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TRIP TO FLICK REWARDS READERS

More than 2,400 Knox pupils catch make-believe 'Lion'

By BETSY PICKLE, pickle@knews.com

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Most kids have to play hooky to catch a movie during school hours, but on Thursday morning more than 2,400 students from Knox County schools had not only permission but also encouragement to go see "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."

"I can't think of a better reward for a reading assignment at school than a trip to the movies," said Russ Nunley, vice president of marketing and communications for Regal Entertainment Group. "I wish I'd had that when I was in school."

The fifth- through eighth-graders who saw "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" at Regal's West Town Mall 9 and Pinnacle Stadium 18 the day before its official opening had all read the first novel in C.S. Lewis' "Narnia" series.

"The kids liked it today," said Dena Pinsker, executive director of Variety, The Children's Charity of Eastern Tennessee. "They knew what was coming. You heard a lot of whispering before the scary scenes. There was shrieking, laughing and clapping."

Pinsker launched a local "Read It and See It" program with "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" after hearing about a similar program in Los Angeles with "The Lord of the Rings."

"One of Variety's missions is to promote literacy," said Pinsker. The Los Angeles organizer "had sponsors purchase the book, and she hosted prerelease screenings in Los Angeles and showed the community that lowering expectations of these children will only give you a low result. They did the work for her."

After securing support from Regal, Pinsker turned to the Scripps Howard Foundation, which bought 3,000 copies of "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe." (The News Sentinel is an E.W. Scripps Co. newspaper.) The books were distributed to students in targeted low-income Knox County schools where reading problems had been identified. Students who completed an essay or other writing assignment on the book earned the right to attend the movie.

"They had about a month to read the book, discuss it in class and write their piece, which sometimes was a poem or creative writing assignment, and deliver it to the teachers," said Pinsker.



Students from Amherst, East Knox County, Norwood and West Haven elementary schools, Chilhowee Intermediate School and Holston, Northwest, South-Doyle, Vine and Whittle Springs middle schools saw the movie at the Pinnacle. Students from Carter Middle went to West Town.

The Regal Foundation paid the admission for 1,000 students. Donations for the remainder came from Panasonic, the East Tennessee Foundation and the Knox County Schools Foundation. Nearly 600 students either didn't complete the writing assignment or were unable to attend for other reasons. About 200 faculty members accompanied the students.

"Many of these children do not have access to their own books at home," Pinsker said. "The teachers said some of the low readers who they didn't think would finish the book were so inspired because they had a book of their own that they told their grandparents, 'Don't give me toys this year. I want the boxed set of "Narnia" books.' "

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West Haven Elementary School students Trevor Towe, Sydney Myers and Bethany Horne, from left, leave a bus Thursday on their way to a special screening of the movie "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" as a reward for a reading assignment.