



I Love My
Librarian!
2015 Award

Nominee: Leslie Koch
Armstrong Elementary School
Eastover, North Carolina

Nominator: Ardry Adams

1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets him/her apart?

Engaged and engaging! Motivational leader! Passionate enabler, focused on ensuring each child has opportunity and motivation to read and learn! More than just the school librarian, Leslie Koch epitomizes teaching with heart.

Armstrong Elementary School serves a rural poor population. The correlation between poverty and lower academic success is well known. At Armstrong, greater than 60% of the children receive free or reduced price school lunch. This percentage is indicative of the community served by Armstrong. Despite the very high levels of poverty, our children excel in reading and library utilization. Leslie Koch is the hidden power behind the scenes.

Under Ms. Koch's direction, circulation of library books has soared. Our school has a student population of approximately 400 students. In the 2014-15 school year, circulation in the library was more than 32,500 books, an average of more than 81 books per student over the course of the year, or greater than nine books per month per student. Ms. Koch recognizes the importance of reaching all children, and especially those from impoverished homes. Students who read, excel. Ms. Koch is raising the bar, encouraging each student to rise up, read, and excel in their individual academic endeavors.

2. How has the nominee helped you and/or students at school? For example, did the nominee help you with a project, recommend resources or collaborate with you to enhance student learning?

Ms. Koch's leadership has had a profound impact upon our student reading scores. Since joining Armstrong Elementary School, our average student reading score has improved 13.4 points, or 26.07% overall. The improvement was obvious: Armstrong Elementary School was the only Title I School of Distinction, of 50 qualifying schools in Cumberland County for School Year 2014-15. Title I is a federal recognition of schools serving an economically depressed student population.

Ms. Koch has utilized available resources to drive down the average age of the library collection. As a result, our students are exposed to more current and relevant library materials. This access to information has enhanced student performance within the science, technology, equipment and math (STEM) arena. These are areas where today's students must focus in order to be competitive tomorrow.

A key area of concern for Ms. Koch since arriving at Armstrong in 2012 has been to ensure the library was "kid friendly". In the words of Ms. Koch, the library needs to be "welcoming for the students". To say that she has been responsible for a make-over of the library would be an understatement. One of the first things she accomplished was to arrange books on shelves so that they were accessible to the children in an age appropriate manner. She took the kindergarten books off of the higher shelves and arranged for them to be on the lower shelves where the kindergarten children could see and reach the books. In a corresponding move, she placed the more advance books on higher shelves where the older fourth and fifth grade students would not have to stoop in order to search for books. In other words, she employed good library ergonomics!

Ms. Koch has had book characters painted on the walls so that children are not viewing the library as an institution, but rather see the library as a warm and welcoming place. Ms. Koch has incorporated stuffed animals into book displays, helping the children to "feel" the book they are going to read. In another brilliant move, Ms. Koch has had a colorful, comfortable rug placed in the area where she reads to the children. Her chair is surrounded by faces bathed in excitement as she employs a variety of voices and accents as she reads age appropriate stories to the children. Children absorb her reading times and then repeat the stories to family members and others. Learning has been enhanced within the environment created by Ms. Koch.

Two other notable ways in which Ms. Koch has helped the students are the Armstrong News Network and Battle of the Books.

The Armstrong News Network is a morning news broadcast by students from the fourth and fifth grades. Students share news events, weather, school lunch menu, and birthday greetings over the school television system. In addition to the simple things such as the lunch menu, students are taught to research local, national and world news and to relay significant events to their peers. In this manner students are exposed to the importance of being an active member of the student body, their community, nation and world. On a weekly basis Ms. Koch will help students identify birthdays of famous people and provide some information to the student body about that person. Ms. Koch also helps the students to do a brief moment on "this day in history". Each element of the broadcast is focused on enhancing student learning and student morale.

Ms. Koch recognized that students of Armstrong could excel at the county Battle of the Books. Yet, our students were not accepting the challenge to participate. Ms. Koch encouraged students to participate in this reading program. She established coaching sessions each week, after school hours. Because the coaching was after school, the children did not miss valuable teaching time in their classes. Equally as important, Ms. Koch was teaching the children to establish goals and then work toward completion of those goals.

Through her tutoring, the children of Armstrong began to grow in confidence and ability to compete. Children were reading books far beyond their grade level. Comprehension and retention scores were steadily improving. More importantly, children were

beginning to see that they could not only participate, but they could achieve team and individual recognition for their efforts.

In the spring of 2015, Ms. Koch took the Armstrong 5th grade Battle of the Books team to the first level of the county competition. In a stunning victory, the Armstrong team took first place!

While the Armstrong team did not win at the next level of the competition, their superlative efforts were noted. Most importantly, the children on the team realized that they not only could achieve through effort, but that they did achieve!

The efforts of Ms. Koch have greatly improved student reading comprehension and test scores.

