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3/31/22

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Thanksgiving Elementary 3rd Grade Class Wins National Reading Competition

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SELMA, NC - Thanksgiving Elementary third grade students, aka "The Buffalo Bookworms," were crowned READBowl "Big 3" World Champions, the top third grade reading team in the United States.

Students participated in "Read with Malcolm", the Youth Literacy Initiative of NFL Super Bowl Champion and Children's Book Author Malcolm Mitchell.

Third grade teachers Nicole Humphrey, Heather Best, Tonya Green, Rebecca Hills, Tammy Westerback and Debbie Cascioli worked together encouraging the students to read for the competition.

Through the program, the teachers and students were able to get creative with how, when, and where they read. "Reading is a part of our lives without even realizing it," Humphrey said.

The Buffalo Bookworms read for a combined 720,464 minutes during the four-week team competition, held from January 10 (the day of the College Football National Championship Game) through Super Bowl Sunday, when Mitchell crowned the winners.

"I am so proud of our 3rd grade students and their Big 3 World Championship in Malcolm Mitchell's READbowl," said Thanksgiving Elementary Principal Chad Jewett. "It was amazing seeing their excitement for reading throughout this event, but to see their excitement for reading even after the end of the READbowl is even more inspiring."

This marks the fourth year that Nicole Humphrey and her students have participated in READBowl and the first at Thanksgiving Elementary. "It's grown more magical every year," she said.

She stumbled upon the event when her mentor suggested finding a reading competition as a way to keep her students excited about reading. A quick Google search led her to "Read with Malcolm".

At first glance, Humphrey was intimidated by the fact that READBowl is a global competition. She continued reading and learned the program was free. "I was so excited to be able to participate!" she said.

The first time Humphrey shared Mitchell's story with her students, there was a child that was struggling to read. As that child watched Malcolm share his struggles with reading, Humphrey saw an immediate change in his face. "There was a softening on his face," she said. At that moment she knew this was something big.

This year, more than 57,000 students in every state competed in READBowl, including more than 7,000 in NC. Since its inception in 2018, more than 325,000 kids have competed in READBowl: Read with Malcolm's Free Virtual Reading Challenge.

"It's not so much about what we do with the kids," Humphrey said, "it's what happens within the child as they are transformed as a reader. You start to see a sparkle in their eyes and excitement when it's time to read."

The Buffalo Bookworms were treated to a celebratory pep rally and Malcolm Mitchell appeared via Zoom to congratulate them on .

"I could not be more proud of The Buffalo Bookworms and their third grade teaching team," said Mitchell. "The effort and dedication required to read for 720,000 minutes is testament to the commitment of the kids and to the passion of their teacher, their school and Johnston County Public Schools.

In preparation for the pep rally, each third grade student wrote down a question they wanted to ask Mitchell. The teaching team chose one question from each class and that student asked their question directly to Mitchell on the Zoom call on Tuesday, March 29.

Fredrell O'Neal asked Mitchell how he learned to read. O'Neal shared that he is still learning how to read. Mitchell answered, "I never stopped trying."

He suggested that O'Neal change the way he sees himself. "Instead of saying 'I'm not a great reader,' say 'I'm not a great reader yet,'" Mitchell said encouragingly.

Each student received a 2022 READBowl Big 3 Conference Champion certificate with their name on it as part of their accomplishment.

"Yesterday's time with Malcolm Mitchell was a culmination of so much effort from our students and teachers, and for our students to spend some time with Malcolm Mitchell and hear how important reading is to him and how it has impacted his life will be a memory our students will hold on to for the rest of their lives," said Jewett.

PHOTO1: National Football League Super Bowl Champion and author Malcolm Mitchell takes questions from third grade students at Thanksgiving Elementary's Buffalo Bookworms who were crowned READBowl Big 3 World Champions at a special pep rally on March 29.

PHOTO2: Thanksgiving Elementary third grade teacher Nicole Humphrey speaks to the entire third grade class, aka The Buffalo Bookworms, during their pep rally in celebration of them being crowned READBowl Big 3 World Champions.

PHOTO3: Thanksgiving third grade student Fredrell O'Neal shows off his READBowl Big 3 Conference Champion certificate. O'Neal and the entire third grade class, aka The Buffalo Bookworms, read 720,464 minutes during the four-week national competition.

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