



Class Hands

School Beat: Bringing Books to Students in SF

by Elise Proulx, Apr. 21, 2011

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This winter, Litquake, San Francisco's Literary Festival launched a new program with only one \$1,000 grant offered through the organization's bank. Kidquake in the Schools was a natural extension for the city's 12-year-old literary festival. As

the death of reading is ever more lamented by the media, it seemed a no brainer for a festival founded by a group of writers to look for new ways to introduce a new generation of readers to the written word.

Litquake itself brings a diverse and eclectic range of authors before audiences of all ages each fall for nine days of readings, performances, panel discussions, and more. Its mission is to foster an interest in literature, perpetuate a sense of literary community, and host a vibrant forum for Bay Area writing. Last year, its audience reached 13,303.

Included in this total were 823 schoolchildren in Kindergarten through eighth grade – from public and private school – at three days of Kidquake programming at the San Francisco Public Library. Part of the fall festival since 2004, the Kidquake program had exposed over 3,000 schoolchildren in San Francisco to free, age-appropriate reading material and in-person presentations by children's book authors. Teachers found that the programming was highly motivating to their students. A teacher at San Francisco's Paul Revere elementary school wrote in a 2010 evaluation, "Meeting authors and getting to read their books = Magic!" But the festival was only to accommodate a fraction of the classes that requested to participate. Hence, Kidquake in the Schools was launched in February 2011, in coordination with the San Francisco Unified School District.

"Kidquake in the schools is a natural evolution for us," says Litquake Executive Director Jack Boulware. "With this extension program taking authors directly to schools, we can continue to excite young minds with the experience of reading, and the importance of our written language."

Similar in concept to Litquake's original Kidquake programming, Kidquake in the Schools seeks to introduce students K-5 to the writing experience, fostering greater interest in reading and enhanced learning in all subjects – all through in-school assemblies, classroom visits, and giveaways of books by participating authors and illustrators. The program plans to reach at least 2,500 students K-5 at 20 San Francisco elementary schools this year.

What Litquake's organizers most fervently desire is both the development of reading skills for these students but also, and most importantly to a bunch of writers and literature lovers, a life-long passion for reading. And multiple studies have shown that a love of reading leads to improvement in scholarly pursuits across the board – a win for everyone.

"Kidquake is a shot in the arm for our literacy efforts in schools. Our students are asked to write in every content area...even math. So when they meet a person who writes for a living, who created a book from their hard work and imagination, it gives them ideas about who they could become and opens up their eyes to possibilities," says Rachelle Resnick, Program Administrator, SFUSD Library Services. "We want students to love to read, write and create. Meeting an author and receiving their books is so motivating on an individual level."

And motivating students to read – and enjoy reading! – is a challenge that needs to be met. Illiteracy is a large problem in the U.S. Among African-American and Hispanic/Latino students (two groups who experience disproportionate rates of poverty in the U.S.), the percentages of Grade 4 students reading below the basic level are 64% and 60%, respectively ([National Center for Educational Statistics](#)). Correspondingly, 12% of schoolchildren in San Francisco are African-American, 23% are Hispanic/Latino, and 54% receive reduced or free school lunches (SFUSD “[Walking the Talk: Progress Report 2010](#)”). Low reading skills leads to problems with overall learning: An exhaustive report commissioned by the nonprofit group Reading is Fundamental, “[Children's Access to Print Material and Education-Related Outcomes](#),” recently showed that access to printed materials improves children's reading performance, causes children to read more and for longer periods of time, and produces improved attitudes toward reading and learning in general. And yet, 61% of low-income families in the U.S. have no age-appropriate reading material in their homes (“[America's Early Childhood Literacy Gap](#)”).

Thus far, Kidquake in the Schools has organized author and/or illustrator visits at 4 schools and has served just under 800 students, with each student going home with his or her own book, written by the author or illustrated by the artist they have just met and interacted with in person.

An early author participant was American Book Award winner Francisco X. Alarcon, who sees the program as filling a void from his own childhood.

“It is important for children to see authors and artists in action so that they can see themselves not just as consumers of literature and art but as creators of both,” Alarcon says. “When I was a child I never had an author or an artist visit any of my classes. I wish I had had a visit by an author with whom I could have related and shared my experiences. I believe our visit to schools empower the children to see themselves as authors and artists.”

The program is still a work in progress. We've been able to capitalize on six years of experience connecting authors with children, but we've also learned some new lessons. Assemblies late in the day have proved difficult for energetic kids (a “no duh” realization for any experienced teacher); classroom visits work better than assemblies for the youngest kids; not all authors have the same ability to appeal to a group of children as diverse as those in San Francisco's public schools. But we're certainly meeting excited teachers who share our vision and kids excited to get their very own books by authors they've met in person.

After all, as a teacher at San Francisco's Sunset Elementary School said on an evaluation form, “Meeting authors sends an important message: We all can be authors & illustrators.”

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