3. How does the nominee make the school a better place? Please be specific.

Ms. Koch believes that there is a book for everyone. Her stated personal goal is to foster a love for reading within each student. Ms. Koch also wants the children of Armstrong Elementary School to know that there is an adult in their life who cares about each of them and their success.

When Ms. Koch arrived at Armstrong, the school was already using the “Reading Counts” learning program. This program challenged students to read from a list of books and then complete a computer based test. The student was scored based upon comprehension, retention and ability to properly answer a standard set of questions for each book.

While this methodology has been well established, it begins with the premise that all students in the same grade should choose books from the same list and be able to read at the same level. This premise fails to recognize individual ability, and the normal distribution of reading ability within a standard bell curve. Consequently, children on the high end of the curve were becoming bored with the reading and testing and consequently were reading only the minimum number of books to meet the grade requirements. On the other end of the curve, the students who were poor readers were struggling to stay on grade level, became frustrated, and didn’t want to participate with reading. In both cases, the student performance was impaired by individual student ability.

Ms. Koch identified this problem and has implemented a change which differentiates standards based on individual ability and performance. As a result, students are rewarded based on their individual performance. Children who are accelerated readers are challenged to read more complex books. Similarly, children who are not yet accelerated readers are scored based on their ability. Consequently those who are not reading on grade level are rewarded based on ability and performance. This new paradigm has removed and replaced frustration with reward, leading to desire to do more and better. Ms. Koch has turned the tide of hope with this single positive change.

Ms. Koch’s successes do not end with a single change. Ms. Koch has been working in a school environment where financial resources have been very limited. Consequently she has had to become very innovative in order to realize library improvements.

Ms. Koch coordinates two Book Fairs each school year. The Book Fair excites students as they arrive to search and shop for age appropriate books. A portion of each book sale is returned to the school library. Ms. Koch has been able to utilize these funds for library improvements such as painting and collection age reduction. In addition to library improvements, Ms. Koch has also been able to provide small incentives to children

residing in homes where there is a severe lack of financial resources. These small incentives have allowed children to participate in the book fair when their normal daily circumstances would have prevented such participation. These small acts of kindness elevate the personal self-esteem of these children and they feel they have been able to participate in the Book Fair in the same manner as their peers.

Student perceptions are very real for Ms. Koch. She has worked to change the scoring system for "Reading Counts" and she has effectively utilized the funds generated from the Book Fairs to enhance the library environment and the lives of the students at Armstrong. Another area in which Ms. Koch has focused on paradigms is the "Leaders are Readers" program.

Each year Ms. Koch coordinates to have local people come to the school and spend some time reading with the students. Some of the people who have participated are the Mayor, local pastors, members of the fire department, members of the military (active duty and retired), and local physicians. The purpose of this program is to demonstrate to the children that everyone reads. The children are exposed to persons from a variety of backgrounds and professions. And while the children enjoy all of the readers, these local leaders always leave with a smile and sense of achievement for their contribution to reading with the students. This simple program is mutually beneficial to everyone!

Ms. Koch excels in multiple other areas. She is recognized as a leader within the faculty and staff of Armstrong Elementary School. She serves as Chair of the School Fund Raising Committee, Chair of the School Improvement Team, and is a member of the Instructional Leadership Professional Learning Community. In each of these areas her leadership talents are only exceeded by her passion and vision for successful students of the school!

4. How has the library, and the nominee in particular, had an impact on students and the learning process?

Ms. Koch has effected successful change within Armstrong Elementary School. The school has always had a library. Now the school has a library which is inviting to students, and one in which students receive assistance, but more importantly have learned to help themselves.

As the sole library staff person for Armstrong Elementary School, Ms. Koch's influence spans the entire student body of more than 400 elementary students. In addition to maintaining the library, Ms. Koch also has classroom responsibility for every class at Armstrong. Ms. Koch knew that as the sole library staff member she could not hope to be available for every child at every moment. With this in mind, Ms. Koch set out to teach the students how to check in books into and out of the library using the electronic system at the school. Add to this knowledge an open library schedule. Students are encouraged to visit the library throughout the school day, at times when it is convenient for them. Students don't have to wait for their weekly library time, but as their regular teacher may allow, the students can travel to the library and help themselves. As a result of her teaching, and flexible library hours, students know that they may check a book in, or out at any time. Consequently, even when Ms. Koch has a class in the library, students arrive and depart, helping themselves. Children know and understand the importance of properly checking the books in and out. Ms. Koch devised a color coded system which helps students to know where returned books should be placed. Children know and

understand that they must demonstrate appropriate library decorum at all times, and most especially when Ms. Koch is with another student or class. In other words, Ms. Koch has taught, and facilitates self-reliance among a student body of first through fifth grade children!

Self-reliance by young people leads to self-confidence and higher levels of self-esteem. Children are learning to read, while they are learning to be responsible citizens. Can it get any better than this?

