

# Starting a Birthday Books Project:

## A Step-by-Step Guide for Community Partners Working with a School

Starting and operating a Birthday Books Project is surprisingly easy and affordable. When a community organization — or even one dedicated individual — partners with the school, the school saves money and effort, so it's a great way to support a school in need. While schools and community partners can divide responsibilities however they choose, the most common method is for the community partner to buy the books and give them to the school, and the school to give out the books to the students on their birthdays. **This document provides a step-by-step guide for the work of the community partner under that common role division, as follows:**

- This page is a basic overview;
- Page 2 (tan) details communication with the school, including outreach, needed information, and agreement;
- Page 3 (pink) details how and where to buy the most affordable, high quality books online; and
- Page 4 offers printable signage.

**How the Birthday Book Project works.** BBP's are simple: The community partner buys terrific books for the school, and the school gives a book to each student on their birthday (or, for students with summer birthdays, during the last week of school.) Books are typically ordered online, and can even be delivered directly to the school. The school is responsible for setting up a book display area, announcing student birthdays, and helping students to select their gift books.



**Community Partner responsibilities.** Community groups should plan for two key responsibilities toward each school they sponsor:

- **Gift from the pocket.** Title I schools have many competing budgetary needs, so community partners typically fund the purchase of books for the school's BBP. **A BBP needs about \$2 per student per year.** For example, a BBP for a school with 500 students would need an annual budget allocation of \$1,000.
- **Gift from the heart and mind.** Community sponsors don't just write a check; they actually select the books that the schools will offer to the students. While the task is simplified by some great sources for online ordering, it still requires careful consideration of the reading levels, interests, and diverse needs of the students, as well as issues of book quality, durability and cost. Since this task is so important, all of page 3 is devoted to describing exactly how it can be done well.

Community partners can also offer to help the school in other ways, such as by helping to set up and maintain the BBP display area, offering to read to students, and/or attending or sponsoring school literacy events.

**Project Leadership.** While many volunteers in your organization may contribute to project success, it's important to have one person from your group who will be the Project Leader. (If your organization signs up to sponsor more than one school, you can choose whether to have one person be the Project Leader for all the schools or to have a different Project Leader for each school served.) The Project Leader will be responsible for 1) communicating with the school, 2) ordering books to give to the school, and 3) making sure the school gets the books when needed. Most people find the role more fun than difficult, and the time spent typically averages less than an hour per week. Consistency and reliability are key to project success, however. For this reason, a one year commitment is essential, both for the Community Partner sponsoring the school and for the individual serving as the Project Leader.

## Communicating with the school

**Planning and outreach.** The Project Leader can begin planning in early spring for a project to start the next fall. If you are not already aware of a Title I school near you, a quick web search can help you identify one. You can then send an email to the school's Principal, describing your offer and linking to [The Birthday Books Project](http://www.birthdaybooks.org). Standard language you could use (copying and pasting as needed) is:

GOOD NEWS FOR YOUR TITLE 1 ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: Your school can receive free, new, high-quality children's books -- one for each of your students annually beginning next academic year -- with [your organization name] sponsoring you to participate in the nonprofit Birthday Books Project ([www.birthdaybooks.org](http://www.birthdaybooks.org)).

The Birthday Book Project is simple: A community partner (us) provides terrific books at no cost to your school, and you give them to your students on their birthdays. This gift of reading:

- celebrates student learning,
- promotes student literacy, and
- reinforces strong school/student relationships.

There are over 60 schools whose students receive Birthday Books, and your school can be next.

Principals are busy, and your offer may sound too good to be true (i.e. may be mistaken for spam), so don't be afraid to follow up with a second email, a phone call, or even to stop by the school. Once the principal has indicated interest in the program, send an email to the principal asking these important questions.

1. Are you a Title I school?
2. How many students Pre-K to 5th grade do you serve?
3. Do you, or will you, announce student birthdays daily (or at least weekly)?
4. Will you provide and maintain a bookcase or media cart in a place of your choice (e.g. front office or media center), where Birthday Books will be displayed and birthday students can choose their gift book?
5. Will you designate a staff member to serve as your BBP Coordinator (to receive the books, set up a book display area, and help the birthday students choose a book) and provide that person's contact information to us?
6. Will you commit that the books we provide will be used only to give to students (or returned to us if not needed for that purpose)?

If the school answers yes to all yes/no questions, you'll have all the information you need to move forward. You can confirm by emailing the principal:

*Welcome to the Birthday Books Project, with [your organization] serving as your school's Community Partner! Our commitment to you will be to reliably, timely, and without cost provide you with [insert the number from the school's answer to Question 2 above] high-quality books to give each of your students a wonderful Birthday Book in the coming academic year.*



**Working with the school's BBP Coordinator.** Once you've reached basic agreement with the principal, invite the principal to designate a school staff member (usually a Media Center or Front Office staff member) to serve as the school's BBP Coordinator. Some principals may wish to play the role themselves, and that's fine, but most prefer to delegate. Whoever is designated, most of your ongoing contact will be with that BBP Coordinator. An in-person visit, video call or phone call at the outset can help build bridges and answer any questions the Coordinator may have. This is also a good time to decide with the Coordinator whether to have book orders go directly to the school, to the Coordinator's attention, or to you. It can also be nice to offer to help set up the school's display if needed. If you wish, you could also ask about the school's other literacy initiatives, such as guest reader days, and offer to volunteer or to be notified of volunteer opportunities.

