

For kids, dictionaries spell power

Nonprofit's giveaway to 4,000 Oakland elementary students encourages learning
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ISLAM AHMED, a third-grader at Fruitvale Elementary, just learned that "salubrious" means healthy and that "leader" is the person in charge, the chief.

The student and her classmates were asked Wednesday morning to look up those and other words after each received a dictionary. The gift of words was all part of Dictionary Day.

"I like it when you know everything. You think: 'What this word means?' You go and check the dictionary," Islam said. The 8-year-old girl was happy to take her dictionary home because "it is compact and small."

The California Dictionary Project, a nonprofit organization that sponsors the annual event, distributed about 4,000 dictionaries as gifts to Oakland students.

The group of philanthropists believes children should be provided with reading tools at an early age and taught how to use reference books. Elementary school students can develop better reading skills and achieve higher literacy levels when they get the right resources, they say.

Project founders, who participated in classroom presentations, said they firmly believe in the project's motto: "Today a reader, tomorrow a leader."

"It is our hope that we can provide a reference tool that is a catalyst for increased learning and leadership," said Barry Graynor, president of California Dictionary Project.

The group was formed in 2002 after businessman Mark Robinson and attorneys Barry Graynor and Heather Burror learned of a woman on the East Coast who, wanting to make a difference, gave away dictionaries.

"Mary French's story was an inspiration to us," Robinson said. "We put our ideas and funds together and started this, wanting to make it a statewide project."

They started in Oakland and have relied since then on the support and assistance of local Oakland Heroes, a group that provides volunteers for school-related activities in the district. Oakland Heroes told school principals about the opportunity to receive free dictionaries months before Dictionary Day.

Each school asked for the number of books it needed, and Oakland Heroes sent the requests to California Dictionary Project.

Oakland Heroes directors said 32 schools responded this year. Five schools that filed late requests will receive dictionaries in a few days.

The principal and teachers at Fruitvale Elementary said it was not only fun but also a moving experience seeing students excited about their new dictionaries and learning some of the hundreds of alphabetically arranged words, their definitions and usage. Some kids even got Spanish bilingual dictionaries.

"Knowledge is power, as we all know, and this is the beginning," Principal Cherie Ivey said. "Our students received a high-impact gift today, believe me."

Educators believe the use of a dictionary can influence the learning process of students.

"Once they (children) start this in third grade, they get into a habit of wanting to know the meaning of words, and that habit will continue," teacher Randell Hernandez said.

In the next few months Dictionary Day will be celebrated in San Jose. San Francisco will have Dictionary Day in the fall, and other Bay Area cities are on the list for future dictionary giveaways.

Anyone interested in participating in Dictionary Day or for more information about the project can go to <http://www.dictionaryproject.org>. For more volunteer opportunities, contact Oakland Heroes at <http://www.oaklandheroes.org>

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