

Alumna Brings Diverse Books to Remote Schools

Angelina Buck was in first grade when her teacher at Mattawa Elementary School was reading a book about Native Americans just before Thanksgiving.

Angelina raised her hand. The story wasn't right, she said. It wasn't what she had learned while growing up with the Wanapum Tribe.

"She said that what she was hearing in the story was conflicting with what she had learned about first-hand, being Native American and growing up in a Native American culture," said Alyssa Buck, Angelina's mother.

Angelina's teacher invited her to visit the library to find a better book. When Angelina and the librarian couldn't find a book with accurate information about the Native Americans of the Northwest, Angelina selected a book about pumpkins instead.

"In her mind, it was better to share about pumpkins than to share mistruths about Native Americans," Alyssa Buck said. "She didn't want her classmates misinformed."

That moment was part of the inspiration for an effort to get a more diverse set of books for the Wahluke School District, in rural central Washington.

Tiffany Coulson, a 2016 graduate of the iSchool's Master of Library and Information Science program, led an effort to get books that more accurately represented the community. With Coulson's help, the district received the Laura Bush Grant, which helps libraries get books that encourage kids to read. Coulson — who is the associate director of programming for Northwest Learning and Achievement, an afterschool nonprofit that supports



learners in rural areas — worked on the grant project on her own time as a volunteer.

Coulson's interest in the project was piqued while she was taking a Multicultural Literature for Youth course at the iSchool. For the class, students were asked to look in their community for a way to apply what they were learning. "That got me looking at gaps in the elementary library, especially in diverse literature for students," Coulson said.

She learned that while a majority of students at Wahluke are Hispanic, less than 3 percent of the books in the library had diverse characters.

Coulson volunteered to help the library staff at Mattawa Elementary and helped write the grant, which earned the district \$6,800 for new books.

Then it was time to find new books. Coulson used the skills she developed at the iSchool to identify books that featured diverse characters, by diverse authors and illustrators, and that would encourage kids to read.

"My iSchool experience helped me find the information needed to bring these books to the school," she said. "It really makes me happy to have cultivated a knowledge that is valuable to my community and that wasn't accessible to them before."

Even with those skills, finding books was a bigger job than she'd expected. She needed culturally relevant books, both fiction and non-fiction. Coulson found that most suppliers don't carry many books that fit her community's needs. Often when she identified a book that interested her, she'd find that it was out of print or only available in paperback, and unsuitable for a library.

Getting books to kids

Eventually, however, all of the books were selected and purchased. But the work wasn't done. The books needed to be coded and processed — another big job. Coulson didn't want to overwhelm the staff. But she also didn't want to wait. She felt it was imperative to get the books into the hands of students and their parents quickly.

Coulson asked the local Parent Teacher Organization if it could help prepare the books.

“Our PTO is very well organized and very community based. They grabbed the idea,” Coulson said.

The PTO organized a family night. While the kids watched a movie, the parents began processing books for the library. The evening had an added benefit — the parents were able to get a first look at the books.



After that, the PTO continued to connect the community to the library. It organized several family reading nights to give families a chance to explore the offerings, including graphic novels, wordless picture books and bilingual selections. The final event even had a carnival, and everyone was able to go home with a book of their own, thanks to a private donation purchased through the non-profit First Book.

Audra Leitz Eckenberg, a member of the Mattawa PTO, said the organization is looking forward to spreading the word about the books even further. She believes the exposure to a wider range of books gives children more chances to fall in love with reading.

Parents, library bond

According to Coulson, working to prepare the new books gave parents a strong connection to the library. Not long after the project, Coulson learned the district had discontinued the funding for the library position. She was disappointed to learn that, but also grateful for the community's interest in keeping the library going— particularly after hours when parents can visit as well. The partnership that Coulson helped cultivate between the school and the community, through the PTO, will help ensure that kids and parents continue to have access to the library.



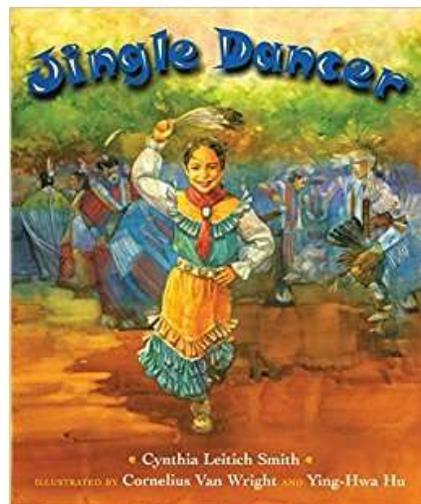
“We had to pull from non-traditional resources outside the school to implement the grant, and we hope that will actually end up perpetuating the goals of the grant,” Coulson said.

Coulson is excited for students to read books that more accurately reflect their community. In fact, students are already reading and enjoying the books, Leitz Eckenberg said.

And Angelina, who wanted books that were true to the Native American culture she knows, can now find such books.

One of the books Coulson selected is called “Jingle Dancer,” by Cynthia Leitich Smith and Ying-Hwa Hu. Angelina’s mother is a Jingle Dancer.

When Angelina saw the book, she asked the librarian, “Did you get this for me?”



Alyssa Buck is pleased that the new books feature diverse Native American cultures, including those from the Northwest. And she’s happy her daughter spoke her mind.

“I think most kids would have just sat back and let the teacher read the story, but she was engaged enough and had enough self-awareness to see that things weren’t adding up,” Buck said. “She felt comfortable enough in her teacher’s classroom to speak up and say, ‘No, that’s not really right.’ ... Her dad and I are really proud of her.”