

First Day Jitters

Kindergartners Start Their School Careers

BY ANNELEISE SCHNEIDER

The children make their way through the halls of Kling Elementary, which is once again buzzing with noise — children talking, teachers calling, the echo of the first bell — at the beginning a new school year.

Last Wednesday was the first day of the 2023-2024 school year for Buena Vista

City Schools, and the first day altogether for some of its students.

For Terri Flint's kindergarten class, the first day is met with some mixed emotions.

As they filter into this classroom, they slip out of their backpacks - some sequined, at least one Mine-craft themed - put their lunches on the low counter

at the back of the room, and set out to find their assigned seats, with a little help from Mrs. Flint.

“Let's see if we can find your name — do you know what M looks like? There we go — Maverick. Looks like you're at the red table,” she says to one boy.

Maverick sits in the small red chair in front of his

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name and joins his classmates in what they will soon learn to call “maker time.” Today they are working with blocks, stacking them into towers until they become too high to support themselves and fall, scattering blocks across the table. Then they start again.

The teacher moves to greet another of her new students, who are standing nervously at the edge of the rug. “

“Are you nervous?”

He nods, seeming on the verge of tears.

“Now,” says Mrs. Flint, turning to address the class, “who was nervous about coming to school this morning?”

About half of the class raises a hand; one girl with gold threads in her hair raises both of her hands as high as they can go.

“See? We’re all a little nervous, but we’re going to have so much fun together.”

He nods again, still looking at the ground, but leans forward into her hug.

As the last of the kindergartners find their way into the classroom, some first-graders slip in too, excited to say hi to their old teacher.

For the first time, the first-graders are the oldest students at Kling this year, second grade having been moved to Enderly Heights



TERRI FLINT and one of her kindergarten students mark the calendar for the first day of school. (Anneliese Schneider photo)

Elementary to ease crowding.

This shift, according to Kling Principal Dr. Brenda Walton, has been a successful one.

“The shift of second grade students to Enderly helped tremendously with the overcrowding of students and staff at Kling,” she told the News-Gazette.

“It allows space for our reading specialist, speech language pathologist and other related support service providers to ensure our students are receiving a well-rounded educational program.”

For now, the kindergartners are still working on the basics: six legs on the floor (four for the desk and two of your own), raising your hand, and how many months are in a year (guesses range from six to 100).

This is something they will learn with the help of the calendar hanging on the whiteboard, and through a song, which they are only now beginning to learn.

For assistance, Mrs. Flint puts on a video on the screen at the front of the room, which is only part of the technology that will be assisting these students throughout the year.

As Walton explained, “Students use technology in the classroom, typically an iPad. Additionally, each student is provided a Chromebook to take home.”

While the first day was certainly an exciting one for this class, the beginning of the new school year has been enjoyable for staff as well.

“Our first week of school has been very successful. Students arrive each day and are taught procedures and routines,” said Walton. “It has been exciting to see the support from families and the community as a whole.”

Pulled Library Book Stirs Debate

BY ANNELIESE SCHNEIDER

The Lexington School Board is facing controversy over a book recently pulled from Lylburn Downing Middle School's library.

The issue was raised earlier this month when Elizabeth Braman, a mother with five students in the Lexington school system and a teacher at Waddell Elementary, wrote an open letter to the School Board, asking for its removal.

The book in question is "Kiss Number 8," written by Colleen Venable and illustrated by Ellen Crenshaw. According to the publisher's summary, "The novel follows the protagonist's experiences through a series of horrible kisses and humorously explores her sexuality, family, and faith."

In 2019, the book was long

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listed for a National Book Award for Young People's Literature and was included on the New York Public Library's list of best books for teens.

Braman took issue with the novel's depictions of Catholic symbols, and with what she feels is an age-inappropriate discussion of sexuality.

The book was brought to her attention by another parent.

"The pages of this book were shown to me by another parent. It had been checked out of the library," she told *The News-Gazette* this week.

After reaching out to other parents, she chose to address the School Board directly.

"I contacted the school initially - I wanted to know if this book's presence in the library was a mistake or somehow an oversight. It was not," she said.

