

Teachers encourage a love of reading



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ELLENDALE — Marking February as I Love to Read Month at New Richland-Hartland-Ellendale-Geneva Elementary School in Ellendale is nothing new to its students and staff. What's new this year is the Brain Food Book Drive, in which students will donate new or used books to be distributed to local food shelves.

"February is a big, important month with I Love to Read Month," said Doug Anderson, NRHEG Elementary principal. "This is kind of a new twist this year with the book drive."

The idea for the drive came after a meeting of preschool and kindergarten teachers, and they were talking about literacy and getting books in the hands of all children, said NRHEG kindergarten teacher Shelly Mangskau.

Books will be collected in the NRHEG Elementary School office Feb. 4 through March 1 and given throughout the year to children ages birth to 12 who use the food shelves in New Richland and Ellendale. Some of the books will be added to the packs of students who participate in the backpack program, where they take home backpacks for the weekend that are full of food.

"Trying to promote that early literacy, feed tummies and minds," Mangskau said.

They're looking for student and community donations of books for babies, toddlers, picture books and chapter books to cover the age range. The books will help out families who can't make it to surrounding communities that have public libraries. For some, the elementary school library in Ellendale is their only option.

"We just have such a generous community," Anderson said. "Our communities have just been so very supportive when it comes to our kids and families.

"The sooner we can get those books in the hands of those kids ... the better off our students will be."

Teachers will talk to their students about the book drive and what it will mean to donate a book or two. It's about helping others through their school pride, Mangskau said.

"The value and the impact that they will be providing for other kids will be explained," said family services coordinator Barbara Handahl.

It also teaches citizenship and community to the kids, she said, which is "a great head start on supporting community and giving."

The school caps off I Love to Read Month with a breakfast from 7 to 8 a.m. March 1. They served more than 600 breakfasts last year. Tickets can be purchased in the school office or during the week of conferences Feb. 14.

So why spend an entire month focusing on reading with students?

"It's an important skill because you use it every day," said librarian Joanne Phillips. "Every day, wherever you go. It's just so basic to everything that we do.

"You continue to enhance it, try to get kids excited about it, make them understand how important it is."

Students aren't just using paper books anymore either. Technology has played a role in the excitement kids have when they read. New this year at the school is a website program where kids can read. The program was made possible through a three-year grant the school received last spring from the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation.

It's a program that's made some of the school's students better readers even sooner than before, Phillips said.

Even with all the technology, holding a bound book in your hands is something for which there is no substitute.

"It's still so important to have that book. ... I hope that never goes away," Anderson said.

What else is going on?

Other than the book drive, the school has activities planned for I Love to Read Month. Some are:

- Scheduled reading times throughout the day called D.E.A.R. time (drop everything and read).
- Independent reading goals and rewards for the number of books or pages read.
- Community members will read with students.
- Older elementary (third grade through fifth grade) and younger elementary (kindergarten through second grade) students will read together. It's something the students have really enjoyed, teacher Shelly Mangskau said. The teachers talk about how to practice reading with the kids, said librarian Joanne Phillips.

"That's a reciprocal learning experience," family services coordinator Barbara Handahl said. "Really beneficial for both."

- Making Read Across America posters and placemats for Read Across America Day.
- Students can read with flashlights.
- Kids will read books with their hats on.
- Creating a book cover or jacket for a student's favorite book.
- Creating Dr. Seuss-themed art.
- A high school theater group will perform skits based on Dr. Seuss books.
- Gary Nordlie, a former NRHEG teacher and author, will be invited to share his book, "The Boy Who Talked to Loons," with third-grade students.

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