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ATPE News

ONCE UPON A TIME

HELPING STUDENTS BECOME PUBLISHED AUTHORS

ATPE

ONCE UPON A TIME

HOW AN IGUANA NAMED IGGY CHANGED LITERACY IN HOUSTON

BY ELAINE ACKER

As an eight-year-old, writer Melissa Williams was fascinated by iguanas. Her pet iguana, named Iggy, became her creative inspiration as she wrote a series of children's books, and has become one of Houston's strongest voices for literacy. Through iWRITE, her literacy nonprofit, she has now partnered with the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation to publish and celebrate students' short stories, poems, and illustrations, and to create resources for teachers in the classroom.

Photo by John Klipper

STUDENTS BECOME PUBLISHED AUTHORS

Demacio Johnson was just 13 years old when children's book author Melissa Williams first visited his classroom and encouraged students to take their dreams seriously. "I could see the gleam in his eye," said Williams. "He was determined to become a published author."

Behind that gleam, however, were more challenges than any one child deserves. Growing up, Demacio spent time in a foster facility where an educator told the children, "Eighty-five percent of you will end up in jail or on the street." Demacio said, "Not me. I'm not going to live in poverty. I'm going to make a difference with my life." His commitment paid off. He entered and won (in blind judging by educators and librarians) the iWRITE publishing contest, his artwork appeared on the anthology cover, and he has been helping illustrate a book written for orphaned children in Mexico. He has also appeared with Williams on news programs highlighting that literacy isn't just about reading and writing. It's about quality of life.

> **"LITERACY ISN'T JUST ABOUT READING AND WRITING. IT'S ABOUT QUALITY OF LIFE."**

Williams has now visited more than 200 schools and spoken to more than 100,000 students. Her experience as a writer and counselor created a solid foundation for the iWRITE Literacy Organization, but it was an iguana named Iggy that fueled her imagination. "I loved reptiles as a kid, especially my very own Iggy, and I loved writing," Williams tells the students. "I was also obsessed with Disney characters, so I turned Iggy into a character and other critters became his sidekicks." The result was the *Iggy the Iguana* series. When kids started asking if they could become published authors, too, Williams had an "ah ha" moment and launched the annual publishing contest.

"At iWRITE, we invite students in the third through twelfth grades from all over the US to submit short stories, poetry, and artwork to our annual publishing contest called I Write: Short Stories by Kids for Kids," says Williams. "Each year we select 65 winners to be published in our anthology and attend our big annual book signing celebration in Houston." Students can submit their entries from Jan. 1 through May 31 and have the opportunity to see their work professionally published and available at Houston bookstores and online retailers. Last year, there were 300 entries.

The Groomed for Literacy initiative kicked off in September 2016 at Houston barber shops.

FOCUSING ON PRESCHOOL READINESS

While Williams focuses on school-aged children, Dr. Julie Baker Finck, president of the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, has turned her attention to preschool-aged children. "We have far too many children entering kindergarten who are lacking reading readiness skills," says Finck. The foundation points to data from the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers' Graduate School of Education. "The State of Preschool," examines benchmarks in education for each state, and Texas has been found lacking. "We don't have a high-quality childhood education system in Texas. When you look at the indicators for a quality education, Texas meets only two."

Finck views literacy as an essential investment in Texas's future. "In Houston, one in five adults is functionally illiterate," she says. "These adults oftentimes struggle to serve as a child's first teacher, and the cycle of illiteracy continues, putting constraints on our education system. If Ms. Smith has 22 kids at different levels of readiness, it puts a constraint on that classroom. But

Photos and graphics courtesy of Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation

Dr. Julie Baker Fink (right) plans to help volunteers place more than 60 Little Free Libraries at barber shops across Houston.

if we invested in quality early childhood education and parent involvement early on, it would mitigate the issues we see when kids enter school." According to Finck, economically disadvantaged children are especially at risk for losing quality early learning development time. These children are behind before they ever walk through the school's doors.

"We'll reap the investment in the long run," says Finck. The foundation published a study titled "Houston's Literacy Crisis: A Blueprint for Community Action." The study provides an in-depth look at how the cycle of illiteracy impacts communities. What is clear is that dollars invested in early childhood education would mean that Texas taxpayers would spend less money addressing the consequences of low literacy rates, including poverty, crime, and the prison system.

In September, the foundation partnered with the Houston Public Library in a project called Groomed for Literacy. "We need to meet parents where they are," said Finck. "The families and children who need the library's services the most often don't have the time or means to get there. But they do go to the grocery store, or see their pastor or barber each week. We talked to barbers who wanted to be mentors and promote reading, and then we funded Little Free Libraries in the barber shop. Children can take a book home to read and bring one back." More than 60 Little Free Libraries will be made available across Houston, and volunteers from the Friends of the Houston Public Library are working to keep them stocked.

