

# Springfield Gift of Literacy program wins national award

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Later this month, excited Springfield first graders get to spend a day at Lane Community College.

No, this isn't for very early college enrollment. Instead, the young students on May 28 get books and gifts as part of the 2009 Gift of Literacy program.

Springfield Public Schools recently won grand prize in the American School Board Journal's Magna Awards program. The award comes with \$4,000 for the Gift of Literacy program, which was started in 2006.

Earlier this school year, first-graders were read 10 books and selected the ones they would like to receive.

"It's exciting to go to the college," said Tami Brown, a first-grade teacher at Mt. Vernon Elementary and Gift of Literacy committee member. "They're excited about that and about seeing the book characters there. They put on a great show for the kids.

"It was quite a while ago that the teachers read the stories, so when the kids get the book bags they are very excited to open the book, that hard back book," Brown added. "Then they find other items like rulers and pencils. They can't believe they get to keep the books and everything in the bag."

Katie Stiles, a first-grade teacher at Thurston Elementary, noted students chose books in February.

"They still talk about it," Stiles said with a laugh. "They don't know what to expect. They ask, 'When are we getting our books?' I have to say it's not for a few more weeks. They aren't quite sure what to expect, but they don't forget, either."

Stiles confirmed Brown's recollection of the reaction from students when receiving the book bags.

"They can't believe somebody is actually giving them the book," Stiles said. "They get very excited. They go, 'This is the book I picked out! I get to keep this!'"

Brittany Kronholm, Gift of Literacy program assistant, said all first-graders in the district, nearly 900 students in total, get served with the program.

"We now offer 10 books,"

Kronholm said. "It was eight books the first year. We now offer bilingual books. Students' needs have evolved, and the program has as well. Our sponsor base has expanded, and we usually have about 125 volunteers. I think the popularity is because this program really illustrates the community's commitment to improving literacy. It's a great way for the community to get involved."

Since 2006, more than 4,000 books have been distributed to students, libraries and community organizations. Each elementary school library in town gets a copy of the 10 books.

Stiles is on the Gift of Literacy committee for a second year, and liked the idea of the program from the start.

"I was really excited that students would have their own hard-cover quality books to take home, and that they also get to see a college," Stiles said.

Kronholm noted the program has been completely funded by community support this year, as the school district no longer covered any costs.

"We need approximately \$30,000 a year," Kronholm said. "We have been able to reach that. The award has definitely helped, and we have a great sponsor base. It's been a little more challenging this year to raise the funds we need. Sponsors help with things like mentor support and book bags. The \$4,000 makes a huge difference."

Kronholm believes the award is a tribute to the program's many supporters.

"The fact we have received national recognition in our fourth year highlights the support of the community for literacy," she said. "The program gets great support from the school board, parents, teachers and volunteers. It really is a great treat for the program to get award, and serves as a great thank you to those who have supported the program from the beginning."

Brown was thrilled to hear of the program's award.

"I'm glad to be part of the program," she said. "It's exciting for little Springfield, Oregon to get the recognition. We know we do great things in our schools, and it's nice to see that recognition."