

Nice News

“The Magic of a Good Book”: Free After-School Program Is Improving Grades and Making Reading Fun



AUTHOR Rebekah Brandes

Los Angeles residents Joe Blackstone and Jamie Mohn have long recognized the power of storytelling and the lasting impact it can have on a child’s life. Shortly after getting married, the couple began volunteering to read books to elementary school kids. Then, when they became parents themselves, they created the J3 Foundation to fund child development organizations. But after learning that [two-thirds of fourth graders who cannot read proficiently end up in prison or on welfare](#), Blackstone and Mohn decided to take a more hands-on approach: In 2018, they launched J3’s Cozy Reading Club.



The [two-hour, after-school program](#) was developed to not only support reading skills for fourth and fifth graders, but also to build children’s confidence and promote positive study habits. Each session is free and includes mindfulness exercises, outdoor activities, and a healthy snack. Then, it’s time for some cozy reading: After teachers read a book aloud and the group discusses the storyline, the kids grab cushions and find a spot to sit while grabbing a book of their choice to turn through. At the end of each meeting, they get to choose two books to borrow and take home.

“The magic of our program is that we provide a safe space where all students get to rediscover the joy and magic of a good book,” Sr. Program Director Stacey Longo said in a statement on the foundation’s website.

In its first year, Cozy Reading Club served 15 students in one L.A.-area classroom. As of 2022, it had expanded to 17 schools across four different districts, impacting a total of at least 400 students, the vast majority of whom live in underserved communities.



With [impressive statistics](#) backing it up — 90% of students have significantly improved their reading scores, and 95% say they’ve started reading for fun since taking part in the program — its founders have much to celebrate.

“Our students’ gains in reading have been phenomenal,” Blackstone told Nice News. “But seeing them achieve that while using tools like mindfulness, and growing trusted relationships with their fellow students and teachers, has been even more powerful.”



He added: “We’re incredibly proud of our collection of books as well. Ninety-two percent of our students are students of color, so having more than 5,000 carefully curated, culturally relevant books available to them is so exciting. I love that our students can see themselves and their classmates’ lives reflected in the books they are reading.”

Currently, J3 is in the [process of fundraising](#) \$864,000 so the Cozy Reading Club can expand to an additional 24 Los Angeles schools and double its book collection to 10,000, a cause more necessary than ever. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, [68% of U.S. fourth graders](#) weren’t proficient in reading in 2022, up from 66% in 2019.

“Knowing that we can turn that stat on its head, that we are actively interrupting the school to prison pipeline is very meaningful to us,” Blackstone said. “The hope and aspiration of changing one kid at a time makes all the work worthwhile.”

Visit J3FoundationLA.org/donate to help the J3 Foundation reach its goal.

