

School Spotlight

Transforming Reading Culture at Bethune Academy

Bethune Academy is a K–8 school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where approximately 40% of students are English language learners, many with refugee backgrounds and home languages ranging from Swahili to Maay Maay to Karen. As the school's first full-time library media specialist, Leigh Knapp has made it her mission to make reading part of daily life for this diverse community—and make it fun. With the help of a school-wide Beanstack challenge, Bethune has sparked a powerful shift in school culture and literacy outcomes.



“Kids are talking more about books, they’re cheering each other on, and they’re excited to visit the library. Even staff are competing and connecting in new ways.”

Leigh Knapp

Media Specialist, Bethune Academy

Goals: Building Excitement and Boosting Literacy

Leigh was familiar with Beanstack because of her local public library and saw its potential to support a fun, engaging, and goal-driven reading program. She aimed to foster a strong reading culture across the school, especially for students reading below grade level or learning English, by offering incentives, encouraging friendly competition, and making reading a shared community experience.

Rolling Out the Challenge: A Whole-School Effort

Bethune Academy built a reading program that touched every corner of the community, from the youngest learners to the cafeteria staff.

- **A Collaborative Effort:** With the support of her principal and parent coordinator, Leigh created a prize structure and coordinated funding for rewards like trophies, movie passes, and a pizza party for the most engaged classroom.
- **Getting Staff on Board with a Challenge:** Teachers and staff participated in their own Beanstack challenge and were encouraged to model reading in front of students. Leigh even created a “Little Free Library” in the staff lounge to make books easily accessible.
- **Hands-on Learning:** Students in grades three and above brought Chromebooks to the library and used Beanstack’s reading timer as part of their routine. Leigh modeled logging on her Promethean board, reinforcing the habit visually.

Keeping the Excitement Going: Recognition and Raffles

- **Weekly Raffles to Sustain Momentum:** Each Friday, Leigh drew names based on Beanstack badges earned that week. Winners—both students and staff—received small prizes and public recognition, keeping the energy high.
- **Class-vs-Class Trophy Battles:** Each grade level has a traveling trophy that moves at the end of each trimester. The winning class claims bragging rights—and the trophy—until the next challenge, motivating students to read even more to win it back.
- **Celebrating Wins with Award Ceremonies:** End-of-trimester awards ceremonies feature reading challenge winners alongside academic and behavior honorees. Leigh announces the winners live on the mic, with students cheering each other on.

Outcomes

Since launching Beanstack, Bethune Academy has seen measurable and meaningful success:

- Library circulation has increased by an astounding 487% this school year.
- There has been a 10% decrease in students scoring significantly below target on the school’s reading screener assessment—the most significant positive change in six screening windows.
- Bethune has had strong Beanstack participation throughout the year. They are currently at 96%.

Reading has become part of everyday conversation. Students request specific titles, discuss their reading, and celebrate each other’s progress. Staff are modeling reading, and the school community is more connected through a shared love of books.

CONCLUSION

At Bethune Academy, reading has become a school-wide celebration. Thanks to Leigh’s leadership, students and staff are more connected, curious, and confident. What started as a simple reading challenge is now a vibrant part of Bethune’s identity, helping students grow as readers and as a community.