Indeed, there are other areas of important achievement. Ms. Koch regularly communicates with the teachers and faculty of Armstrong. Working in a collaborative way, Ms. Koch is aware of teacher specific needs for resource materials. When such materials are not available within the Armstrong Library, Ms. Koch seeks out inter-library loans from other schools within Cumberland County. In this manner Ms. Koch is able to ensure that teachers have selected resources available as they are teaching the subject matter in class. Seeking inter-library loans allows Ms. Koch to focus her limited library resources on subjects which have broader application, while simultaneously ensuring appropriate levels of support for the teachers.

Ms. Koch has also been judicious and deliberately discriminate with available resources. Often there are thematic series which seem to generate mass interest by the student body. For example, the students may generally have an interest in dogs, or cats, or pets. Ms. Koch has focused some of the library resources to ensure that there are sufficient library books dealing with animals.

On other occasions there may be a narrow interest expressed by a group of students. When this occurs, Ms. Koch will ensure there are sufficient library resources to meet the needs of this group. For example, a group of students may have interest in space travel as a result of President Obama's recognition of NASA Astronaut Scott Kelly at this year's State of the Union Address. Ms. Koch has ensured there were sufficient books available to those students who have such interest.

Ms. Koch regularly seeks to generate interest in reading among the students. She begins with the kindergarten students. One of her favorite activities with this age group is to read aloud, beginning with, "Don't let the pigeon drive the bus." Using various voices for the characters, Ms. Koch entices the students to want to hear more; and read on their own.

Ms. Koch works with every grade level, employing age and grade level appropriate techniques to generate individual student interest in learning. Steven Covey said in his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, that we should, "begin with the end in mind". As noted in response to Question 3, Ms. Koch has said that she wants to foster a love of reading within each student. Basically, Ms. Koch seeks to develop life-long readers. This is her vision for students. By fostering a love for reading, teaching students to read, and enabling students to know how to use the library, Ms. Koch is developing life-long readers.

By her daily actions, Ms. Koch brings reading alive to the students of Armstrong and is helping them to become the reality of her vision. Indeed, Ms. Koch begins with the end in mind!

5. How has the individual demonstrated leadership in the school community?

Ms. Koch Chairs the School Improvement Team and is obviously not one to be satisfied with the status quo. Teaching students to read transcends all areas of learning. Ms. Koch seeks to ensure that students of Armstrong are also literate in electronic media. Assistant Principal Bianca Carter has said:

“Mrs. Koch has worked to increase technology usage within classrooms. We are in an age where digital learning tools are prevalent in our society and used consistently within our school. Mrs. Koch assists administrators in making good choices when determining the types of technology best suited for our students.”

It is not news that children are using electronic media at young ages. Ms. Koch seeks to engage student interests in electronic games, capitalize on their existing knowledge, and apply those same skills to real life application in the class room and library. We have already mentioned student self-check in/out of library books and the Armstrong News Network where students are actively utilizing learned skills to enrich their own lives and the lives of others at Armstrong.

Ms. Koch works closely with the faculty and staff of Armstrong to select appropriate electronic media for the school. She diligently researches products and makes well informed recommendations to the school faculty.

Assistant Principal Carter also noted that:

“Mrs. Koch serves as the School Improvement chairperson and is aware of teacher/student needs. She serves as an advocate for students and literacy needs. She goes out of her way to help the school in areas that are not directly related to her position. Mrs. Koch also serves as our web master which entails ensuring that school information is accurate and up-to-date. She is certainly an asset!”

Ms. Koch is: aware; an advocate for students; goes out of her way. Ms. Koch is able to simplify problems and find solutions. Former Secretary of State General (Retired) Colin Powell, said:

“Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who can cut through argument, debate and doubt, to offer a solution everybody can understand.”

On a daily basis Ms. Koch reminds the faculty and staff of the reality of our student population: very many of our students are young people, dealing with the grown-up problem of poverty. Our school can help these children to grow and become self-sufficient thriving adults.

Former First Lady and librarian, Laura Bush, has said:

“Libraries allow children to ask questions about the world and find the answers. And the wonderful thing is that once a child learns to use a library, the doors to learning are always open.”

Ms. Koch has enhanced access to learning by opening the doors to the library at Armstrong Elementary School throughout the school day. And by opening the doors to the library, she has opened the doors to the world. But more importantly, she has ensured that the students of the school do not have life doors closed to them because they can't read well enough. To the contrary! Ms. Koch's leadership at Armstrong assures our students they will achieve life success by learning to read. Ms. Koch works diligently to ensure every student who walks the halls of Armstrong Elementary School has the opportunity, encouragement, and teaching by adults who care about their individual successes.

It is an honor and privilege to work with Ms. Leslie Koch and to present her to this panel as a most deserving nominee for the Carnegie Corporation of New York and New York Times 2015 Award, I Love My Librarian Award.