

Read Across America



THE MISSION OF THE POPULAR READING PROGRAM IS TO CELEBRATE A NATION OF DIVERSE READERS ALL YEAR LONG

BY CINDY LONG

Linda Estrada grew up in Donna, Texas, the border town where she now works as a campus secretary at Runn Elementary School. Fifteen miles from the Mexican border, she worked alongside her parents and three siblings as a migrant farm worker until she started kindergarten.

“My parents didn’t want us to fall behind in our studies like they did growing up as migrant workers, spending more time in the fields than in the classroom,” says Estrada.

By the time she was 10 years old, her mother was the only one working and the family subsisted on the \$60 a week she earned cleaning a local hotel.

“Not much with four children to support and in those times, no government assistance either,” says Estrada. “But my mom was a miracle worker. Aside from paying bills, buying groceries, and clothing us, she made sure we were surrounded by books.”

Estrada says she never realized that they were poor. In a home filled with love and books, her world was enriched beyond material things. She became an avid reader and recalls devouring the *Little House on the Prairie* books and Nancy Drew mysteries, even World Book Encyclopedias. But in school, there were few books about her own heritage and culture. It wasn’t until she was an adult working at Runn, a dual language campus, that she encountered books about Cinco de Mayo, 16 de septiembre, and Dia de los Muertos.

“Becoming an [education support professional] ESP at Runn

Elementary was the best thing that could have happened to me,” says Estrada. “I was able to reconnect with my culture.”

Now, as chair of NEA’s 17-member Read Across America Advisory Committee, she connects students with their cultures and exposes them to the cultures of their classmates.

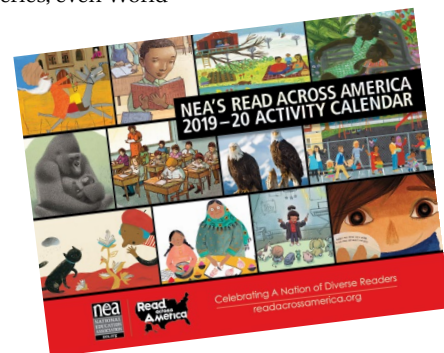
“Through books, they get a better understanding of all the different diverse cultures in America today,” she says. “My hope is that they will learn that although they may be different, they also share many similarities.”

NEA’S READ ACROSS AMERICA REBRANDS WITH NEW LOGO AND NEW WEBSITE

Our student population is ever-changing and evolving and every year there are new children’s books that reflect that diversity. That’s why NEA’s Read Across America is rebranding with a new logo to appeal to students of all ages and backgrounds and a continued mission of “Celebrating a Nation of Diverse Readers.”

Of course, children still love Dr. Seuss, and his birthday on March 2, NEA’s Read Across America Day is an ideal time for a reading event with green eggs and ham! But, with the newly broadened scope of NEA’s Read Across America Day, additional activities, resources, and ideas can keep students reading all year long.

A colorful printed calendar and an interactive resource calendar (find it at readacrossamerica.org) offer book



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suggestions for different age groups and provides ideas for applying lessons from the books to the classroom.

Kicking off this school year, the book for August 2019 was *All Are Welcome Here*, written by Alexandra Penfold. “No matter how you start your day, what you wear, when you play. Or if you come from far away. All are welcome here.”

The lively picture book sends a clear message that our public schools are places where every child is welcome. The calendar suggests hosting a community-building back-to-school event that opens opportunities for talking about individual differences, diversity, and how we can learn from each other.

USE BOOKS FEATURED IN THE CALENDAR ANY TIME OF THE YEAR

Lubna and Pebble, written by Wendy Meddour, the June 2020 book, explores the wrenching world of refugees where a little girl’s only friend is a treasured pebble she found on the beach where she landed with her father after fleeing war at home.

Pebble listens to her stories; its smoothness comforts her when she’s scared. But one day, Lubna realizes that a new boy in the “world of tents” might need Pebble more than she does.

“*Lubna and Pebble* is one of the books that I am looking forward to sharing,” says Carol Bauer, a fourth-grade teacher at Bethel Elementary School in York

County, Va. Bauer, who is the past chair of NEA’s Read Across America Advisory Committee, adds that even if a book is featured in a particular month, it can be shared any time during the year.

“Students in fourth grade hear the word ‘refugee’ but don’t have a good understanding of what that might mean. This book will help with their understanding,” she says. “I also have my students collect money using the ‘Trick or Treat for UNICEF’ program. This book will be another way to allow my students to understand where the UNICEF money goes and who it helps.”

MIDDLE GRADE AND YOUNG ADULT BOOKS FEATURE DIVERSE THEMES AND CHARACTERS

The Hero Next Door, featured in the Read Across America calendar in the middle-grade section, reminds students that not all heroes wear capes. They can look just like them. They can even be them.

“The New Kid could have been my superhero name,” writes middle-grade novelist Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich, editor of *The Hero Next Door*, a collection of middle-grade short stories from some of the best known diverse books authors. “School after school, classroom after classroom, playground after playground ... I’d swoop in, hoping to dazzle and impress, save the day somehow. Each time I hoped to get it exactly right; each time I got it so, so wrong.”

When she was the new kid again in sixth grade, Rhuday-Perkovich’s mother asked the principal to make sure she’d have classes with other

