

*Kwame Alexander*  
**BOOKFEST**

## A BOOK CLUB THAT BRINGS ENGAGEMENT TO THE ENTIRE SCHOOL

In Van Meter, Iowa, a farming community on the outskirts of Des Moines, the elementary school serves a diverse range of readers. Many who attend Van Meter Community School are avid readers, while others struggle with motivation and engagement. Like many schools in similar towns across the country, Van Meter's administration is dedicated to literacy learning, and its librarians and teachers are excited when they discover something new to share with their students.

When district librarian Shannon McClintock Miller was first introduced to Kwame Alexander Bookfest, she knew her principal and fellow teachers would want to know more. "I have been so excited about Bookfest since I heard about it," Miller shared. "When I read how Kwame Alexander Bookfest allows students to choose their books and gives teachers the resources to inspire amazing student-led discussions, I couldn't wait to see the books available to our readers."

Available for Grades 3-8, Kwame Alexander Bookfest promotes student choice to increase engagement and motivation. Bookfest is unique as it allows students to choose their books and gives teachers the resources to inspire lively discussions. Each book, curated by the Newbery Medal-winning author for which Bookfest is named, helps students see themselves reflected in what they read, promotes academic achievement, and provides opportunities for students to engage with each other in lively discussions.



**SHANNON  
MCCLINTOCK MILLER**  
Teacher Librarian  
Van Meter Community School  
Van Meter, Iowa



**KATIE FLAWS**  
5th Grade Teacher  
Van Meter Community School  
Van Meter, Iowa



**CODY TIBBETTS**  
Elementary Principal  
Van Meter Community School  
Van Meter, Iowa

At Van Meter, Bookfest became an instant sensation as it provided an opportunity for the librarian, teachers, and administration to support learning in a collaborative and student-led format.

“I was thrilled when I learned about Kwame Alexander Bookfest and how it would be used here at Van Meter Community School,” said Cody Tibbetts, elementary principal. “When I saw the available titles, I knew the collection would give students great topics to read and discuss.”

Teachers agreed. Katie Flaws, a fifth-grade instructor, dove right into Bookfest as soon as she received the titles. Flaws quickly realized it would reveal new teaching and learning experiences she hadn’t previously seen in her classroom.

Miller and Flaws collaborated early on [a plan they felt would immediately engage the students.](#)

“We kicked it off by sharing book trailers and the background of each book,” Miller shared. “I put these resources together in a [fun choice board](#) and made it into a poster to put with the books while the kids decided which one they wanted to read. Katie and I kicked it off together with her fifth graders by having them vote for which book they wanted to read. It was so much fun to see Katie get the kids excited by announcing the book clubs and having them get their book.”

Both Flaws and Miller used the Bookfest Discussion Guides extensively. “I love the questions and how these are laid out for our book clubs,” Miller said. “It evoked wonderful conversations

and gave our students ways to make connections to the characters and stories.”

Overall, Bookfest has been a fun, motivating, and thought-provoking experience for educators and students alike at Van Meter. “The feedback from my staff and students has been positive, and the fact that it has encouraged reading is a testimonial in itself,” said principal Tibbetts.

“Connection, conversation, and community are what come to mind when I reflect on my Bookfest experience,” Flaws said. “The questions were open-ended, giving students the space and place to share their unique ideas. Best of all, though, it brought my students and me closer together. We read together, we shared emotions together, and we built a love of reading together. It truly was a remarkable experience.”

Embedded in these new reading adventures, according to Flaws, were exciting new titles for both her and her fifth graders to discover. “I was able to share ideas, emotions, and reactions alongside my students,” Flaws said. “Kwame’s books *The Crossover* and *Front Desk* acted as windows and mirrors for my students. Bookfest encouraged students to make connections with the characters while simultaneously developing empathy for others as they put themselves in the characters’ shoes.”

According to Miller, Bookfest gave her new tools that support her goals as a librarian. “The list included so many titles and authors that I couldn’t wait to share with our students. The titles available are perfect for our readers –

there is something for everyone,” she said. “Our students can choose from all different types of genres, including fiction, graphic novels, nonfiction, biographies, and more. This supports my mission as their school librarian because I want all readers to have choice and voice within our library and within their life as a reader.”

### SHARING THE NEWS

When asked if she would tell a colleague about Bookfest, Flaws didn’t hold back. “I would absolutely recommend Bookfest! While book clubs weren’t a new idea in my classroom, Bookfest created an environment that felt more natural and authentic. My students and I shared and learned so much,” she observed.

Miller agreed. “I have recommended Bookfest to many other librarians looking to bring excitement and meaning to their book clubs. A lot of people ask me how we start and kick off book clubs within our library and school, so Bookfest is the perfect thing to recommend,” she said. “Bookfest is like a one-stop shop for book clubs, and the best part, we know that the books Kwame and Follett have put together are going to be ones that our kids love reading while giving them a chance to experience stories of others.”