



SERF Grants Fund First Grade Poetry and Other Innovative Literacy Projects

by Dawn Solowey (Original Copy Submitted to Town Crier)

"I never knew I was such a good poet." Those were the words of a Sudbury first grader, following the launch of an innovative pilot program, funded by the Sudbury Educational Resource Fund ("SERF"), to enhance the poetry curriculum in first grade classrooms across the district.

Maria Papetti, the Literacy Specialist at the Josiah Haynes Elementary school, and Elizabeth Richter, her counterpart at the Peter Noyes Elementary school, applied for funding for the poetry project from SERF, a non-profit organization dedicated to funding student enrichment and curriculum enhancement projects in K-12 classrooms in the Sudbury Public Schools ("SPS") and Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School ("LSRHS").

With the SERF funds, Ms. Papetti and Ms. Richter were able to purchase a collection of poetry books for every first grade classroom in the district. The idea of applying for SERF funds for a poetry project stemmed from the Literacy Specialists' experience providing professional development for first grade teachers across the district on teaching poetry and designing a poetry unit. They found there was tremendous enthusiasm among the teachers for quality poetry for children, and applied for the SERF grant as a way to fund a collection of excellent poetry commensurate with the teachers' interest. The first grade poetry project quickly paid off big dividends. Students began asking for poetry books in their classrooms, the school libraries and literacy centers. Students had an enhanced understanding of "the different types of poetry that are possible," reports Ms. Papetti. Immersed in reading great poetry, the students were inspired to write their own, and began to select poetry when offered a choice of genres during writing workshops. Ms. Papetti says, "The poems generated were deemed so successful that they became part of almost every student's writing treasury." The first grade's enthusiasm for poetry has already inspired the second grade to begin a similar project. Moreover, Ms. Papetti reports that "teachers at the next grade level are delighted that their incoming students will bring this experience with them as a building block."

The first grade poetry project is only one of a number of invaluable literacy-related grants funded by SERF in the past year, enabling teachers to continue introducing innovative projects, even as difficult economic times are forcing deep budget cuts at SPS and LSRHS.

In part due to those budget cuts, school administrators are turning to SERF to fund new literacy projects. In response to a grant request from all four elementary principals in SPS, SERF funded the purchase of a literacy learning text called "Implementing the



Continuum of Literacy Learning" for all K-5 classroom teachers, elementary administrators and special educators. This resource now serves as the district guide for English Language Arts ("ELA") curriculum planning and clarifies learning expectations for each reading level, targeting student needs in the areas of reading, writing and word study. Janice Binus, now an ELA teacher at Curtis Middle School, and formerly the SPS ELA Curriculum Specialist, explains that this text allowed teachers to "improve their practice in assessing children's literacy development, evaluating student progress and reporting grades, discussing expectations with parents, and identifying specific needs for targeted intervention." Ms. Binus reports that as a result, "Students will experience enhanced instruction, resulting in greater success for students at all levels of skill development."

SERF also provided substantial funds for an innovative phonics and spelling program called Wilson "Foundations" at the Israel Loring Elementary School. The funds purchased durable sets of magnetic letter tiles, and magnetic "building boards," which flip open like laptop computers, for all Loring students in kindergarten through third grade. In kindergarten, for example, students use the tiles to practice identifying letters and their initial sounds, placing letters in alphabetical order, and spelling sight words. In the older grades, students use the boards to practice more complex skills, like spelling multisyllabic words. Teacher Katherine Brown emphasizes that the sets provide "all students K-3 with a systematic phonics approach which is an essential component in a comprehensive language-arts program," with the outcome being "proficient readers and writers." The students agree; one third grader reported that the board "helps me visualize the words I'm trying to spell. It's easier to see my mistakes and fix them."

SERF grants have also helped students who may be struggling with literacy skills. For example, a SERF grant funded attendance by the four elementary school literacy specialists, the curriculum specialist, and the early childhood director, at a workshop entitled "Response to Intervention," on how to effectively intervene with students before they fall too far behind in reading. After the workshop, the attendees met with numerous elementary administrators and educators to develop a plan to implement a "Response to Intervention" plan across the district. Kathy Zito, the Literacy Specialist at Nixon, and one of the applicants for the grant, explains that as a result, SPS has "redesigned its literacy assessment process," and classroom teachers will be able to "modify their instruction to better meet the needs of their students."

Students at Curtis Middle School have benefited from SERF literacy grants as well. At Curtis, Ms. Binus and the sixth grade teachers were granted SERF funds to purchase for the sixth graders copies of three novels that portray a young adult living in China, South Africa, and Afghanistan, parts of the world studied in the sixth grade social studies curriculum. "Teachers used a multi-disciplinary unit approach while using these



books," reports Ms. Binus, and students "completed essays, short research projects and maps to assess their knowledge of the geographic regions documented in each book." "When presenting their learning to other students and teachers, for example, they were able to take on the personalities of the literary characters and demonstrate their knowledge of cultures very different from their own," Ms. Binus explains. This approach has expanded student understanding of the diverse cultures that exist within the Sudbury community as well as in the larger world.

To donate to SERF, and help fund similar innovative literacy projects in our schools, please visit www.serfsudbury.org.