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Reaching Reluctant Readers

Four educators share their top tips

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jan 23, 2023

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Some say there is no such thing as a kid who doesn't like reading. They profess, "It's just that they haven't found the right book." And while this may be true for many readers, it may not be for all readers—especially for reluctant readers who show little or no interest in reading. Thankfully, there are dedicated, skilled, and persistent teachers and librarians who know how to reach readers in need. *PW* spoke with four such educators about the ways they help turn reluctant readers into readers—and, hopefully, lifelong readers. And they won't stop until they do.

Blake Hopper believes helping reluctant readers begins with creating a culture of readers. As the librarian at Tazewell-New Tazewell Elementary School in New Tazewell, Tenn., Hopper does this in a variety of ways, including keeping his library open from first bell to last, and allowing teachers and students to come in whenever they want. "Even when I have a class in the library, I want teachers and kids to utilize me—and the library—to get the things that they need."

Hopper also creates posters of teachers reading their favorite books and hangs them outside the library, and engages his readers with kid-led book talks and the 40 Book Cover Challenge. To kick off the challenge, Hopper gives his readers a recording sheet to draw the covers of the books they'll read throughout the school year. While students are encouraged to join the fun, they're not required to participate. "There's no pressure or quizzes," Hopper said, "just ice cream, prizes, and a celebration at the end of the year for the books they've read!"



To get reluctant readers reading, Hopper works with teachers to discover what is behind their lack of interest. “We try to figure out why some feel like they just can’t read, don’t want to keep up with reading books,” Hopper said, “if they have difficulty reading, or don’t want the responsibility of having a library book to keep track of or return.” Hopper sees all kinds of reluctant readers. He says that some may read in the library, but then put the books back.



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Blake Hopper.

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Once Hopper and his teachers pinpoint the problems and assist with the solutions, he helps these readers find books that they can and want to read. “If they ask me for superhero or sports books—or whatever they ask for—I’m going to order it,” Hopper said, “because if the books in the library aren’t what kids want, you’re not going to build that culture of reading or reach those kids that are reluctant to read.”

When these books arrive, Hopper pulls out all the stops. “I do *big* presentations, forward-facing displays—and videos about the books to ensure that the kids know that the books are for them.” Then, it’s time for kids to check out these books and start reading. The enthusiasm is palpable and often contagious for all of his readers.

Hopper loves “catching them reading” in the library—and throughout school—by snapping photos of kids reading, and posting the photos (with permission) on the school’s website to heighten the excitement. “Today, I caught a kid reading in the bus line,” Hopper said. “I snapped a photo and posted it. I try to share 90% of them!”

But Hopper believes 100% that everybody wins when *all* readers have access to a school librarian and a school library. He is quick to credit the support of his principal and teachers for helping to create their school’s culture of reading. Hopper said that it’s why he’s able to make connections with his readers—as well as advocate for school libraries and librarians nationwide, especially for the elementary years.

“Because if we can get to the reluctant reader—and all readers [in primary school]—we’re setting them up for greater success in middle and high school—and college,” Hopper said, “and we can show them that books can offer a place to fit in, and to feel good about themselves—and their accomplishments when they might not have that [opportunity] at home or anywhere else.”

Kelly Silwani, the school librarian at Olentangy Orange Middle

School in Lewis Center, Ohio, prefers the term “emergent readers” when talking about reluctant readers. She believes that all readers have the capacity to love to read, and that it may have more to do with their ability to read. “It becomes a question of what is preventing readers from loving to read,” Silwani said.

To answer that question, Silwani teams up with her teachers to discover if any of her emergent readers have difficulties or disabilities, diagnosed or not. Sometimes it’s the kids themselves who will tell her that they don’t like to read. That’s when Silwani speaks privately with them, and asks them what is the last thing they have read. “It could be anything: a book, a children’s magazine, or a cereal box!” she said.

Depending on their answers, Silwani will swing into action, offering immediate recommendations or getting back to them in a timely fashion. The only thing she asks in return is that they are truthful about whether they like the books she’s recommending or not. This honesty goes both ways. “I tell them that they will be given books to read their whole lives that they’re not going to like,” Silwani said. “So I say, ‘Let me help you find the books you *do* like, to help you build the capacity to read the books you’ll be required to read.’”

Silwani will often suggest graphic novels to emergent readers—and others. She’s also keen on teaching them the best ways to navigate them. “You’d be surprised how many kids don’t know how to read them.”

In her graphic novel reading lessons, Silwani demonstrates how to move from panel to panel, top to bottom, and to use the gutters. She explains how the gutters are placed where readers will often need to fill in information (e.g. time lapses, flashbacks, etc.).

From graphic novels, Silwani may move on to series like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* or *Dork Diaries* and novels-in-verse for her emergent readers. “I need to go where my students are interested,” Silwani said. “It’s all about what they want to read whether it is above, at, or below grade level. I tell them that all readers do this.”

