

Saunders: 'Let's get ready to read together, Hastings'

By Bonnie St. James

Star Gazette staff writer

Al Saunders, principal at McAuliffe Elementary School, had a little time to think over the summer.

Saunders is an advocate of reading and knows how important reading is in doing well in school.

He wondered how he could better promote reading and his thoughts went beyond the school.

In August, Saunders and others to whom reading is important formed a committee to do promote literacy across the community. All the elementary principals came to the first meeting. The librarians were there, along with members of "Friends of the Library," and the United Way.

At the first meeting, Missy Thompson, an Early Childhood Literacy Education Coordinator, talked about the success of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library program, funded last year by the United Way.

The group decided "Hastings Reads" was something they wanted to do. They wanted to get everyone of all ages reading and talking about the books they'd read.

Their project got a boost this past week with a \$3,200 grant from the Hastings Public Schools Foundation.

"I thought perhaps we didn't get the grant," Saunders said.

"But, as close as we are to the cities, that diversity is coming, and we need to be ready to accept all cultures."

— Allen Saunders

Principal at McAuliffe Elementary

"The Foundation group passed by my office to go to Lynette Wayne's room."

He was just glad that Wayne got her grant, but Saunders was surprised when the trumpets played a second time in Wayne's room and handed him the "What If" grant.

The Hastings Public Schools Foundation Grant of \$3,200, plus a United Way grant of \$3,000, will pay for books, a Web site, brochures and activities throughout the year, according to Saunders.

The group thought about focusing on a theme. Thinking beyond just this year, members wanted the reading to also be a learning experience and they decided to focus this year on diversity, Saunders said.

"Hastings doesn't have a diverse population," he said. "But as close as we are to the cities, that diversity is coming, and we need to be ready to accept all cultures."

The books for this year's events are divided into three categories. There is a book for students in grades one through three, another for students in

grades four through eight and an adult book.

The book chosen for young readers is "My Brother, Martin," by Christine King Farris. Farris is the brother of Martin Luther King, and she wrote a book about their childhood together. The illustrator, Chris Soenpiet, will be at the kickoff event.

The committee hopes the book will be read by the students who can read and that parents will read it to children who aren't yet reading, Saunders said.

The middle group will concentrate on "The Watson's Go to Birmingham," by Christopher Paul Curtis. It was written in the backdrop of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Adults will read "To Kill a Mockingbird." "It's a classic," Saunders said. "And it's a book most of the students read in high school."

Events planned so far are pizza and book nights at the elementary schools, a scrapbooking night to help families start a family scrapbook, adult



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Leslie Nielsen, Hastings Public Schools Foundation, hands Allen Saunders his grant. Lynette Wayne looks on. She had just received her grant. Saunders was surprised when a second grant, his, was awarded. He hopes to get all of Hastings reading together.

book discussions and, perhaps, a showing of the movie, "To Kill a Mocking Bird," at the theater as a family night. There may also be a night to design book covers.

"There will have to be tremendous volunteer support

to make this successful," Saunders said. "But we're hoping to involve the whole community."

"We hope we can continue this on an annual basis far into the future."

The program is patterned

after the "One Book" program instituted by the Library of Congress' Center for the Book.

For more information on what other communities are doing, go to www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook and click on "One Book" projects.