

Biography Blitz

*Lake Park Elementary School
Lake Park, Georgia*

Students from Lake Park Elementary dressed as distinguished historical figures during a high tea hosted by the school last year. The annual Biography Blitz event drew 650 students from grades K-5 a little deeper into their reading curriculum as part of an effort to boost standardized test scores.

Members of the school's Action Team for Partnership (ATP) came up with the idea three years ago when they noticed that few students at Lake Park read non-fiction books. At the time, they were looking for ways to expand book appeal in the student body. The ATP decided that biographies, packed with so much historical drama, were an excellent way to expand readers' horizons. They challenged all students to read 1,500 biographies between September and February and each student to produce a PowerPoint presentation about their favorite book during a celebratory event just before Presidents' Day. If the students met their goal, school administrators agreed to dress as celebrities and sing hilariously out of tune at an American Idol-inspired competition.

Staff promoted the event through the school's newsletters and through its web site. Informational tidbits encouraged parents to help their students meet the 1,500 book goal by reading with them at home. In early February, administrators mailed formal invitations to parents and asked them to attend the culminating event: a White House Tea.

While school staff and the ATP readied promotional materials for the event, the school's librarian made sure that Lake Park students had enough biographies to read. To ensure diverse content, she partnered with the local library, which lent extra books over the six-month period. Between September and February students read over 9,000 books—greatly exceeding the goal and doubling the library's normal circulation of biographies.

On a blustery day in late February, parents arrived at the school to watch their

children present reports on their favorite books. Parents enjoyed finger sandwiches, biscotti, and tea served in china cups during many of the presentations. Younger students read their reports aloud to the audience, while older ones wowed the audience with flashy PowerPoint slides.

To celebrate students' thorough research and reading projects, staff at Lake Park put on an American Idol competition unlike any students had ever seen. Teachers dressed as Simon, Paula, and Randy and critiqued a few brave teachers' performances of the Lion King and Little Mermaid. The school's assistant principal brought the K-5 audience to its feet by appearing as Hannah Montana.

The PTO paid \$50 to rent a spotlight for the American Idol competition. The ATP donated refreshments and decorations for the tea. There were no other costs associated with the program.

Administrators plan to repeat the program next year. They will incorporate folktales, fairy tales, and fables into the practice to give younger readers a greater variety of reading materials.

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