As a result, Silwani hopes that her efforts encourage life-long reading and fill social emotional needs. “Reading is at the heart of every subject area in school—and mastering it can give you a jump ahead in life,” Silwani said. “Books can also offer a safe place where readers can get lost—and escape what’s going on in their life. I’d like to give my students that place through the books they read!”

Dawn Ferencz’s judgment-free library is just the place for her reluctant readers—and all readers, for that matter. A former English teacher turned librarian in the hopes of working with all students at Elk Grove High School in Elk Grove Village, Ill., Ferencz has successfully created a library where there is no judging. “Here, no one is going to judge you for what you are reading or not reading in high school—or if you return a book late. In high school, kids are always being judged, and graded—another form of judging—so our library can be that place where there’s no judging,” Ferencz said. “We’re just happy they’re here.”

That also includes Ferencz’s library’s emotionally and physically comfortable space, and her library assistant, Toni Pytel (who is an expert on crafts, biographies and memoirs) to welcome readers, make them feel safe, and promote ownership. She said that this involves putting up student artwork from paintings to colorings, and offering a wide-range of books at all kinds of reading levels, and for all kinds of readers—ELL, ELA, etc. “I truly think these things jump-start readers!” Ferencz said. She is mindful of having books above and below reading levels so her kids can read old favorites from middle school or shiny, new future favorites, and books that match their moods. “It’s like when you don’t feel well and you want to watch a TV program that you’ve always liked. It’s for comfort,” Ferencz said. “So why can’t we offer that comfort here, too?”

To figure out which titles may comfort or turn her reluctant readers into future lifelong readers, Ferencz poses a variety of questions. She might also suggest changing up formats and genres, including graphic novels or novels in verse. “I want to know if they are looking for text that is less intimidating or in a different language,” Ferencz said. “Sometimes it’s an interest they have, or even a television show can be an entry point.”

While pondering all of the literary possibilities, Ferencz may reach out to her wide community of librarians for help, especially her fellow District 214 librarians. “There’s always a librarian who has just made a reading list that I can use. I also rely on readers’ peers—what other kids may have enjoyed,” Ferencz said. “But I promise my students that if I don’t get it right on the first try, and if they come back, we’ll give it another try. We’ll talk about what it was about the book that they didn’t like, and fine tune.”

To that end, Ferencz will often include a post-it note in a possible match with a “next-time recommendation” written on it. “With this suggestion, we might be onto something. And, if that isn’t right, I will tell them, “I’ll be here for you,” Ferencz said. “There are a lot of books in the library—and in the world. I’m here to help them figure it out. It’s a collaborative effort.”

Liz Lapidus is a fourth-grade general education teacher who co-teaches with Galiah Morgenstern, a special education teacher at P.S. 174 in Queens, N.Y. Currently on sabbatical, Lapidus is taking classes on social emotional learning and writing in the content areas. When she’s back in the classroom she’ll be working again to make reading more fun and enjoyable for all of her readers. She believes it’s a necessity for every educator. “The more interesting and fun reading is for them—we can truly engage them!” Lapidus said.

While some educators may blame technology for distracting their students, Lapidus leans in and uses it to enhance the reading experience. Her tools of choice include audiobooks and Novel Effect (an application that adds sound effects to books). “Pairing technology with reading is helpful, especially for reluctant readers,” Lapidus said, “because they can see *and* hear the book they are reading.”

She also goes low-tech, high interest with the tried-and-true read aloud, but with a mindful twist. While she loves to read books aloud, she also taps her students to read aloud to their classmates. “The kids love hearing their peers read aloud,” Lapidus said.

After readaloud time is over, Lapidus follows up with reading and writing lessons, classroom discussions, and culminating activities such as assigning literary responses, writing letters to the author or the books’ characters, or creating thematic book posters. She marvels at the magic of the readaloud each and every time. “Readalouds make books come to life,” Lapidus said, “and they show how exciting books—and reading—can be.” She said that this is especially true for the reluctant readers who aren’t completely “sold on reading” or aren’t yet reading at the level readaloud she chooses.

“After we finish a readaloud, I have students lining up to check out the book; before, they may not have!” Lapidus said. “But, now, by listening to it, they know the characters, the plot, and have confidence to read it.”

However, you won’t find Lapidus *telling* kids to choose any book. Her role, as she sees it, is helping them find a book they want and need to read. She does this best by getting to know her readers: learning what kind of readers they are through lessons and instruction, and discovering what they like and the topics that interest them. Encouragement helps, too. “They need to know that they can do it, and whatever they are reading is okay,” Lapidus said.

Lapidus believes these positive attitudes and feelings will impact their reading across the board, and change their reading lives. “Reading is so important because we need to read in all subject areas. The more enjoyable and engaging we can help make it for them, we can help flip the switch from *have* to read... to *want* to read.”

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