"Believing that parents had a right to know, I reached out to friends with my letter. It was then posted and shared by others. I directed another letter, which was essentially the same, to the School Board itself."

In her letter to the School Board, Braman amended her original request to have the book removed to read, "Now that *Kiss Number 8* has been removed from the library, would you please ensure that this decision does not get reversed?"

She goes on to make six other requests, including that the School Board, "organize and facilitate regular library open houses, such that parents may come in and see for themselves the books that are actually available to their children."

Braman's desire for more parental oversight comes after what she considered an unsatisfactory response by school staff.

"School management did not seem fully aware of the contents, or type of contents, of books in its library," she told *The News-Gazette*. "Some parents, even ones who were aware of rumbling

controversies regarding library books in general, were shocked when I showed them these specific pages."

This controversy is something that school administrators are aware of, having had similar complaints in 2022. The school system is actively working to address these concerns, according to Superintendent Rebecca Walters Tuesday.

"In 2022 one of the things we did was add a young adult label, a sticker on all of these books to communicate that they were for more mature readers, and we communicated with families and kids about what that means," she said.

"Parents can also opt-out of the young adult literature, so if they feel that their student is maybe not mature enough they can opt to not have them check out anything young adult from the library. And if teachers want to use any of those things in their classes, they will communicate it, and give enough information beforehand that families can opt their student out, can ask for a different assignment or different reading material."

This categorization of books according to age range is largely the reason the book was removed from the middle school, according to Walters.

"Upon review, we found that [*Kiss Number Eight*] was more appropriate for older students, ages 14-plus, which would be grades 9 through 12," she said. "Looking at age and grade, we decided it wasn't best suited for our middle school aged kids."

Issues of appropriateness are particularly relevant to the middle school, which sees a broad range in terms of student age and maturity.

"The middle school library is a bit of a puzzle. You have students who have just come out of elementary school, you have those who are truly in the middle, and then you have students getting ready to transition into high school," Walters explained.

"We are a library that serves minors. We're not a public library, and not a bookstore. We're looking at the American Library association's guidelines, looking at what's appropriate for certain ages, and at what is going to support our students. We want to be confident in the collection that we have, and feel good about the opportunities that provides for our students," she said.

Others have opposed the school's decision to remove the book, including 50 Ways Rockbridge, which has started its own petition, which reads, in part, "We object in the strongest terms to any attempt by individuals to dictate changes to the collection based on personal or religious preferences."

"Please continue to abide by the Virginia Educational Association's standards of inclusivity and intellectual freedom in school library operations."

The petition is collecting signatures online, while 50 Ways encourages citizens to go to the next meeting of the Lexington School Board on Oct. 3.

Braman, too, hopes that people will make their opinions known at the meeting.

"Whatever our beliefs may be, I want everyone to be able to make informed decisions," she told *The News-Gazette*. "I hope that any publicity surrounding this issue or the upcoming school board meeting will shed light, for everyone, such that all parties, in whatever their relevant capacity, may function more intelligently and effectively."

While the district continues to work on its materials and guidelines, Walters said administrators are taking community feedback into account.

"We're listening to feedback. We've been working around the clock to come up with more clear guidelines and policies. We're talking to families," she said.

"We want to make sure we're doing our best by the students we serve, and by the families that entrust them to us."

Literacy Act Prep Starting In Area Schools

*State Program Takes
Effect Next Year*

BY ANNELIESE SCHNEIDER

With the 2023-2024 school year now well underway, area school divisions are looking ahead to the start of next year, when the Virginia Literacy Act will go into effect.

Passed by the General Assembly in 2022 and updated in 2023, the Virginia Literacy Act is a state-level program aimed at improving student reading outcomes.

According to the Virginia Department of Education, “The VLA requires that each local school board shall provide a program of literacy instruction that is aligned with science-based reading research and provides evidenced-based literacy instruction to students in kindergarten through grade eight.”

The topic has come up at several local school board meetings recently as school officials plan for the act’s implementation.

In Lexington

For Lexington schools, improving reading instruction was a priority before this act.

