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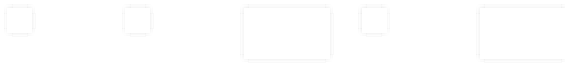


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Mark Woods: Donors give Jacksonville students chance to pick out books of their own

By Mark Woods (Mark Woods' Blog) | May 1, 2013 - 2:00am



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BOB SELF/The Times-Union
Aaron Manns, 5, puts some thought into his many options Tuesday at the George Washington Carver Elementary School book fair. Thanks to vouchers made possible by donors, students there can take home books of their own.

I can vividly remember some of the first books that I called my own. Not library books. And not books that an adult had picked out for me to read.

Books that I chose to read. Books that I got to keep. Books that, in some cases, I still have on a shelf at home.

This is why instead of going to the Champions for Education Conference in Ponte Vedra Beach on Tuesday, I instead headed to George Washington Carver Elementary School in Northwest Jacksonville.

Don't get me wrong. What happened at The Players Championship Clubhouse — local philanthropists and leaders making plans for a \$50 million education initiative — is more than newsworthy. It deserves to be celebrated as something that will impact the future of our public schools and our city. But what was happening at George Washington Carver not only was having an instant impact, it sounded like a lot more fun.

It was a celebration for a school that has made great strides in recent years, going from a D grade to B to hopes of even higher when the next grades come out. There was a carnival, complete with bounce houses, face-painting and dunk tanks. Not that any of this compared with what was happening in the media center.

Students were entering a room with tables and shelves full of new books.

As Vanessa Tussey, a former teacher, gave me a tour of the activities happening outside, a girl waiting in line at a giant slide came up and gave her a hug.

"Miss Tussey," she said excitedly. "Can I help you at the Book Fair? Please, please, please!"

Tussey smiled and said this was an example of what she had just been talking about.

At many elementary schools, the Scholastic Book Fair is a staple of the school year. Once a year for a few days, thousands of new books magically appear in the media center. (OK, "magically" with a tremendous amount of work from staff and volunteers.) And after the kids

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negotiate with parents how much they're allowed to spend, the children have a blast picking up, and picking out, some new books.

Until last year, George Washington Carver never had a book fair.

Beyond that, many of the students didn't have books in their homes.

"Most of our children live in poverty," Tussey said. "A lot of parents don't have cars and can't drive to Barnes & Noble. And when you have to make hard decisions that involve paying the rent and buying food, books are pretty far down on the list. ... So we wanted to make sure these kids had access to a real book fair. They deserve it."

We talk about food deserts. George Washington Carver was in a book desert. Thanks not only to the faculty and staff at the school, but the time and monetary commitment of the Junior League and others, that is changing. The school now not only has popular chapter books in every classroom but, perhaps as significantly, its students are taking books home. And calling them their own.

Last year sponsors raised more than \$10,000. And although that is several decimal points away from the figures involved in the Education Conference, it made it possible for every child in school to have a \$12 voucher for the first book fair.

This year, each student had a \$15 voucher.

Tussey, 25, doesn't even live in Florida anymore. She moved to Ohio when her husband got a job there. But she said she had to come back for this, to see the kids streaming into the media center again, excitedly mixing reading with some math.

"If I get these two books, can I get this one?" one of the students asked her.

She had the student to flip over the books, find the prices and do the math. It added up to a little more than \$15. So a decision had to be made.

"I really want this one," the girl said.

This is an important part of the day's equation. These aren't textbooks. These are mysteries and adventures. They are novels and non-fiction. They are everything from Captain Underpants to the book that fifth-grader Jaesean Holmes had his eye on.

"I want that book 'Life of Pi,'" he said, adding that he and his classmates gobbled up "The Hunger Games" and other books this year. "I like the way you're sitting down and when you read a book you get to go to where they are."

Principal Timothy Warren says this is the beauty of the book fair and the result of the broader everyday reading initiative. Instead of seeing students shy away from a challenging book, he sees them run toward it.

"They'll find a way to read it because they're interested in it," he said. "And you can't beat that with a stick. ... If a child loves to read, you've got it in the bag."

As festive as the atmosphere was Tuesday, the teachers and principal say you should see what happens Wednesday.

The goal of the initiative is to put books in students' hands for the summer. But often the kids can't wait until summer to start reading.

"Kids will be walking through the hall like this," fifth-grade teacher Tomia Hodge said, as if holding open a book and reading while walking.

She has been teaching at George Washington Carver nine years. She joined the kids Tuesday and got her face painted. But while she was standing outside on a day warm enough that sweat was starting to make the paint run, when she started to talk about the book fair, she held up her right arm and pointed to it.

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“It gives me chill bumps when I think about it,” she said. “I’ll have students say, ‘Miss Hodge, my momma says she doesn’t have the money for a book.’ And I say, ‘It’s OK. You’re going to get a book. You’re going to get two or three books.’”

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Wednesday, May 1, 2013 @ 7:39 am

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