LITERACY ON CAMPUS

In a similar effort, Houston ISD invested 8.5 million dollars in classroom-level libraries. Teachers are often better at understanding the child's reading level and choosing appropriate books. Teachers can also work closely with parents to help

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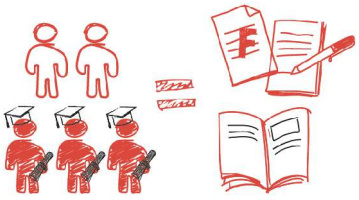
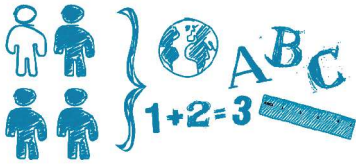
3 IN 5

HOUSTON CHILDREN LACK READING READINESS SKILLS WHEN ENTERING KINDERGARTEN.



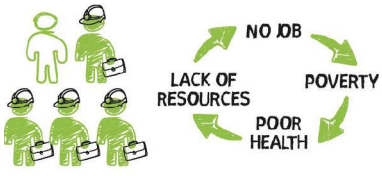
2 IN 5

HOUSTON YOUTH FAIL READING AND WRITING EXAMS REQUIRED FOR GRADUATION ON FIRST ADMINISTRATION.



1 IN 4

HOUSTON CHILDREN DO NOT MEET MINIMUM STANDARDS AT GRADE 3.



1 IN 5

HOUSTON ADULTS ARE FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE.

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that you have to do is modify the student's classwork until they get back to normal. Athletes need time to recover mentally as well as physically.

What are some policies that you've helped implement to improve sports medicine?

ImPACT® (Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing) is a computerized exam that athletes take prior to the season to establish a baseline. Then, if an athlete suffers a concussion, they retake the exam to help determine the extent of the injury and the information can be shared with the team doctor and concussion management team. A decision can be made as to when return to play is appropriate and when to start the concussion management protocol.

Another thing I'm really proud of is the implementation of a program called "Who We Play For" that deals with sudden cardiac events in young athletes. We do electrocardiogram (ECG) tests on all of our high school athletes. Our athletic trainers perform the ECG screenings and send them off to be read by a cardiologist electronically. If a student has any glitches in their reading, we don't let them participate until they are cleared. Several students have been disqualified from athletics because they had a problem. Their parents didn't even know and they got treatment so they could participate safely. At one time, we were the only school district that was paying to get these ECGs read.

I'm also proud of our partnership with an infection control company here in Lubbock called GermBlast. GermBlast provides a comprehensive, state-of-the-art sanitation system to combat the growing danger of quick-spreading infectious disease. GermBlast disinfects all of our athletic facilities. We've even had them disinfect every elementary classroom and do treatments on all of the buses we travel on. Out here in West Texas, sometimes we have to travel five or six hours and the students are confined to that bus. But sickness is down and the service pays for itself because of the money we get from the state for attendance.

What's the community's reaction been to the district's proactive work?

We are very fortunate to have a supportive school board and administration that allows us to have a positive impact on our student athletes. Health and safety is our number one priority, and kids and parents are very appreciative that we have licensed athletic trainers to provide quality comprehensive care.

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important to know that a resolution of a criminal complaint that includes probation, community service, counseling, or anything beyond an outright dismissal of the charge may result in a required sanction. The minimum sanction for a misdemeanor-level prosecution is an inscribed reprimand on the educator's certificate. The minimum sanction for a felony-level prosecution is a suspension for the period of any probation or community service. Because of this new rule, all educators should get advice about how their agreement to resolve a prosecution might affect their certification.

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put in place for the benefit of students. At the very least, the DOI law should require enhanced state oversight for districts that take such actions as hiring uncertified teachers not regulated by the State Board for Educator Certification, exceeding statutory limits for elementary class sizes without parental notice, and employing teachers without annual contracts.

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them understand the importance of reading with their children every day. "Teachers can really help parents understand how to pick out a book," says Finck. "Whether they're going to a library or a bookstore, sometimes parents just don't know how to choose. The kids may run over and grab a book with an interesting character on the cover, but it may not be the right book for their level."

Finck also notes that teachers can help create a culture of reading by building in 10 to 15 minutes of independent reading time during the school day (the time can also be spent reading with another child), and by making books visible in the school by decorating the walls with book covers.

Another resource for teachers, just launched by iWRITE, is an interactive journal for elementary students. Activities in the journal encourage kids to write for fun and help offset the negative attitudes about writing that are often created by standardized testing. A mascot, "i" The Guy, speaks to students via comic book bubbles and offers writing prompts using silly sayings, personality charts, and character development exercises.

Students Helping Students

When Williams first told her Iggy stories, visited classrooms as a guest author, and met students like Demacio, she quickly realized how critical writing and publishing could be to building confidence and self-esteem, and to opening the doors to future opportunities for students. In addition to becoming published authors, students whose work appears in the anthologies soon become public speakers, role models, and leaders. Like Williams, they visit classrooms in Title I schools and help inspire a new generation of writers.

"Melissa's approach is successful because she's doing three things," says Finck. "One: she's taking her own skills and passion around creative writing and inspiring children to have the skillsets to become writers, too. Two: she's working with teachers so that her process is passed to educators who can incorporate the lessons in their own classrooms. And three: she's celebrating the work of those children in publishing their stories. They have something to aspire to. Her passion is just infectious, and people want to be involved."