**Staying in contact.** After the initial meeting, regular communication with the Coordinator can help keep their BBP running smoothly. The most important regular contact will be simple emails from you to let the school's Coordinator know when shipments of books are coming. Your book suppliers will send you emails whenever books you've ordered are shipping, so be sure to forward these emails to let the Coordinator know to expect the shipment. While your regular book ordering (next page) is designed to stay ahead of the school's need for books, it's a good backup to invite the Coordinator to let you know anytime they are running low on books. And, of course, invite the Coordinator to feel free to contact you with any other needs or questions.



## A Simple, Step-by-Step Guide to Ordering Great Books—within Budget!

**When to order how many books.** Most schools don't have storage space for a full year's books all at once, so it's wise to have several orders over the year. For example, you could order:

- A number of books equal to about 30% of the school's student body in the summer before the project begins;
- Books equal to about 10% of the school's student body in October, December, February and March; and
- In early May '26, books equal to about 30% of the school's student body (to give for summer birthdays).

You can have the books shipped directly to the school, with attention to the school's BBP Coordinator.

Or you can have the books come to your Project Leader first, then bring them to the school as needed.

**Choosing great books.** When ordering:

- Seek books which are fun, exciting, and positive.
- Look to include a wide variety of cultures, reflecting the wide variety of students in our partner schools.
- Consider the reading levels of the students who will receive them.
- Prioritize high-quality, hard-cover books, often available at no extra cost.
- Avoid books that are specific to one religion or holiday, books which feature weapons or fighting on the cover, or books which might cause controversy or be objectionable to some families.
- Above all, look for books that a child can enjoy and treasure!

**Where to order great books at affordable prices.** There are lots of places to get great children's books, but we at the BBP rely most heavily on these two resources due to their unusual affordability. (Please note we get NO benefit from your use of them, nor do you get a discount because you're hosting a BBP. They just offer excellent choices at startlingly low prices.) They are:

- **[Book Depot](#)** is a for-profit company with remaindered books, but includes many great titles in the \$1 to \$2 per book range, plus a shipping cost of about 30 cents per book. Because of its combination of affordability and quality, you'll probably use it for your first and last big orders, and maybe some of the bimonthly orders, too. To get started, go to <https://www.bookdepot.com/> and create a free account, using your own email address. This lets you choose from their full catalog, which is arranged by categories. To help you get started, here are a few of the most useful links.
  - **[Children's hardcover books](#)** (mostly picture books). (Use link or click on Browse, then Categories, then Children. Then, in the left column, under Format, click on Hardcover, then Apply. To see lowest priced books first, use box at top right to select Price Asc.)
  - **[Early chapter books](#)** (may be soft or hardcover). (Use link or click on Browse, then Categories, then Children. Then, in left column, under Format, click on Tweens Fiction, then Apply. To see lowest priced books first, use box at top right to select Price Asc.)
  - **[Children's graphic novels](#)** (may be soft or hardcover). (Use link or click on Browse, then Categories, then Children. Then under Format, click on Comics and Graphic Novels, then Apply. To see lowest priced books first, use box at top right to select Price Asc.)
- **[First Book](#)** is a nonprofit devoted to bringing high quality, wonderfully diverse books to Title I schools and their students. While most of their prices are well above \$2 per book, they do offer some giveaways and specials. With persistence, you can sometimes find a few of their wonderful books for free or for the cost of shipping only — perhaps freeing up your budget to buy some of their other books a bit above your usual price point. First Book thus offers a great way to supplement your regular orders with extra quality and variety. To get started:
  - Go to the **[Become a Member](#)** page and create a free account. Use your email for contact but, when they ask about the school you serve, describe the school you are sponsoring.
  - New members typically get their first \$25 in books free. Also, watch your email for occasional promo codes and gift coupons. The Facebook page “Teachers on First Book Marketplace” also sometimes offers promo codes.
  - There are two major sections to shopping on the First Book website. The **[Marketplace](#)** is the one with higher prices but the most exciting selections. They have wonderful collections to explore, such as **[Stories for All](#)**, **[STEAM](#)**, **[Picture Books](#)**, and **[\\$3 and Under](#)**.
  - The **[Book Bank](#)** is the bargain bin, so use it carefully. It offers boxes of books for the cost of shipping only, but many aren't the fun, festive choices suitable for a birthday present. Also, you get 20 or more copies of the same book, decreasing selection options. Still, there's always the chance of finding a title so fun and affordable it's worth getting a box and using it over time.

*Tip:* If, before ordering a title from any source, you'd like to see a reading sample of a book, there's an easy way to do it. Pull up Amazon.com on a separate tab, search for that book by title, and look for a “Look inside” feature you can use.

**That's it. In no time, you'll find yourself enjoying the exciting array of beautiful children's books to choose, purchase and give!**



*Happy Birthday*

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