

Ventura County community leaders participate in annual Take 5 and Read to Kids campaign

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Community leaders throughout Ventura County began reading to children as part of Take Five and Read to Kids to encourage literacy. Juan Carlo, juan.mendoza@vcstar.com, 805-437-0294



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The kids at La Escuelita in Oxnard got excited when adults they hadn't seen before came into their classroom. The kids immediately turned their heads and ran toward them.

They got even more excited when they sat down to read one of their favorite books. They looked on in awe and diligently paid attention to the narrative being read by a local celebrity.

When the story was over, the kids ran up to hug the reader and thank them.

The story was much the same across the county Friday morning as community leaders went into classrooms in different schools to take five minutes and read to kids.

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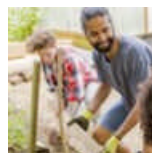
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Take 5 and Read to Kids is a partnership between First 5 Ventura County and The Star to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood literacy.

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"It's so important for all kids to learn to read," said Mike Powers, chief executive officer for Ventura County, who read a couple of books to children at La Escuelita School on

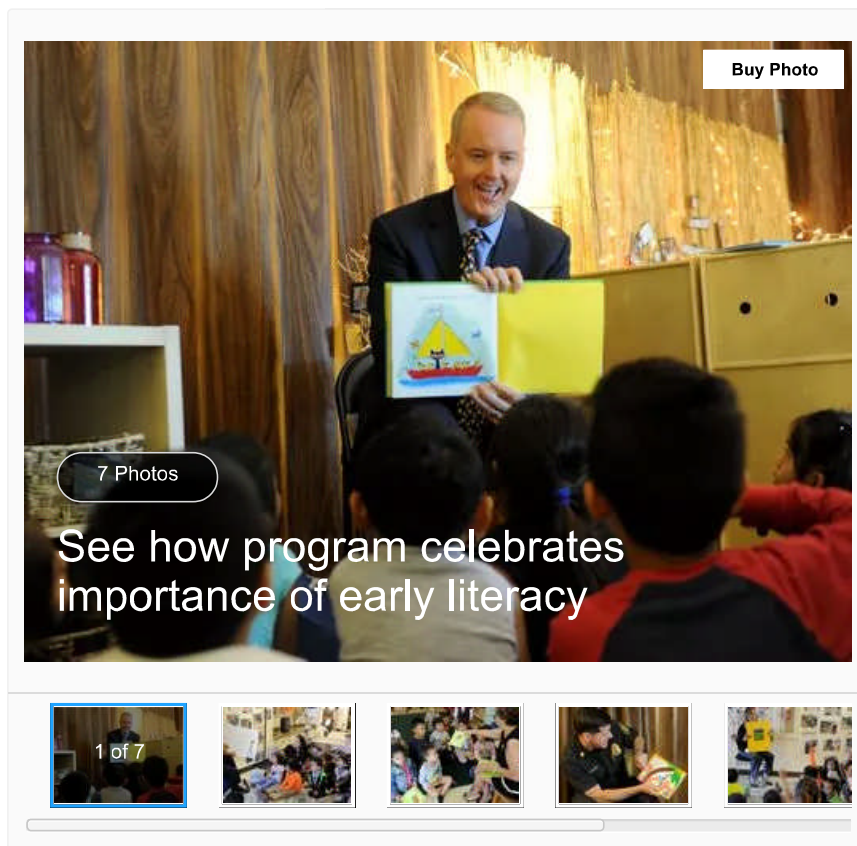
Friday. "The brain is really developing language skills from ages zero to 5. ... We want to make sure every child in our community has that advantage."

La Escuelita is a child development center that caters to toddlers and preschool-age children in Oxnard. The students are largely English language learners.

"Look at these kids; they are so excited," Powers said. "I love to read to my kids. My boys are now 9 and 7. You want to make it fun, you want it make it a habit and you want to engage them. ... Engage them and get their brains working and their imaginations firing and just making those connections and helping their minds and their brains."

The school is divided into a series of classrooms, each holding upward of 15 students. Children ages 2 through 5 years old are served at the full-day preschool program, said Teresa Martinez, supervisor at the Oxnard school.

Take 5 and Read is now in its third year. Readers on Friday at the school included Ventura County Fire Chief Mark Lorenzen; Oxnard Police Department Officer Jared Schacher; Celina Zacarias, director of community and government relations for CSU Channel Islands; and Powers.



Reading began at 10 a.m., but the celebrities lingered after they had finished their books to ask the kids questions. Powers raced a few kids, and let them win. Zacarias asked them to sing their favorite songs.

"I hope that there is something that we can do to help them continue that level of excitement" about books, Zacarias said. "Putting people in the business community in the classroom, I think, is extremely important. ... I think that we as business people need to show educators that we are here to support them."

First 5 Ventura County Executive Director Petra Puls said in a news release that exposure to books, including being read aloud to each day, is critical for the long-term academic success of children. But in Ventura County, only 58 percent of children are read to daily. Puls said,

This event is designed to combat that and show children the value of reading. Powers said he hoped he showed the children how fun reading can be.

"Reading is the best part of life," Powers said. "... We want to make sure everybody in our community had the same opportunities and a level playing field. It's just so much fun."

Across the county, other local celebrities read to classrooms full of students including Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Westlake Village; Assemblyman Dante Acosta, R-Santa Clarita; Ventura County Supervisor Kelly Long; Ventura County Superintendent of Schools Stan Mantooth; and Sheriff Geoff Dean.

This year's event also will expand to include celebrity readers at local libraries during their regularly scheduled story times throughout the month of May. Check with your local library for a full list of upcoming events.

Scheduled events and readers include:

Camarillo Public Library

- 10 a.m. Monday: Kara Ralston, CEO of the Camarillo Health Care District
- 10 a.m. Tuesday: Mayor Charlotte Craven and Councilman Tony Trembly

Fillmore Library

- 11 a.m. Wednesday: Mayor Manuel Minjares

Hill Road Library, Ventura

- 10:30 a.m. Wednesday: Radio personality Tom Hilton

Grant R. Brimhall Library, Thousand Oaks

- 10:30 a.m. Tuesday: Thousand Oaks City Manager Andrew Powers

Ojai Library

- 10:30 a.m. Wednesday: County Public Health Officer Dr. Robert Levin