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Program gives kids a break on book costs

By STEVEN LONG
Staff

Eleven-year-old Sherrie Porter is the proud owner of five books purchased at the cut-rate price of \$1.50 each at her elementary school's bookstore.

But these aren't well-worn used books donated by the Parent-Teacher Organization or rejects from the school library. Each book is brand new and similar to those selling for many dollars more at area bookstores. They are available at Epps Island Elementary School, in the Klein Independent School District, through a program aimed at getting books into the hands of children.

Sherrie's favorites are mysteries, because of the surprise endings.

"It feels good," she said. "You don't know anything that's going on in a book till you read it."

Her interest is just the sort that former PTO president Carol Busbee had in mind when she pursued the bookstore project after reading about a New York teacher's school store.

"We are in a lower economic area, and anything we can do to encourage children to read is a plus," she said.

Busbee wasn't the only one who read about the Bronx school project.

"Hundreds of schools wrote her after the article came out," said Jess Cohen, the son of the New York teacher. "I got the letters together, contacted publishers, then responded to the letters."

Cohen, a book wholesaler and chief executive officer of Schoolwide, Inc. of Bohemia, N.Y., decided to offer both hardcover and paperback books to schools for \$1 each. Because he buys in quantity, he can offer the low price.

"We don't make a big profit on each book," Cohen said. "Our goal is to get a large number of schools to participate."

About 100 schools in 20 states have taken advantage of Cohen's offer, including three in San Antonio and three in Lubbock.

Most of the schools, including Epps, sell 100 to 200 books each month, Cohen said.

The Epps bookstore opened in the art room at the beginning of the school year. Busbee is manager, but fourth-graders serve as store employees.

"They had to fill out a job application, they went to an interview process, they went through job training, and at the end of the semester, they get a letter of recommendation and a certificate," Busbee said.

The students also receive a book coupon for each month that they work in the store, which is open from 7:50 to 8:10 a .m. three days a week.

"Some of them (student employees) beat me to work, and I live across the street," Busbee said. As cashier, 10-year-old Barbara Helt said she is learning to give change by counting backward. She used her first pay coupon to buy a book on baking cookies.

Cashier Bruce Abdullah, 10, said the hardest thing about his first job is figuring out how to store books at the close of business. The store has about 500 books in stock.

"I figure it out from the title," he said. "Sometimes I ask the teacher."

Principal Sally Chapman said the bookstore has been a big hit since it opened.

"The store has replenished stock twice this year," said Chapman, adding that the books have been of good quality and great variety.

"These are not cheesy little paperbacks, as the kids say. We even had some ... that were auto-graphed by the authors."

Alicia Crittle, 10, is one of the satisfied customers.

"I love to have my own book ," she said. "It is something that I own and don't have to share."