

Finding Success with School-Wide Reads

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It all began with a great book. It was summer and like all good teacher-librarians, I was going through my pile of summer reads. *Run* by Eric Walters, tells the story of Terry Fox's Marathon of Hope from the perspective of a troubled teenager who follows Terry on a portion of his run. The story made a huge impact on me as it brought to light the physical struggles Terry had to endure, as well as the skepticism and emotions that his supporters endured. Right after I finished *Run*, I remember telling myself that every student at my middle school should read this book. I knew, logistically, it was not possible to have a copy for each student; however, every teacher could have a copy and read it aloud to their students. I quickly fired off an email suggesting that *Run* would be a great school-wide read, and tie in with our annual Terry Fox fundraiser in September. Teachers were curious. Teachers were nervous. After our first attempt of having the whole school read the same novel, teachers were happy and open to the idea of doing another school-wide read (SWR) the following year. Their only request was to have a novel that did not make them cry in front of the class!

For our next SWR, my challenge was to select a novel that would appeal to students from grades 6 to 8 and would allow for teachable moments in the classroom. In June, I scoured the Writers' Festival programme and saw that Gordon Korman, author of *Schooled*, would be presenting in the fall. *Schooled* was a great choice because of its humor, its message, and its appeal to both genders. To compliment the SWR program, teams organized tai chi lessons, teachers talked about bullying, and I organized school-wide tie-dyeing sessions with the help of our PAC. Siblings from different grades were talking about the novel at the dinner table. Friends from different classes were asking each other about which part of the novel they were at. Teachers were sharing project ideas. Our choir teacher selected a song mentioned in the book for our Remembrance Day assembly. Gordon Korman books were flying off the shelves! When it was finally time to bring select students to meet Mr. Korman at the Writers' Festival, the feeling was unanimous: *Schooled* brought our school together.

To follow the enthusiasm of *Schooled*, I selected a book written by an author who was in the running for the CBC Children's Literature Award for the following years SWR. *Jolted*, by Arthur Slade, brought our school together in that we had a school goal of winning the CBC/TD sponsored contest to have Arthur Slade and the CBC visit our school and record a show. Students wrote letters, songs, performed skits, and created music videos. We submitted the most entries and instead of having one winner, we had six winning entries! Mr. Slade was most impressed by the foiled hats that greeted him in the gymnasium.

Same event, different perspective

This fall was my fifth year running a SWR, the second one at my current school. Teachers at this school have embraced SWRs in a different manner; they have chosen to celebrate it as a whole day event. For two years, we have chosen one day to shut down curriculum and have students participate in activities associated with the school-wide novel. With the success of our “unusual day” from last year (*Every Soul a Star* was our SWR last year), we planned a *Between Heaven and Earth* day. Eric Walters kick started the day with a rousing presentation. If you’ve never had him come to your school, it is well worth the cost as he inspires both students and teachers with his passion for adventure and writing. After his presentation, students “trekked” with their team around our nearby forest, participated in a selection of workshops (wilderness survival, African drumming, African art, outdoor games, obstacle course), sat through an adventure-book talk presented by the local public librarian, or listened to a speech on the ecosystem of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

It has been six years since I organized my first SWR. I have shared my experience with SWRs with other TLs in the district, and this year alone we have had seven middle schools in our district participate in a SWR. Not only are teachers asking about next year’s SWR, but so are the students. And it all began with one great book.

Tips for running a successful **SCHOOL-WIDE READS** program at your school:

- Choose a title with broad appeal that isn’t too young for your oldest grades.
- Choose a story that allows for teachable moments and incites discussion.
- Get teachers and staff involved—what special skills can they bring to the SWR that relate to the novel?
- Do it every year! Make School-Wide Reads a tradition that students can look forward to.