

The Lowndes County School District (LCSD) received a grant of \$5,000 Wednesday from International Paper's Columbus Pulp Mill and Columbus Modified Fiber facilities to fund the construction of reading lofts for Caledonia Elementary School (CES).

Dr. Kristie Jones, the director of Federal Programs for the LCSD, said the grant will provide a valuable tool that will enable teachers to facilitate learning and create a more welcoming atmosphere in their classrooms.

"The reading loft is a learning center with endless possibilities emerging every day," Jones said. "The lofts will support evidence-based reading instruction. Reading achievement starts in the pre-kindergarten classroom."

Jones said the LCSD has had success with reading lofts that were built by the district's maintenance department. The lofts are in several pre-kindergarten classrooms at New Hope Elementary School (NHES) and give teachers there added space and quiet areas where they can work with a student or a few students. She said research has shown reading lofts promote independent reading and help students develop a sense of ownership and autonomy in their reading.

"Instilling a love for reading in elementary school students is a critical step in ensuring they will be life-long learners," Jones said. "That love of reading will stimulate their curiosity to discover new ideas and concepts."

Jones said the plan is to get an estimate of the cost to build multiple reading lofts so the district can get the most out of International Paper's grant. Currently, most of the classrooms at NHES, which has four classes and serves 80 pre-K students, have reading lofts. CES also

has four classes that serve 80 pre-K students, while West Lowndes Elementary has two classes that serve 30 pre-K students.

“We are incredibly grateful to International Paper for their generous contribution, which has made it possible for us to have reading lofts in our pre-K classrooms at Caledonia Elementary School,” CES pre-kindergarten teacher Heather Herring said. “These lofts will provide a creative and cozy space where our students can engage in reading activities, ignite their imaginations, and enhance their language skills.

“As early childhood educators, our primary goal is to create a safe and engaging learning environment that nurtures a lifelong love for learning. The addition of these reading lofts not only will expand our classroom space, but it also will enrich the overall learning experience for our students.”

The International Paper Foundation makes sustainable investments to address critical needs in the communities where its employees live and work. Its signature causes are: education, hunger, health and wellness and disaster relief. Funding also is available to address environmental initiatives (forests, water and air), employee involvement grants and other critical community needs.

“At International Paper, we believe fostering a love of reading is essential for developing lifelong learners,” said Kellum Hawk, communications manager at International Paper. “By supporting Lowndes County Lofts, we’re not just investing in a quiet space for elementary students to read, we’re nurturing their independence and sense of ownership over their learning journey. Encouraging independent reading empowers students to explore new worlds and ideas, laying the foundation for their future success.”

International Paper’s Columbus Mill and Columbus Modified Fiber facilities awarded \$57,000 in IP Foundation grants to 18 area

educational and non-profit groups in 2024. In addition to Foundation support, local leadership is committed to addressing critical needs in the communities where its employees live and work through volunteerism, product donations and charitable giving.

“As part of the IP Family, we are honored to assist our schools and area non-profits in their efforts to make an impact on the lives of those throughout our communities,” Hawk said. “Our heartfelt appreciation to each of these organizations, educators and volunteers. The missional work they do is vital to the success of our community.”