

One District One Book: Uniting a Community

One district launched leading and learning through literacy and community engagement.

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The One District, One Book initiative in Alberta's Lethbridge School District 51 united the entire community through the power of literacy and engagement.

How do you unite a community through the power of literacy?

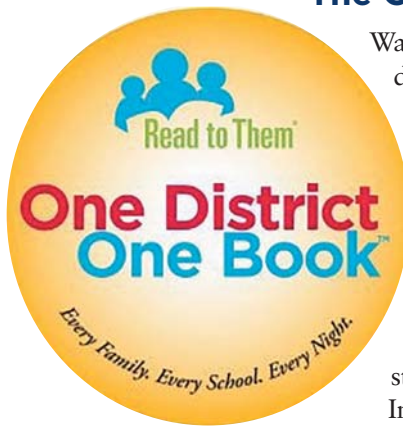
With one book: one book about kindness and hope; one book that crosses cultures, borders, ages, and genders with a universal story told by a wise tree, a crow, skunks, raccoons, and opossums that capture your heart; one book with the magic to mobilize schools across all grade levels, to engage parents, and to spark a community conversation.

It all began when Dr. Gerald B. Probe Elementary School in Lethbridge School District 51 in Alberta, Canada, joined the One School, One Book program, which

is promoted by Read to Them, a nonprofit organization in the United States that encourages family literacy (www.readtothem.org).

Spearheaded by teacher Michelle Dimnik, the initiative was such a success that the district expanded the program so students, staffs, and families at all three elementary schools in west Lethbridge were simultaneously reading *The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate. The entire west Lethbridge elementary school community was talking about Ivan the gorilla in school hallways, grocery stores, and parks. Dimnik wondered, "Can this be bigger than just a few schools?"

The Challenge



Was it feasible for all students and staff members in the entire district to read the same book at the same time? That would be no small task—Lethbridge School District 51 has 11,800 students in preK–12 and approximately 1,500 staff members.

In February 2017, Dimnik formed a core organizing group with Vice Principal Catherine Thorsen and Learning Commons Facilitator Ruth McMahon. This trio had the passion and drive necessary to pursue the dream of harnessing the power of literacy within the community through a shared story. When the core group later expanded to seven members, they became the 1D1B (one district, one book) Committee.

To be successful, “we had to find *that book*; it is all about the book,” Thorsen says. Then *that book* appeared: *Wishtree* by Katherine Applegate. *Wishtree* is the story about Red, an old oak tree that symbolizes hope. According to the story, on May 1, Wishing Day, people in the community traditionally tie pieces of cloth to Red’s branches on which are written their expressed wishes. Over the years, Red had seen it all and was the keeper of stories that when woven together were the fabric of collective community history.

When a new family moves into the community, Red sees that not everyone is welcoming. It takes the wisdom of Red, the fortitude and actions of a crow named Bongo, and a few other “tree” friends to set things straight.

Wishtree is a story about hope and kindness, a story about community; it is that “one book.”

Financial Support

In November 2017, the 1D1B Committee made a formal request to the district to launch this project in March 2019. From the beginning, they had the support of Superintendent of Schools Cheryl Gilmore and the board of trustees. The committee had the vision, the book, and everyone on board for the project.

The next challenge was to raise \$200,000 to buy the 13,000 books required to make this project a success. By June 2018, the committee was concerned because it had not raised the money to purchase the books. Then the



Trees were unveiled in schools to symbolize the oak tree depicted in the book.

University of Lethbridge (U of L) Bookstore came on board as a major in-kind sponsor. The U of L Bookstore was able to work with the publisher to print less-expensive paperback copies of *Wishtree*, which the district bought at a discount. As a result, the district realized a savings that was half of the estimated \$200,000.

A major hurdle had been surmounted, but a new financial challenge was looming. The publisher required a deposit of \$45,000 by September 2018 to print the books. The committee made a pitch to local philanthropists Ron and Joyce Sakamoto of Lethbridge. Excited by



*Lethbridge Mayor Chris Spearman read *Wishtree* and visited classrooms to participate in discussions with students.*



Wishtree's message of kindness and compassion inspired the entire Lethbridge community and promoted the virtue of tolerance.

the project, the Sakamotos generously donated \$40,000 for the printing. An additional \$36,000 was derived from fundraising efforts throughout the schools and the Lethbridge community.

The committee also applied to the Government of Alberta for a Community Initiatives Grant that recognizes projects that help build community. In December 2018, the committee nervously waited for word about the grant. With a planned March 2019 1D1B launch, the grant had the potential to make or break the project time line. Much work had been done to prepare for the launch date in all district schools. A few days before the Christmas break, the committee received the news that the project was a successful recipient of a \$75,000 grant. Fully funded, the project was on track for the March 2019 launch.

Project Support

School support and enthusiasm for the project increased in January 2018 when the 1D1B Committee provided district administrators with an advance copy of the book. In March 2018, district staff along with school staff watched a video presentation about the project. A committee of school-based representatives built excitement and coordinated the rollout of 1D1B to schools.

With high schools and most middle schools new to the concept, the committee was purposeful and strategic in this planning phase. They developed a framework for schools that included reading dates

and flexible reading schedules. In preparation for the March 25, 2019, launch, committee members encouraged collaboration and idea sharing among schools, and schools were empowered to be creative in the activities they undertook to prepare for the launch of 1D1B and the reading of *Wishtree*.

