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Mounds View School District creates INSIGHT for students and community

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This month, the Mounds View School District is working to provide students, staff and the community with a little insight.

INSIGHT 2010 is a project meant to encourage National I Love to Read Month and Black History Month, both of which take place in February, by having students, teachers, parents and other community members read and discuss the same book, "Beetles and Angels," by Mawi Asgedom.

According to Pat St. Peter, a teacher at Irondale High School and coordinator of the project, the district circulated 225 books at both Mounds View High School and Irondale for students and staff to voluntarily read and almost immediately all of the books had been reserved.

Later this month, those who read the book and wish to participate in discussion about its significance will come together in a book club format. The forum for the community will take place Feb. 25 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Family Service Center of New Brighton.

On March 8, the author will visit Irondale and speak about the book and his experiences. St. Peter said this will be an invaluable presentation for people who have and haven't read the book, alike. She said the insight gained from listening to Asgedom's experiences as an immigrant from East Africa will be beneficial to all.

Asgedom shares his story, about his flight from a war-torn country and stay in a refugee camp, before his eventual immigration to the United States and acceptance to Harvard University.

"Mawi reminds us through his own life story that we all have stories that define who we are and where we've come from," said Irondale Principal Scott Gengler. "Our stories are unique to each of us. As the Irondale community learns about Mawi, my hope is we all move a little closer to learning more about each other. Mawi invested in himself and his future by finding value in connectedness - to his school and to the people around him. I think we can all learn something from that!"

"The idea is to focus in on reading and gain insight through the experience of others," St. Peter said.

St. Peter submitted a grant to the 621 Foundation after reading the book. She said the idea was to have a community read and "become a virtual group of readers."

The readers span grade levels and classes, as well as including teachers and staff.

"We all read and write for a living, we learn together, so why not pull us all together with a book that has themes we all can relate to," St. Peter said.

She said it was that question that helped her develop the INSIGHT 2010 project. The themes in the book that St. Peter mentioned are ones of facing new challenges and trying to fit in, while

"trying to not give up who you are for where you are." St. Peter said the struggle Asgedom describes is remarkable.

"We're hoping our students will think it's remarkable, as well," she said, adding that she hopes they'll also gain some insight as to what it's like to be a refugee and immigrate to a new country. She added gaining insight to the journey of others is what's most important.

"To broaden their understanding," St. Peter said is the purpose, she added that it is important to not just know what a refugee is, but understand the implications of being a refugee from one's country.

The project is operating on an entirely voluntary basis, but students are responding well to the idea, St. Peter said. She noted that all 225 books were checked out immediately and that teachers hear students discussing the book in the hallways.

She added that some teachers are even incorporating the book into their curriculum.

One student, who didn't want to share her name, said, "From my perspective I thought it was a great book because anyone who has immigrated to a new country deals with hardships, so I thought it was very interesting how even though they knew it was going to be hard, they decided that they would rather live in a free world and that's what a lot of people are going through during these hard times. I would recommend that students or people around the world should read this book and get a view of how much hardships some people can go through."

"Beetles and Angels" has been selected nationally as a community read. Communities all over the country are coming together to discuss this work and glean insight as to what it means to be a refugee and an immigrant, St. Peter said.

She said while the concept of a community read is nothing new, it can still be used as a tool for students, parents, and teachers to define themselves as lifelong learners, and come together to discuss a singular issue with a specific context.

"The concept of a community read is a way to build a community and sort of bond them in a sense through a common theme or themes in a book," St. Peter said. "We read and write and learn together; this is another vehicle to do that.

She noted a community of readers has already begun to form in the schools as students across grades and classes find each other to discuss the book they have mutually read.

"It kind of took on a life of its own," St. Peter said. "I knew what I would like to happen and it is happening."

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