Getting students excited about reading can be a challenge, particularly where public school funding gaps occur. Heavy use of smartphones can also make reader engagement more of an uphill battle. Two Seattle-area teacher librarians, Whitman Middle School’s Katie Riley and Gatewood Elementary’s Jackie Snyder (“Miss Jackie”), are up for the challenge. Each of these women actively models, teaches and leads her students by emphasizing reading skills and resources that meet personal and academic needs and interests. Both professionals are on a mission to build classrooms of engaged 21st-century readers by promoting reading advocacy in innovative ways.

For Snyder, the success of reading advocacy at Gatewood Elementary is tied to generating a contagious love for reading and creativity. Now in her fourth year as Teacher Librarian, she oversees the library space and programs for 400 students in Grades K-5. She translates the concept of reading advocacy from paper to real-life schoolwide enthusiasm, like experiencing a book and its message in a variety of exciting, interactive ways. For instance, Gatewood teachers in Grades 2-5 kicked off the year by reading Lynda Mullaly Hunt’s *Fish in a Tree* aloud in their classrooms. According to Snyder, “I chose this book because it not only teaches compassion and understanding for dyslexia and different ways of learning, but it’s also inspiring for teachers, reminding us that we really can make a difference. This amazing book has so many lessons and inspirations and brought us together as a school community.”
Rather than simply setting the book aside after reading it together, the students and teachers continued to visit and explore the story and its message. They created related hands-on art projects in art class. They joined forces with a local sports star to help foster even more excitement and student engagement. “We reached out to Jewell Loyd, who plays for the WNBA’s Seattle Storm. She made a video just for our class in which she answered questions submitted by our students about what it is like to have dyslexia,” Snyder explained. The students watched Loyd’s video during library time – it resonated so deeply with many that they were in turn inspired to share their own struggles with learning. Added Snyder, “This not only gave these students a chance to open up about themselves, but also helped to further educate our students on these important topics.”

Katie Riley also uses an innovative, holistic approach to reading advocacy to build passionate readers and thinkers. Though only in her first year as Teacher Librarian at Whitman Middle School, she brings a wealth of relevant skills and experience to her new role, including working at school and public libraries, as well as teaching sixth-grade English in New York City. Riley is on track to soon complete a Master’s of Library and Information Science degree at the University of Washington.

Riley’s library programs promote future-ready learning through a creative and critical-thinking-led approach to reading and literacy advocacy. She explained, “At Whitman, our library’s information motto is: ‘Who Made It and Why Should I Believe It?’” This helps to teach and remind the students to look critically at the information around them, in an age where they are constantly inundated with information of varying quality and in which accusations lobbed at even mainstream media is pervasive. Riley created and taught a lesson on the topic available for teachers to use in their own classrooms via Schoology.

Much as in Snyder’s library at Gatewood Elementary, reading in Riley’s Whitman Middle School library isn’t necessarily a silent or solo endeavor. “A literacy advocacy program I’m working on with our English teachers is book clubs. We have sets of 10 books on various topics, and the students read in small groups and have discussions.” These group reading activities are designed to encourage deeper engagement and appreciation, as well as provide a place for students to debate, encourage and educate one another about what they read together.

“I love this job. I work to create the most joyous space for kids to come in and read cool books!”

JACKIE SNYDER
Teacher-Librarian, Gatewood Elementary
READING ADVOCACY GOES DIGITAL

Though both Snyder and Riley’s library work still features plenty of printed books, they have also each embraced many digital tools to help share and amplify their lessons for students, parents and teachers in their communities.

Snyder manages the @gatewoodlibrary handle on Instagram, where she posts photos of students taking part in library programs, fostering their love of reading or showcasing the posters they’ve created for Gatewood Reads. Said Snyder, “The Instagram handle allows anyone in our school or community to see what we are up to and how we pump up kids to read and feel part of this program. “For example, we posted during our Winter Book Fair to show off all the students’ hard work on the art installations they created for the event around this year’s book theme.”

Riley also uses platforms like Facebook and Instagram. These varying avenues allow her to promote reading and literacy advocacy in a way that will resonate with today’s digitally savvy students.

“Students are often assigned infographics as a way to present information that they have learned,” said Riley. Her students also use Keynote to visually display facts, images and their own ideas. These types of projects combine research skills with presentation skills.

Riley is just getting started. Plans are in the works to start a coding club, and she is working on acquiring materials for a green-screen space to help students build digital content creation and editing skills – all incentives to keep students engaged in reading various resources.
USING INCENTIVES TO BUILD SCHOOL-WIDE ENTHUSIASM

Snyder and Riley each promote a variety of fun, school-wide contests, campaigns and incentives to keep students reading and learning with sustained excitement throughout the year.

Snyder’s annual, all-school Gatewood Reads program was adopted from an idea sparked by the district’s Middle School Librarian, Stacia Bell. Fifty award-winning books were chosen, spanning a wide range of reading levels, interests and genres. A letter was sent home to parents at the outset to share details and ask for their participation and encouragement, while posters of the chosen books were displayed in the library and around the school to pique student interest. By completing books on the list, students (and teachers!) earned entries into monthly drawings to be featured on a special poster displayed in the library and given to all students at the end of the year. Students who read at least 45 of the 50 titles earned a special poster and admission to a pizza party in the library with Snyder and her fellow book lovers.

“It’s admittedly a lot of work to set up, but the kids absolutely love it and I can’t keep the books on the shelf,” Snyder said. “I buy at least three of each book, and they are almost always checked out.”

Last year, 1,700 Gatewood Reads books were read by students and staff in just six months. This year, close to 400 books were read just in the month of October.

Riley’s primary literacy advocacy program, Wildcats Read, uses a similar structure to incentivize student reading. She explained, “The students must read the book and then take an online survey where they enter their demographic info and a six-word summary. There are monthly prizes ranging from gift cards to a Kindle Fire!”

For both Riley and Snyder, reading and literacy advocacy remains a top priority, regardless of funding challenges or the various resources through which their students choose to read. As Snyder said, “as long as they’re reading, eager and curious, I know our programs are working.”