

# A book club with 715 members

Schoolwide Wood Reads program builds community, fosters literacy

Students at Inza R. Wood Middle School are reading — all 715 of them.

They're taking part again this year in Wood Reads, an annual program at the middle school that provides each student with a copy of the same title. Throughout the school year, students read and discuss the book inside and out of class. The program will wrap up with a visit from Gary Schmidt, the author of this year's title, "Okay for Now."



by: SUBMITTED PHOTO - Sixth-grader Nick Ackerman is among 715 students at Inza R. Wood Middle School reading Okay for Now by Gary Schmidt this school year.

It's the seventh year that the entire school has read a book together, according to Stuart Levy, Wood's teacher librarian and the program's founder. The school-wide reading program has three goals, he said: to promote literacy, to build community and to provide a forum for discussing character education.

This year's selection provides plenty of discussion opportunities. Published in 2011, "Okay for Now" follows the misadventures of a teenage boy whose family relocates from New York City to a small town upstate in 1968. The book incorporates key themes and events from the late 1960s, including the Vietnam War and the moon landing, and characters deal with sensitive topics including bullying, child abuse, loss and recovery.



Schmidt

Schmidt is asked often about the difficult themes his books cover. "You think middle school isn't serious? Are you kidding me? Living is serious business," Schmidt said on his website, [hmbbooks.com/schmidt](http://hmbbooks.com/schmidt). "Funny is good, of course. We all like to laugh. But I want more than that. Much more. ... We all wish it could be brightness all the time. And maybe for some people it is. I doubt it, but maybe. But there is gloom for us all, too. And maybe books even for kids shouldn't ignore that."

Reading together about difficult situations makes it easier to discuss tough topics, Levy said.

"It's hard to talk about situations out of the blue. Put it in the context of a book, it's a starting ground for conversations," he said.

Reading the book together also allows teachers to provide context for the history and the social issues.



by: SUBMITTED PHOTO - Students in Dana VanderZandens sixth-grade class spend some class time reading this years selection for the Wood Reads program.

"Many of the kids needed the support, especially with this book, since it's set in 1968. It really helped to share background," Levy said. "One of the goals of (Wood's) academy classes, besides the curriculum they have, is dealing with some character issues. That's the place where the bulk of the Wood Reads discussion happens, with the academy teacher."

Teachers will bring up the book in other classes, too, Levy said. A social studies teacher might refer to the book when discussing history from that time. An English teacher might base a lesson on the book. And an art teacher might direct students' attention to the nature drawings of John James Audubon, whose work plays a big role in the story.

To ensure student engagement in the program, each year a group of sixth- and seventh-grade students at Wood pick the book the school will read the following year.

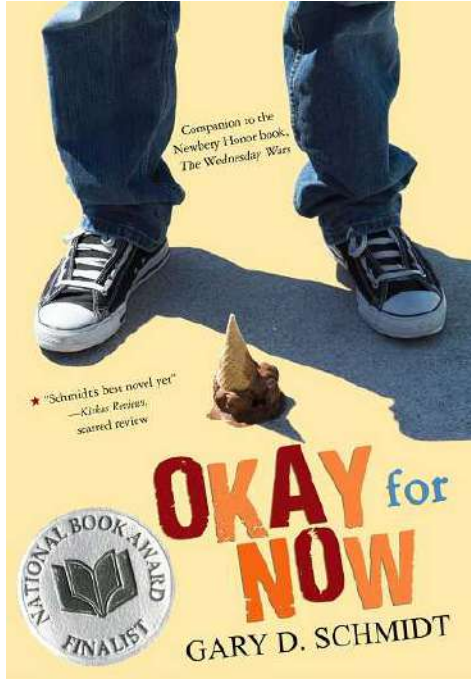
"Membership ranges over time," Levy said. "This current year I've got about 25 kids on the committee."

With student input, Levy and a group of teachers compile a list of titles for the selection committee to consider. Each student on the committee is expected to read and discuss the books on the list. This year, the committee is considering seven titles.

"Hopefully it will be clear that one book stands out," Levy said. "Last year we had two books as frontrunners."

Last year's runner-up, "Wonder" by R.J. Palacio, is among the titles under consideration for Wood Reads 2014-15. Levy hopes that students will agree on a title when they meet later this month. Whichever book emerges as the winner, Levy is certain that the committee will have chosen a good book for the program.

After all, Wood Reads has a seven-year history of success. And



by: SUBMITTED PHOTO - The Wood Reads program is focused this year on Okay for Now, by Gary Schmidt, and will wrap up in March with a visit from the author.

"Okay for Now" is the latest in a string of winners.

"It's a book that I really liked," Levy said. "It's great literature, just the writing of it. ... All the kids who read the book loved it. He's got a great blend of humor but also serious issues as well. It hit all those points that we wanted."

Students will have a rare opportunity to interact with the book's author. Gary Schmidt is scheduled to visit Wood on an early-release day this spring. Wood's parent support group is helping to cover Schmidt's honorarium and his travel expenses.

Key support also came from Wilsonville's Kiwanis Club.

"The last three years, we have applied for a grant with them, and they have given us \$2,000, which pays for a good chunk of it," Levy said. The money received from the Kiwanis Club is used to purchase a copy of the book for every student to read and keep.

Levy credits Wood's principal, Barb Soisson, for making Wood Reads possible.

"I feel really happy that the principal is completely behind this," he said. "All seven years we've done this she has worked very hard behind the scenes to make sure this happens."