The special paperback edition, which included a dedication page to 1D1B and the sponsors, was part of a package that included a bookmark, a letter from the superintendent, and a pay-it-forward letter (more on that later). In all, about 13,000 packages were prepared for students, staff members, and some members of the

community.

Launch Day

The day finally arrived: March 25, 2019. The staff had worked hard to create props to go along with the book: On launch day, a variety of trees were unveiled in schools to symbolize Red the oak tree. The character of Bongo was represented by cow figures and illustrations. Many of the other animal characters were symbolized in creative ways as well.

Students began reading the book in classrooms. They took the book home every night for their families to read. All staff members, including school support staff, maintenance staff, caretakers, and administrators, read the book. What's more, the school trustees read the book and visited schools to show their support.

Schools created plays, artwork, and songs about *Wishtree*. The book was in such high demand by members



Students throughout the district read the book in the classroom, in the halls, on the buses, and at home with their families.

of the community that it was back-ordered at the city's bookstores.

Community Impact

Beyond the school walls, *Wishtree* had an impact on approximately 40,000 members of the Lethbridge community. Taxi drivers discussed the book with passengers, and adults selected *Wishtree* for their book clubs. The U of L Bookstore promoted the book to university students and staff and made the book available at cost. Books were purchased from individuals in neighboring provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan so they could be involved in 1D1B.

The mayor and city council of Lethbridge read *Wishtree*. The Lethbridge Public Library promoted *Wishtree* through displays. Based on the message of being welcoming and kind to newcomers, a presentation about *Wishtree* was made to the local mosque. The community excitement about 1D1B and *Wishtree* was incredible.

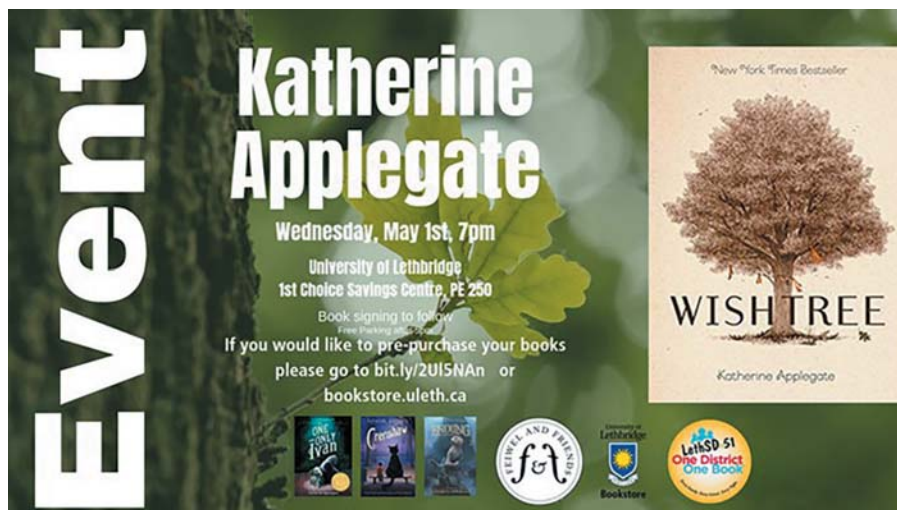
With such an inspiring book about hope, kindness, and community, it was important to “pay it forward.”

The local newspaper published 53 “toasts” about 1D1B. One of the best toasts was from a Muslim student: “Thank you so much for doing this book! It is the first time I have ever seen myself as the hero in a book instead of the villain!” Another toast states: “The story became real to me when our school walked to the local mosque and hung ribbons. There was a man there with tears going down his face. It made me see a real person behind the story.”

Leaving a Legacy

Once you have reached an entire community through the power of literacy and that “one book” with a story that speaks deeply to what it means to be human and caring, what could possibly be next?

On May 1, Wishing Day in *Wishtree*, author Katherine Applegate visited district schools to participate in readings as well as assemblies that gave her an opportunity to meet with students and discuss the book and



Author Katherine Applegate visited the community and participated in readings and book discussions.

her love of writing. Two high schools hosted assemblies at which some elementary and middle school students were guests; the remaining district students accessed the assembly via live streaming.

One community member stated, “It was heartwarming to see students from kindergarten through grade 12 receive the same message of compassion and the power that comes from a community that works together for the common good.”

Author Katherine Applegate provided her own toast: “I am struggling to put into words my gratitude for your kindness, inspiration, and hard work. The committees, the schools, the booksellers, the parents, the students, the community: where to begin? Lethbridge has changed my life forever. Never have I had such a tangible reminder that writing books can truly make a difference. And I doubt I’ll ever experience a visit as heartfelt and moving as my day in your beautiful city.”

With such an inspiring book about hope, kindness, and community, it was important to “pay it forward.” The book packets included a letter asking the recipients “to pay it forward” by donating their books so that they may be forwarded to another community where other schools may want to try One School, One Book.

To date, more than 1,500 books have been donated for that purpose. To build on the hope and inspiration that this project developed in the community, legacy funds have been committed to placing a plaque and planting May Day trees at every school site. In the interest of welcoming newcomers and building community, participants hope that on May 1 each year, wishes are placed on these trees as a lasting tribute to uniting a community through the power of literacy.

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