

50 000 students read 500 000 books!

PREMIER'S Reading CHALLENGE

Alle Goldsworthy, policy and program officer, South Australian Premier's Reading Challenge

The Premier's Reading Challenge (PRC) is a State Government initiative of the South Australian Premier, Mike Rann, to encourage students from Reception to Year 9 to read more books for enjoyment and improve literacy levels.

South Australia is now at the end of its first year of the Premier's Reading Challenge. It has been an amazing year, culminating with 49 446 students achieving the Challenge and reading at least 12 books each. This is well over half a million books! All students who participated received a certificate signed by the Premier.

Students are expected to read at least eight of their twelve books according to their year level from the three booklists on the website: Reception–Year 2, Years 3–5 and Years 6–9. A booklist panel of three teacher-librarians and a public librarian work together with myself to develop the booklists, and each booklist was refreshed at the beginning of each term. By the end of the Challenge there were 2497 annotated titles on the booklists.

Seventy-two per cent of all South Australian schools participated in the Challenge, as did a number of home-education families. Forty-seven per cent of students completing the Challenge were boys and fifty-three per cent girls. It is interesting that anecdotal stories from schools showed that boys were enjoying the idea of the Challenge, that they were often the first finished in their schools, and that they are reading almost as much as the girls.

The Premier, Mike Rann and the Minister for Education and Children's Services, Dr Jane Lomax-Smith have been very proactive in promoting the Challenge and their interest in children reading for enjoyment and developing their literacy skills. They have been keen to visit schools and hear about the Challenge from students and teachers.

Ambassadors, including authors Mem Fox and Phil Cummings and sport personalities Mark Bickley, Che Cockatoo-Collins, Kathryn Harby-Williams and Juliet Haslam have also fulfilled

the role of motivating students by talking about meeting the challenges in their lives and how important reading is for them. They have been guests at major events and also visited schools and talked about the Premier's Reading challenge in the course of their own work with children.

Teacher-librarians in schools are particularly supportive and so are librarians in public libraries.

The website is the main communication avenue for everyone involved in the Challenge, and it has been used to keep people up-to-date with any news about the Challenge, refreshed booklists, and Challenge events. It will be updated and enhanced in preparation for the second year of the Challenge in 2005.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Premier's Reading Challenge is having a real impact on literacy development:

- Breaking the PRC booklists into categories has helped students to find books that they enjoy reading.
- Students taking up the Challenge are surprised that they can read that many books in a year.
- Teachers are enjoying reading the books to students.
- Students are reading more books than usual.
- Public libraries are reporting increased borrowing rates due to the PRC.
- Some students have become interested in books for the first time.
- PRC is a motivator for classroom reading programs.
- Parents are more involved with their children's reading.
- Class 'browse and borrow' sessions in the library have more purpose.
- PRC has provided a boost to enthusiasm for reading.
- PRC is an inclusive program which has appealed to special education and special needs students.
- Students gained skills in using the library catalogue system.



South Australian Premier, Mike Rann (far right) with the Minister for Education and Children's Services, Dr Jane Lomax-Smith (centre back), and school students from Loxton High School at the Premier's Reception

- Borrowing of books from the school library increased.
- Reluctant readers made an effort to finish the Challenge.
- Students motivate each other to finish the Challenge.
- The program fostered a love of books and reading.
- Students are looking forward to completing the Challenge next year and earning a bronze medal.
- Distance education students have enjoyed taking part in the Challenge.

The Premier's Reception was held in the Mortlock Wing of the State Library on Friday 26 November 2004. Representatives from 28 schools with an outstanding rate of students completing the Premier's Reading Challenge in 2004 were invited to attend. The Premier and Minister presented each group with a certificate and a parcel of books and book vouchers donated by sponsoring bookshops and publishers. The student-friendly event included face painting, a milkshake bar, delicious food and the chance to mingle with the Premier, Minister and ambassadors including Juliet Haslam, Mem Fox, Che Cockatoo-Collins, Mark Bickley and Phil Cummings. Guests were welcomed by 'The Stringettz', the Marryatville High School Year 8 ensemble and were entertained by Colonel Light Gardens Primary School rap group. The backdrop of the awesome Mortlock Library made this a very special experience for everyone involved. ■