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The National School Boards Association lauds an annual book giveaway that encourages first-grade students to read

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SPRINGFIELD — The Springfield School District’s “Gift of Literacy,” an annual program that places books in the schools and hands of every first-grader and culminates in a celebration of reading at Lane Community College, has earned a top national award at the National School Boards Association conference in San Diego.

The Magna Awards honor districts and their school boards for innovative, effective programs that advance student learning. The recognition program is co-sponsored by NSBA, the American School Board Journal and Sodexo School Services.

Springfield won the top prize in the midsize division, for districts with between 5,000 and 20,000 students. Its application, submitted in October, was one of 123 in that division.

“We have six judges on the panel, and they were all impressed with the relationship of the board in trying to involve the community in the students’ education, which is really so vital,” said judging panel chairman Harold Fisher, director of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement for Mississippi.

In its fourth year, the Gift of Literacy is a model of community collaboration. Key partners include the Springfield and Twin Rivers Rotary clubs and TEAM Springfield, made up of leaders from the district, city of Springfield, Willamalane Park & Recreation District and Springfield Utility Board. Last year, the program drew nearly 125 volunteers and more than \$35,000 in donations — enough to cover virtually all expenses, said Jeff DeFranco, the district’s director of communications.

The program spans several months, beginning with the distribution of 10 hardcover children’s books — each reviewed by a selection committee — to every elementary library, as well as other community programs. Teachers read the stories aloud, and students get to choose which one they’ll eventually get to keep.

“They have been checking them out like crazy,” said Katie Stiles, a Thurston Elementary

first-grade teacher and selection committee member. “They actually argue over them.”

Then comes Springfield Education Day, this year set for May 28. The district buses all 1,000 or so first-graders to LCC, where they’re treated to small-group circle time with dozens of “celebrity” readers, such as Springfield Mayor Sid Leiken, U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio and even some of the books’ authors. Each child leaves with the book of their choice and a reusable bag full of goodies such as pencils and Willamalane swim passes.

Stiles said her students are so excited they’re repeatedly asking her “when they get to ‘go to college.’ ”

“I think it’s easy to feel like, this is what we do in our town and our little district, and to find out people are actually recognizing it nationally, it’s a big honor,” she said.

The award — and the \$4,000 cash prize — couldn’t have come at a better time, DeFranco said. With the sputtering economy, it’s been tougher this year soliciting donations, he said, and the district is in no position to cover any expenses. All the prize money will be funneled into the program, improving the odds of it continuing next year, he said.

“We believe we’re on target, but it’s going to be a challenge for us,” he said.

The district is so strapped for cash, in fact, that the school board slashed its travel budget, which meant no board members were able to attend last week’s conference in San Diego. Eugene School Board member Beth Gerot accepted the award on Springfield’s behalf.

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