering the books. The second year they also sponsored T-shirts for participants and recognition awards for the end of the competition. This year, they're adding trophies and extra prizes. They also help with snacks for the kids.

In total, ASTAC contributes \$15,000 toward the reading program and additional funds for the awards.

"It's just kind of been evolving over the last couple of years," said Forsland.

Each year is slightly different than the last in terms of books as well. This year's middle school team from Nuiqsut is made up of three students from the Trapper School. They were given 12 books total for the team.

"That's why they give them months to read their books," said Carlene Brusca, a language arts teacher at the school and the team's coach this year. "They're not quick and easy reads."

The way the competition works is that the team as a whole is responsible for reading the books over the winter and then participating in a trivia contest in February that will test their reading comprehension and memory of

the books.

Each member of the team doesn't have to read each book, so long as combined, they get through them.

Brusca divided the 12 books up into three stacks based roughly on the number of pages, so each kid would be reading about the same amount. Then, she let her students come in and choose which stack they wanted to be responsible for.

"I let them decide," she said. "They're the ones doing the work and I wanted them to want to do it. So, the more control they have over it, the more engaged they'll be."

She's meeting with them twice a month through December. After the start of next year, she'll start meeting with them weekly. They go over practice questions and make sure everyone is keeping up the pace.

"I also create little forms that I tape into each book where they can write down the main protagonist and antagonist, climaxes in the story, conflicts in the story, setting, things like that," she said. "It's basically an organized form of notetaking that they do as they go along in the book."

That's one of the reasons Battle of the Books is about more than just reading. It encourages students who participate to work on their critical thinking skills, organization, time management, and creativity.

"They have to work as a team and spur each other on, encourage each other to keep up with the reading, because when the actual competition comes, they need one another," said Brusca. "No one person can carry the team. There's going to be questions on every book."

By helping students feel connected to others and by encouraging them to work together and feel like part of the team, the hope is they won't turn to other, destructive ways of spending their time down the road.

"Any time you make a child feel special you're developing them. That's the whole goal of teachers and parents and working as a community to make children feel like they're special, safe, and secure, and part of something bigger and important," said Forsland.

In the villages of the North Slope, as throughout much of Alaska, basketball is king. For kids who aren't into sports, there aren't many other avenues for them to turn their attention to. This, however, is an alternative.

"I'm hopeful that it's just going to develop more of a love for reading, being inquisitive, asking questions, learning about the world outside of where they live," said Forsland. "And then for pleasure as well. You don't have to do something outside of your home to find pleasure. You can sit down and read a book."

As for the kids themselves, it's pretty special to be part of this competition. They get to put their brains to work, dig into a good story, and hang out with like-minded peers.

Then, if they do well in February's regional trivia competition against the other Slope communities, they'll even have the chance to move on to the state championship.

"They feel great that they're involved in something," said Brusca. "So, to be one of the kids who did Battle of the Books is a really big thing."

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