“Even before the VLA was announced, our school district was working to make sure all

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of our K-2 teachers were formally trained in evidence-based literacy programs,” Superintendent Rebecca Walters told *The News-Gazette*.

“During the past two years, we have had all K-3 teachers, special education teachers, intervention teachers, and reading specialists trained in Orton-Gillingham instructional programming.”

Orton-Gillingham is an approach to teaching reading developed in the mid-1900s, alongside research on teaching students with dyslexia.

According to its “core principles,” this approach emphasizes instruction that is “diagnostic in that the instructor continuously monitors the verbal, nonverbal, and written responses of the learner,” and “individualized to meet the differing needs of learners who may be similar, but not exactly alike.”

The district’s reading specialists will be participating in statewide training this year ahead of the VLA’s implementation.

The schools are also preparing interventions for at-risk students, to keep them from falling behind.

“As we look to full implementation of VLA next school year, we are following state guidance on the development of individual student reading plans for any of our students performing below level,” said Walters.

“We will also plan to review the state-approved core curriculum programs with plans to adopt a new textbook series and core curriculum for 2024-2025.”

In Rockbridge

Rockbridge County Public Schools is also updating its curriculum in anticipation of the new standards.

At its most recent meeting, the Rockbridge County School Board heard a presentation on the University of Florida Literacy Institute, whose curriculum will soon be taught in county elementary schools.

“When we started our work with UFLI, we were thinking about our students’ needs, we were thinking about how we would respond to the Virginia Literacy Act, and we were thinking about how we could promote reading and literacy since it’s so important to success, both in school and in life,” Lauren Fauber, principal at Fairfield Elementary, told the Board.

For Rockbridge, this program will be important for the VLA’s requirements of research and evidence-based reading curriculum.

“UFLI is very helpful in meeting the criteria of being research based,” said Fauber. “It does align with the science of reading, which takes into account psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, and education, and it also is evidence based.”

The program provides lesson plans for teachers, which follow an eight-step learning routine, including phonemic

awareness, visual and auditory drills, and connections with other words.

“This is very helpful in meeting the criteria for the Virginia Literacy Act, but above that and beyond that, it’s explicit and systematic,” said Fauber, noting that the pre-made lesson plans will be helpful for teachers, especially new teachers.

“The scope and sequence is very helpful because it looks from more simple skills to more complex skills, and it gives that opportunity for growth,” she said.

This new program will be challenging at first, Tim Martino, assistant superintendent of instruction and administration, acknowledged.

“This is a heavy lift. This is probably one of the biggest instructional lifts, at least in the seven years that I’ve been here,” he told the Board. “This is complicated. The challenge of reading is that you have to have all of the prerequisites. You have to have everything in that rope to move forward to the next step.”

However, he believes that the long-term benefit to students will be worth the upfront challenge to schools.

“We have a team dedicated to this. It’s a good group, they don’t sleep very much. It’s like everything, as we roll it out right now, it’s a little bit messy, but as long as we’re falling forward, we’re doing better by our kids,” he said at the meeting.

“We have to reprogram ourselves a little bit. For any of us who have been at this for about 20 years, weren’t taught anything like this. We’re growing into this. But it’ll be a fun journey,” he said.

In Buena Vista

Buena Vista Public Schools officials are looking ahead to some changes, but are, for the moment, waiting on more concrete direction for the state.

The Department of Education is still reviewing materials, and has not yet put out a complete list of all the curriculums which will be accepted under the new law.

“Right now we’re holding until the list comes out for full K-8,” Dr. Gennifer Miller, assistant superintendent of Buena Vista schools, explained to *The News-Gazette*.

“We want a curriculum that will span all through those grade levels, so we’re holding until the spring when the final list comes out,” she said.

When the time does come for new materials, money has already been set aside through a state grant.

While the VLA will bring changes in curriculum and in student evaluations, most of the teaching in Buena Vista will stay the same, according to Miller.

“Most of our teachers here in Buena Vista are already using the science of reading in their classrooms, so it won’t be too big a shift,” she said.

“We’ll have new curriculum and new materials, but a lot of the teaching is already there,” she said.